

Widows journeying together along the path of healing

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"The laughter of my children makes me feel lighter. I must survive for them," responds Jane, pursing her lips and holding back her tears. She is in her mourning clothes when I visit her at her home in the northern mountains of Sagada, Philippines.

It is barely two months since Jane was widowed. Her husband Christopher Balicag was killed on 15 February 2014. Balicag was a passenger jeep driver who ferried commuters from our northern village to the center of town, and returned to his home through a pine forest. He was found bloody and unconscious in his jeep near his house by two of his children late in the afternoon. Neighbors who took the body to the hospital thought it was a vehicular accident, however, an autopsy revealed that he died of gunshot wounds in different parts of his body. This sent shivers throughout the community. Until today, the assassin has not been identified and the motive for the killing is still unknown.

A few days after Balicag's death, a letter from a revolutionary armed group was circulated in public. The letter clarified that Balicag had no known criminal record and the group had no involvement in his killing. The group also cautioned the family against implicating them, as this would only be exploited by counter-revolutionary forces. I share Jane's discomfort with this letter, even as it condemned the killing and vowed to help investigate.

Some weeks later, Jane received a text message from an unknown sender: "Sorry for what happened. But don't you worry, others there will follow. Your husband was the first one because he is kind so it would not be complicated. The bullet does not choose especially those without discipline in the mouth. Take care also." Despite the fear and threat that the message brought to her, Jane appealed to the sender to not cause any more suffering to others.

After the immediate crime scene investigation done by the police, follow-up investigation has been quite slow. Confused stories are afloat within the community, and Jane has appealed for unity and cooperation. She believes this is not only about her husband; it could happen to anyone, as two other men are now receiving threatening messages through their mobile phones.

Amidst the anguish, anger and fear that threatens to embrace Jane, we managed to share a few hopeful moments during my visit. When I asked if her husband had appeared in her dreams, Jane narrated how her late husband spoke to her with a warm smile and bid her to take good care of their children. "Itungi da," ('they do guide us'), I said.

I shared with Jane a Mary Magdalene story I came across in the days of my own search amidst the senselessness of the extrajudicial killing of my late husband eight years ago. When everyone else left and Magdalene was at the foot of the cross where Christ was crucified, she cried "Why, why, why?" and Christ replied, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." How can they not know what they do? How can we forgive those who cause so much suffering? Like many widows, Jane and I also struggle with similar questions screaming in our minds, in moments of agony.

We remembered the conversation we had in a jeep sometime in December 2013. Jane was concerned with two high school students who were harassed by soldiers camped at the mountain near the school where she was teaching. Images of truckloads of battle-ready men and their weapons passing by the

village are intimidating enough, but two youngsters had a taste of what it felt to be held for a few hours and suspected as rebel spies. Their parents and fellow villagers were only too relieved that they were set free. We just hoped that the two youngsters would not end up as soldiers or rebels perpetrating the same violence they were subjected to.

In August of the same year, four villages of Northern Sagada were terrorized as the military dropped bombs and sprayed bullets at an alleged rebel camp in the watershed just across the civilian villages. The watershed is part of the ancestral domain of the two tribes in the four villages. Children in school spilled out of the classrooms and joined other villagers to watch in shock and awe. Helicopters hovered right above our homes as we listened to their machineguns and exploding bombs. Pregnant women worried about their unborn babies, while some younger children got sick after the bombing. As the smoke cleared, no civilians were physically wounded. The trauma lingered however, and the townsfolk of Sagada denounced the air-strike as a violation of the Sagada Peace Zone. The town of Sagada is among the seven fragile peace zones in the country.

A peace zone is supposed to be a demilitarized zone that all contending armed groups must recognize, to protect the lives of the civilians in the community. This happened after children, youth and an elderly woman were caught in crossfires right in the middle of the villages sometime in the 1980s.

Despite our circumstances, Jane and I share a similar concern about the culture of violence and impunity seeping into our quiet village. We are concerned for our children. We are concerned for their health, safety and happiness. And now, we seek what needs to be done so that the wounds inflicted in their young hearts will not become scars that will ruin their lives. Jane's heart still bleeds with the sudden and unexpected loss of her husband. She asks herself how she will manage the practical obligations of parenting by herself.

As I and Jane talked about the long journey on the path for truth, justice and healing, I also shared with her how I have encountered many fellow journeyers and mentors who guided me and my children along the way in our difficult moments. How visual and theater arts have helped us move beyond the tragic assassination of their father. How our communion with nature assured us that his spirit lives forever.

I am happy to help Jane learn how to play the bamboo nose flute which she has wanted to learn since she heard me play it on one occasion. She is also interested in training in theater arts to enhance her methods of preparing students for cultural performances. I invited her to visit our organic healing garden too.

Nobody said it is an easy journey: it is a walk and a dance of letting go and embracing the changes even as we travel in dark alleys with lurking shadows. A journey not without risks, particularly in light of our vulnerabilities. Yet, we summon what is left of our strength, and we choose to move on.