In Praise of Mentors

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If you can, do. If you can’t, teach.’ That’s the unfair line comparing practitioners and teachers. In fact, the best teachers are those who practice what they preach, who impart learning by example.

So it is with mentors. While instruction and counsel are essential to mentoring, no amount of words can make deep, lasting impressions if what they say is not seen in how the ones speaking them live and act.

Thus did I absorb my mentors’ precious knowledge and, more important, their uncompromising principles in life and vocation. Mentors do and teach, imparting learning through their learning and living, their counsel and caring.

Three mentors in eight years of study at the Ateneo de Manila University, greatly influenced the direction of my life and the contours of my mind, heart and will: my high school drama moderator Onofre ‘Pagsi’ Pagsanghan, my college literature teacher and theater director Rolando Tinio, and my history professor, Jesuit Fr. John Schumacher.

Onofre Pagsanghan: Molding the Soul

Pagsi was one of my first classroom teachers at the Ateneo High School, but not in the usual way. I first encountered him on television, giving instruction on educational TV programs we watched in first year. As with all TV personalities, Pagsi loomed large when I finally met him at a talk he gave to students about Dulaang Sibil, the high school drama group, of which he was the moderator.

Adolescence is a time when youth acquires identity: the perspectives, principles, personal ties, physical attributes, and other personality aspects that one carries through most of one’s life, and which set directions and moral imperatives that guide and shape one’s actions and decisions in the coming three or four score years. Absent proper mentoring at this stage, and one may be lost all his or her life.

To countless teenage Ateneans through his more than half-century
tenure at the Ateneo High School, especially in his first year class and in Dulaang Sibol, Pagsi has gifted his life principles of Christian faith, caring, righteousness, peace and joy; and his personal virtues of industry, excellence, perseverance, and frugality. That 1-A and Sibol alumni return to the Ateneo to see Pagsi and often seek his advice and affirmation, testifies to the seminal influence he wielded and continues to wield over his charges.

I was among those blessed with having known this Christ figure and being his lifelong friend. My constant drive to be of service to others and society and to do what is right and just, I owe in large part to Pagsi's own man-for-others, no-compromise ethic. Indeed, there have been crucial moments when I asked how Pagsi would act in those situations, not unlike many Christians pondering in the face of moral issues, "What would Jesus do?" Moreover, my career path through theater, journalism, and government, was set on its trajectory by the delight in drama and writing as well as the self-confidence engendered by Pagsi in Dulaang Sibol.

How did Pagsi exert such a strong influence on the students who were fortunate to be mentored by him? After all, high school boys usually put fun and chatter ahead of study and work, let alone serving others and achieving excellence. Our Sibol group in 1971 was no different. During the first play I joined, Paul Dumol's fable 'Puting Timamanukan,' our group was far from focused. We were missing practice, falling behind in memory work, and frolicking at rehearsals.

Pagsi did not fume at our ill discipline. But the fatherly moderator made it clear that if we did not care for excellence in our presentation, he would have no part of it. He left rehearsals and even crossed out his name as director in posters of the production. That prodded everyone in our group to shape up and give our best. Not just for that play, but for keeps.

The episode exemplified Pagsi's mentoring manner. While he did not tolerate mediocrity, he did not browbeat anyone either. He gave counsel, not orders, always trusting that his students would eventually see the wisdom of his guidance. Like God calling humankind to Him, but giving each of us a lifetime to find our winding way to heaven. Pagsi was also generous with praise (he was the first person to cite my coolness under stress) and always constructive in criticism. Everything was for the growth and flowering of the student, never for the ego or
ambition of the mentor.

Today, after many awards for education and the arts, the fatherly Pagsi brings his Christian message nationwide to educators, doctors and nurses, business people, and others keen to listen. Recently, I saw him on Magsaysay Boulevard, trying to catch a cab to the Philippine General Hospital to give a talk. The PGH could have sent a car to pick him up, but even at 83, Pagsi preferred to take public transportation and walk, as he still does to and from the Ateneo every school day since 1951. Even in walking he teaches. After all, the Lord whose message Pagsi brings, preferred walking to chariots.

 Rolando Tinio: Sharpening the Mind

If Pagsi was instrumental in giving Christian shape to my soul and kindled my interest in writing and theatre, the late Rolando Tinio, who passed away at age 60 in 1997, liberated and sharpened my mind, and solidified the direction of my work toward literature and media. Indeed, after I took a required essay course under him, Rolando urged me to shift to literature from management engineering. I did, to the dismay of my father, who saw no financial stability in a writing or teaching job.

As mentors go, Rolando was no doubt the assertive, tough-talking, even temperamental kind, celebrated in backstage stories of directors thundering at cast and chorus line for the tiniest of miscues. To be sure, Rolando had his share of infamous diatribes delivered from the director’s chair or at dreaded company calls after the show. But to the talents he mentored, he was warm, kind, and generous with advice and knowledge to bring budding potential to fullness.

But dullness of mind and artistry, especially from those lacking in humility and deference, certainly ignited the poet-professor’s fire. One piece of Tinio lore had it that a student with a gilded family name presumed to cross verbal swords with him in class. The youth lamented having to take English classes when Filipino should be the lingua franca in the Philippines. Rolando promptly switched to lyrical Filipino in the discussion. Unable to understand every other Tagalog word coming from his professor, the student asked that the exchange go back to English. Rolando obliged and treated the class to a lecture peppered with words that only a Master of Fine Arts in Creative
Writing graduate, major in poetry, from the University of Iowa, the leading literary center in the U.S., could mouth.

That tale may suggest that Rolando was a mentor who brooked no opposition to his line of thinking, writing, and direction. But in fact, he encouraged, even demanded, independent thinking. On our first day of class in the essay course I took during the summer before my first year in college, the professor said he did not care for work that simply quoted or cited material written by others. Instead, we had to come up with our own views and analyses of essays. He also told us to fill textbooks with “marginalia” or notes, instead of keeping them pristine, but missing ideas and learning not taken down.

The independent, rational and original thinking that Rolando espoused extended my intellectual and creative horizons beyond the narrow world of rote learning and routine living. In various phases of my career, from teaching and theater to journalism and government, seeking innovative ways to address tasks and situations has been the main challenge and tool of work, whether it is crafting well-written plays, stories and public statements, or devising innovative, effective solutions to urgent public concerns.

On the other hand, being original doesn't mean anything goes for Rolando. He insisted on the highest academic and artistic standards in his work and for those under him, whether students in school or performers in shows. If Pagsi used theater to build Christian values, Rolando saw great art, from verse and drama to film and TV, as inspired expressions of divine truth, goodness and beauty. “Politicians are elected by the people,” he once told cast and crew after a performance. “Artists are anointed by God.”

With the vision of great art and literature as heavenly inspired works, Rolando drove us not just to excellence, but to perfection. That lofty goal became my own driving force in career: to bring my work as close to perfection as I can, despite constraints of time, ability, resources, and willpower. With our meticulously crafted Teatro Pilipino productions in 1976–1977, I strived for the same finely chiseled achievements, on stage, at the press, and in government.

The intensity of working with and learning from Rolando also posed challenges, including strains in friendship. Before I graduated in 1977 with the A.B. Literature degree in Filipino which he urged on me, we had a brief falling out. Rolando told me that I lacked the creative
spirit to make it as a writer. What a blow! — to be told by my idolized mentor in literature that I would never succeed in writing. It was like a law or medical student being advised by a respected professor to give up his ambition.

I did not, concluding that Rolando’s dismaying regard for my writing talent may just be due to our personal differences at the time. A few years later he invited me to join a group of TV sitcom scriptwriters he was organizing. He also gave very helpful critiques of my plays, and occasional advice when I was artistic director of the Tanghalang Ateneo drama group, where I replicated his system of annual seasons of productions. After I moved in Hong Kong as editor and writer for Asiaweek magazine in 1984, I visited him every time I was in Manila, and wrote two lengthy articles about him, including his obituary in July 1997.

My mentoring experience with the late National Artist and Ateneo professor Rolando Tinio demonstrated one goal of every mentor: to see the pupil flourish on his own. Our brief falling out unwittingly launched my solo flight toward literary and journalistic achievement. I wonder how Rolando might have regarded my government work, including TV and radio programs and newspaper columns. But up there with the angels, he would surely agree that I have followed his first lesson to our essay class three and a half decades ago: Think for yourself.

Fr. John Schumacher: The Historical Perspective

Independent thinking, of course, must be grounded in reality, or else it could well stray into insanity. My three semesters of Philippine history under two great Jesuit historians, two courses with Fr. John Schumacher, and one with the late Fr. Horacio de la Costa, helped keep my musings grounded in fact. No room there for argumentation without documentation, no matter how sound and solid the line of thinking may seem.

Fr. John underscored that lesson in his comments on my term paper in my first course under him, Philippine History Until 1750. I argued that pre-Hispanic Filipinos baptized as Christians by the early missionaries, cannot be considered Christians because they did not fully comprehend the tenets of the faith. Fr. John pointed out quite
correctly that it was not clear from historical evidence what was going on in the minds of the early converts. He added that the documents recount changes in the way these new believers lived, which showed that they embraced Christian ethics.

Fast-forward to January 2006. Amid calls for President Gloria Arroyo to quit over allegations of election fraud, I addressed an evening meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines plenary conference. There I presented the facts about the 2004 elections: the Pulse Asia and SWS pre-election surveys, in which the President trailed Fernando Poe Jr. by 10 percentage points in January 2004, but garnered 37 percent against his 30 percent to 31 percent two weeks before the May vote; the endorsement she received from the Iglesia Ni Cristo and El Shaddai religious groups, with a combined two million voters; the exit polls by media outfits ABS-CBN, GMA7, DZRH and Radio Veritas, all topped by the President; the near-identical percentages won by presidential candidates in tallies of both Congress and the Namfrel watchdog, the former using provincial- and city-level certificates of canvass, and the latter tabulating precinct-level election returns; and the landslide victory of the administration K-4 coalition, taking nearly 90 percent of congressional, gubernatorial, and mayoral positions nationwide. In their subsequent deliberations, the CBCP did not call for a vote recount, as some quarters had urged.

My dogged pursuit of hard facts and proof in my work since college, from period plays on the Philippine Revolution and the life of Saint Francis of Assisi, to Asiaweek and CNN features, as well as media briefings as Secretary of the Cabinet for seven years and now Presidential Spokesperson, I owe greatly to the discipline of seeking historical truth in documents and evidence ingrained by Fr. John (Fr. Horacio passed away the year after I took modern Philippine history under him). Besides incisively analyzing material to draw fact-based conclusions, the lanky Jesuit from Buffalo, New York, also critiqued writings marred by ideological leanings that disregard evidence.

I did not see Fr. John regularly, as I did Pagsi and Rolando, but our few meetings through the years helped recalibrate my perspectives in assessing the wide-ranging impact of today's events in the light of history. Recently, I interviewed him for a profile to appear in a book on great Ateneo figures. He and I agreed that the country has been held back by the actions of politicians of every stripe. They can certainly
learn from great mentors who work for the flowering of the people put in their charge, and do not grind them up into fodder for their ambitions. Indeed, the greatest of them gave up His life that we may all live for eternity.