

Jamie Buckingham

He's Not

I'm having a hard time enjoying my Filipino house guest. Already his presence has upset my way of living — a way in which I have grown very comfortable. The alternatives are not pleasant: either get rid of him or change my way of living.

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I first met Aley Gonzalez three years ago on my first visit to the boondocks of Mindanao. An ex-boxer with more than 100 professional fights under his bantam-weight belt, this 47-year-old, tough-as-cocoonut-husk, brown-skinned Filipino was preaching like he fought in the ring—both hands jabbing, feet dancing and always boring in for the knockout punch. With the aid of a vintage motorcycle and a motorized outrigger canoe, he would go into some of the most inaccessible places in the island archipelago, starting churches and training pastors.

His average salary today is 50 pesos a month (\$7) and his entire wardrobe consists of three pair of pants, some shirts, a cheap nylon jacket and a pair of rubber sandals.

Few Americans ever visit his out-of-the-way location in the province of Agusan del Norte. To get there you go 700 miles south from Manila, cross two volcanos, through the straits at Mactan, and take a jeep ride through the rain forests to the coastal barrio of Cabadbaran. Those of us who have visited there, however, have encouraged Aley to visit the States. It would surely broaden his perspective and make him a better preacher.

Surprise!

Then, yesterday, Aley arrived at my Florida home. My son Timmy had worked this summer and saved money for an expensive new slalom water ski. Knowing how much Aley loved the water (we spent some happy hours swimming together in the China Sea) I took him with us for a later afternoon ride in our new boat.

On the way to the marina we passed a golf course.

"Why do those men hit that little ball with those sticks?" he asked. "Does somebody hire them to do that?"

I started to give him an explanation but realized it sounded so foolish I stopped. "We have a lot of people in America who do odd things," I mumbled.

Aley nodded. He understood.

"We hear in the Philippines there are many Americans without work. When jobs become more plentiful they will probably stop this foolishness."

Aley was impressed with my boat.

"It is very expensive," he said softly, running his hands along the sleek fiberglass deck. "It must have cost 20,000 pesos. But what do you use it for? Do your sons and daughters fish for a living?"

Not Enjoying This Visit

"Perhaps you go up and down the river and preach the Gospel to all those out-of-work people swinging their sticks at the balls?"

When I explained we used the boat only to pull water skiers and for some sport fishing he was startled. He turned his eyes away and said nothing.

Another Eye-Opener

Coming back we stopped at the home of a friend who has three motorcycles in the garage. Aley's eyes danced with excitement, thinking of his battered old Kawasaki.

"These people must go many places helping the poor, feeding the hungry and preaching the Gospel," he said approvingly.

When I explained they were dirt bikes, used only to roar around in the woods, going no place, I saw that same pensive look move across his face like clouds over the sun.

I drove home a different way. I didn't want him to see the yachts on the river, the dune buggies in the driveways, or the imposing church buildings that sit idle except for a few feeble groans on Sunday morning. I didn't want to face any more of his questions. It was the same feeling I had many years ago when, as a young idealist, I attended a church service when they dedicated a \$75,000 stained glass window—to the glory of God. But, since then I have mellowed—which I now realize is the state one reaches just before he begins to rot.

Aley is too kind to say anything to me. But last night I couldn't help but see his face when he looked in my closet and saw all those shoes.

I didn't sleep well last night.

