

The Secret of JCL

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"Come over. I shall help you transfer to my school even if I have to see the Superintendent myself about it." Thus wrote Juan C. Laya, Principal of Arellano High School, in answer to my letter of inquiry. Very stiffly, in the most formal language that would hide hesitation and timidity and lack of self-confidence, I had written to the Principal of Arellano High School, without ever having met him before. I had inquired how an elementary school teacher about to finish her B.S.E. course should go about for a teaching position in the high school. Perhaps he saw through the stiffness and the formality and discovered the hesitation and the timidity and the lack of self-confidence and so wrote me the above reply.

It was with some nervousness that I approached a clerk in the school and asked who Mr. Laya was. But it was with trepidation that I introduced myself to the stern-looking school official pointed out to me by the clerk. However, when he spoke to me, I knew at once he was a kindly man who understood people, especially timid people. It was later, while working with him in the same school, that I would discover why he had a knack for drawing shy people out of their shells, often

going out of his way to do so: He was once timid himself, retiring within his shell. It must have been a long, lonely fight before fulfillment. And he had never forgotten that fight in spite of the successes and the affluence that came later.

He was patient in the process, perhaps because he remembered so well the pain and the anguish before he could break the wall and extend a hand to a friendly world—which is, after all, really kind and friendly, in spite of what timid people think. He told me I would demonstrate lessons on the Tagalog translation of the "Rubaiyat" of Omar Khayyam. He had barely finished saying that when I grew pale and began feeling faint. He asked why and I told him in all candidness of my unholy terror of observers entering my room, let alone demonstrate. I begged and implored and even thought of absenting myself from school, but he kept on smiling his easy smile and repeated slowly and calmly but firmly that I would demonstrate. And demonstrate I did — for three successive days. How I did it is still a wonder to me now. But survive it I did and with the experience came a knowing: one must not fail the faith entrusted; one must

try hard enough and long enough to deserve that faith.

After that came other assignments like advising the National Language paper, the dramatic club, the writers' club, and others. With the help of Mr. Laya's deep understanding and unflinching appreciation for whatever we could do for and with the students, however insignificant, I found myself well on the road to liberation. As, doubtless, many years ago, he found himself breaking the shackles of introversion for a fuller life of dynamic leadership and unselfish service to others.

We were always Ilde, Bini, Nintang and Bebang to him, never Miss de Jesus, Mrs. Gonzales, Mrs. Abiad, Miss Edroza. He was very friendly and never unapproachable to teachers, students, janitors, even to the reactionaries. He had that human touch which made people want to work for and with him even on Saturdays and Sundays, carry on extra work and eventually lose themselves in their undertakings. Perhaps it was his sincerity in appreciating the spirit, the effort that went into a little school play, however amateur; his ready chuckle that invariably ended in a hearty laugh to ease one's embarrassment; his eagerness to meet a fellow, however uncouth, more than half-way. Time and again, people have wondered what it was in him that attracted all-out loyalty and cooperation. In the high school where he was once principal, teachers and students used to stay as late as nine o'clock

in the evening to rehearse for a program, to put up a stage for a play; used to work on Sundays on dummies of the school-paper, on cleaning and decorating a room for a coming celebration. And they did it all willingly and they found satisfaction in the doing. After his death, a layman on a passenger bus heading for Bataan was heard to say the following. "That Mr. Laya...even we, the common people there (Bataan) who have nothing to do with the schools...why, we find ourselves cooperating with him in his many projects, and liking it too."

The key to the secret lies in his favorite reminder to mentors: "Far and above human knowledge, there is the human soul."

He lived by this — treating every person with importance, not so much for his knowledge as for his human soul — whether he be a gawky freshman in high school, a frightened janitor caught napping, a new teacher in the throes of beginning, a bare-foot farmer in Pangasinan, an unschooled fisherman in Bataan.

This is the key to the secret of JCL.

Memory is short and Life tarries but a while for Death. JCL may be forgotten, why not? But as long as the key to his secret keeps on unlocking timid hearts, unlettered hearts, human souls, we can say this: His passing this way once is worth the grief of his sudden departure, and JCL lives in our midst.