

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Circle of Life

Gilda Cordero-Fernando

Philippine Studies vol. 53, no. 2&3 (2005): 290–294

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Circle of Life

GILDA CORDERO-FERNANDO

Watching a parent growing old, one suddenly realizes what “life is a circle” really means. It hit me outside a U.S. department store when I overheard an exasperated young man telling his grandmother: “Now you stay there. Don’t you go wandering around or I’ll have a hard time finding you. It will take me only five minutes to buy that glue I need and I want to find you right there. So just stay right where you are, okay?” All it lacked was the bribe of a red balloon and one would have believed it was a three-year-old the fellow was addressing.

First it is forgetting things. One has to repeat over and over to the aging person— “the car is in the repair shop, that’s why we can’t go out.” Or “You just drank your medicine a while ago.” Or “We can’t visit her. Don’t you remember? Mrs. Molina died last year.”

The aging parent loses many things—ID cards, keys, glasses, wallet. After several particularly painful losses, the aging person expresses a desire to be relieved of day-to-day responsibilities. One offspring takes over the taxes, the insurance, and the rent collection. She is happy enough to get a fixed allowance. She looks to the new manager for decisions and advice on everything from what to put on her thinning hair to how to treat the relative who won’t talk to her.

Like a toddler, the old man’s judgment of spaces is poor. He stumbles often. His cane is his walking aid just like the toddler’s is his walker. His children keep telling him not to cross the street alone, but once in a while he will manage to dash triumphantly across, unaccompanied, holding up his cane as if to part the Red Sea (while the jeepneys collide).

One day he is (or is almost) sideswiped by a car or slips in the bathroom. From then on he is assigned a *yaya* or a houseboy to accompany him wherever he goes. (He resents this, so the houseboy has to trail *lolo* ten feet away). The senior citizen becomes petulant, like a four-year-old, sulking because his daughter or his wife is “always scolding” him. “Ang tigas ng ulo,” people around him complain.

Finally he has one friend left. All the others have featured in the obituary page, the only part of the newspaper the old man still turns to. The passing of each friend deteriorates him greatly. Soon he won’t eat meat, just boiled fish, mashed potatoes, soft stuff, and eventually only gruel and milk. He loses most of his teeth and his hair, becoming, in the end, as toothless and bald as a newborn babe.

One day the old man is too weak or too sick to get up. Like an infant he lies in bed all day. He has to be cleaned and spoonfed. He wets his pajamas. After a particularly disastrous incident, one helpful relative suggests that they put a diaper on *lolo*.

If a young child talks to imaginary playmates or spirit beings one can’t see, so a person close to death sees the departed relatives and friends who “have come to fetch him.” The inner world, the world of the invisible, becomes a reality again. He sleeps longer and longer, waking up only for his milk or juice. One day he curls up in a foetal position and sleeps forever.

Birth is going through a canal into the harsh light of day. Death, we’ve heard people say, who have been close to it and come back, is passing through a long dark tunnel and coming into the light of another dimension. A baby, they say, comes from heaven; a dying person, they say, is going back to heaven.

One observes that *lola*’s hardest old-age years are 70 to 80 when she is rebelling against the slipping of memory, the loss of concentration, the adjustment to a deteriorating body. The leaving behind of knowledge, one observes, is just as difficult as the entry into it. Until she one day realizes that the information she has stored is slowly turning into wisdom. Now, people are attracted to the senior citizen, no longer for her looks, but for her experience which has made her a respected adviser.

The childhood years, roughly from 1 to 14, are the body years, devoted to growth and discovery. In the early years, the outside world is vast, full of wonders, beyond comprehension. God lives in the sky

and the rain is God's tears. Clouds are cotton candy. Thunder is someone bowling up there. To the mature person, the world beyond this one is also full of wonders and the unfathomable. Does he see a hierarchy of angels and saints up there as in the Renaissance paintings? And as with the child, the old person feels that God is back again within.

By seven years old, the child has begun schooling. She hates the discipline of having to rise early, getting into a uniform, and sitting at a desk. It is difficult to remember all those words and numbers. Just as difficult as it is for an old lady to accept that she is leaving behind (forgetting) the knowledge she has accumulated. Later the old person realizes that she is entering an exciting new phase where the learnings are not material but spiritual. She becomes just as happy as the little girl who discovers that the world of books and numbers opening to her is not bad at all.

If one takes an earlier segment of the life cycle, the teenage years, one soon realizes that its counterpart is middle age. Both are crisis periods. In both, the physical security and identity offered by the family set up (the original one and the family one has produced) are being questioned. There is a glimmering awareness of freedom, a sense of self, and the possibility of choices.

At the same time, the teenager feels lost. She carries her I'm-a-victim-of-my parents baggage, and so is searching for her true "home." She craves an identity and finds it in a group. They wear the same clothes, like the same music, have the same idols, speak their own private language. Like some kids, she may experiment on drugs and get hooked.

The teenage girl meets other young people. Boys. Who is Mr. Right? She finds him in the bowling alley or the university canteen or a rock climbing event. Soon they realize they're in love.

During his crisis years, the middle aged man feels just as lost as the teenager. He has reached the peak of his powers and there's nowhere to go but down. Time is running out. He has a comfortable and predictable home life. He is sick of the rat race. He is bored.

He enters midlife like a young boy entering adolescence. He grows his hair long (or short) depending on the fashion, and wears loose or tight shirts (or pants). In contrast to the young man who tries so hard to look older than his years, the middle aged man does his darnest to look younger than his age. Like the teenager, he suddenly needs and enjoys the company of young girls (or just another woman).

One day, forgetting that he has an old wife at home, the middle-aged teenager falls madly in love. He lavishes his love object with gifts. They have long phone calls. They tryst. Like a teenager he steals out of the house and from his disapproving wife whom he now treats like a strict mother (horrors, calling her "mama" has become a reality!). The angrier his wife gets the more hopelessly in love he becomes.

The love peaks. He questions the commitment issue. It is breakdown or breakthrough. If the marriage has always been rocky, he may opt to bail out and start a new family. If the marriage has been fairly satisfactory, he may repent, go through the marital storm and stay with his old wife. It is destroy or transcend.

If a shift in consciousness triggered the rebellion (against security and accomplishments of his material world), desires of another sort now emerge. These are an undefined longing for a spiritual home, peace, faith, acceptance, unconditional love.

Eventually it is plateau time again. He struggles to adjust to his new wife or to his old one who has gone through an upheaval and isn't about to take anything more sitting down. Years after the recommitment it is still shaky ground, adjustment time all over again, just as in a new marriage.

Then a time comes when the old couple realize that they are over the hump—they have passed the crisis of middle age! There is no more question about it—they will live through many anniversaries, in sickness and in health, through poverty and riches, through crankiness and boredom, until death do them part. They realize that even if they can't stand each other they can't live without each other, which may be just another definition of love.

For the repressed Filipino female, the second adolescence comes much, much later—sometimes when their mates are gone. One of the socially accepted forms it takes is the ballroom dancing session with hired dance instructors. The old girls enjoy dressing up and being squired by their young DIs. They get the attention that they miss from their old or dead husbands. It is like a real date, only this time the guy doesn't pay, the girl does. They dance. They flirt. Sometimes they fall in love. When a matron goes overboard, gifting her partner with the departed husband's Italian shirts or that extra car in the garage, all her friends gossip about her just as if she were a "fast" teenager.

The real teenager, on the other hand, now done with college, has become a young adult. He has a brand new job and what promises to

be a bright future. He has had a steady girl for some years, also finished with her degree. He is thinking of marriage. Will he be able to support a wife? A family? He has to make a decision. It is breakdown or breakthrough.

The meeting point of young adulthood (teenage and above) and mature adulthood (35 to middle age) is marriage. (Unless they decide it's not.) Young adulthood then progresses toward the commitment cycle of family and career, the embodiment of personal power, freedom, and choices. The period is creative—the birthing of family, the building of name and reputation. They are survival years. Nose to the grindstone, focused on the job, and on the raising of children, one is too busy to wonder whether he/she is happy. The growth of career and family continues into adulthood. Then the cycle declines. It becomes a search for wholeness and peace.

What part of the circle does early adolescence and its puppy love correspond to? But, of course, second childhood! With his children too busy making their place in the sun and the grandchildren in school all week, lolo, in his dotage, falls in love with his nurse, yaya, cook.

Everyone is much amused with lolo's love affair until one day, the old man declares that he is going to marry his nurse/yaya/cook. (Much like five-and six-year-olds declaring they will marry their mama/papa.) His children are suddenly up in arms. "But you're too old to get married!" they lash at him cruelly, just as in an earlier segment of his life his parents may have told him, "But you're too young to marry!" "Can't you see she's only after your money? She'll soon run off with some young fellow!" If the old man is determined, of course, he marries her anyway, with his children as the reluctant sponsors.

Just as there are precocious children who walk and talk early, there are old people who walk unaided, talk lucidly, see clearly, and have active sex lives well into their dotage.

Late adult to the grace years, the last part of the circle, are the soul years. A sense of tranquility follows acceptance and surrender to the reality of death and life. This may bear fruits of wisdom for some, regret and unforgiveness for others. But with the resignation to things that one can no longer change, of maybe not having become as successful, as rich, as popular or loved as one wanted to be, comes a satisfaction very like happiness.