

Knocking, Incessant Knocking

By Melinda Bak | Philippine Islands

It was a sweltering night in 1979, without air-conditioning or a fan.

Tossing and turning in the oppressive stillness, I coped because I was head over heels in love. In love with a people and a place. Studying on this southernmost Philippine Island of Mindanao was a dream come true.

A dream, right up until the moment the knocking started.



Distant knocking.

Then,
incessant knocking.
"Silab! Silab!"

Searching my nascent vocabulary for a translation to the Cebuano word, I moved through the darkened room toward the sound.

Pulling back the white silken-curtains and peering into the night that glowed ominously orange, I saw smoke, inhaled smoke. It came to me then, Silab. Fire! Skin prickling with the encroaching heat, I was wide awake. Heading back in the direction of the flames, I yelled with a voice from somewhere deep and unfamiliar, a voice loud enough to wake the sleeping, "Get out! Get out!"

Together, eleven of us fled the tongues of fire already lapping the ceiling. Pajama-clad and covered in soot and ash, I and my host family stood bereft, penniless in the street. We watched and wept.

Wept with relief, that our lives had been spared. Wept with grief, when the piano fell from the upper story to the lower, wheezing a dirge of dissonant notes. Wept from the sting of smoke and senseless destruction.

It was the tip of a conflict that was still decades from washing up on American shores. Islamic forces had waged a jihad on this block of homes and businesses owned by Christians. And on this island, I was not only a witness to the callousness of insider-outsider thinking, but standing barefoot in the street, I heard firsthand the weeping, the jeering and the cheering; the ruthless religious rhetoric on both sides.

With a fearlessness that is forged only in hottest flames, I bring outsider understanding to insider thinking. I welcome dissonant voices to the conversation. And I knock incessantly against the door of dehumanization and genocidal justification, with a voice able to wake the sleeping. I tell the stories that create breakthrough, understanding; stories that deliver amidst the ash, what we need to rebuild.