Of my Mentors but, especially, of Frankie Sionil Jose

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I didn’t have to think twice, responding to Fr. Louie David’s request for an essay on my most outstanding mentor, “Yes… I will write about Frankie Sionil Jose!” Serendipitously, I spoke those words into my mobile phone which, owing to my difficulty hearing, was on speaker mode, standing not four feet away from Tessie, Frankie’s wife of endless years. My conversation with Fr. Louie had, therefore, not slipped past her. We traded not a word about it, however, only smiles. Tessie knows how tireless Frankie has been, giving me intellectual stimulation and professional encouragement. I was, in fact, on the premises of Solidaridad on Padre Faura St. (the door into which the Joses have kept open to all in quest of Filipiniana, despite doomsday assessments of the unreliability of such a market), to have a conversation with Frankie, the nation’s most widely read fictionist and essayist, who I also would say, co-opting Fr. Louie’s text message to me as a follow-up on our conversation, “… contributed most to shaping values important to me as a professional.”

By coincidence, only a few days before, I had been surfing the Web for the book, Goodbye China, Hello Golden Gate—White Russian Olga Valcoff’s autobiographical account of her harrowing escape from Communist Russia, along with some six thousand of her compatriots, and of their welcome by the people of Tubabao Island, in Eastern Samar—on the idea that I would educate my readership on this important piece of their history,¹ when a Webpage entitled, “Crisp 50 Minute Books,” containing a Google Books “Preview” of Mentoring,

¹Not many Filipinos are aware of this piece of their history, so I had decided to write it up.

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by Gordon F. Shea (Third Edition, 2002, Crisp Publications), popped up on my screen. I learned from that book that the term, "mentor," goes all the way back to Ulysees' action (Odysseus in Greek, King of Ithaca), on the eve of his departure with his troops from Ithaca, to fight in the Trojan War, entrusting to Mentor, who had taught him in his own youth, the education of Telemachus, his son. Many years and multiple harrowing adventures later, Odysseus and Telemachus (who, as a grown up, and joined by Athena—the Greek goddess of wisdom, disguised as Mentor—had gone out to look for his Father), are reunited, and together they return to Ithaca to reclaim from usurpers, Penelope, Odysseus's wife, and Ithaca, their Kingdom. Shea continues:

"...[N] time, the word, Mentor, became synonymous with trusted advisor, friend, teacher, and wise person. History offers many examples of helpful mentoring relationships – such as Socrates and Plato, Hayden and Beethoven, Freud and Jung... [M]entoring is a way of encouraging human growth. Mentors are helpers. Their styles may range from that of a persistent encourager who helps you build your self-confidence, to that of a stern taskmaster who teaches you to appreciate excellence in performance. Whatever their style, they care about you and what you are trying to do... [The mentor] offers knowledge, insight, perspective, or wisdom that is especially useful to the other person... [They] set high expectations of performance, offer challenging ideas and help build self-confidence... encourage professional behavior, offer friendship, and confront negative behaviors and attitudes... [They] explain how the organization works... offer wise counsel, encourage winning behavior... [They] share critical knowledge, offer encouragement, and assist with their mentees' careers."

Google Books, as you may know, calls its reviews of books, "Previews," since they contain not only book summaries, but an amazing number of actual pages taken from the books, such as you are bound to find in "Kindle" (marketed by Amazon.com), which bundles hundreds of thousands of books into an electronic reading device – the difference is that, to get "Kindle," you pay through your nose, but to access Google Books, you put in nothing more than your computer station.
An important part of the training I received as a doctor is training in listening—to everyone, no matter whom, although it is Frankie to whom I listen much these days. Others, of course, come to mind, so before I get started on Frankie, let me say something about them. First, there was Papa, my first tutor on the importance of discipline, gratitude, street-smartness, and respect for women (regardless of the sort). A true *bon vivant*, Papa, in a Manila long gone by, often headed out to Taboy’s Cuatro Cantos in Ermita, to unwind over drinks with his good friends. One time, he asked me to meet him there. Getting there, I couldn’t just leave, of course, but following a round of drinks and jovial pleasantry, Papa and I stood up to leave. Just outside the bar, feeling for my wallet, I realized I didn’t have it, which set me into a momentary panic since I had placed my travel dollars in it preparatory to my first trip abroad on the following day. I returned to the bar, naturally, but had not gone too many paces into it when one of its female attendants stood up to meet me and, pressing my wallet into my hands, said to me, sweetly, “You forgot this!” Although my gratitude just at that moment knew no bounds, it had not occurred to me that I should give her something for her trouble. Papa noticed it, and sternly reproached me for it, calling me ungrateful. “She could have kept your wallet, but she instead returned it to you, and you showed her no gratitude! Get back in there! Give her the equivalent of what you would have spent for my *pasalubong*! For a few bucks she would sell her soul, so the equivalent of my *pasalubong* from you would help her a lot more than it would help me!” I did what I was told. Now that is a lesson I would never forget! I bought him a homecoming gift anyway, better than I had originally planned. Papa, in his time, was one of Manila’s most beloved icons. How I have vied to secure a similar honor! Although all I ever get from people is: “Are you the son of Iking?” Ah, Papa! you do me proud!

Another person who taught me many important life lessons is Father Alejandro Remirez, my high school principal, a brilliant Recollect priest who had distinguished himself by successfully obtaining three doctoral degrees from the University of Villanova (USA). He taught me a life lesson in humility. When we first met, I had consistently ranked first in my year. In my third year, however, inexplicably, I slipped into second place. On suspicion Father Alejandro was responsible for the turn of events, I went to see him. He said I had allowed things to get
to my head, always coming out first in class, so couldn’t I use a lesson in humility? I didn’t see it that way, however, although a few years later, when I lost my full scholarship to Medical School for having so arrogantly miscalculated its academic challenges, his words came back to mind. In the meantime, however, Papa even threw him a punch on the jaw, which almost knocked him out. Notwithstanding Papa’s assault on him, I went on to become a close personal friend of this gallant priest, who designated me Valedictorian when I graduated. At a funeral service he officiated many years later for Bunny, my late wife, Fr. Remirez brought up the matter again, saying my lesson in humility had helped me to become a good husband.

Yet another unforgettable mentor was Alfredo (Peding) Montelibano, who combined the toughness of the Visayan with the long perspective of a polymath. In tandem with Eugenio (Ining) Lopez, Sr., he had built the foundations of the venerable Lopez Empire. There were little Montelibano had not developed a mastery of, not because he was the proverbial “jack of all trades although master at none,” but because it was entirely in character for him to become truly expert in whatever he knew. He became on that basis, not only an extremely successful and respected industrialist, banker, and civic leader, but also a statesman, who served his nation as Secretary of National Defense, and then as Secretary of the Department of the Interior. He was Chair of Hotel Enterprises of the Philippines, which had brought into the country Sheraton Philippines, our first international class hotel, when, as the proprietor of a small furniture company, I became privy to the fact that two additional hotels, comparable in class to the Sheraton, were putting up shop in the country, which meant, among other things, that they would be looking to source their furniture needs! I decided to approach Mr. Montelibano with the offer of a partnership arrangement in furniture manufacture, which would supply him the motive to persuade the hotel owners to contract with us for their furniture manufacture requirements. I contacted him and set a meeting with him for December 23 in Hong Kong. When I arrived at his hotel in Hong Kong, I was told he had just stepped out, but that if I hurried, I probably could still catch up with him at Moutrie’s, an electronics appliance shop. I arrived at the shop just as he was leaving it with a dozen shop attendants in tow, with large boxes in arm containing Fischer hi-fi stereo equipment. Mr. Montelibano apparently was an
enthusiast of the stuff, a novelty at the time. When I introduced myself to him, he seemed a bit surprised, “You are Dr. Soler?... I expected to be talking to an older man. Anyway, come with me.” He headed for his hotel in a brisk walk, put his boxes in storage, and then took me up to his suite. Holding the door to his suite open for me, he motioned for me to go on in. Letty, his wife, happened to be sitting, with not a stitch of clothing on her body. Upon seeing me walk in with her husband behind me, she screamed, “Peding!” quickly wrapping a towel around herself. He retorted: “Don’t worry, he’s a doctor.” All through lunch, and through most of that afternoon, we spoke of transforming my small furniture company into a joint business venture that would involve as well the other owners of the best hotel chains springing all over Manila. Mr. Montelibano found the idea sound, and we collaborated from that point on with Pacific Woodworks International, Inc., the largest furniture factory in the country. Mr. Montelibano became so proficient in the details of furniture manufacture that he soon was giving us lessons on the angle at which the seat of a chair should be joined to its back. Indeed, much of what I know today about running a business, any kind of business, from marketing, to accounting, to production, I picked up from Mr. Montelibano throughout my eleven year mentor-mentee relationship with him. His own children thought it unusual, since they knew their Dad sometimes to be irascible and peremptory. Yet he held me in so much trust that, one day, he made me the CEO of his hotel business, and consultant in a number of his other business ventures, including the Manila Electric Company (Meralco). He even asked me to handle the matter concerning ending his management agreement with Sheraton International. Happily, this resulted in the first-ever termination of the relationship between a local hotel owner and an international hotel management chain that did not spill over into acrimonious litigation. We managed well enough on our own for a while, with Savoy Philippines, but since neither of us possessed the hotel management expertise required for long term success, he sent me to the U.S. to find a suitable partner among hotel management chains. The outfits we had in mind, unfortunately, had either already signed up with other Philippine partnerships, or had not yet begun operating in Asia. Hyatt International, which had newly organized in Asia, subsequently sent us word that they were interested. Mr. Montelibano, Atty. Alfredo Africa, our lawyer, and I, flew to Hong
Kong for negotiations with them. By prior arrangement, I met the Hyatt people two hours each morning, three in the afternoon, and in the times between I reported back to my two colleagues for their item by item approval of the terms spelled out in the actual meetings. In three days, we had our management contract, as opposed to at least the month’s worth of hard negotiations that the Hyatt people subsequently told us they had made allowance for.

In short, I would not have become the self-possessed man I am now without Papa and Fr. Remirez, or the good business professional, without Alfredo Montelibano. And as for myself as a writer, if I have amounted to anything at all, I owe it to Frankie Sionil Jose—to his own accumulated wisdom as a writer par excellence, which he readily, and liberally, has shared with me. Let me explain.

Frankie and I had met socially quite some time ago, but began a friendship only after a short story I published in the Philippines Free Press prompted him to ring me up with kind words of praise. This naturally inspired in me, when I heard them, the thought that if someone of his stature and sagacity could praise my work then, truly, I had something to say that people would just love to be told about! His encouragement was important because writing is not something I would say constitutes part of my inherited legacy from my forebears, although I will say it is a passion in my soul. I began writing in Elementary School, was a cub reporter in my teens, and at one point even produced a book of essays on photography that quickly sold out. In my adult life, however, I got busy with other things than writing, although my passion for it continued to inhabit some deep part of my soul, so when I took it up again some years ago, upon my retirement from the active pursuit of my business concerns, it was to begin work on a novel that while, nine years later, mostly still hibernates in my brain, has become something which the more I think about it, the more I am determined to finish it. But even as the novel remains a work in progress, I have experimented with other genres, specifically, the short story. The Philippines Free Press published a story of mine in 2002, and then again in 2008, on the subject of Edouard Manet’s painting, Luncheon on the Grass. The fact that the earlier story had elicited no reaction from anyone did not bother me as much as the fact that the second one won no prize during the Philippines Free Press’ annual literary contest, although I had thought it would be a cinch for
one. But rather than stymie me, the setback motivated me to throw
myself even more seriously into my writing. The Philippines Free Press
soon thereafter published a third story of mine, the one that prompted
Frankie’s call, with his compliments. That was all I needed to keep at
my short stories, a number of which have been recently published as,
For Starters. Frankie vetted most of the manuscripts of those stories.
But that’s the thing with Frankie. Time and time again I have leaned
on his patience, sending him manuscripts almost on the eve of their
publication. Yet, each time, he would respond generously, often calling
me late at night to convey invaluable suggestions. Which means
Frankie is generous not only with his time but also with critique,
always, however, delivered caringly, with a tender regard for the person
to whom he speaks. On the receiving end of his largesse, I have become
a better short story writer.

Any mentee would be truly in awe of Frankie’s accomplishments.
Without a doubt the most widely read Filipino writer, domestically
and internationally, his published works include thirteen novels, and
six short story collections (which have been translated into twenty-
eight languages, including Japanese, Indonesian, Korean, Russian,
Latvian, Ukrainian, Dutch). On that score alone he would qualify for a
nomination to the Nobel Prize Committee for achievement in literature.
A nationalist, he writes for the day when his people, much deservedly,
will shine as brightly as the sun. In the meanwhile, there is the almost
daily disappointment he must contend with relating to the excessive
corruption of our politicians, landed gentry, industrialists, traders,
financial leaders. What especially saddens him is their penchant for
stashing their ill-gotten fortunes in offshore hiding places, instead
of arranging for them, notwithstanding their problematic origins, to
induce helpful motion in our local economies. Their behavior merely
underscores their total lack of patriotic feeling, their utter disregard of
our need to pull close together in order to dispel the giant shadow that
poverty, among many other dysfunctions, has cast over our land. He
writes in, Why are Filipinos so Poor?

We are poor because we are poor—this is not a tautology.
The culture of poverty is self-perpetuating. We are poor
because our people are lazy. I pass by a slum area every
morning—dozens of adults do nothing but idle, gossip and
drink. We do not save. Look at the Japanese and how they save in spite of the fact that the interest given them by their banks is so little. They work very hard too.

We are great show-offs. Look at our women, how overdressed, over-coiffed they are, and Imelda epitomizes that extravagance. Look at our men, their manicured nails, their personal jewelry, their diamond rings. Yabang – that is what we are, and all that money expended on status symbols, on yabang. How much better if it were channeled into production.

We are poor because our nationalism is inward looking. Under its guise we protect inefficient industries and monopolies. We did not pursue agrarian reform like Japan and Taiwan. It is not so much the development of the rural sector, making it productive and a good market as well. Agrarian reform releases the energies of the landlords who, before the reform, merely waited for the harvest. They become entrepreneurs, the harbingers of change.

One could get the impression reading Frankie that he looks out upon his people wearing unnecessarily critical lenses, although it is “facts,” as they come across to him, that he describes in his writing. Among those “facts,” Jose also lists the goodness of the Filipino, his struggle to establish shared values with his fellows, his practical sense of the common good, his head-on encounters with both the opportunities and the perils that daily he must face in order to rise above. And so in his novels, novellas, short stories and essays, Jose exhorts us to ground ourselves in our “facts,” in our untiring efforts to remind ourselves of who we are, of who we should be, of what we stand for, and of what else we ought to be standing for. By not turning our gaze away from the particularities of our present condition, we can avoid becoming unwitting pawns in the machinations of people whose care is not for the general wellbeing, but for what is theirs.

So much is written about Frankie’s writing that there is little left for me to say in addition, except to mention that his book, Ermita, was rated by Discovery magazine in its March 2002 issue as one of the top ten best novels set in Southeast Asia and written in the English language. There are 184,000 postings on him in cyberspace: 6,170 of
them blogs, 1,060 virtual forums and discussion groups, 9,130 images, and even 31 videos feature! One blog is called *F. Scott Fitzgerald! F. Sionil Jose*, which means, in the estimate of the blogger, on the same level as the great English fiction writers. Another blogger, "Fish," writes in his account of *The Samsons*:

I've been on a never ending search for outstanding Filipino literary works and this book literally made me shout "Eureka!" Very impressive, descriptive writing, deeply moving narrative, superbly informative and truly exceptional insights on nationalism, colonialism, and revolutionary minds. People can bash F. Sionil Jose all they want about his "Filipino English." [Well, let's see them try to write as well as he does!]

When this book was rejected by Filipino publishers in the 1970's because of its citation of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Jose mimeographed and distributed it for a few friends to read as a kind of *samizdat*. It was first published in Dutch, and was initially unsuccessful, but was eventually reprinted by the Solidaridad Publishing House in Manila in 1962 [and subsequently translated into fifteen languages, earning Jose not only local, but also international, acclaim.

On a more personal note, I will attest to his robust sense of humor, his sagacity, his memory, his grasp of just about every subject in literature that one can think of, his kindness and generosity, amounting almost to an obsession, providing mentorship to new writers. His simplicity of dress and demeanor underscore his desire for people to either take him as he is, or take him not at all. He is at present gifted with good health, and about the only giveaway to his age is the cane that he takes with him everywhere, although seldom uses. I pray he lives to be over a hundred. Let his many friends, already in heaven, upon not finding him there, succumb to their suspicion that he may not have made it there after all, but their temporary deprivation is our singular gain.
Frankie Sionil Jose

Ricardo "Ricky" Soler