

# Betty Calleja-Ilao: My English Teacher

WILL VILLANUEVA



She banged my head on the blackboard. I couldn't make heads or tails of the Arithmetic problem presented to my Grade II class that afternoon in 1960. Previously, my Arithmetic teacher had made caricatures of all classmates, and she drew me hanging by a thread to the bridge, a metaphor for passing her class. That was in St. Anthony School in Singalong, Manila. I was supposed to be scarred for life, the slow kid whose head had to be banged to comprehend what's going on in Arithmetic. That was until 1963, when our whole family transferred to Naga City in Camarines Sur, to follow my father's job assignment.

Little did I know that moving to Naga City would change my life. In 1965, I was one of the elementary school graduates around the country who passed the entrance exams for the Philippine Science High School. We were the second batch of that school which was established to teach and house the top 150 elementary school graduates every year. I also qualified as a scholar to the Ateneo de Naga high school. Call that a grand slam. What happened? How did I go from zero to hero in two years?

To be sure, the teachers in Naga Parochial School where I studied Grades V and VI were top-rate. But my chances of landing scholarships in prestigious schools were very small considering that Arithmetic was a big hurdle for me, unless I perfected my score in the English and comprehension parts of the examination. Enter Miss Betty Calleja, now Mrs. Betty C. Ilao. She was our English and comprehension teacher, our GMRC (Good Manners and Right Conduct) instructress, and our Class Moderator.

I was also tutored in Arithmetic by Mrs. Carmen Ojeda, our Grade V Class Moderator, who drilled our class like a master sergeant in

addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. We did not have time to write anything down because she would issue, “4 times 8 minus 2 divided by 10 times 9 equals...” Without catching her breath, she would call out the number designated for several classmates in different rows, like, “4!” and all the fourth persons in all of the five rows of the class would have to stand up and shout, “27!” It turned out that I was slowest in class again and my Nanay approached Mrs. Ojeda to have me tutored. Because of her valiant efforts to teach me numbers, I became quite competitive in the drills, although still no match for the top honchos who could answer in rapid fire even if they appeared to be not paying attention.

Miss Calleja was a sweetheart. She was only 21 at that time, fresh from a degree in Education in Colegio de Sta. Isabel. She was too young to be our mother, and too old to be our love interest, so we placed her in the region which was not threatening, not sexual, somewhat like an elder sister or a young aunt. She was something close to a divine apparition, actually, because of the way she walked, which was noiseless; the way she talked, which was almost a whisper but made everyone in the room pay attention. Make her clasp a rosary and place a white veil on her head and she would be a perfect model for Our Lady of Fatima. It didn’t require an effort to keep our eyes on her, for she was a beauty, virginal.

She enveloped you. I don’t remember an exact drill just like Mrs. Ojeda’s that she did. Rather, she was a complete presence. We were young lion cubs, testing our teeth, seeing how much we could push a 21-year-old fresh college graduate to the limits of her restraint, but there was no such struggle, because from the beginning of Grade VI to the time we graduated, we were her lion cubs, and she would just whisper her instructions, standing almost inert in front of the class, but spotting every detail, every noise which wasn’t much because even the church mice from the nearby Naga Cathedral fell prey to her charms and hung on her every word. We devoured articles and were tested for comprehension, recited poems, wrote essays under her. Using the English language became second nature to us.

And so it came to pass that the boy who was slowest in numbers, but schooled by the best Arithmetic and English and Comprehension teachers managed to pass two prestigious high school entrance exams in 1965, one of the top in the country at that time, and the other the top

in the Bicol region, maybe because of the change in mentors?

I was even one of the two Spelling contestants of Naga Parochial School in the Bicol Association of Catholic Schools Meet, a gathering of the strongest and the brightest elementary and high school students in Bicol, an Olympics of both brain and brawn where school teams competed in basketball, softball, table tennis, Arithmetic, Religion, Spelling, Extemporaneous Speaking and Oratory and other events. I won second place in my event. Our school took top honors, like the U.S. team in the Olympics. I graduated with a medal in Excellence in English and Spelling.

Miss Calleja must have taught me so well. I didn't pursue Philippine Science High School, because the first batch had issues of delinquency which my Nanay and Tatay would not brook, so I settled and finished in Ateneo de Naga. When I was ready for college, I passed the entrance exams in the University of the Philippines, taking up Journalism in Diliman.

As a father of four daughters only one of whom is still in university, no one has to bang my head on the board anymore because I cannot comprehend numbers. I discuss numbers every day, being a Life Insurance and Variable Life Agent of a major multinational company for the past eighteen years. I can do Arithmetic in my head, thanks to Mrs. Ojeda. But love of writing is something which consumes me day and night. Everywhere I go, from selling life insurance, to being a blogger, a runner and dog whisperer, to loving my wife Baby and my grownup daughters, writing ties together all of these loves of mine.

All that can be traced to Miss Calleja. She didn't just teach us English. She taught us how to be men. She taught by example, showing us that education does not stop in the classroom but is something that defines us for the rest of our lives. By being strict in grammar, she taught us that we have to follow rules or fail. She didn't just give us passing or failing grades. She showed by her quietude that success in life is not a contest of who has quantity alone but quality as well. She walked her talk, and as we walk ours, we remember her for her simplicity, and the power of words—even if whispered.



*Will Villanueva and his classmates  
with Mrs. Betty Calleja-Ila*