

ALL SOULS DAY & THE TIPPING POINT

Today November 2 is All Soul's day. Time for families to remember their dead. The cemeteries will be full today with crowds of people, bringing candles, flowers, food and what have you, to maintain whatever tradition dictates. There would be crowds of vendors and whitewash-your-tomb cleaning boys vying for business, and probably in the big cities, shysters and pickpockets, to boot. And certainly crowd control gov't personnel to ease the confusion. Also present would be the religious caste, if you will, blessing the tombs and holding various rituals.

We avoided all these by visiting our dearly beloved yesterday, which is, to the Catholic tradition, All Saint's day. But many others had the same thing in mind, so there indeed were crowds, but not as bad as today. Both days are holidays; no school, no gov't (and few private) offices open.

In Tanjay, there are three cemeteries: the old Catholic cemetery which is located just almost out of town, the non-Catholic which is referred to as "Bido's" that is the nickname of the fellow who donated the land closer to town many years ago, and the modern concept of a "Park", located across the river, aptly known as Serenity Gardens.

Tombs in the Catholic cemetery are of two types: owned and rented. A family can buy a plot from the Church, and build elaborate structures to house their dead theoretically forever. On the other hand, those that can't buy plots are allowed to bury their dead (for a much lesser fee) in tombs that are maintained for 5 years, after which, the remains are exhumed and placed in a common grave at the center of the cemetery. Trouble is, there is little space available, so many

concept of columbariums, where ashes are interred in niches in some consecrated area such as a church basement, now getting quite popular in Manila.

We didn't go into that business, and have averred we will just use the plots in the Catholic Cemetery that Lisa's folks had purchased years ago. It is only one tomb high.

Funny thing is the question on how. If either of us goes to the beyond while here, then a regular burial will be in order. If in the US, then it'll be cremation and shipping the ashes for burial here. But I keep kidding that if I were already ashes, then it would be more appropriate to spread a third to the sea since I worked some time as a marine engineer; a third to the air for my work in aerospace, and for my work as a plumbing engineer, a third should be flushed down the toilet.

Other quaint practices in the barrio involve "having meals" with the dead. The family members throw a feast in the house, and have empty plates for their dead. They have some sort of ritual, which as I understand, includes rattling the spoons and forks to indicate that "they" are indeed eating. That's why we let our barrio domestic-help take the day off.

So after we got home yesterday afternoon, we were all alone and all set to eat leftovers, or go to the hotel nearby for a different meal for a change.

Then our cousins called: they were having lechon and a feast that evening at the Serenity Gardens. Their priest son would do the blessing. And they were not the only ones making merry. We saw the upper social crust strata at their "mausoleums", eating, hanging out, and just socializing with everybody else. I could see now why some of the tomb structures had air-conditioning.

Below, the food tables. Right, a papaya jack-o'-lantern.



With the above topic in mind, and the recent spate of friends who have passed away, I now find myself ruminating about one's individuality in relationship to the human race.

Shouldn't every individual have a "score card" which quantifies one's ultimate worth. Consider some complicated equation that takes into account everything about each of us, such as our age, health, wealth, potential. How many people rely on us as employers, as leaders? And how about those who support us? Those paying for our pensions? Have we received too much already? Or is what we are spending now from our hard earned reserves? If we get sick, will the cost of our cure by the pooled medical system be worth it?

In other words, have we exceeded our usefulness on earth?

Some scoring system indeed, and I'd like to call this the "tipping point equation".

Furthermore, just suppose that in the distant future, we will have developed a deconstruction mechanism such that upon demise, "poof", we instantly become a pile of ashes. No more funerals or wakes, or even Serenity Gardens. No high cost of dying, which really are earth resources; entropy will last longer.

Also, we'll have evolved mentally and culturally, so that we'll have no qualms making way for the younger generations, in a steady state equilibrium, just like lemmings who know when they are overpopulated, and do a self-culling. Remember the movie "Soylent Green"? Or Dr Kevorkian?

"Dust thou art and to dust returneth", will be a truism, but will be accelerated, scheduled, orderly and planned.

Meeting friends, one will wonder "are they near their tipping point?"

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Upper left is the common grave where bones exhumed after 5 years are interred. To accommodate the candles lit by numerous family members (upper right) honoring their dead in the common grave, the cemetery management place metal trays (lower left) with chicken wire to help hold the candles. So dense can be the candle offerings that sometimes, the tallow that drips into the tray catches fire. Two years ago, a number of trays caught fire, caused panic, and even the water in the blue barrel shown in the background couldn't quench it, so sand was finally used. Lower right photo shows multi-storey tomb stacking.

families go highrise: stacking tombs as much as five high. Below is our tomb plot with orchid sprays from the farm.



Many others go to Serenity Gardens, which truly can be considered real estate. And just like real estate, the prices keep going up. I know of many a person who bought plots for speculation. And as far as I know, we don't have the newer