

Death in the Promised Land

I wrote this as a memo to my colleagues from an Internet café in Manila on July 17, 2000, after spending the morning at Payatas, Philippines.

I was supposed to attend a meeting this morning but it was cancelled so I suggested to John, one of my former graduate students who is living and working in the Philippines, that we travel instead to Payatas, the scene of the garbage mountain slide that killed nearly two hundred people in Quezon City. Quezon City is John's home. The mountain fell last Monday morning at 7:30, just about the time that my plane was taking off from the Manila airport on the way to Cebu City. That happened a week ago.

The "Promised Land"

This morning, John and I took a taxi to Barangi Lupang Pangaka. (A Barangi is the Philippine equivalent of a county.) Lupang Pangaka is *Tagalog* for the "Promised Land." They piled Manila's garbage onto the Promised Land. This week, the people who had been living there died as a result of that decision.

The taxi dropped us off at a tricycle stand (tricycles are motorcycles with covered side cars—a primary mode of transportation in the poorest sections of Metro Manila). For a dollar, a tricycle driver took us to the community on the edge of the dump. I was staring straight ahead, looking for the dump. Not seeing it, I turned to the side and there it was, rising high above the landscape about a quarter of a mile away. The sun reflected off the garbage; it startled me. I remembered thinking that it felt like the first time that I saw the snow-capped peak of Mt. Kilimanjaro, which suddenly appeared in front of me above the East African plains.

We drove down the hill along side the dump, arriving in a small, crowded village at the base of the garbage mountain. We got off the tricycle and started walking down the narrow street—lined with ambulances, rescue vehicles and military trucks. We saw several cars with the names of different media outlets written on the side. A lone TV cameraman was filming the scene in the village. We picked our way carefully down the street. Every hundred feet or so we could see a narrow alley leading down to the dump. Several policemen stood or sat at the entrance to each. They nodded as we walked by.

The street curved to the right so we followed it since it appeared to lead closer to the garbage dump. Not knowing exactly what the protocol was, we simply picked one of the paths and followed it down to a clearing about ten to fifteen yards from the base of the dump. We stood and watched a backhoe (crawler, on tracks) dig through the garbage in front of us (about 50 feet away). After a few minutes, the driver stopped and the rescue team working along side the backhoe, walked toward the village. It was lunchtime.

We carefully walked down the slope to the base of the garbage heap about 15 feet below the point where we had been standing. The pungent smell in the air burned my nostrils—

it reminded me of old, rotting silage that has been disturbed. John said it smelled like a huge garbage truck. I looked around and realized that nearly everyone around us was wearing masks. In the distance, I could see a dog running back and forth across the garbage.

Garbage Mountain

The whole garbage mountain looked to me about the size of a city block. Newspaper reports said that it was the size of two soccer fields. No way. It was far larger than that. I had heard that the garbage mountain was seven stories high. At least. From where I stood at the foot of the garbage, it looked to me as if the area that had broken off and buried part of the town was at least twice the size of the Arts Quad at Cornell—though perhaps a bit longer.

I have seen the effects of mudslides in other places; that's exactly how it looked. It was as if part of the hill (which had been flat on top), had just broken off and slid away, covering everything and everyone in its path. It looked like black mud, dry on top but wet on the bottom. You could see strips of plastic—bags, sacks and the like—hanging down the edge of garbage cliff. Although I could see old tires mixed in with the garbage, if you were to ask me what the hill was made of, I'd have to say, "plastic."

There was what looked like a small stream about two feet wide and nearly a foot deep running along the crevice line where the garbage ended and the hill on the side where we were standing began. (It looked like a miniature gorge.) The water was black, reminding me of used oil draining from a car that had not been serviced for a long time.

The water formed a puddle about 10 yards long and four to five yards wide. Five boys (between five and seven years of age) played along the edge, tossing bottles into the water and trying to skip stones across the surface.

Lamberto

The village itself stood on a slight incline leading uphill, away from the garbage. We walked up the hill a few yards and stood under a small tree. Suddenly, I felt something hit my back. It startled me. Looking down, I could see that a small mango had fallen from the tree and landed on me. A man who appeared to be about 50 was sitting in silence under the tree, staring at the garbage mountain. He told us that his name was Lamberto. We asked him about the tragedy that had struck his village.

Lamberto told us that when he came to Lupang Pangako in 1987, the areas was covered with grass as far as the eye could see. No people. No city. No garbage. It was a valley—more like a basin, actually—in which you looked down from his house on the edge to a long flat bottom. In the early 1990s, someone decided to turn it into a garbage dump. Trucks dumped garbage on the other side of the basin. A caterpillar would come and flatten it out so that trucks could drive over it and dump more loads.

Slowly, the pile grew higher and higher. Soon, instead of going down the hill to dump their loads, the trucks had to start going up the hill. Gradually, the hill turned into a mountain; slowly it moved closer and closer until it towered seven stories over the village.

Before it fell on Monday morning, it looked like a mountain standing high above the community onto which it collapsed. Some of the houses along the main street of the village (at the top of the basin so they escaped unscathed) were made of concrete. At the bottom of the hill, however, most of them were shanties—wood frames with steel roofs and sides made of bamboo matting, plastic, cardboard or even cloth. (You could see similar houses that the garbage slide hadn't reached.) This looked like all the shantytowns I have seen from Calcutta to Port-au-Prince, from Nairobi to Ibadan and Monrovia.

The Origins of Lupang Pangako

Lamberto told us that when he moved to Lupang Pangako in 1987, it wasn't a place that anyone would choose to live. Unfortunately, some didn't have a choice so squatted here on city land. The community was poor with no jobs and no decent roads or public transportation to/from Quezon City. When people first moved here, gangs of criminals frequently held people up as they were walking home. According to Lamberto, it was not uncommon for men to arrive at home wearing only their underwear—having lost everything else to thieves they encountered along the way.

Several typhoons had swept by the Philippines during the previous two weeks, bringing heavy rains that caused flooding throughout the region. When I arrived in Manila on Saturday night, it was pouring rain. (My flight from Tokyo to Manila had to detour around a typhoon that had swept by the Philippines earlier in the evening as it moved north to the China coast.) On the way from the airport to my hotel, the taxi drove through low areas where the water ran across the road. These rains were probably what weakened the garbage mountain because 36 hours later on a sunny Monday morning, it collapsed.

Lamberto said that many people originally moved to the dump because there they could make a living recycling—picking up plastic, glass and metal. Recycling trucks regularly came to the village to buy these materials. A family could easily make 150 pesos (just over \$3) in one day of scavenging. Anyone with a job in downtown Quezon City would spend 40 pesos on transportation alone so that hardly makes commuting worthwhile.

The Mountain Falls

It started on Sunday evening. Someone first noticed that the stream of water running between the garbage mountain and the village was narrower than it had been before. Apparently nobody realized that the garbage mountain was compacting and spreading. At 7:30 on Monday morning, people heard what sounded like a low-flying plane. Lamberto told us that he had looked up at the sky but couldn't see anything. Then he turned south and saw that the garbage mountain had collapsed, sweeping over the community below his house. Others in the community thought that a helicopter was flying overhead.

You could hear people screaming, Lamberto reported. They were crying for help. Then there was dead silence. The garbage tumbled to within perhaps 20 feet of Lamberto's house, so he went out on to the pile and looked around. He found a woman who was partially buried so he dug her out.

Eerily, a large flock of pigeons circled overhead. Lamberto described it as a sight akin to that of a tornado. People assumed that when their nesting area was disturbed, the pigeons took flight, circling over what had been their homes.

The Recovery

As Lamberto told us his story, the rescue crew (actually by this time, it was a recovery team) came back to resume their work after lunch. The backhoe driver maneuvered his machine to the edge of the hill in front of us. From what I could tell, the backhoes (there were nine of them working today; apparently there had been more of them here earlier) started on the bottom edge of the pile. They were digging up the garbage and dumping it away from the hill. Scoop by scoop, they were literally moving the mountain. In this area, the backhoes would move a pile (right down to the ground at the bottom of the basin) and then drive over it. That way they could keep their machines off the ground under which bodies might still be buried.

The backhoe working near Lamberto's house stood on top of a twenty-foot pile. Since this pile had already been moved once, it was very unstable. I could see the ground (garbage, actually) move as the operator would swing his hoe around. At one point he stopped, put his shovel down and pushed himself sideways away from the edge of the hill. (It was a twenty-foot drop almost straight down.) I moved back from where I was standing because it seemed to me that if the ground gave way while the hoe was extended, it would have rolled over on us.

Three men (in addition to the operator) stood on the platform of the backhoe, all staring intently into the area where they were digging. Ten members of the rescue team (wearing orange jump suits, orange hard hats and cloth masks) stood quietly near the backhoe, watching carefully. The operator would take a bite with his hoe, swivel it 180 degrees and then slowly dump his load. Every time the backhoe took a bite of garbage, everyone stared intently into the hole. As the garbage slide out of the scoop, everyone watched in silence.

I found myself holding my breath until after the scoop was empty; then I would breathe again. Suddenly, the machine stopped and several rescuers pointed into the hole, talking urgently with each other. After a bit, the operator gently moved his scoop into position and lightly scraped some dirt aside. He then took a bite. I saw it too. However, when he emptied it, we all realized that it was just an old tire.

Whenever the operator was unsure of what he saw, he would scrape the fork of his scoop along the surface, barely disturbing the soil. Then he would dig a little deeper—always

watching, frequently stopping to check. I had never before thought of a backhoe as being “gentle,” but that was the word that came to mind as I watched this skilled operator maneuver his scoop.

Death in Payatas

Meanwhile, Lamberto told us about the people in his community. A nine-year-old boy had decided to spend Saturday night at his grandmother’s house in the upper part of the village. He was walking to his own home on Monday morning at the base of the village when he saw the mountain of garbage collapse on his part of the village. He turned and ran for his life, escaping up the hill. His parents and all five of his siblings died under the mountain. A minute or two earlier and he would have died with them.

A woman who was eight months pregnant woman sold pork in the community; she escaped the initial slide but then remembered that she had left her money in the house. She went back inside when a second slide enveloped her. Rescuers found her body alongside that of her dead baby, which had been forced out of her womb by the crush of the slide.

“Bicol Village”

One part of the community covered by the slide was called “Bicol Village,” named after one of the poorest provinces in the Philippines. The reason? The people living along that particular alley all came from Bicol. Some people without land in Bicol had few options so moved to Quezon City where they scavenged for garbage in Payatas. It seemed as if the poorest generally lived at the bottom of the hill, nearest to the garbage. Their houses were the first ones buried by the slide.

Shortly after the slide, Lamberto heard an explosion. He suggested that someone had probably been cooking breakfast at the time. It may have been some kind of fuel or possibly the methane gas released from the garbage. He didn’t know the origin of the explosion.

We said goodbye to Lamberto and then walked back toward the center of the village, where we took another alley down to the base of the garbage. There, across a small valley (perhaps 50 yards wide) between the ground on which we were standing and the garbage, I saw an incredible sight.

The Relay

Below me, I saw another pool of brackish water about four feet deep, 20 yards long and perhaps 10 yards wide. (This was several hundred yards “upstream” from where we had been standing before.) On the opposite side (from us) about six-eight feet above the water, I could see a crawler backhoe perched on a small ledge not much wider or longer than the machine itself. The operator reached down as far as he could reach (down to ground level about four feet below the water) and brought up a scoop of garbage. He then

extended his scoop up as far as it would reach and dumped his load—about 10 feet above his cab.

Twenty feet above this backhoe, I could see a second backhoe perched on another small ledge. The operator running this machine reached down, picked up the load from the first and lifted it 10 feet above his head. Above him on the edge of that garbage cliff (50-60 feet above the water), I saw a third backhoe that reached down, picked up the garbage from the second and lifted it to the top of the hill where he dumped it. A caterpillar then pushed it away. It was the most incredible relay that I have ever seen!

I saw the ground (garbage) shake as these machines worked. All I think of was what would happen if one of the three ledges gave way? It would bring down the mountain and bury all three backhoes. I can't believe that it hadn't happened yet, particularly when I could see the ground tremble. Downstream, the garbage had been wet but it held together. Here it was pure slush—black, slimy water ran out of the scoops as the operators maneuvered the booms.

Our side of the hill was lined with bystanders. At the moment that we were there, they were searching right in front of us for two houses that had been covered by the slide. Unlike most of the shanties that had been buried, both of these houses were made of concrete. We saw them bring up chunks of concrete held together by reinforcing rod. These houses had obviously been built before the mountain of garbage had encroached on that part of the valley.

The meaning of courage

I was stunned by the courage of the rescue and recovery team. I understood why they were approaching the task in the way that they were doing it, but they were clearly putting their own lives at risk to recover the bodies of missing villagers. I counted nine backhoes, some of which came from as far away as Subic (the former U.S. Navy base). Others had apparently already left the scene. Two caterpillars moved garbage at the top of the hill. Bystanders told us that they had found victims alive who had been buried two days. By now, however, they were only looking for bodies.

Less than 100 yards from this scene, in the upper part of the village in back of us, children played, boutique owners transacted business and teams of rescuers waited in the shade to take their turns on the mountain. A woman was washing dishes on the veranda of the "Living Bread Christian Tabernacle," which was obviously being used as part of the rescue efforts.

Will anything change?

The government has promised to aid the families displaced by the garbage slide, but for many it's too late. I keep wondering whether anyone will do anything about the basic conditions that caused this tragedy. Will anybody do anything about it after the last TV

camera leaves the community? After all, people are making money from garbage in the Promised Land.

Although the details were unclear, the son of the mayor in Quezon City had apparently leased the land (this is public land) on which Manila's garbage is being dumped. Drivers of garbage trucks pay the equivalent of a "tipping" fee to those controlling the dump, so this is lucrative business. Scavengers, Lamberto told us, don't want it closed either because recycling plastic, cardboard, glass and rubber tires is their only source of income.

I was mesmerized by what I saw. I stood in the hot sun—watching. There was nothing to say. As I stood there in silence, I was haunted by Lamberto's words, "I know that we all have to die but does it have to be like this?"

It will be a long time before I forget what I saw today.

Merrill