

Drawing despair and hope after Sendong

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All photos courtesy of Dr. Boboy Alianan. All drawings by Alee Alampay, Sarah Alampay, Kim Alampay, Andre Alampay, and Jam Alampay.

I was part of a team of psychologists from the Ateneo de Manila who went to Cagayan de Oro to train volunteers on providing psychosocial support for survivors. We did the same for Ondoy, we saw the photos, read the news. Yet nothing prepared me for the reality of Sendong.

More than a hundred teachers, students, religious, aid workers, HR professionals, and private citizens came to volunteer. Because no one was untouched by the tragedy, we asked them to share their stories first. Many were still in disbelief. "This does not happen here", they said. There was a sense of helplessness at the extent of the devastation. But the overwhelming mood was of grief and despair.

All of them knew someone who died or lost everything they had.

There was a medical intern who stayed in the hospital as a way of coping with the news that all her childhood friends in Iligan were buried in the mud. She spent days sewing together limbs of survivors – as many as she could save, as best as she could. An aid worker recounted the heartache of seeing an entire family clinging together inside their house.



There was an HR manager whose employee told her that he tried to keep afloat while holding onto his wife and their 11-month-old baby. He could not hang on to both. He let go of his wife only to have a whirlpool suck his baby from his arms. The HR manager is now worried that her employee now seems to have also lost his mind; he has since disappeared.

They were angry as well - at illegal loggers and the corruption that allows it to happen. At a commercial building that is being put up in a reclaimed area by the river. At informal settlers along the riverbanks they believe were brought in to assure votes. At what they perceive to be an unresponsive local government.



There was also a sense of gratitude for being alive or still having family. But there was also guilt – "*Why did our neighbors die when we were spared?*," they asked. Though there were those who questioned why God allowed this to happen – most simply leaned on their faith to help them prevail.



The stories and emotions of the children were much simpler but just as wrenching. We did art therapy in the evacuation center at the Xavier University (XU). Some kids drew themselves on top of roofs and trees. They drew dead bodies floating in the river. One girl was withdrawn and simply put "XU" on the sheet. When asked why, she said she wanted to study there and become a nurse so she could save people. Her three siblings are still missing. ***(Editor's note: For ethical considerations, all the drawings below are NOT from the art therapy sessions conducted by the author and her colleagues. These have been commissioned of other children, based on the narratives provided by the author.)***

The group of kids I handled started drawing an idyllic picture of the countryside – complete with mountains, rivers, flowers and butterflies. Then they shaded the entire picture over with brown crayon. "It's gone," they said.

"Pasko pa naman," some said.



We normally associate Christmas with remembering God's love and as a time to be thankful for our blessings and celebrate family and friends. How do you comfort people who have lost their families or all their possessions? Even as I struggle with that question, the experience also made me look at Christmas in a different light.

I was struck by how the nativity scene was real in Sendong. For these survivors, the evacuation centers are their mangers. Like the child Jesus, there were gifts from Kings. Only this time there were many and in different forms. The security guard who dropped off the canned goods he received as a gift. The child who came with a bag of coins taken from his piggy bank. An anonymous donor who gave a hundred thousand pesos. The many institutions that donated their goods or services.



There are many shepherds, too. Rescuers, aid workers, fundraisers and countless relief volunteers.

Even the animals are there. They were part of the miracles. People were found in other islands hanging on to a piece of wood, a ball, a door, a refrigerator – and in one instance, even a dog. A volunteer told us about an 8-year-old boy who carried his younger sibling on his back up a hill. He went back down to see what else he could save but the waters had come up quickly. He saw a pig swimming by and climbed on top of it. The pig is now his constant companion and sleeps beside him in the evacuation center.

So maybe Christmas isn't just about celebrating the gift of the child Jesus. Perhaps Christmas is really about the community that comes together in solidarity because of God's love.



Then again, maybe it is just too easy for me to view Christmas in this light because I have come to a home that is upright and a family that is intact. Even as I prepare to celebrate it with my family, my thoughts go back to this young girl who clung to me in the evacuation center. She tugged me to where we had hung the drawings and pointed at all the pictures of flood and would whisper to me again and again, "*dako na ulan... abaha kami.*" And I wonder if she even feels it's Christmas.

