My father grew up in the difficult 1930s and the 1940s. What could have been a privileged youth was cut short by two fateful events. My grandfather died at an early age and the Second World War arrived on Philippine shores. My grandmother had to raise seven children on her own and my father, who became the only surviving male in family, had to grow up and be a man very quickly. He married his high school sweetheart as soon as he recovered from illnesses contracted during the Death March. Those ailments would bother him all his life. He now had to work to raise a family and could no longer go back to school. Like many from his generation, he never talked about the depravity and horrors of war. He was a quiet, solid, and dependable man from a bygone era of he-men, built in the mold of silver screen idols Humphrey Bogart and Leopoldo Salcedo.

So much of what I have learned from him were not from words, but by the strength of his character and the resoluteness of his actions. He was a tough man, difficult to please, and a terrifying disciplinarian. None of us, maybe except for our firstborn, was spared from corporal punishment. Everyone was expected to do chores at home, even during weekends, particularly weekends. It was expected that we all got up as early as if it were an ordinary school day. Respect for elders was the law. Punctuality was a must, which became a habit for me and up to now, however late to bed at night, I wake up early and make it a point to always be on time to any appointment.

Part of my weekend routine was to assist him in his workshop behind the house. I was never really taught how to do things but I was ordered to watch everything he was doing. He said that watching and doing are the fastest ways to learn. And however much I resented missing playtime with other kids, I now realize that I learned carpentry,
painting, masonry, plumbing, and other handy skills during those weekends. This knowledge served me in good stead when I became vice-president for engineering and estimating at AG&P. Linear meters and square feet, time and motion studies and value engineering, as well as other construction methods and techniques came naturally, in spite of the fact that I graduated with an Accounting degree and had no formal training in engineering at all.

My chores also included shining shoes on weekends, using Chinese ink and wax, cleaning-up the table after meals, and watering the plants in the garden. Being the youngest of five siblings, I was also the tsimoy of the house, ordered around by almost everyone. My father insisted that I follow everybody else’s orders. I was the conscripted kitchen helper to my sisters, and I learned to mend clothes, bake cake, cook, clean house, wash and iron clothes, go to the market, feed the animals, and so forth. All of these I grudgingly did with a lot of grumbling. But little did I know at that time that all these skills would bring me a lot of joy and satisfaction. My kids now enjoy my cooking; they approach me for clothes that have to be mended, for school projects or anything else that needs repair. I am their “go-to guy.” Even close friends ask me for suggestions for their house plans or repairs, recipes, and household improvements.

My father was a proud man. He could never bring himself to ask for any favors. Any man who could not provide for his family and/or stand on his own was diminished in his eyes. I learned fortitude and independence from him. He taught himself many things. He designed serving trays and napkin holders out of popsicle sticks. He learned to repair dentures and many of his friends came over to have their dentures repaired. From a relative’s request to build a perfume cabinet, he was able to fashion a callado curio display cabinet. He learned to write beautiful ornate script, such that many asked him to do their formal invitations, he drew and painted colorful Disney characters on our headboards and on his grandchildren’s high chairs, and much of our Christmas decorations were made out of egg trays. He was a gifted arts and crafts guy. From him I learned that it is never too late to learn anything, acquire a new skill, or try a new job.

All of us siblings were products of public schools. Tagalog komiks and newspapers were banned from the house. I learned English from the Illustrated Classics my father brought home. Initially with titles
such as “The Ugly Duckling,” “Peter Pan,” “Black Beauty,” and Aesop’s Fables, much later we got Ivanhoe, The Man in the Iron Mask, Mutiny on the Bounty, The Count of Monte Cristo, and many, many others. And up to now, reading humorous, mystery or dramatic novels, magazines, biographies, history books, all hold special fascination for me. I developed the habit of reading three or four books all at the same time.

I grew up listening to his kind of music: innocent, haunting, memorable, fun, melodic tunes from the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s. He typed, catalogued, and compiled them all from memory—English, Spanish, and Tagalog lyrics. He even recorded some of them in a first generation tape recorder. No wonder I am tuned-in all the time to Business Radio 104.3FM, which played most of these tunes particularly on Sundays with Jo San Diego, Lito Gorospe, Bar Samson, Ernie Zarate on the air. My kids know not to touch the dial whenever I am driving.

My father and my mother were married for 52 years before he passed away and until the very end, he never asked for any favors or complained about his sickness. In fact, he shooed me away from visiting him every weekend, which he believed should be spent with my own family. He also told me that much as he appreciated us spending the Christmas and New Year holidays with him and my mother, we really should start our own tradition and spend New Year’s Day in our own home. Now that he is gone, I realize that in his own unique way, he really was my best mentor and role model. He truly belonged to what Tom Brokaw called the “Greatest Generation.”

Greg Navarro is the 2010 President of the Financial Executives Institute and the Carl Jung Circle Center. He is also a Governor of the Management Association of the Philippines, Treasurer and Director of the Philippine Dispute Resolution Center, Inc., a Fellow of both the Institute of Corporate Directors and Institute for Solidarity in Asia, and a member of the Board of Visitors of the Philippine Military Academy.