I have always felt that I have been immensely lucky with the people I have met on the road. I have never felt completely hopeless or helpless since there was always someone ready to help me. To this day, my choices are guided by the life lessons that are the true legacy of all mentors.

My first and most important mentor was my father. Before it was fashionable, and before it made any real sense to me, my father taught me about courage and fairness. When I was a confused first grader, he taught me something that remains with me to this day: “Being old does not make you right. Being the teacher does not make you right. Being right makes you right. You can be young, small, and the student. She can be old, tall, and the teacher. That does not mean she is always right. It does not mean you never have a chance to be heard. Everyone has a right to be heard.”

I think, at some point, I realized that his experience of taking on so much responsibility so early in life taught him the importance of courage. I also think that having to watch his widowed mother bear up in a male-dominated world made him want to give his daughters that courage. My father did not teach me that men insult me when they open doors or carry heavy loads for me. Those are a courtesy and should be received with grace and appreciation. What he did teach me was that I am neither less nor more because I am female, or younger or newer, or of lower rank.

My father, whom I love, was and is my pillar and my inspiration. Each day that I live the way he taught me to live is a celebration of his life. When he died, our entire world changed.
I joined the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) from a career in professional management, which was apparently a recipe for potential disaster. After all, the failure rate was high even among those who join AIM from an academic background. I was, of course, blithely unaware. I was lucky, though. I joined AIM during the golden years of the Gallegos’s deanship. In the history of AIM, he is perhaps the best and most widely loved of all the deans. To this day, when pictures are pulled out of fun times at AIM, you can almost bet that the pictures will date from his term as Dean. They were also, in the modern history of the Institute, days of both fiscal as well as academic success.

Jesus G. Gallegos, Jr. or Jess, as he preferred to be called, made a practice of managing by walking around. One of the first things he forced me to do after he convinced me to become his Chief Financial Officer (CFO) was to take a tour of the grounds and buildings. This was not just about meeting people, but it meant touring the archives, the elevator shafts and the many nooks and crannies of the campus. In the process, I realized how much time Jess had spent understanding the campus and its people. Everywhere, he was met with a warm, almost anticipatory smile of welcome and affection.

I learned many pearls of wisdom from Jess, some of which are the following: over the long haul, it is the time you spend with people that pays off the most. Focusing on short-term tasks gets this week’s deadlines met but focusing on relationships and people development builds the capabilities for getting things done over the long term. Interest in others cannot be feigned. While respect can be earned, true leadership lies in the ability to build one-on-one relationships. Intellect can help a man land a position but it is the soul and heart of the man in the position that forges the organization’s success.

It was from Jess that I learned that if you concentrate on doing what is right at the moment, the future will take care of itself.

Another mentor from the AIM was Felipe “Fil” B. Alfonso, who had been the Dean, President and Vice-Chairman of the Board at AIM, while he was in the Boards of many large commercial enterprises. However, the work that Fil was truly proud of was his involvement in organizations that work with disadvantaged communities. Fil’s own children say that their Dad needs to work because he needs to serve others so that this world can be a better one. The advice they hear most from him is, “Don’t work for money. Work to serve others and
the money will come."

Over the ten or more years I have known Fil, it was during turbulent and challenging times that he stood out. He always seemed to be an oasis of calm and logic to me. When I asked him how he managed to steer through the many difficulties he faced in life, he said that it was a matter of keeping things in perspective. He also said, "I have always just tried to do what seemed right. I look at the consequences for the institution. My personal desires cannot override what is right for the institution."

In the year Fil turned 70, the third movie in the Spiderman series was released. At the end of the movie, Peter Parker reflected on choices. He said, "Whatever comes our way, whatever battle we have raging inside us, we always have a choice... It's the choices that make us who we are, and we can always choose to do what's right." We make choices everyday. Whether they bring us to higher or lower ground depends entirely on what we choose to do. And if we allow it, our choices can be guided by the lessons learned from those who have helped us on the way—our mentors.

Maya is a member of the faculty of the Asian Institute of Management, where she is Program Director of Executive Programs in Finance. She is also Managing Director of Solutions Incorporated, a management consulting firm. She writes the column "Integrations" for the Manila Standard Today.