

Struggles and Strengths
By Joaquin Mejia

The Carefree Years

I started studying in Community of Learners Foundation (COLF) when I was seven years old in 2009. I was in Grade 1 during that time. Many of my classmates when I was in Grade 1 continue to be my classmates as a Grade 12 student. However, I was a really different back in those days because I did not care about the things I care about now.

For example, I did not yet read the books that I cared about now. When I was reading children's classic novels like *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce as a teenager in high school, I often looked back at my years as a young child poignantly. I was asking myself why I did not read those books when I was younger. The answer to that is because I was not as avid a reader back then as I was now.

Another example is that I was not aware of problems in the wider world. I gave a presentation on the administration of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in one of the Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) classes and I told my classmates that it would probably evoke some childhood memories because she was the president until we were about seven years old. I now remember 2009 as the year when the infamous Maguindanao Massacre happened. However, I did not learn more about the event until I grew older. I was too young to understand those issues.

The differences did not just lie in my awareness of literature or politics. I was carefree about almost anything. I was not concerned about my work. I had less worries because it seemed like I did not need to worry about those concerns yet. However, I would soon care more about them as I grew older and it played a huge role in shaping my values.

Life got more difficult after those carefree years. I started learning more. However, this meant that I also struggled more. It taught me how to be more compassionate to people who also struggled because I saw that many people would have the same problems as I had.

Growing Inspiration and Growing Difficulty

My first reading of what would become some of my favorite books, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, happened when I was Grade 4. The books might have been too heavy for me at that time. However, I was still impressed by how amazing Tolkien's world of Middle-earth was. I wanted to learn how to be brave like the hobbits in the stories like Bilbo and Frodo. I wished I had deep wisdom like Gandalf. I was so inspired by how the characters in the books would follow goodness and resist evil. Reading the books made me want to become a righteous person like the characters in the story.

It was also around that time when I really started having school problems. I was always having unfinished requirements. I experienced great difficulty in the submission of my tasks. This showed how much I struggled in COLF even during my early years. However, that was also when my interest in reading began to grow because I would read more books.

Grade 7 and Grade 8 were better for me because that was when my work ethic improved. I did well in my subjects when I was Grade 7. I fondly remember my Grade 8 school year as the time when I consistently passed my work on time. Grade 7 and Grade 8 were also when I became close to the people who continue to be my closest friends. We would always spend time together whether we were working or not working.

I did not realize this during those days but I have thought much about it recently. I did not spend much time with people who shared my love for reading books. I had a few discussions on stories that I really liked such as *The Lord of the Rings* but I never swapped recommendations with anyone. Liking books was just a habit I became known for. I could not draw impressively or do math equations properly like my other classmates but I was vocal about reading and writing.



Grade 9 and Grade 10 were much more difficult for me. I started struggling again. I also became less close to the people whom I would often talk to before. This made life harder for me because I would see my classmates happy about finishing assessment while I was having a hard time finishing my tasks. At first it was just Math. It was a subject that I never enjoyed. However, I would later struggle with English and Social Studies even if these subjects were the ones that people associated with me because they thought I liked writing and talking about social, political, and economic issues.

I was relieved when I learned that I managed to reach Senior High School despite my difficulties in Junior High School. It did not get easier because it had its own problems that needed to be solved.

Senior High School Highlights

Ever since the Philippines started regularizing the K-12 system of education, I wanted to be a Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) student. I thought it was an academic track where I can thrive. I liked to read and write. I had interest in societal and cultural issues. While everyone else in my class was discussing about how conflicted they were with their choices, I had already made up my mind about being taking HUMSS.

HUMSS subjects were the subjects where I was truly able to do my best. I was engaged in the discussions on the different concepts from the different social sciences like history and psychology. The subjects actually caught my interest.

What really caught my interest in HUMSS was Creative Writing though. I got to write my own novella. It is about a psychiatrist named Dr. Christopher Carriedo who adopts his goddaughter, Laura Alvarez, when she has lost both of her parents. The story follows their summer break days in Metro Manila. Christopher has to go work in a hospital but he makes time to introduce Laura to his family.. Laura meets new friends like the Christopher's nieces and the children of his friends. I wanted to write a story about family life.

This was the time when I would really write seriously. I would submit chapter drafts often. I would do my best to describe the details of the characters' appearances because I could never draw. It was really difficult to write but I was pleased with my work.



Brian Tianco of the Visual Arts track drew my character. I thought that he did well. His drawing matched the descriptions I had for him in the story. He wears glasses because of his poor vision and he wears a therapist coat because of his job. He also likes wearing maroon because I made the character into a proud graduate of the University of the Philippines (U.P.). Maybe we could be a writer and illustrator duo but I do not actually want to have a writing career when I am older.

I am more of a reader than a writer now actually. I prefer to read books than write my own thoughts. However, I am glad that I got to finally make my writing better. I may not be able to become a writer but I can still develop my writing skills.

Conclusion

I am still far from content though. I still want to become a better reader by reading more books. I still want to be a better writer by becoming clearer and more forceful in expressing my thoughts. I still want to become a better student by working more diligently when it comes to my studies. I still want to become a better friend to my classmates by learning how to listen and empathize with them. There is still a lot that needs to be improved.

I am still glad about the progress. I am glad that I have learned much. I am grateful that I have become wiser throughout the years. My hope is that I do not stop getting wiser as I get older.