Farewell to my Brother Max

JOSE MANUEL "BABE" ROMUALDEZ

The sudden departure of my dear friend Max shocked me no end, and to this moment I still have to get over the staggering fact. Still, I had to get myself together and write this about a man whom I have come to love and respect over the years that I have known him.

I first met Max Soliven thirty-five years ago at my wedding. He and his wife Precious were there, but even before that, I had already become acquainted with him during my school days at the Ateneo, at which the teachers would always talk about this remarkable journalist whose writings were a “must read.” Curious, I started reading Max Soliven and since then, have remained a fan of his articles, first at the Manila Chronicle, then at the Manila Times. I became fascinated by his writing style, which minces no words and does not hesitate, when the occasion warrants, to—if I may quote that oft-repeated phrase—“go for the jugular.” I filled with amazement over the breadth and depth of his knowledge, particularly in local and international politics and world history. His written pieces always served as storehouses of information, making reading them an always edifying experience.

Perhaps this is really no surprise, considering that Max spent many years as a foreign correspondent, traveling in his younger days to the hottest and most troubled spots on the globe, covering as a newspaper reporter a variety of world-significant events such as the Vietnam War, and arranging exclusive interviews with extraordinary people such as Chinese Premier Chou en Lai at the time when China first tested a nuclear bomb in Lop Nor in 1964. He has rubbed elbows with Kings and Presidents, mingled with rouges and heroes, renegades and soldiers. That’s why, when I actually met him for the first time, I was almost overwhelmed by his presence. Over the ensuing years he became one of my dearest and closest friends.

When Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972, Max was one of the journalists immediately arrested because his writing
at the *Manila Times* had become too abrasive for comfort. He was incarcerated along with Ninoy Aquino, and languish in prison for three months before he was finally released on probation. After his release, we invited Max Soliven to join us regularly at our Breakfast club at the Mandarin at a time when it was not fashionable to be seen with him. But I was just glad to have him as my friend, so much so that it did not matter that he was considered an outcast at the time. Although Max and I did not get to see much of each other later, we kept in touch through the years and met up again in 1999 shortly after Joseph Estrada won the presidential elections.

Max loved this country very much, so much so that he would roar out in frustration and sometimes be moved to tears especially during the times when he felt this country was going nowhere, its leaders deaf and blind to what was needed to lift the country up from the dumps. And he knew whereof he spoke, covering nine presidential elections during his lifetime, and having known nine Philippine Presidents including Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo whom he first met when she was but a nine-year-old girl. That's why even if he came from Ilocos, a true-blue "saluyut" as Max loved to call himself, he went against Marcos because of his deep conviction that Marcos would not be good for the country.

But what really struck me about Max was his fierce loyalty to friends. He was not one who would discard you or let you down in critical moments. He was never the type who would remember you only when you were up. If Max Soliven became your friend, he would defend you to the bitter end come hell or high water. No one ever manage to sow divisive intrigues between Max and those he valued as his close friends, no matter how hard some people tried. That was the kind of man he was. Yet in the same token, if you earned Max Soliven's ire and he became your enemy, he would go after you with all the force and fury of a hurricane. With Max, there were no half measures. It was either black or white. There was never a gray area with him. He was a man who knew no fear, who was steadfast in his beliefs, who measured courage by having no ifs and buts. No doubt he was a man of passion, who would not hesitate to blast away at anyone who needed to have some sense banged into his head.

I remember how Max would often tell me that it was better to be feared than loved, but I believe he said that from the perspective...
of a man who loved this country so much, knowing that more often than not, it was necessary to instill fear in anyone whom he thought was not doing right for this country. But I could say with all certainty that Max was loved. He had that kind of charm that endeared him to people, leaving them feeling very good to simply bask in his presence. Whenever he dropped by our Stargate office, employees would cluster toward him and he would exchange pleasantries, greeting them by name, asking how they were, jokingly admonishing them to “be good, and don’t do anything I wouldn’t.”

Max undoubtedly liked being with people, but there was no question that he loved to travel. He once told me that there are a thousand places on this earth to visit, but he had only covered 400 of them, and there 600 more to explore. He loved visiting places, and there was no doubt traveling stimulated him, for he was happiest when exploring and discovering new things even in places that he had already been to.

Max Soliven was my mentor and my closest friend. I remember when he first invited me to become a guest columnist for the Philippine Star, taking over his space whenever he was away traveling. He helped me along, more often than not suggesting topics I could discuss. He would always try to read my columns and praise me if he liked them, yet he was also my greatest critic. I remember he used to tell me that if I believed in something, I should go ahead and write about it. But if not, then I should not even try because it would come out halfhearted.

One thing I remember about Max was his love for books, and he never stopped giving me books to read. One time, he gave me a copy of Andalucia, a book that details the history and culture of Southern Spain. On it he wrote a dedication: “To my dear Brother Babe, You must learn about your roots.”

Max believed that a great source of information for anyone who wanted to write is books, and that one can understand the present better if one studied the past. That was his style.

But I think the thing that I am most proud about is the fact that Max considered me his very own brother. I could confide in him about many things, and he in turn would confide in me about his fears and his frustrations especially about this country. The biggest gift that I will treasure from Max is the kind of brotherly bond we had.

Truly, he was the last of the lions of journalism, that extraordinary breed of men who could make even stones bleed with tears with the
zeal of their writing. He is a big loss to journalism, but much more so to this country.

We will miss you, brother. But I know that wherever you may be, you would still be furiously banging the keys on your old, outdated Olympia typewriter. For I know that you are a newsman through and through; you wouldn’t stop until your heart stopped. I will see you again in our next life. But for now, farewell, my dear brother Max.

(L-R) Arthur Lopez, Max Soliven, Babe Romualdez