

Whatever gets us through Christmas - Filipinos and the pandemic

Tuesday 22 December 2020, by [DAVID Randy](#) (Date first published: 21 December 2020).

The title of this column is inspired by John Lennon's 1974 No. 1 single "Whatever Gets You Thru the Night." I have learned that he himself picked up this line from a black televangelist, Reverend Ike, who, one evening, was telling his late-night viewers: "Let me tell you guys, it doesn't matter, it's whatever gets you through the night." The exact sentiment comes out in Lennon's hit song thus: "Whatever gets you through the night/ It's all right, it's all right/ It's your money or your life/ It's all right, it's all right."

I think it succinctly captures the kind of pious assurance we must give ourselves as we anxiously attempt to recreate—amid so much uncertainty and isolation—the uplifting mood we associate with Christmas.

There won't be any large family gatherings, except maybe online (which is not the same). The malls, which have become the average Filipino's principal source of amusement and relaxation, will not be as festive or full as before. No actual exchange of gifts will happen, except perhaps indirectly through Grab, Lazada, or Shopee. Even UP's Lantern Parade will be virtual.

There won't be any office parties, no in-person gathering of longtime friends. No welcoming of balikbayan relatives from distant parts. No unhurried conversations at the ancestral dining table. No playing together of children and grandchildren of the same generation. No opportunity to get acquainted with new members of the clan. No real hugs, kissing, handshakes, or personal rites of benediction, respect, and recognition across the generations.

Zoom sessions simply won't fill the gap. For Christmas is when we're neither at work nor in school.

For most of us, the pandemic we are living through once existed only in movies, novels, science fiction, and historical accounts of past plagues. Today, in contrast to these simulacra, we find ourselves right in the middle of the real thing, or possibly just at its beginning, and no one can tell exactly when and how it is going to end.

Apart from the incalculable loss of lives not just to COVID-19 itself, but also to countless other illnesses and chronic health problems that have gone unattended, the world we know has been shattered by the economic devastation and social dislocation arising from quarantine restrictions and lockdowns. We have hardly begun to take stock of this unprecedented explosion of effects.

Some say, with scientific wonderment, that what we are going through may be thought of as an experiment in adversity and human resilience on a global scale. With careful documentation, this great unsettling pause might offer us important insights into how we react and survive, how we adjust or cope, or bend or break during a prolonged catastrophe.

Unlike the medical and economic consequences of this pandemic, it has not been easy to quantify and keep track of its mental and psychological effects on individuals and families. But, one thing is sure: At one point or other, almost all of us will be wrestling with doubts about our own or a loved

one's psychological well-being.

There will be many triggers for such self-checks: A death or an illness in the family, the loss of a job, the loss of one's bearings in a virtual school setting, the closure of a business, despair at seeing one's lifetime savings vanish, the inability to pay one's rent or mortgage, hunger—or the sheer thought of catching the virus and getting hospitalized, and, worse, waiting to die alone.

Lying awake in the middle of the night, I myself have sometimes wondered if the itching in my throat or the occasional coughing that interrupts my sleep might not be the onset of something dreadful. I consider myself fortunate to be living with members of my immediate family who will let me know if I'm not all right. I cannot imagine what it is like to adjust to pandemic restrictions while living alone.

I guess this is what the pandemic has done to many of us at a more profound level. The disruption has dissolved almost all the routines that make up our everyday lives. We find ourselves adrift in uncharted waters, not quite knowing how to keep going or what to do with the time we have. It may have been fun at the beginning when our thoughts were filled with prospects of finally finding some time to do anything and everything other than work. But soon we realize that we need to put some structure to our waking hours, and restore purpose to what we do.

That, perhaps, is what makes Christmas this year a particularly tough moment for many of us. This season has always been for us Filipinos the most important time for communal sharing and celebration. It marks the end of the year, for which we express gratitude, and the prelude to another year, to which we look with hope. How do we get through this year's Christmas without being overwhelmed by the deep awareness of something missing?

In the David clan, my sister Leila has always cooked the Christmas Day breakfast, lunch, and dinner for all of us. It is one of the rituals that have kept all 13 siblings and our respective families tightly-knit. But, this year, in observance of quarantine rules, there will be no gathering at the old house in Betis. Instead, my sister is sending each one of us our share of the family lunch.

It won't be the same. But, as the song goes—"It's all right, it's all right/ Do it wrong, or do it right/ It's all right, it's all right."

Merry Christmas, everyone!

Randy David

P.S.

• "Whatever gets us through Christmas". December 20, 2020 :
<http://www.randydavid.com/2020/12/whatever-gets-us-through-christmas/>

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