

Mr Ralph Cecilio: an educator who dared to be different

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“At the beginning of this school year you will hate me, but at the end of it, you will love me.” These were the opening words of Mr Rafael “Ralph” G Cecilio as he first stepped into our third year high school class in 1976. He was then our teacher in English literature. We were all boys in Xavier University – Ateneo de Cagayan, Cagayan de Oro City. Although he was a new teacher in our school, he seemed like he was a veteran educator who knew how to rouse the youth in our academic slumber. There was something very different and compelling about him. He was unconventional with an imaginative and inquisitive mind. He appeared tough but deep down inside he cared so much for his students. Many of us feared him, not because he was a dictator, but simply because we revered him.

Indeed at the beginning of our school year, we dreaded having to meet him in class. Personally, I did. We wanted an easy class, but he made it tough (read: challenging) for us. In this sense, we hated him. His classes of less than an hour appeared very long for us. The count down of the end of his class started the moment we finished the prayer that signaled the beginning of class. At times we wished there would be no English class or he would not show up for whatever reason. He really made us work, study and read, and that to us was contrary to the natural inclinations of our youth. He made us read “strange” novels at a time when most of us were trying to outdo each other reading Hardy Boys pocketbooks. He compelled us to read what appeared to us as unheard-of-novels. He had a list of must-read novels such as J D Salinger’s “Catcher in the Rye,” Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “Brothers Karamazov,” and “Crime and Punishment,” Pearl S Buck’s “The Good Earth,” Herman Hesse’s “Siddhartha,” Graham Greene’s “The Power and the Glory,” Ernest Hemingway’s “The Sun Also Rises,” and “The Old Man and the Sea.” Many of us preferred Hemingway’s novels because they were short and light to carry. They were easy to read and understand as well, or so we thought.

One hour each day we were all expected to read the novels. It was our daily assignment. He prescribed the novels. We were not allowed to read just any kind of novel. He had to approve our reading materials. Parents and guardians were minded to sign on our daily record card to attest what

pages were read. Each day, Mr Cecilio would probe everyone about what one had read as he inspected our daily record card. I remember him asking me a series of questions: “What page are you now in this (“Siddhartha”) novel? “What happened in this chapter?” “How?” “Why?” I was so scared then. I don’t even remember what I told him. I knew I could not just make up stories. Good thing I passed his inquisitive mind. There was just no escape, no fooling around since after we read our novel, a novel review was expected from each student.

Using the Socratic method (question-answer mode of interaction), we read, interpreted in detail and recited some poems of E E Cummings and sonnets of William Shakespeare and those written during the Elizabethan period. We read and interpreted Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” and his short story “The Cask of Amontillado.” He made us write compositions with some style, clarity, brevity, succinctness and elegance. He taught us to value words. In this day and age when words seem not to carry any weight, he showed us the power of words. Words have the power to influence, to transform and to bring about a renewed appetite for reading. To him, words are life-giving and sacred.

Over time, our dislike and disdain for Mr Cecilio became a conversion experience. We started to look forward to his classes, his humor and humanity, his wisdom and wit, his depth and dedication to teaching, his laughter and life, his intuition and intelligence. He became well-loved and even adored by our class. He earned our highest respects in the course of time.

He taught us the value of reading. His mentor, the late Fr Miguel A Bernad SJ, once told me that the secret to learning the English language is *reading*. Fr Bernad told me to read any literature, fairy tales, stories, novels and even newspapers. There is no substitute to reading. In these days, words are no longer as attractive as multimedia images. We live in a world of IT or multi-media images. There are numerous images and sensations that attract the human mind. Often people communicate easily with images rather than words. It is difficult to ask students to read stories and let alone books. It is much easier to watch movies than read novels. Mr Cecilio’s campaign was no different from his mentor. He instilled in students an appetite for reading. He told the wife of my friend (who was with me in our high school class): “never save on reading materials for your daughter.”

We did an exegesis of William Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice." Word by word, line by line, we examined closely the text. It was very tedious. It was scary if Mr Cecilio posed questions for students to answer. We had to be on our toes all the time. He acted out some parts of the play when we were tempted to doze off. We memorized parts of the play. Some of these parts, I can still memorize to this day even after three decades under his tutelage. He empowered us to interpret the play, and zoom in on symbols and imagery and to the beauty and precision of the words penned by Shakespeare. He made us see the twist of the plot, the climax, the wit and humor, the basic flaw of the "pound of flesh" that the character Shylock was pressing on Antonio by way of revenge. As a result, we gained *confidence* to interpret drama, poetry and prose, *confidence* to write simply and clearly, *confidence* to recite in class, *confidence* to speak clearly in complete and simple English, *confidence* in ourselves that we could be better students than we thought we were.

He did not give us a lecture about the story of "Merchant of Venice." A lecture was a mortal sin in his classes. There were no lectures, only interaction, conversation interspersed with humor – at times at our own expense. He did make fun of us sometimes. I enjoyed it, but only insofar as I was not the butt of his jokes. He wanted to develop in us an ability to laugh at ourselves if only to drive home a point. His laughter filled the four walls of our classroom. His laughter was infectious as put by one of my classmates. There was not a dull moment.

At one point, Mr Cecilio, in an effort to caution people in class who liked to talk loudly but were not making sense, recited a line from Macbeth's soliloquy. "Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." We learned to label easily people who made so much noise but bereft of substance thus: "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" or simply FSFSN.

I don't recall him giving us quizzes that measured memory work, although he asked us to memorize poems which we still remember to recite. Our final exam with him did not require cramming and staying up late at night. In fact, one did not have to study for that exam because at that point, learning already happened all throughout our classes. Either we had it or not at all. For the final exam, I do recall a poem he gave us which was written

by E E Cummings. He had a series of questions which led us to interpret and appreciate the poem. That final exam enabled us to learn a new poem, rather than just simply give back to the teacher what we know.

What was so different about Mr Cecilio was he made learning fun despite the difficulty. It was a challenging class and yet with his sense of humor learning was made easy, if not fun. He made us cry, nervous, scared and laugh – all rolled in one. He came across a terror, but not because he loved to intimidate us. He was just singularly interested in one thing: student learning and that love of learning which many a teacher these days cannot seem to communicate with great success.

The sad moment of our engagement with Mr Cecilio came to a point when he told us he was leaving our class for another work. He certainly loved teaching, but somehow he had to cut short his teaching stint with us and pursue another career. Why he had to leave us, I could not figure out then. But what was most certain during the time when he bade goodbye to us was sadness, as if we were losing somebody so dear and precious to us. I was personally teary-eyed as he was saying his farewell message to us. Indeed, we learned to love this teacher we hated initially.

Our paths have never crossed since the time he left our school. The next time I saw him was about three decades after he left. He came to see me in the Dean's Office of the Arts and Sciences of Xavier University where I assumed responsibility. I had to remind him I was his student back in 1976. I further reminded him of the happy days I had with him as my teacher and how grateful and proud I was to be under his charge. He told me he was back to teaching in Corpus Christi School, Cagayan de Oro City. He also told me that he was still using the same tricks back then when he taught us. I was glad he went back to teaching. Teaching was indeed his life. How lucky were his students. Then I didn't hear anything from him and about him.

The next thing I heard was his battle against lung cancer. Then prayers were offered for him, and requests for prayers were also sounded out. Mr Ralph Cecilio died on 02 December 2009. Email messages, Friendster, Multiply and Facebook postings were written by his former students and friends all around the country and beyond. One need only google his name in the internet and these postings, tributes and expressions of gratitude can be sourced out and read. I made my own pitch for the man

who changed our lives. I wrote: “In my 27 years of study, he was the arguably the best teacher I’ve ever had.”

We claimed with pride to be his former students from Xavier University High School. His students from Corpus Christi School where he taught from 1993 until he retired likewise felt the same. Truly an excellent teacher who was a friend and father to his students. His students will let his memory live on – his stories, depth, humor, wit, laughter, wisdom, character and life. He was indeed an educator who dared to be different.