**Service-learning: Bridging the gap between classroom instruction and ground reality**

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**Abstract**

Stuti was part of a five-member delegation from her college to an international conference and service-learning program, Learning From Yolanda: Disaster Response, Community Resilience and the Role of Asian Universities organized in response to Typhoon Haiyan by the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia in collaboration with five universities in the Central Philippines, namely, Central Philippine University, University of St. La Salle, Silliman University, Filamer Christian University and St. John’s College, in the Visayas region of the Philippines from June 28 to July 11, 2014. The contingent was led by Dr. J. Sasitha, Head of the Department of Sociology, Stella Maris College, Chennai, India. The objective of this program was to offer the participants an insight into the disruptive effects of a natural disaster on community life and to provide them with an opportunity to participate in the rebuilding and restorative efforts that follow. In this piece, Stuti reflects on her experience of volunteering at a shelter complex in Estancia, Philippines through her interactions with those displaced by the typhoon.

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I can recollect the first time I came across the news of Typhoon Haiyan: on a morning very much like any other, while reading the day’s newspaper. “Typhoon Haiyan kills over 1000 in Philippines,” the headline read.1 The report that followed described the resultant death and devastation, and the relief efforts being undertaken. I read it, feeling quite shocked at the scale of damage, before rushing out for a morning class. While considering the headline during my walk to class, I thought of Susan Sontag’s book, On Regarding the Pain of Others, a thought-provoking meditation on modern life. In the context of her study of wartime photographs, Sontag speaks of the great distinction that lies between the reality of war as experienced firsthand and the perception of those who only observe and respond to the images of war. Dwelling on the representations of atrocity, she argues that, depending on the context in which they are being viewed, photographs often confer upon reality an altogether different meaning. In his review of Sontag’s book, Peter Conrad from The Observer asked a resonating question: In our culture of spectatorship, have we lost the power to be shocked?2 I argue that perhaps we have. Of the remainder of the day on which the news and images of Haiyan first reached me, I do not remember anything. Within a month, barring an occasional reference or two, Haiyan was out of international news. I cannot claim that it was on my own mind for much longer than that.

We can extend Sontag’s observations to the context of our current education system. Given its excessive reliance on classroom instruction, I began to wonder about the extent to which this system contributes to Conrad’s “culture of spectatorship”. Within the relative comfort and security of the four walls of a classroom, reality is communicated far removed from its actual context. These transmitted words and images at best convey only a partial meaning; in turn, they endow the recipient with only an imperfect understanding. The truth then is this: between traditional classroom experience and a near-accurate understanding of reality, a void lies waiting.

This is where, I believe, service-learning programs which seek to combine formal instruction with the opportunity to serve in the community assume importance. Nearly eight months after first reading about Typhoon Haiyan, I found myself as part of a delegation to an international conference and service-learning program, titled Learning from Yolanda: Disaster Response, Community Resilience and the Role of Asian Universities organized in Panay and Negros islands by the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia. The aim of the program was to help a contingent of international students and teachers learn about the processes of renewal and recovery from the trauma of a disaster, and to give them an opportunity to contribute their bit to the process. After a two-day conference followed by a day-long orientation program on the beautiful green campus of the Central Philippine University – a locally declared tourism site with parks, gardens and open spaces – we set out for a seven-day sojourn among people with whom we had never before crossed paths. In total we encompassed 12 groups of service-learners, and 12 host communities. Our aim was to observe, to understand, to learn, and wherever possible to lend a helping hand.

Having never been part of anything similar before, I arrived not knowing what to expect. Forced out of the familiarity of my own life into unfamiliar terrains, both geographically and mentally, I experienced a sensation quite akin to landing on another planet. What I returned with, in addition to several enriching experiences, was the awareness that classroom education informs, but service-learning educates by helping us to transcend the state of being a mere spectator to being part of the situation itself.

In the process it imparts us not just with an in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon at hand but also with valuable lessons on empathy and understanding, teaching us to reach out –not merely with our hands but also with our hearts.

Memories of our first day of work among those displaced by the typhoon still remain fresh in my mind. It is 11:20 in the morning. A scene composed of several smaller images greets us: in front of a row of wooden houses, children play, and their shouts and laughter fill the air. In one corner, under a tarpaulin sheet, a small group of women sit huddled around a big table. In the clear, blue, infinite sky overhead, the summer sun shines strong and bright: a glaring Cyclops. You cannot see the ocean, but you can sense its presence. Straining our ears, we hear the warm, briny air carrying the rhythmic sound of waves falling on the shore.

This is Estancia, a municipality in the province of Iloilo in the Philippines. These
women and children are among those who have been rendered homeless by Typhoon Haiyan. The wooden houses, evocative of Pete Seeger’s *Little Box*, constitute the shelter complex the government has assigned them.

“… they are all made out of ‘ticky tacky And they all look just the same.”

The UN estimates that more than 4 million people remain homeless due to Haiyan, or Yolanda, as it is referred to in the Philippines. The National Disaster Risk Reduction & Management Council (NDRRMC) estimates the total cost of damage at Philippine Peso 89,598,068,634,88. Here, statistics take on human form: numbers seldom tell the whole story.

The shelter complex bustles with activity: people going about their domestic chores, clothes being washed, pots and pans being cleaned, soil being tilled for a kitchen garden. Several *sari-sari* stores are doing a brisk business; children play at their games. Amidst all these, under the makeshift tarpaulin sheet shelter, a meeting is in progress. In the wee hours of the morning, when the sun has yet to ambush the night, the men go out into the ocean to cast their nets, we are told. Life goes on.

Located along the Pacific Ocean’s “Ring of Fire” and surrounded by bodies of water, the Philippines is no stranger to natural disasters. From typhoons to tsunamis, volcanic eruptions to earthquakes, the country has seen it all. Nobody had imagined Haiyan to be any more devastating than any of the other 20 or so typhoons the Philippines is no stranger to. The extra heat will lead to an inevitable increase in the severity of storms. The Philippines, which is the first landmass that typhoons encounter on their usual track landfall.

What must it have felt like? The question remains unasked, unanswered. What these facts translate into, in terms of the typhoon’s impact on the lives of the people, becomes evident to us on the sultry afternoon when we meet 60-year-old Ananio Putashio. In a clear, quiet voice she recounts her losses: the house; the fishing boats; the animals – pigs, poultry; all of her material belongings.

We are stunned into silence: this is a lot to take in. Eventually, the conversation resumes.

Many a typhoon have been witnessed and experienced by Ananio during her lifetime. She could not imagine Haiyan would be any different. But there was something very unusual about November 8, 2013.

First there was wind, coming in strong violent gusts. Then there was water: at around 10 p.m. on November 7, the first rains from Haiyan started pouring down. In the early hours of November 8, the typhoon hit with full force. In a matter of minutes the ocean water began surging in, ready to devour all. Typhoons usually bring high winds but rarely mountainous waves; this was not the case with Haiyan. Ananio and her family ran out of their house to the safety of a small hill nearby. Two hours later when the rain stopped, the reality of her life had been entirely re-written: house gone; livelihood gone; a lifetime of accumulations, loves, thoughts, hopes – all gone.

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Reasons behind the recurrence of such natural disasters continue to be explored and researched. Many climatologists have held climate change responsible for Typhoon Haiyan. According to Professor Will Steffen, a former director of the Australian National University Climate Change Institute, there exists a clear link between Haiyan and a warming world. Typhoons, hurricanes and all tropical storms draw their vast energy from the warmth of the sea. Therefore, rising sea-surface temperatures have a direct influence on the nature of storms. New research suggests that the Pacific Ocean is warming possibly at its fastest rate in 10,000 years. When released into the atmosphere, the extra heat will lead to an inevitable increase in the severity of storms. The Philippines, which is the first landmass that typhoons encounter on their usual track westwards from the mid-Pacific, is always the first to face extreme events. Haiyan is the third superstorm to strike the archipelago in a year.

Walking along the shore, the deep, sapphire waters of the Pacific Ocean look so calm, so peaceful, so incapable of evil that it requires a fair stretch of the imagination to think of the havoc it unleashed only a few months ago. 45-year old Noël, one of the residents of the shelter complex, tells us that the speed of recovery in most parts of the Philippines has been quite incredible, but efforts are far from over. Physical evidence lives on to tell the tale: trees ripped from their roots, buildings without roofs, broken schoolroom windows, piles of wood stacked where houses once stood. There is a sudden disappearance of familiar landmarks, but a gradual obliteration of cultural history and memory.

But personal memories are strange things in that they endure. Memories of the good as well as the bad linger. A poignant example of the emotional toll that natural disasters can and do take on those affected comes in the form of an interview with Noël, who tells us about the utter helplessness he felt as he stood watching his house – the one he called home – getting washed away into the ocean. He narrates to us the terror he experienced on seeing those huge waves coming in one after the other – one receding, another rising. We listen on as he tells us about the fear invoked in him by the deep roar of the wind and the eerie silence afterwards; about the shock he experienced from the sight of corpses scattered along the coast, of trees strewn across roads, of ships washed ashore, of mountains of rubble everywhere, of farmlands reduced to lakes of brown mud; about the profound sadness he felt at the sound of children’s cries through nights; about how weak and exhausted he had grown from having to survive on water alone for a week before help was to arrive. All these and a great deal more Noël remembers. There is a lot that he has to come to terms with, he tells us. A surge of grief overwhelm us.

A tragedy, however, is never the story of just a day; it is also the story of the days and months afterwards. This we realize as we hear about how even after 8 months, when it has long gone out of international news, Haiyan continues to shape the lives of the people. 31-year old Raeia recounts the overwhelming uncertainty that has suddenly gripped her life. Having lost his boat to the ocean, her fisherman husband has now taken up the work of carrying fish to the market. Concerns about providing for their four children, which had never featured among their worries before, now haunt them night and day. In another six months they will have to arrange for their own accommodation, as the present one has been allotted for a period of only a year. Added to this problem are concerns of space constraints, water shortages, occasional fights among neighbors, ailments that arise from living in cramped quarters, and above all, deep down in their heart of hearts, the fear of losing this shelter too to nature’s wrath. And from all these arises the question: how do we start again?

At a makeshift day care center we are greeted by a bunch of cheerful toddlers. On rainy nights they still cry themselves to sleep, their mothers tell us.

But despite all this, the Filipino spirit shines. Even in the face of overwhelming grief, they smile. Ever kind, always helpful, and never unwilling to engage in friendly chatter, one finds no dearth of kind faces. Even in the face of overwhelming grief, they smile. Even in the face of overwhelming grief, they smile. Even in the face of overwhelming grief, they smile. Even in the face of overwhelming grief, they smile. Even in the face of overwhelming grief, they smile. Even in the face of overwhelming grief, they smile.
but also of the days and months after as they struggled to get back on their feet. Once during a late afternoon visit to a school in Botongon, one of the worst affected areas, in the last rays of the setting sun, a graffiti scribbled across a classroom wall caught our eye. It read: NOTHING CAN DESTROY US, summing up perfectly well, we thought, what the Filipino spirit embodies: a powerful lesson for all of humankind on the resilience of the human spirit and the invincibility of the human mind.

Disasters – natural or anthropogenic – pose a great challenge to local leadership and the pace of recovery often rests on its efficiency. Nowadays is it more evident than in the case of Haiyan, where we witnessed firsthand the significance of community leadership in dealing with the aftermath of a calamity. Condemnations of slow government action in the relief effort in response to the typhoon surfaced in media reports soon after the storm is over. The government has also been criticized for its apparent lack of preparation and for its failure to effectively facilitate coordination among its agencies during the aid operation. Yet one cannot help but feel amazed at the rapidity with which the Filipinos seem to have sprung back on their feet. Throughout our interactions, stories of survivors coming together in an expression of solidarity to help each other rebuild their lives kept emerging, underlining the importance of bottom-up mobilization in combating the effects of disaster and of social cohesion in nurturing resilience to tragedy. The traits of openness, freedom of expression, flexibility, strong family orientation and a spirit of communal unity that characterize their culture infuse Filipinos with a rare strength which surfaces as that resilient spirit which aids them during times of catastrophe. Our interactions, stories of survivors coming together in an expression of solidarity to help each other rebuild their lives kept emerging, underlining the importance of bottom-up mobilization in combating the effects of disaster and of social cohesion in nurturing resilience to tragedy. The traits of openness, freedom of expression, flexibility, strong family orientation and a spirit of communal unity that characterize their culture infuse Filipinos with a rare strength which surfaces as that resilient spirit which aids them during times of catastrophe. Our initial apprehensions about this journey being one in which we would tread only territories of grief and loss are soon replaced by the lesson that tragedies are not just about grief and mourning but also about optimism and camaraderie.

Our final day of volunteering at the shelter complex was a particularly gritty, scorching day. Post-lunch we decided to go outside, or it could have just been put up: we may never know. Adorning the entrance of one of the houses was a wind chime, the metal rods suspended from a tiny wooden model of a boat on the mast of which are engraved in black the words: GOD BLESS OUR HOME.

“...And then the fling of hope, the finding of a shadow Earth in the implications of enfolded time, submerged dimensions, the pull of parallels, the deep pull, the spin of will, the hurl and split of it, the fight. A new Earth pulled into replacement...”

We pause to think. We never speak of people as being houseless, but always as being homeless. What is home anyway? Is it something more than a house? What is it that makes a house home? Is it the people who reside in it, the things that grace it, or the memories that accumulate from years of living in it? Here, where we are, people have lost all that to them had been familiar; most things that had been dear and beloved had left them. How long, then, would it take them to build a home? We ponder these questions, here at this shelter complex, where leaving and living coexist. We mull over several possibilities, as answers elude us.

Two days later we leave the Philippines, unsure whether we will ever come back, but certain in the knowledge that we shall carry the impressions of the past two weeks in our heads and in our hearts all our lives. We realize that we are going back with several valuable lessons – lessons on the frailty and fragility of the human body and at the same time lessons on the invincibility of the human mind and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming grief – all of which, we trust, will last us a lifetime and beyond. We realize that we are going back a mere 15 days older but several experiences richer and numerous emotions fuller; we know that we are returning with answers, but more importantly with questions we could spend a lifetime answering.

And therein, I believe, lie the merits of service-learning programs. Facts and figures imparted through classroom education no doubt build our stock of knowledge and endow us with an awareness of the different facets of the reality around us, but service learning programs help bring textbook knowledge and news information from the realm of the impersonal to the personal, thereby functioning as a bridge between perception and insight. As a result what had once been distant ceases to remain so, and in the process understanding and empathy are born.

Looking back, I realize that the program made it possible for us to not be just tourists looking on hardship from a comfortable place outside, but to be guests in our host communities. It helped us to strive, in our own little ways, to become part of the community and leave something behind: a house painted, a patch of land tilled, children taught, health care given, a patient ear lent. What it enabled us was to do a bit more than sighing, mourning, feeling helpless and moving on; it helped us to pause and share our humanity across cultures, languages, geographies, and life circumstances, for therein lies the seeds of compassion and the possibility of healing.

While reminiscing of his childhood days, Noel narrated how his fisher folk parents had taught them that the ocean always gives back all that it takes away. He lives in the hope that one day it will. We hope so too.

Acknowledgements

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Reference:

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.