Corazon Santos de la Paz-Bernardo: A Debt of Gratitude

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My success in my profession, if you may call it such, is something I did not dream about or aspire for. Looking back, I would call it the reward for hard work, sacrifice, passion for perfection, dedication, loyalty, and commitment. It has come from adherence to the values and principles I learned from the many individuals who, in one way or another, became my mentors or role models as I faced the many challenges that crossed my path.

I have to thank my humble beginnings for what I am now. My parents, Ambrocio Hernandez and Josefa Macaraig, came from families of farmers in remote barrios in the town of San Jose, Batangas. Despite their poverty, they managed to go to school and get employed in the government. My father, a third year law student, was a Court of Appeals employee while my mother was a public elementary school teacher.

Early on in my life, they taught me the importance of good education, good character, and good reputation. They inculcated in me the values of hard work, humility, frugality, simplicity, and honesty, among others. My mother expected my sister Nemy and me to wake up early in the morning, even during weekends. While sweeping the backyard at dawn, she would ask us to get up before the sun rose to do the household chores. She frequently emphasized to me that beautiful hands are those that work.

On weekdays I had to wake up much earlier to walk to the Tugtug public elementary school, which was about 2 kilometers from our home. To reach it, I had to tread a forest leading to a river then navigate through various tracts of rice and cornfields. It was in this school where I met my first formal mentors, whose teachings were fortified by my next mentors in another public school, Batangas High School.
Having a public elementary school teacher as a mother encouraged me to study very hard and start at a very early age. And with my father’s wish for me to take up law, the course he was unable to finish for financial reasons, I was motivated and expected to do my best and excel in my studies.

My parents exemplified simplicity and living within one’s means. My school allowance was barely enough to sustain my most basic needs, namely fare, food, and school expenses. In college, I had to save part of my P2 daily allowance so I could buy an extra dress. I could not afford to join extra curricular activities that would entail additional expenses such as joining a sorority. Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise, for probably if I had spare money, I would not have focused on my studies and, modesty aside, would not have been able to graduate with honors and be among the topnotchers in the CPA board exam.

Migrating from college to the business world, I was privileged to be employed as a junior auditor in a prestigious firm, Joaquin Cunanan & Co., a member of Price Waterhouse, one of the big eight accounting firms then. There, I realized that what I learned in school was inadequate and had to be supplemented by rigorous training and on and off the jobs. I was fortunate to start working with an audit supervisor and later on, partner, Fortune Cruz, who for many years became my coach and mentor. He guided me with patience, humor, understanding, and trust so that I felt comfortable working with him and even sharing my problems in tears. He excelled in client relationship, motivating employees, and maintaining cool temper even in tense situations. Had it not been for him, I would not have reached the apex of my career in the firm which now bears my name (Isla Lipana & Co., a member firm of the PricewaterhouseCoopers global network) as he dissuaded me from joining the Central Bank to take on a job that I thought would allow better work-life balance.

My other mentor was another audit partner, Art San Gabriel. Of all the good traits he had as a leader, two that really stood out in him were his diligence and persevering persistence. He would review working papers and reports with such care and thoroughness, making sure all i’s are dotted and, all t’s are crossed, so to speak. Working with him compelled me to pursue my passion for perfection and excellence. I recall, though, that it was not really tough for me because since childhood, I always tried to give my best, dreading criticism and
admonishment for wrongdoing or defective work.

Another mentor was my tax managing partner, Lito Tayag, who invited me to move from Audit to Tax Practice. He gave me the trust and empowerment to do beyond what I thought was expected of me or I was capable of doing. He allowed me to get involved in leading and managing the Tax team. More importantly, he encouraged me to be active in the professional and business organizations of my choice and gave me his full support as I took on leadership roles as first nonlawyer president of the Tax Management Association of the Philippines, and national treasurer and director of the Philippine Institute of Certified Public Accountants. He made himself redundant, figuratively and literally, by moving to one of the conglomerates in the country, thus leaving me with the opportunity to step into his big shoes unexpectedly.

My stint in the Tax Department challenged me to metaphorically to a better professional as my work required me to get exposed to and deal with various public officials and employees from such agencies as the Department of Finance, Department of Trade and Industry, Bureau of Internal Revenue, Bureau of Customs, Board of Investments, the Philippine Economic Zone Authority, Securities and Exchange Commission, Congress of the Philippines, among others. I was also fortunate to be given the privilege to travel abroad to attend various global and regional PricewaterhouseCoopers conferences and meetings as well as to join as resource speaker or delegates in investment missions.

The most prominent of my mentors was Corazon Bernardo née de la Paz, our Chairman and Senior Partner for two decades. Cora took the bold move of admitting me to the partnership as the second lady partner of our firm. Her strong personality, breadth of wisdom, good judgment and courage of conviction awed me. Her confidence in the capability of the people working with her was very inspiring and motivating. I would like to believe that she trusted me enough for her to hand over to me the leadership and management of the Tax Department when the opening abruptly came as mentioned above. From her I emulated leadership by example and impatience for the right results. Discreetly, she afforded me the chance to be exposed to the public and the business community by sending me as her alternate to important business meetings, missions, and conferences to which she had been invited. She gave me the greatest complement one could
get from a well-respected leader—in a firm’s event she praised me with a brief, yet touching comment, that I “walked the talk”.

I am thankful I made the right choice of an employer because our firm, now known as Isla Lipana & Co., member firm of PricewaterhouseCoopers, nurtures the same values I hold dear.

Back to my youth, the other mentors who had a great impact on me were the nuns in St. Bridget’s College, Batangas City, where I started my college education before transferring to the University of the East. They reinforced the values taught by my parents and my teachers on Good Manners and Right Conduct in the public elementary school. They brought me closer to the greatest mentor and the best model of everyone—Jesus Christ. I believe that learning more about my Catholic faith provided me with the strength of character that allowed me to adhere to the fundamental moral values and principles as I made important decisions in my career and personal affairs. It also enlightened me to work hard as if everything depended on me and to pray hard as if everything depended on God.

There were many other people who have influenced me through their books, articles, speeches, and stories that I have been fortunate to read, browse or hear in the classroom of daily life. It’s just not possible to enumerate all of them here for lack of space and time.

Last but not least of my mentors was my former boyfriend and classmate, now my husband, Rey. From him I learned to be more caring, thoughtful, unselfish, and sharing, sometimes until it hurt. He was the wind beneath my wings as he encouraged and supported me all the way to do my best, be my best, and even look my best. He was happier than me in my many triumphs and lonelier than me in my waterloos. He was joined by our four wonderful children, Hardy, Kate, Eric and PJ.

The first three have completed their studies and now threading their path to success. Hardy, a holder of an MBA degree from Ateneo, is now the operations manager of Orion Maxis—a company specializing in land titling and registration. Kate, a CPA (like her Mom and Dad) got her Masters Degree in International Business at the Norwegian School of Economics and Business and Administration, and is now an associate director at PricewaterhouseCoopers Financial Advisory, Inc. and assistant manager at Isla Lipana & Co.. Eric, a physical therapist, is now based in Toronto, Canada. PJ, a graduate of
Hotel, Restaurant and Institution Management from the De La Salle University – College of St. Benilde, is now honing his culinary skills at a Le Cordon Bleu School in California. Together with my husband, they inspired and understood me as I struggled to go up the ladder of success. Completing the team now providing joy and inspiration are our lovely daughters-in-law, Kats and Yayi, our amiable son-in-law JC, our adorable granddaughters, Bianca and Chloe and our handsome grandson Marco.

To sum it up, my mentors were my parents, my teachers, my colleagues in our firm, my friends, and my extended family. To them I owe a debt of gratitude and to Almighty God, I owe everything I have achieved in my life. My sincerest thanks everyone, and to the others, including my drivers and household helps, who may not have mentored me but supported me nevertheless with their words of encouragement and other forms of assistance. I couldn’t ask for more.

Tammy Lipana

I have had the benefit of learning many things from my older sisters. Being the youngest of four sisters, I have had my fair share of knowledge and wisdom passed down to me during my formative days and, still, to this day. While each of my parents and my siblings mentored me in some way, my sister, Cora, has been my constant mentor. My Sanse, as I would call her as a term of affection and respect, is the third child and is closest to my age, being seven years apart. Sanse and I spent more time together while our two older sisters, Josie and Carmen, made their way to their own time in school. A memory I recall while I was in elementary school was asking her for help with my vocabulary words. I needed help writing sentences using new words which I had difficulty with, but she would easily come up with sentences that I would use and make the grade with.

We went to the same schools, Pateros Elementary and Rizal High School. While we were seven years apart in age, we were nine years apart in school years. We had the same teachers and as I went through the years, I would often be called by her name. I had always thought
they called me by her name because they knew I was as bright as her. This made me aspire to become an honor student as my Sanse was.

I had graduated Salutatorian in Elementary and in High School. When I graduated from Elementary School she had topped the CPA Board Exam at the age of 19. She was always ambitious and strived to be the best. She was suffering from a bad case of cramps on the day of the exam. We knew that, sometimes, the pain she experienced would be so excruciating, she would collapse from it. But during the exam she fought the pain and persevered through sheer determination. She always had to be the best and she always worked hard at it. She prayed fervently to God, asking Him, if He can't get her the top spot, He might as well not get her a place on the list. Through the years, I've developed my own tenacity which is a trait we've inherited from our parents, but it was something I learned through Cora's practical application of it in her own life. She goes by the practice of finishing anything you start and do your best while doing it.

One thing I admire most about her is her strong sense of family. She loves all her relatives and supports them in the best way she can. She was pivotal in sending me to Medical School. We had lived together in Ermita while I attended school and she worked at Joaquin Cunanan & Company. She would also help our younger relatives with pocket money because she knew they needed it. She valued the importance of education and made sure she was able to help most of our relatives achieve their own academic requirements. To this day, she still offers her support to her nephews and nieces.

As we led our separate lives, making our way through our own careers and raising our own family, she would never fail in keeping contact and staying close. While our older sisters and our brother moved abroad, we remained in the Philippines, perhaps, making our relationship closer than ever. She made a point to always be in touch with me and be a constant presence in our lives. When she would go abroad, she would inform us how to get in touch with her or where she was going, and she would inquire the same from me whenever I went on trips abroad. Throughout our lives, a constant annoyance of Cora was my incessant tardiness. She would be stern and angry at my lack of punctuality and would even scold me. One trait that I seem to have gained from her, though I admit it's a negative one, is her short temper. As true sisters would, we had our share of arguments.
and being Castillo-Santos women, we would have very heated ones. After an argument we would storm away from each other, but, this never failed, she would call me later on, sweet and kind as if nothing happened. I guess it was her own humbling way of admitting her mistakes and apologizing, although she wouldn’t apologize outright, it was all in the delivery.

Throughout her career, Cora achieved numerous things but all her accolades never tainted her need to help others and still be a generous soul. I recall a moment when we were stuck in Hong Kong at the height of the 1989 coup attempt. She became teary and emotional, lamenting the sad state of our country and how the Philippine economy will fall once again and how badly the people would suffer. It was then when I learned the true value of the business sector and how it drives the economy of the country. Although I had always had the notion that businessmen prefer the money than the service, my sister proved me wrong. When she joined the SSS she showed another trait that I admire so much in her, her strong moral compass and her ability to be incorruptible. She had the honesty, integrity, and courage to stand against anyone and stood by her principles because it was the right thing to do for the people. Her strong sense of service never faltered. Through countless criticism and backlash, she remained steadfast. She had mentioned once that she would have wanted to become a doctor to serve the people, but agreed that fate brought her to the business industry and when she started in SSS, she understood her path.

While the things that I learned from my sanse are not a practical structured form of mentoring, it is one that is rich and long lasting. She never gave me tips or made me memorize things, she merely talked to me, told me stories and shared her experiences. If anything, she has mentored me throughout my life, the knowledge and the experiences she has gone through, I have gone through as well. She will not tell you to be anything, but through her experiences and stories, you will imbibe it.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned from Cora was the technique of looking young. Her beauty and skin regiment is something that I learned while living with her. I will always treasure this tidbit of life from my sister as it has paid off in leaps and bounds. When she was interviewed once, she was asked what her greatest achievement is.
And with her unflattering sense of humor, she answered, “Looking young for my age.”

Dr. Ester Santos Bitanga

Cora de la Paz

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