Birthdays falling on round numbers, such as the twenties, forties, and sixties, mark bittersweet anniversaries, with their implicit demand for a comprehensive life rehearsal. When I turned sixty, in 2008, I was presented with a book by someone whom I had taught at the Ateneo in the 1970s (he is now a greatly admired columnist at a business daily), on the frontispiece of which he had written: “My mind has many fathers—foremost among them is you.” Two years later, those words resonate in me still:

Who fathered my own mind? Why am I unshaken in my confidence in the power of ideas and values? What drove me to travel the distance between Manila and Boston for my MBA, then on to New York, and Hong Kong, to stack up additional training and experience, then back to Manila, to assume a six-day workweek (with no vacation leave) bearing a P13.5T monthly paycheck, managing nearly a thousand people at the Philippine National Bank (no easy accomplishment), when for at least much better remuneration I could have gone elsewhere? Why did I eventually quit international banking, to be able to strike out on my own (that is, without the safety nets provided by the employee status)? Why, presently, do I dip into my retirement funds so I can send Christians, Muslims, Lumads, and Mangyans to La Salle and Notre Dame to get an education?
While much of the credit for the aforementioned is owed to my many mentors at Arellano High School (Tondo), and the Ateneo, one person among them stands out—Vicente Babaran Valdepeñas, Jr., Ph.D. in Economics, Cornell University.

Dr. Valdepeñas swept into my life with the force of a one-man tsunami in the second semester of my junior year at the Ateneo, in a class on “National Income Analysis” I had signed up for. He sauntered into our first meeting with a syllabus, a virtual social contract with his students to transfer to them whatever he knew, provided we assiduously pored over the books and journal articles he had listed, single-spaced, on three pages with hardly any English prose on them, only mathematical notations, tables, diagrams, charts. All semester long he “chalked out” the blackboard behind him with the aforementioned ciphers, formulaic assertions, mathematical equations, diagrams of equilibrium analysis in macroeconomic markets, and a wealth of additional detail from economic history, political economy, and philosophy clarifying them. The common practice whereby students merely returned lessons to their teachers in regurgitated fashion hardly occurred in Dr. Valdepeñas’s classes; by means of the class recitation, he elicited from them instead precise critical thinking. But as effective and accomplished a pedagogue and economist as he was, we in the class could hardly keep up, seriously hobbled by the inadequacy of our background in mathematics. Since it was not his practice to hammer grades into the customary “bell curve,” he had to flunk half the class on their first major examination.

As Dr. Valdepeñas disclosed to us later, he literally had transplanted Cornell University onto the Ateneo campus, submitting us to the same syllabus, and lectures, that his undergraduate students at Cornell University had learned to expect from him. He could have made things easier for himself by subjecting us to a lighter-weight, or “gentleman’s,” version of the class, gaining additional time in the process for his dissertation on the deployment, in our local economy, of I-O (input-output) practices, as a means of enhancing and more effectively protecting Philippine industry. But no, his goal was to push us to the same great level of excellence characteristic of student endeavor at the best universities in America.

My heart took up the challenge, and my mind devised the strategy. I began by applying to myself a regimen of reading in economic history
and policy, in linear algebra and advanced calculus, exceeding his requirements. I organized a study club comprised of us in the class, in order that copies of the required readings, which were in short supply, could make the full rounds. Developing, in this manner, a mastery of the subject's most basic concepts, along with their supporting mathematics, we found the veil of enigma around his lectures lifting, which of course only deepened our appreciation of the expert way in which he had transmuted, for our benefit, complex concepts into intelligible assertions, seemingly disjointed theories into integrated systems. Our classroom discussions livened up, with some of us even throwing his way a "test" or two based on material not contained in his reading list. He would respond by cranking up the challenge a notch, showing us actual results of the application of economic theory. Before the semester was over, I had fallen deeply in love with Economics as an intellectual discipline. It had become a pure joy to me just to be able attend class everyday, anticipating a wonderful journey ahead.

Taking that course with Dr. Valdepeñas changed my worldview forever. My self-confidence received a boost upon experiencing first hand I was capable of receiving the same outstanding grade as someone in an undiluted Cornell course. Better yet, I had a taste of pure excellence at the international level and I knew that this could be my future, too, if I worked harder at it. Without hesitation, I took all the courses he offered and signed up for formal courses in advanced calculus and agricultural economics. Without saying a word about it, I chose him as my mentor in academics and he seemed to have accepted me as his student. In my senior year, he asked me to help him teach the same course to juniors, making me the first-ever undergraduate teaching assistant in the Economics Department. For good order, however, he reviewed all my lectures twice before I delivered them; he tested my exams for fairness and content before he allowed me to administer them. This was classic Valdepeñas mentoring: challenge, support, and then affirm. Upon my graduation from the Ateneo at the age of nineteen, he arranged for the Ateneo to give me an appointment to a full-time academic position as Assistant Instructor in Economics and Mathematics. Challenge and affirm.

It was at this time that I caught a glimpse of his humanity and saw just how student-centered he was. As much as he expected from his students, he demanded more from himself. He spent a lot of time
preparing his classes. His syllabi were detailed road maps into them, to enable both advanced and weak students to maximize their learning while in his care. Class discussions were always stress-free: as a master of his craft, and he fielded questions with respect and fairness. I never saw or heard him insult or seek to intimidate any of his students. Whenever he gave an exam, he prepared two sets; the second one was for students who for good reason would not be able to make it to the first exam. Respect for the intelligence of his students took a new form. Once, in face of a question from a student, he realized he did not have the answer, he apologized for it, thought hard about it, and then in the next session floored the student with a detailed, comprehensive response to the original question, checked whether it was satisfactory, and then, receiving a stunned nod, apologized anew for previously not being able to provide the answer. I have never seen such intellectual honesty and humility in any professor again. Without a word, I took him as my mentor in values. More accurately, he took or “found” me.

We both eventually left the Ateneo, although kept tab of each other over the years. He served the government for a total of twenty-five years, I for only four, although throughout that time I completely modeled myself after him. This meant that an entire generation of Philippine National Bank officers got from me the full Valdepeñas treatment – this combination of academic excellence, meritocratic promotions, leadership by example, and service to the people. By the grace of God, no one mutinied and, I think, we made a dent in the government culture. Eventually, I became a self-made entrepreneur in the style of Joseph Schumpeter’s “creative destruction,” in aquaculture, property development, cement manufacture, and investment management. I had this idea that I would succeed on my own far better and less stress-free than if I worked for others; it worked, really worked.

Today, we run a free farm school for large-scale organic and natural farming of vegetables and chickens. We have produced a homegrown, pure vegetable, large-scale organic hydroponic system for lettuce; we are now working on raising the first commercial, grass-fed (no grains), pastured chicken in the Philippines. I also provide funding to, and manage, the Natividad Galang-Fajardo Foundation, which has sent more than a hundred scholars to school at La Salle, and the Notre Dame colleges, among others. We mentor teachers and students in Mindanao and Luzon, prepare them for, and finance them in, graduate
degrees in education. I should add that into our training programs we have incorporated the principal elements of Dr. Valdepeñas’ legacy—a comprehensive syllabus, high expectations, sustained excellence, student-centeredness, intellectual openness, critical thinking, and a challenge to share their education with the poor.

Dr. Valdepeñas, at present, is a grandfather to many minds; soon, he will be a great-grandfather, too.