Strength, Devotion, Faith:
Reflections on the Life of Dr. Imelda Yared Flores
December 31, 2007
By Margaret Helen U. Alvarez

With so many deaths in this family over the past few years, one would think we’d get used to it by now. But as Papa and I rushed to the hospital on Friday evening—as the doctors tried in vain to revive Auntie Melda—all I could think about was my dear cousin Loy and the pain of losing a mother. But even though Auntie Melda must have thought of motherhood as her most important role, she was many other things to a lot of other people. Loy herself chose for me to speak today because Auntie Melda and I have spent so much of our lives in the academe. Indeed, Auntie Melda touched and influenced hundreds as a mentor not just at Silliman, but in Musuan, Bukidnon, in Chiangmai, Thailand, at the Cebu International School, the St. James Palisades in New York, De la Salle University in Manila, and lately at NORSU and Maxino College. She and I also made brief visits to teach at the PhD programs of the Ateneo de Davao University.

Auntie Melda was my teacher in World Literature. Her reputation had preceded her and I was scared to death of an aunt who had all the words, I was so sure I would do very badly in her class. But I realized very quickly that I.Y. – as I nicknamed her—had utmost respect for people who “got it.” In other words, with effort, if you understood, she wouldn’t pick on you. Among the cousins, we agree that Auntie Melda’s sense of humor was so subtle, sometimes irreverent and caustic, but definitely witty, it was hard not to feel dumb around her.

When I first started attending meetings of the graduate council, it was at first hard to separate my niece role from that of a colleague. But Auntie Melda apparently switched roles with far less difficulty. When I spoke, she listened. When she spoke, everybody listened, and I warmed to the fact that she always knew what she was talking about and everyone looked to her for guidance and wisdom. In my administrative role at the College of Arts and Sciences, I had been asked more than once to act as mediator between Auntie Melda and others with specific concerns. I always wondered why it was
such a big deal because in my conversations with Auntie Melda, she knew just the right words to say that always made me comfortable and less self-conscious.

Of course, there have been hurts. I think Auntie Melda rocked not a few boats because she was always frank and honest. She worked very, very hard. To which you might say, “Don’t we all?” What set Auntie Melda apart was that she cared and she was compassionate. I would have to say that not all teachers are like that. The presence of her students today and all the messages e-mailed, texted, phoned in since her death testify to that care and compassion. She leaves us that “intellectual legacy” that Dean Magtolis referred to at last night’s vigil service.

Even more, however, her memory lives in the family she leaves behind. Along with Tio Winnie, she was always the gracious host—something I grew familiar with when they lived in their campus home during our schooldays and as well when, without question, they welcomed me into their home in Quezon City at the time I struggled to finish my thesis at the U.P. The Tandang Sora days—the cousins like to refer to that time—when the busy aunt worked with the World Executive’s Digest.

German shepherds and golden retrievers, coca-cola, heliconias—these were a few of her favorite things. A frustrated pianist and architect, English as a spoken language was her passion. We laughed over the use of commas in a sentence. “Too many commas,” she said. “English is evolving—we no longer need quite so many commas.” She was telling me once about a word used during a spelling contest for college students at the Luce Auditorium. She had to look up its meaning. I can’t even remember the word anymore. Imagine the great and formidable Dr. Flores looking up a word in the dictionary. Hard to imagine. She was the linguistics expert, committed to excellence, hard to replace—but she was also a very humble person who wanted to simply live.

Loy, Bon, Barb, Dong, I wish I could tell you it will get easier. For Auntie Melda loved fiercely, as any mother would and that you will sorely miss. But what I know is that eventually time will come when you have more good days than bad. Let us all just always remind ourselves of our own motherhood and remember our own children are growing up, too.

Nurture only the good, as well we all should.

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Imelda Y. Flores (1940-2007)
By Dale Law

I don’t know why I’m the one doing this. I guess it’s because I’m the oldest active member of the Silliman University English Department, and, therefore, the one with the most exposure to Imelda’s comings and goings — in good times and in bad — over the past 30 or so years. Or perhaps I’m here because I was always on good terms with her.
At any rate, it’s truly hard for me to believe that she’s gone. Just over a week ago, there she was in KH-1, laughing and reminiscing in the midst of the Department faculty Christmas party.

But, to tell the truth, since her retirement, Imelda hadn’t appeared in the English Department very often. There were some hard feelings there. Despite the University age mandate and the perceived needs of the Department, Imelda really wasn’t reconciled to retirement. She liked what she was doing and wanted to continue doing it. She was ambitious; there was unfinished business. Perhaps, like the persona in Robert Frost’s poem, she felt she had “miles to go before [she slept].”

Some English faculty members surely heaved a sigh of relief when she retired. You see, Imelda wasn’t easy to live with. She was often demanding, sometimes brash and outspoken. She was proud of her Ph.D. and didn’t hesitate to pull rank on those with a lesser qualification. She didn’t work well by consensus; she liked to do things her own way. But, while she may have ruffled some feathers, she got things done. In fact, she got a lot done.

Of special note, of course, was her work with foreign students. Imelda was a mother to them. She touched many lives over the years. You can see that in the number of foreign students in attendance tonight. As word of her death spreads, I expect we’ll soon be receiving condolences from all corners of the world.

Both the English Orientation program and the Intensive English Program were her babies, and because of the foundations she laid, they continue to be very important parts of what Silliman does, and does well, as we prepare students with limited English to meet the demands of the university curriculum, and as we offer an opportunity for intensive short-term enrichment in the English language to students from abroad, especially from Korea. Another batch of Koreans will be arriving here next week.

She was also the mother of a graduate program – Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages – designed to give others the special tools needed to do the job she did so well.

Again, it’s hard to believe she’s gone. In good times and in bad, she was a part of us – and her legacy is a part of us still. We’ll miss her.

Imelda Yared Flores

By Myrna Peña-Reyes

Imelda Yared and I were freshmen at Silliman in the late 1950s. We were in some classes together, and I remember her as a pretty, bright, vivacious girl (yes, we were “girls” back in that younger time, compared to the “women” we became later). She was fun to be with, and she also sang in a band. But while most of us went on to graduate in
1960, she had gotten married to Winnie Flores and was soon raising a family before we ourselves experienced how it is to be in the real world. As we took our place in that world, it was easy to lose track of several of our classmates. But in time, I would hear that she did graduate from college shortly after us.

Our paths would not cross until 1971 or 1972 when the Summer Writers Workshop was invited to hold a session at St. Paul College. She was one of the gracious people who hosted us, and I realized that she was something of a campus big shot there. So I was surprised when she told me that she really wanted to teach at Silliman, and could I keep her in mind if there would be an opening in the English Department? She said that her main reason for wanting to transfer to Silliman was so she could send her kids to school here. I could sympathize with that very well for my own father moved our family from Cagayan de Oro to Dumaguete just to give his children a Silliman education.

I was the acting chair of the English Department when some vacancies occurred due to staff leaving and increased enrollment. My first thought was to recommend Imelda for an appointment. I felt that with her intelligence and interests, great drive and energy, she would be an asset to the school. Thus while I was leaving for abroad, she began her long and loyal service to Silliman University. Later, while I would hear sometimes about how her great drive and energy resulted in friction with some of her colleagues, I understood that this went with the territory. As is usually the case when somebody has big ambitions and much talent, impatience results in misunderstandings and a great many hurts, both big and small. But, realistically, that is the case in any academic setting.

When I returned with my husband to Dumaguete to retire in 2005, Imelda, who had earned a doctorate in her field, was one of the senior members of the faculty. She was the program coordinator of the English Language Training Program that was responsible for the language orientation of foreign students as well as the special short-term classes for visiting foreign students that Silliman offered. Her significant contribution to the academic program of the University and the life of the community vindicated my earlier belief in her.

Our paths would cross again when she attended a literary event in 2006 at Silliman where I was one of the panelists. The panelists were invited to sell copies of their work at the event. It is an unfortunate fact for me especially that nobody reads, much less buys, poetry books, so I was touched when she was among the few who bothered to purchase a copy of one of my books. I remember while walking out together after, we were discussing that tired topic of whether one should write in English or Pilipino or Cebuano, when we had to abruptly end our talk and hurriedly board pedicabs because of a sudden rain and wind that came up. We promised to get together again, but as is usually the case, nothing came of that.

It is ironic that the last time I spoke with her was at the necrological service for her brother-in-law last month. As expected, our thoughts were on death, and she spoke of Winnie and confessed that she still hadn’t gotten over his death. I lamely offered the cliché of time healing. But she was excited about her forthcoming trip abroad to join one
of her kids. I remember we spoke mostly about Social Security benefits for she was hoping she could work there and add to her Social Security deposit (which she had started when she worked abroad for a while) before she would retire for good. Before we parted, we promised to get back in touch “after Christmas.”

Who would have thought that, indeed, we would be here together again after Christmas, but under the most shocking and saddest circumstance! Her unexpected death when she was looking forward to starting a new life abroad brings sharply home our shared mortality, how we are helplessly at the mercy of that harsh visitor who drops in unexpectedly at the most inopportune time.

But what stands out most clearly in connection with Imelda is a memory of a picnic that she and Winnie hosted shortly after she joined our department in the early ’70s at the Flores family farm in Amlan. She brought us to a most beautiful wilderness setting by a river. The day was clear and full of sun. For a while we would forget our personal differences and petty hurts as we sat and soaked and swam and laughed a lot with the sounds of rushing water and the wilderness around us. Such outdoor settings make us realize that the world and the whole of creation is truly God’s Cathedral.

That particular moment of beauty, happiness, peace and goodwill among friends, when we seemed transported back to childhood, is embedded in my memory as things are preserved in amber through time. Many years after the event, I would write a small lyric about that rare moment, which I would like to end with here. (Incidentally, a phrase in the poem suggested another poem which became the title of my first book, “The River Singing Stone.”) I am not sure if Imelda had a chance to see the first poem. If not, I am reading it for her tonight. So Mel, in your memory, here is

San Miguel Picnic

Sprawled on the rocks where water thrashed
I felt the river tug at my back,
jerk at my feet and drop
into a pool splashing with children.

The river sang stone
while children filled their hands with light.
Framing the sky
birds balanced on bamboo spires.

Snug in my stone and water pew
I held the foaming bottle high
and turned the sun
like amber in my hand.