

# In the aftermath of Sendong, we came to help, and I feel small

24-Dec-11, 2:51 PM | Liane Pena-Alampay



Drawing by Sarah P. Alampay

Anything anyone can say about the tragedy of Sendong seems trite. Words seem trite in the face of the indescribable losses that I glimpsed during our day-and-a-half stay in Cagayan de Oro. Tears seem trite, too, although many were shed. And then, on the plane to CDO with our team of six (Boboy Alianan, Gina Hechanova, Meling Macapagal, Bopeep Franco, Joy Calleja and myself), I was preoccupied with thoughts of the chores and Christmas shopping still left undone. Nothing more trite than Christmas shopping. In CDO thousands lost their homes and loved ones.

I listened to survivors. One college student talked about how she and her younger sister made sure to put their school IDs in their pockets, even as they scrambled to their rooftop at the wake of the rapidly rising flood waters in their home. For easy identification of their corpses, she said. She was certain they were about to die. She and her sister witnessed (or heard, because it was dark) many things in the waters below them - people dying by electrocution, by drowning, as they huddled on that rooftop.

Amazed and grateful as she was that they had survived, she signed up to volunteer to provide psychosocial debriefing to other survivors. Other stories: a mother pushing each of her nine children up to their roof, thinking that if they should die, at least they die in each others' arms. A boy, saved from drowning because he held on to a pig (apparently good swimmers, pigs), one of 90 pigs swept away from a piggery. A social worker who cannot sleep for the screaming he still hears in his head when he ushered hysterical families into the cathedral at the height of the tragedy. A father who is still waiting for news of his missing son, believing firmly that the boy had been saved and is now being cared for by another family.

A school teacher buried her three young children just yesterday. How might I feel if I lost any one or more of my children? I would fall apart. I don't know how I could survive that.

And yet, they do. They are surviving.

One of the volunteers I debriefed shared her story in rapid Visayan. She seemed to have forgotten at some point that I could not understand or speak Visayan. I did catch a few words and phrases when she spoke English, though. She said, "I feel ashamed". Ashamed that she couldn't do more to help. Ashamed that she was left practically unscathed by the tragedy when so many of her friends and neighbors were suffering.

I know that feeling. I may not have used the same word, but I resonate with the sentiment. I feel small. There is nothing so humbling as being one person faced with such overwhelming need and grief and loss. Nothing so humbling as being one person faced with such overwhelming resilience and faith on the part of survivors. Nothing so humbling as being one person faced with the goodness and generosity of so many desiring to help. Nothing so humbling as being human faced with the power of Nature.

Back in Manila, I hold my children close to me. There is no time like Christmas, no time like the aftermath of Sendong, to remember what is most important in life.