

There's the Rub

Sins

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My own experience, or ordeal, with smoking is this:

I began smoking when I was 17. I took my first puff of cigarettes a year earlier and went into a violent fit of coughing. A year later, I was inhaling the smoke, sucking it with a fury, and liking it.

Looking back, I'd put my inspiration for it not so much at peer pressure as at the images it conjured, courtesy of books, movies and ads. The ads proposed that you weren't cool if you didn't smoke. The books and movies suggested—by back covers that showed authors to be contemplating life with cigarettes tucked between fingers and noir movies where actors delivered their lines through a haze of smoke—that you weren't a writer, artist, or thinker if you didn't smoke.

I started off with a few sticks a day and graduated fairly rapidly to a pack. By the time I quit smoking in 1983, I was smoking two packs a day, alternating between regular and menthol. Three packs when I went out to drink at night, which was quite often. I had become what was called a "habitual smoker," which really meant a cigarette addict.

It didn't take long for the afflictions to come. I was asthmatic as a kid, outgrowing it only in grade school, and soon after I started smoking the respiratory ailments started coming back. I realized at the forefront of my mind that I was in trouble and needed to quit, but realized as well at the back of my mind that I couldn't.

My greatest need for cigarettes, as I saw when I tried to quit, was when working. It was almost Pavlovian, or conditioned, reflex: I saw a typewriter—the manual kind, a thing kids today will now find only in the attic, or the museum—I needed to smoke. At one time in the mid-1970s, I had to write something and ran out of cigarettes. We had just moved into

SSS Village in Marikina, and I didn't know the ways of the place. It was around 10 p.m. and I went out to replenish. Alas, no stores were open in the neighborhood. I ended up walking all the way up to the bayan, but still found no stores open. I went home in a state of panic, little helped by being chased by a pack of dogs in one dark spot.

I didn't get to write the thing at all. At the crack of dawn after a fairly sleepless night, I set out in search of the lost treasure.

As desperate goes, however, I've seen worse. I remember having a night out with friends in Pete Daroy's place sometime in the early 1990s. Daroy, a UP professor and sometime Opinion Page editor of the revived Chronicle, was a heavy smoker and ran out of cigarettes before the night was over. It was around 1 a.m., we were in his unit in Pag-asa Bliss, and he sent his alalay out to buy a few packs. Alas, all the stores in the neighborhood up to the talipapa several blocks away were closed. Not to be denied, Pete picked up the stubs in the ashtray and relit them one after the other.

Pete had a stroke not long afterward and managed to stay clean for a few months before picking it up again. He had a second stroke, and went through the same cycle. He didn't survive the third one. Neither quite incidentally did Rolando Tinio. He had a heart attack, quit smoking for a while, then went back to it. He didn't survive the second one.

By the early 1980s, I was in a bad way and knew I had to quit. But it took five tries to do it, reminding me of Mark Twain's quip, "It's easy to quit smoking, I've done it hundreds of times." That is, for me, five times cold turkey. Before that, I indulged in the fantasy that I could quit slowly by reducing my intake till I reached zero. It didn't happen, of course, I just smoked more after I gave up the enforced (very) partial abstinence. Which makes me wonder how the authors of the sin taxes can possibly imagine high prices will discourage smoking among those already smoking. The choice is only between smoking more and not at all. There is no in-between.

Finally, I was able to quit at the fifth try, but not before going through one hell of a withdrawal. I couldn't even think straight, let alone write, for several months, my head was roiling in fog. It took almost a year for me to get back in stride, and not without a curious tale to it. To get over my association of typewriters and smoking, I went back to longhand and wrote that way for a couple of years. By the time the PCs arrived, I had been a couple of years off cigarettes and had no association between keyboard

and smoking.

As a parting shot, when you do manage to quit, you'll get no small amount of discouragement. It's not just that friends will keep blowing smoke in your face, it's that you'll get worse before you get better. I was in worse shape after I quit than before, becoming a suki of the Lung Center from various afflictions. The slightest thing—a drizzle, night air, smog—would give me breathing problems. It was that way for about half a year, until suddenly the ailments stopped and disappeared completely. But you'll go through that phase of being worse before you get better, and you'll keep asking yourself why you don't just go back to smoking.

All this is merely to drive home the point that I'm one of those who truly want to see smoking stopped, or drastically curbed. I appreciate its immense health and social costs, having lost too many friends to it already. I leave others to debate the wisdom of the sin taxes, but where I'm coming from, I do think we need to go beyond that if we're serious about stopping it. We need a far more aggressive campaign than even Juan Flavier's "Yosi Kadir" to get people who are already smoking to give it up and—for the kids especially—to not take it up at all. We need to employ ferocious counter-advertising to show the horrors of smoking, the more graphic the better, and all sorts of images to show how very cool it is not to smoke.

It's a sin not to.