

A Cup o' Kapeng Barako

With wit and irreverence, Frank McCourt, the Pulitzer Prize winning author of “Angela’s Ashes” and “Tis,” wrote in his third memoir, “Teacher Man”:

“Yo, teacher man ... □ Joey again.□

“Joey, I told you my name is Mr. McCourt, Mr. McCourt, Mr. McCourt.’

“Yeah, yeah.□ So, mister, did you go out with girls in Ireland?’

“No, dammit.□ Sheep.□ We went out with sheep.□ What do you think we went out with?’

“The class explodes. They laugh, clutch their chests, pretend to fall out of their desks. This teacher. Crazy, man. Talks funny. Goes out with sheep. Lock your sheep....”

I am no teacher man. Nor do I do sheep. Haven’t even tried it. But that passage from McCourt’s book brought to mind the three people who taught me what I know about journalism.

When I was a military journalist, writing and sending stories to AP-UPI and other mainstream newspapers around the country and still VERY wet behind the ears, three seasoned journalists took the time to mentor me.

The first was Bruce Dart, who eventually became a Washington Post political writer in the 70’s and 80’s.

The second was Alex Hailey, who eventually wrote the book, “Roots.”

To Be a Journalist . . . Is to Be a Swordsman - MabuhayRadio

Written by Jesse Jose

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And the third was Gagne (I can't remember his first name now). He was my editor in the 70's when I worked as photo-journalist for the Seventh Fleet Public Affairs Office. My buddies and I secretly called him, "the Frenchman" because of his French name. He was brutal. He had a way of reducing 10 sentences in drafts of my stories ... into one sentence. His favorite expression was: "Re-do this story." He eventually became a city desk editor in one of the metro dailies in Pennsylvania.

And though I met them in different times and in different "foxholes" of my military journalism life, they basically said the same thing. "Jesse," they said, "Journalism is not like writing a college composition for your English teachers. In journalism, you write for news readers. Keep your sentences short. Keep your paragraphs short. Five sentences at the most. Use simple words. Be precise and concise and brief.

"Talk to your readers. Tell them the news, but don't over-tell them. Don't insult your readers' intelligence by over explaining. Get in and get out of your paragraphs. Tell them the five W's of the news -- who, what, when, where and why. Keep moving, doling out your info one at a time.

"Don't try to impress your readers with big, long words. Use short words instead.

"And, don't lecture. Don't make that mistake. Readers resent being lectured at. You're a news writer, a journalist, NOT a lecturer. And avoid clichés. Invent your own.

"And remember this: the most important punctuation in journalism is the PERIOD. Verbiage is garbage.

"If you're going to make a cut at somebody, don't hesitate, don't dilly-dally, do it with force, do it without fear and do it with finesse. Don't make a mess. Do it clean. One cut, two cuts, that's it, then flick the blood off from your sword and sheath your sword.

"A true journalist is a master swordsman. He's a true warrior. He's FEARLESS. Now, go out there, killer, and score some kills."

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As a young pup then, I listened in awe to the words of these writing gods. I took their advice to heart. I became a true swordsman. I scored numerous kills. They were NOT journalistic kills though. I was a knucklehead. They were kills, nevertheless, in the form of “birds, chicks and broads.”

They told me, too, to read, read and read. “Read books. Read novels. Read the classics,” they said. “Read magazines and all kinds of newspapers ... and if, one day, you might want to become a columnist, read newspaper columnists. And study how they write.”

That I truly took to heart. I closely read the late Doroy Valencia, the late Jack Anderson and the late Mike Royko. I studied their style and the way they construct their sentences and paragraphs. And I noticed that what they have in common were their simple, short sentences and their simple, short paragraphs.

Now my favorite columnists are Maureen Dowd and Bob Herbert of The New York Times, Howard Pitts, Jr. of The Miami Herald, and Molly Ivins of the Dallas Star. (Ms. Ivins passed away not too long ago.) All four are Pulitzer Prize winners and all write active, simple, short sentences.

I also took a liking to reading Hemmingway, John Steinbeck and Isabel Allende and Philip Caputo. I read all of their books. For thrillers, I read Ken Follett, Nelson DeMille, John Grisham a little bit of Tom Clancy. What these authors have in common are their short, simple, straightforward sentences.

For fun, I read bestsellers. Mitch Albom’s books are the bests of the best. I tried the old classics, but they tremendously bore me. Maybe, I am not there yet. Maybe, I haven’t reached that plateau yet. Maybe, I am still a knucklehead. I’ve a penchant for the old Pilipino classic, “Tiktik.” I remember them as exciting extracurricular readings while I was a student at Araullo High in Manila and as a journalism student at the University of Santo Tomas.

But yo! readers, I don’t mean to impress you with tall tales of my life. I am just passing on to young pups lessons that I’ve learned when I was still wet behind the ears as a journalist, listening in awe to my three writing gods, Bruce, Alex and Gagne, “the Frenchman.”

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And that to be a journalist is to be a swordsman, but not in the way I became, whose journalistic kills were merely birds, chicks and broads, and therefore, NOT really a writing god, but merely an irreverent wannabe. # # #

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