

Abstract

What makes us who we are? What makes us pursue social development advocacies and live a life of responsibilities? This article is about the life journey of Fleur de Lys Castelo-Cupino. This is an article edited by the author for the A Response Resource Library from that published in the College of Social Work and Community Development (CSWCD), University of the Philippines on the book project: 45 stories for 45 years of CSWCD. It is an autoethnography of a life as a social development worker and an advocate of responsible and sustainable societies.

Key words: life story, social development, autoethnography

My Life Journey by Fleur de Lys Castelo-Cupino
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I am a woman, a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend.
I am a social development worker, an educator,
an environmentalist, a woman advocate...

Growing Up

My earliest memory is happily living with in extended family that included my maternal grandparents, uncles, aunties and cousins in a compound in Quezon City. Churchgoing and Sunday school in a Methodist Church were part of our family traditions. Despite being a Methodist, my mother enrolled me in Catholic elementary schools. The differences in Methodist and Catholic practices and beliefs confused me a bit. But the good outcome is that I learned to respect and be tolerant of the beliefs of others. When I was in Grade 4, I encountered an intellectual and spiritual question that haunted me for many years. I saw the contradiction in the religious belief that God loved all of humanity and yet, only those who believe in God can go to heaven. I wondered what would happen to the millions of non-Christians? How can God show them love if they could not go to heaven? That question was answered in my late adult years by a priest-mentor, Mon. Manny Gabriel, who explained that it is the life we live – Christ-like – that matters in gaining God's grace. It is also a question answered by Pope Francis when he said that atheists who lead a good life may enter God's kingdom.

In early schooling, I also experienced how a foreign nun would humiliate a Filipino nun, or how a teacher would humiliate a student who failed to do an assignment. These experiences made me aware that religious institutions are built by people and as such, may be fraught with human failings here and there. I also learned to be critical of authority. I learned to look at people and events and weigh them in accordance with values taught in family and Church.

In general, however, learning and school always fascinated me. I enjoyed the intellectual challenges. In my upper years in elementary school, I read in the newspaper's headline something about martial law. I went to social studies class and asked what martial law meant but my teacher was clueless. So I learned to be resourceful and seek knowledge outside of the confines of classroom.

I lived in an upper middle class neighborhood. I played with neighbors under the moonlight and climbed trees with them. We spent many summers together. But just a turn away is a block of homes of “squatter” families – informal settlers, slum dwellers, those whose house is built on another’s property. The socio-economic difference among the families in the neighborhood did not escape me. I also became aware of the socio-economic divide because my father, a grassroots politician, would regularly bring me to poor communities during fiestas (local festivals) or meetings or as part of his minding us for the day, and I just knew and felt that the people in these communities were quite “apart” from the social world I grew up in.

Actually, it was my father also who allowed me to live more closely with the economically disadvantaged. He enrolled me in a public school and I accepted this as a challenge. The difference between my socio-economic status and that of my classmates and schoolmates was apparent because I was the only student who went to school in a car. I was a shy and quiet student but I knew that I had to survive four years in this new school with classmates from a culture different from mine. I tried to overcome my shyness and in a certain way, I became one of them, having developed close friendships along the way. I became aware of their way of life, I saw poverty up close. It was an experience that my father explains why I later became a social activist.

As I started high school in 1971, student activism and the renewed movement for nationalism and democracy was at its peak. The next year, martial law was imposed by President Ferdinand Marcos to extend himself in power. But I was protected from the social unrest and I was ignorant of the harshness of Marcos rule. Perhaps this was because my sources of information were the newspapers and television which were controlled by government during martial law, and my parents who were government officials and pro-Marcos. Even in school, the discussions on martial law were not critical of the regime perhaps because it was a public school which had to tow the official line. So I was exposed more on the gloss than on the flaws of Marcos rule.

Even when I went on to study in UP for my college degree, the atrocities of martial law did not dawn on me immediately! I saw student activists protesting against high tuition fees and against martial law but I was afraid of their unruly nature. So I just turned my face away and focused on my mission to get a degree.

Actually, I was somewhat lost in the big university. I applied and was accepted to the BS Psychology program because I wanted to understand people but my mother discouraged me. So I shifted to Statistics but found no meaning in cold numbers. I really wanted to work with people, so I shifted again to Community Development but eventually graduated from the course, Social Work in CSWCD.

I sought spiritual bearings to help me through university life. The UP Student Catholic Action (UPSCA) welcomed me and I was able to build deep friendships and find a second home in the organization. UPSCA gave me an opportunity to integrate among the rural poor as part of its social conscientization program, in a Dumagat community in Antipolo. Together with a team of seven, I lived there one semestral break and one week in the summer. One year after, UPSCA also allowed me to integrate in a church-based urban poor program in Punta, Sta. Ana, Manila.

My UPSCA journey took a more political turn when we had a group discussion with the mother of Fr. Edicio dela Torre, a rebel priest imprisoned during that period. I also came into direct contact with police brutality when we organized a night with community leaders from the rural communities where

UPSCAs integrated during school breaks. We informed the UP Police about this activity expecting support and protection but in return, the police raided our activity and arrested some students and community leaders. It was only then that I came face-to-face with the harshness of martial law.

My stint in UPSCA and my studies in the CSWCD, that included two semesters of field exposure in rural or urban poor communities, politicized me. My spirituality took a political and social dimension. My religiosity assumed a concrete expression. UP and in particular, the CSWCD, introduced me to the intellectual discussions on politics and society while UPSCA introduced me to the theology of liberation, to a living Church that addresses the needs of the poor.

From Social Development to Social Activism

I graduated from college in 1979. Martial law was still at its height, approaching its seventh year. People were no longer afraid or quiet. The eerie silence that immediately followed the declaration of martial law when leaders of organizations, activists, media people, and Marcos' political opposition were arrested en masse was broken by the strike of La Tondeña workers in Tondo, Manila in October 1975, defying the strike ban imposed by martial law. By 1979, students, workers and other sectors of society boldly held protests, rallies and strikes calling for an end to the atrocities and dictatorial policies of martial law.

In the backdrop of this people's movement, I went out to embrace the world, turning down a scholarship in MA in Development Economics in UP's College of Economics. I co-founded with six other colleagues from the CSWCD the Organization for Training, Research and Development Foundation, Inc. (OTRADEV). Our first project was with the Mangyans of Mindoro. Prof. Flora Lansang was our mentor. In the mountains of Mindoro, we had to face the military who suspected that we were fronting for the New People's Army (NPA). In fact, we were not. Still, we earned the ire of the military but at the same time, the radicals did not look well on our work because we "did not effect real change and simply propped up the existing unjust system".

After four years of building OTRADEV, working in Mindoro and later among the fisherfolks of Laguna de Bay, and amidst the growing social discontent and street actions, questions formed in my mind. The change we were effecting in OTRADEV was too slow. I asked myself if community organizing was the real answer to empower the people. I considered the radicals' belief that without structural political and economic change, the lives of the majority will remain the same – impoverished, exploited and oppressed. During the same time, a friend's brother who was a member of the New People's Army (NPA) was killed in battle. This made me take another look at the radicals – who are these people and what are they fighting for? The "radicals" no longer are strangers shouting in the streets or people who looked down on us as reformists but assumed a human face - upper middle class, like me. I thought deep and hard: what made him offer his life to a cause?

It was then that I engaged in dialogue with people from the national democratic movement and after half a year of discussions, I was convinced that the movement was the correct path to change the status quo. I left OTRADEV to work among labor unions in Marikina. I was 25 years old when I joined the movement, where I spent the next 17 years my life. My involvement was well thought of, not a spur-of-the-moment decision of a young idealist. Just a month or so after I joined the movement, United States-

based oppositionist Ninoy Aquino was assassinated as he returned to the Philippines. There was no turning back for me now. During those years, I worked with the trade unions, the urban poor, the department store workers, and the jeepney drivers. I joined rallies, endless meetings, marches, and study sessions. I remember rallies being tear-gassed, rained with bullets, dispersed violently. I moved from one house to another to keep safe.

I learned a lot from the movement. The experience made me more sensitive to social issues; it made me more in touch with social realities. It made me feel good in the sense that I was doing something to change the lot of people. I did not simply stand by and live my own life. It gave me a sense of fulfillment. I met highly committed people. I also remember tender moments – sharing meals, protecting each other, singing and celebrating together.

It is in the movement where I met my husband, Bernie. He was a student leader who stopped studying to join the movement full-time. He lost one brother and one sister to the struggle for change. We are blessed with two children. Raising children while in the movement was a big challenge. I wanted to give them my all as a mother but I also wanted to give the same to the movement. I wanted to be a very good mother and a very good activist. After all, I was fighting for change so that my own children would benefit too. But finding a balance was so difficult, especially with the security situation. The leaders were often saying we had to sacrifice our personal happiness for the greater good of the Filipino people. I tried to embrace that idealism.

In 2000, I attended an international meeting of community leaders sponsored by the Inhabitants Alliance and the Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of Humanity (FPH). There I saw a number of creative initiatives being done by other groups and individuals from different countries. I realized that revolution is not the only option. There are many other programs being implemented that can truly help the people.

With that realization, together with my dilemma in raising my children, and the toll on my health, I left the movement soon after.

The Journey to live a Life of Responsibility Continues

By the time I left the revolutionary movement, the century has turned. It was the start of 2001. Social, economic and political problems still persisted. People were still mired in poverty and President Erap Estrada was being ousted from power. It was the age of globalization and information technology.

I involved myself in activities that would still define myself as a social development worker and give relevance to my life vocation in the service of people while allowing me to attend to the important responsibilities of being a mother and my own person.

I took up my MA in Women and Development in the CSWCD starting end of 2000 and completed the course in 2006. I felt at home in the same college where I completed by undergraduate course in Social Work. I also enjoyed my studies that helped me reclaim and be proud of my being a woman. (In the movement, I worked with many male colleagues. In the process, I tried to be as macho as them. It was during my studies on women and development that I became the woman I proudly am.)

My thesis was on the life stories of women revolutionaries during the First Quarter Storm and I saw how they passionately assumed responsibilities to family, community, nation and humanity.

It was during this time (2001) that I got involved in setting up a high school that started as an extension school of St. Joseph's College of Quezon City. It is a school designed to serve the lower middle class – children who would otherwise have gone to the public school were it not for an affordable tuition fee. I was the founding Executive Director and since 2009, I head one of the schools in San Mateo, Rizal. The school is an expression of my social development advocacy. Through the school, I try to marry the best of both worlds – education and social development, enriched by my being a woman and living out a spiritual life. Education is a window to continue my community and social advocacies. To be more attuned to the needs of the school in the larger context of social development, I decided to take up a PhD in Educational Psychology, completing in 2015. My dissertation is on Martial Law Activists: Teaching and Learning between Mothers and Children.

In December 2001, I attended the Citizens Assembly hosted by the Alliance for a Responsible and Plural World and FPH. In 2002, I was invited to be a part of a group that was an offshoot of this assembly – the Charter of Human Responsibilities that evolved into the Forum on Ethics and Responsibilities and currently, the Alliance for Responsible and Sustainable Societies (A-Response). Since then, I had been involved in the promotion of the Charter of Human Responsibilities (CHR). Our group believes that beyond claiming rights, people should also exercise responsibilities. In 2006, we formed a Philippine group, the Charter of Human Responsibilities Philippine Facilitation. Our team in the Philippines held two Youth Festivals (2006, 2007) and implemented local programs involving the youth to promote the concept and practice of responsibility. We also participated in a global program organized by the Brazilian government and FPH on Let's Take of the Planet in 2009. In 2014, we engaged in Global Citizenship Education. In 2016, we partnered with the Department of Education in producing a manual on Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction and Environmental Concerns. Our team is part of the Asian Solidarity Economy Council, a group promoting solidarity economy for people and planet.

As I journey on, I look back every now and then at how I have transformed as a person and as a woman. I am happy with the many paths I have chosen and I learned a lot along the way. I may have stumbled a number of times but the experiences became sources of personal and spiritual growth for me. Today, I feel I still have a lot to do and to know. I have a lot of responsibilities on my shoulders, which I assume with gladness in my heart. I still have a lot of questions I want answered and some dreams that may or may not come true in my lifetime. Life, full of joys and pains, continue. My life journey goes on as a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend, a work colleague, a social development worker, a student of life.