

Sun.Star Essay: At their smilingest

By Erma M. Cuizon

ONE time, I called up a city government office and someone answered, "Halo" like she had a hot potato in her tongue. I gave the name of the person I wanted to talk to and I said, "Please." There was no word from the other end; I wondered if I was cut off. Should I put down the phone or wait, or did I get a wrong number? A long while after, the person I asked to talk to came on the phone.

I guess no one smiled on the other end of that line.

A sister and her American husband love to laugh over an incident that showed some hotel personnel's bias for Caucasian guests. At one time, she and her husband crossed the wide hotel grounds to go to its small restaurant overlooking the city. She took her time in a slow walk to enjoy the tropical breeze she had missed in years while her husband walked ahead of her. They noticed a hotel boy hurrying across from the opposite direction. He greeted the husband with a wide smile and catchy "Good morning!" But when he passed by my sister, not knowing she was the wife, he showed a wry smile as she quickly glanced at her and away.

There are, of course, many kinds of smiles, as communication dynamics speaker Patti Wood puts it interestingly. She says there are, in a smile, over 80 facial muscles that move in 50 different types of smiles.

A smile isn't just in the position of the mouth and the muscles that move it; there are also the movements of the eyes, the quiet wrinkling and circling motions of the muscles around the pair. Then there's the brow, moving the way the muscles move it; most of all, there's the mouth that speaks or over-speaks without words.

But even more interestingly, there's a researcher on facial expressions, Paul Ekman, who says that there are over a dozen different positive emotions which evoke smiles.

If I go to an office at the Capitol, will I get a welcome smile?

It's a smile that Gov. Gwen Garcia ordered employees of the provincial government to give the public as part and parcel of Capitol service. (Even as the PNP head has put smile at the centerstage of recent trainings in an order which says, "Bawal ang nakasimangot!")

After the training for Capitol employees, they will surely come up with different smiles--from the plastic smile, to the embarrassed one, to the tired smile and, much later, to the true smile that ignites not just goodwill and friendship but a sense of personal reward.

Did our ancestors ever smile?

In the caveman's time, most likely there were no friendly strangers in a world intimidating for its size. A stranger entering a cave would send cave families into a panic, unless he came in smiling. And a lost stranger who has walked miles in a strange land and is about to drop at the mouth of the cave could still smile a tired smile or a smile which says, "Please put down that spear, I'm lost."

Not only is the smile part of the human being in terms of time (from the caveman's era) but also in terms of life--from birth. Wood says a 3-week-old baby can already smile as its expression of joy at his mother's touch and in the "visual clues" his eyes catch around him. The feeling in the child, or "the level of stimulation" in him, according to Wood, is like eating "2,000 chocolate bars or receiving \$15,000 in cash."

A smile is also profitable these days, in global tourism. Almost all countries are saying they're the smilingest.

Everybody in the world is trying to smile the widest, there's even a list that would reveal the friendliest, smilingest places. The World's Friendliest Nation list by Anholt-GMI Nation Brands Index (NBI) branded Australians as top, then recently updated the list with Canadians overtaking Australians after interviews of 25,000 people in 35 countries.

What does "friendliest" mean? They're quick to say, Hello, or they smile shyly, quietly, honestly?

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