Mentoring had not been a part of my consciousness, so that when I was asked twice before who my mentor was, I was stumped. And yet, considering my forty-two years of work in four universities, first as a faculty member, then as a program director, later as dean, and now as head of a major university, and of three other smaller schools, it would only be logical to assume that to be able to do such work, I would have needed to be mentored by someone. I had actually asked a prominent businessman exactly the same question eighteen years ago when I was doing a study of him and of his achievements. He was visibly surprised by the question. He paused for a few seconds and thought hard. I prodded him by asking if the answer might be his father, a friend, a business partner. No, his father was not in a position to be such. He thought some more; no, there was no such person for him. And I believed him. He said he learned his craft over time by treating his life as an adventure and throwing himself into it as much and as wisely as he could.

Now that I am asked to write a piece about my mentor, presumably to figure out how I do my work, I must confess I am thinking about this for the first time. I have to say, though, that there is no one in particular. For who I am and how I work are the result of the combined impact on me of my family, in whose embrace my values and attitudes were formed; my education; a number of positive and negative life experiences; a handful of individuals to whom I have gotten lengthy exposure; and many others who either have won my admiration or incurred my disaffection.

First, I have to say my parents set me on the right path. The following basic things I learned from them. One, is to live honestly and simply as it is the easiest and most comfortable way to live, and to be happy with one's blessings and to be happy for others for their blessings.
With this serving as the main guideline to observe, complications, headaches, heartaches in life are minimized. Two, is to be disciplined enough to go by the rules, which allow us to live safely, peacefully, and harmoniously. Think Ten Commandments, traffic lights, and school rules. Three, is to be kind, and for good measure, helpful and generous in spirit and in material things, in order to enhance the quality of our life and our relationships. People and relationships are all that matter in the end, not achievements, material possessions, wealth, position, power, or fame.

Second is education. One learns many things in school other than knowledge and skills. One learns to get along with many others who come from different life circumstances and experiences, to respect them, cooperate with them, be fair with them, become friends with them, add value to them, and to learn from them.

Third are, yes, mentors. To me, mentors are those who recognize something special in others; let that be known to them, and take the time and care to affirm them at work and in life by allowing them to flourish and blossom. Mentors are warm bodies who are there physically or spiritually present. They are humans who have dreams, qualities that inspire, as well as their share of warts. They are friends who care.

In my case, my mentors would be four—my father, the religious priest-Dean when I was in graduate school and later superior at work, the Religious Brother-School President under whom I served the longest, the businessman-subject of my later studies, and my current superior-friend. To leave anyone out would not constitute accurate reporting.

First, my father. He was a disciplinarian—strict, punctual, proper in speech, manners and grooming, moderate in all things, not given to idle talk or to foolhardiness. He expected the same of his children. He was proud of his modest beginnings in the province, his parents’ wisdom and prudence, his and his siblings’ having finished college—three at the University of the Philippines and one at Far Eastern University, and what he had made of himself as a CPA-lawyer, who with his wife, raised and educated all his eight children well enough. He studied well, read habitually, wrote beautiful letters in Palmer penmanship, spoke well, socialized discriminately, traveled modestly, lived simply and within his means.
Second, the religious priest-Dean during my graduate studies. He knew everyone in the business school. He studied the curriculum vitae (CV) of each of the faculty members, and was acquainted with the students. He made people feel valued. Upon my completion of my graduate studies, he asked me to do some work for the business school, work I could do at home, where I preferred to spend my time to care for my three young children. He sent me piles of written analyses of cases which I dutifully graded and sent back to him. For this reason, now I know, I get very disturbed by careless grammar and punctuation, and worse, excess verbiage. The involvement in the business school started this way till the dean asked me to do full-time work when my children were off to full-day schooling, leaving me much extra time.

God’s ways are unpredictable. When He wants to change gear, He throws you off in a life-changing manner. The graduate business school, now with a lay dean and an exiting university president, was closing down, so the announcement came; no more freshmen would be accepted, and none in fact were accepted for all of one year. All ten administrators were offered to teach instead; nine, including myself, left; the layman-dean stayed on.

It was time for me to go. Industry was where I should be, my older brother said, no more wasting time in academe. I was set for an interview in a bank—the key place to be, in that era.

Third was the Religious Brother-School President. Before I could take the next step, a call from another business school came. Join our team; we were monitoring you, the message went. True enough, later I saw among the minutes of a meeting, at which my recruitment was being planned. Not being asked any CV, I wondered how recruitment could be done that way. Besides I had no real connection to the school.

I recalled, though, that some five years earlier I had attended a big conference at which I heard this university president speak. For a split-second then, I thought to myself, I would like to learn from this man – brilliant, eloquent, straightforward, down-to-earth, witty. That split-second thought must have conspired with the universe and must have brought me to this point in my life. After a quick perfunctory interview, I had dropped the idea of working in industry and returned, after a European tour, to where my heart belonged, a school. At first, I felt strange in the school. What was I doing here? My clan on the maternal side, from the late 1800s up to my generation, went to the
other school.

In time, I enjoyed the efficiency, the effectiveness, the quick decision-making, the excitement and the vibrancy of my new community. The president was a total inspiration, appreciative of every good deed and accomplishment. The compensation was good, though not spectacular; it did not matter. The work was fulfilling enough. The recognition, in the form of cards and notes, by the president, was heartening. This man became a friend, especially during a low point in his life, as he became to countless others, and remained so to his dying day. He is truly missed. It was not achievement, wealth, position, power and fame that made the man special, although he had those, too. It was his relationship with others that did.

Like all good things, this employment ended after seventeen years. Of this period, the first year and the last year I served under the same come-backing direct superior were difficult, but the fifteen years in between were a joy, when my unit was almost autonomous, mostly under this much-loved president. Again, my time in the place was coming to an end. When pain came, then I knew, God would operate his changing of gears in a most unpredictable manner. Hang on tight, God will perform His surprise, I thought with great equanimity.

My son, the middle child, now grown up with wisdom and prudence, taking graduate studies and gaining work experience both at home and overseas, became my partner in thinking. My two daughters, very similarly equipped, were the cothinkers and cheerleaders.

Was it time to think once more of giving up on academe and finally joining industry or even government? As soon as I took my sabbatical leave from work, twelve job offers came within weeks. I was surprised at this since I was really a quiet person, working in my little corner of the world the best way I could on a daily basis.

Fourth, was a businessman. During this time, I had done a study on a businessman, who was blessed with remarkable energy and long life, amazing belief in the bounty of this country and the endearing qualities of its people, which all led to his phenomenal business success, from ground zero to the zenith, within the span of his lifetime – with family intact, a rarity without doubt.

This man has treated life as one great adventure. He is very accomplished in his field and in many other related fields. Although he is wealthy, he does not make anyone feel any differently from him.
He is simple, modest, prudent, thoughtful, deliberate, kind, generous in spirit, but tough and bold in spirit. He prides himself on being a perpetual learner, believer in continuous improvement, and is a good judge of character. He dearly values relationships once he has given his trust. He keeps his friends long-term; his friends are his friends practically for life. His relationships transcend political affiliations or the political powers that be. From that which and from whom he distances himself, exist basic differences in value frameworks.

This man speaks minimally but manifests the teachings of management gurus from far and wide. While from books I have learned business and management principles, I have observed, from spending time with him, how these may be practiced. He breathes and enjoys the intertwining of his business and life. There is no delineation between the two; I imagine that he cannot imagine such oddity.

This man asked me join the school board and administration in which I am currently posted. It was he who helped me finally to select this post over the others, although I did my own sorting out until I was left with the last two most appealing ones.

Fifth, is my current superior, my first female one. She loves the school dearly, the full fruition of which was the dream of her school founder-father, whom she adores. The father’s life was cut short by the war. She witnessed her father’s death, along with those of his wife and two youngest children, in the hands of the enemy. For the manner in which, in face of that adversity and incomprehensibility she has carried herself, I stand in awe.

Furthermore, I have a special love for this school as it was where my parents shone, met, and fell in love, occasioned by the notice of them by the School Founder-President who urged them to join a national students’ trip overseas. The school was where my mother had happily taught History and Rizal as well as Social Studies all her life, and my parents’ admiration for the school was long-running. As at other institutions, there were many glorious, some not so glorious, years, especially under martial rule, when the price of vigilance among students, as it was for the rest of the country, was profound disturbance.

My superior, being a woman, makes my work even more fun by leaving room for the “girl stuff,” which never made sense to men—clothes and bags, comedies and romantic movies, operas and ballet, table setting, flowers, landscaping, and detailed accounts of travel and
family goings-on, for which men have not much patience.

On the more serious aspect of work, my superior is as detailed and meticulous in the most mundane aspects of a school’s physical plant as she is in the most important academic matters, sport events, and cultural programs. Everything for her is almost equally important and urgent. Like an entrepreneur who highly values time, she thinks 24/7 and becomes impatient and restless until the work is done. If one is as dutiful, diligent, and persevering as she is, an extra dosage of such qualities, plus a good measure of stamina, would certainly help when working with her.

My other current superior in school, a seasoned banker, with whom I get to sit down every now and then, has taught me some core attitudes, such as equanimity at all times and a bag of tricks for survival, like choosing one’s battles and conserving one’s bullets. In other words, in the grand scheme of things, do snags and the small stuff we sweat even matter? See the big picture and don’t sweat the small stuff.

Thank God for mentors. They inspire, affirm, guide, care, and serve as safety nets. Upon reflection, it is clear that everyone’s life journey is directed and shaped by family, education, life experiences, and mentors—regardless of whether one realizes it or not.

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