

DOREEN FERNANDEZ

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We had put off our regular lunch. “Let us wait until after the end of the school rush,” we said. And summer was travel time so “let’s do it when we get back” we said again. “Life is short” lunches we called them. But we didn’t realize how short.

Our last lunch together was typical of lunches with Doreen and I know many in this room have shared this experience: Doreen introducing us to the specialties of the house; the owner or the chef coming out to make recommendations that would be prepared specially for us. And indeed the food was great.

But it was not just the good food that characterized the lunches with Doreen. More than anything else, it was the wonderful, comfortable food for the soul. There we were, Doreen, Honey Carandang and I—3 mature women, women of substance we like to think, in what Homey and (Erik Erikson) would call our generativity years—sharing something read or a place traveled by or yet another endearing or infuriating *Pinoy* trait and of course some exciting discovery—usually a person doing great things or someone with tremendous potential.

And the gossip! Doreen always had the latest juicy morsels (and I am not referring to the cuisine) on the rich and famous and pretentious. This was probably the part of Doreen that Danton Remoto would fondly refer to as “ascerbic, sly and wicked.”

And we discussed projects, not so much what we were doing (although there was that as well) but what else we could or would do. For Doreen was always the best support for any project. Dreams and schemes that were merely a glint in our eye, an idea struggling for clarity or support was greeted by Doreen with encouragement, suggestions and offers of help. Always upbeat even enthusiastic, Doreen was the perfect partner in an endeavor as not only was she interested and positive, she was hardworking, fast and always delivered.

Her columns in the *Inquirer* continued to appear during periods that she was critically ill and recently even after she died. In the *Philippine Journal of Education*, a magazine for teachers which I edit and to which Doreen has been a regular contributor for almost two decades, the August issue will still carry her column, “Book Talk”. You see, Doreen unlike you and me (well, me anyway), was always ahead of her deadlines.

We had a project we were working on, Doreen and I—an edited collection of my grandmother’s essays. Paz Marquez Benitez may be best known as a short story writer, but in fact she wrote only a few stories. She however wrote hundreds of essays as editor of the *Philippine Journal of Education*. Doreen and I were collecting and sorting through these essays and we planned to put them together in a book. I guess I will have to work on this project without Doreen’s help. Incidentally, I remember that my grandmother, although somewhat of a loner and recluse in her later years, always welcomed and enjoyed Doreen’s visits.

At this last “life is short” lunch I referred to, I recall expressing my feelings of inadequacy and regret at not having written a book. Here I was with Doreen and Honey, both such prolific authors, and I was sadly unpublished and bookless. Doreen in typical fashion offered to help by conducting a workshop for an intimate group of friends who needed an extra push to write. Or just collect and show her what I had written she said, and she would help find the book in them. That too was put off. There is no book as yet but Doreen’s encouragement felt so good.

Yes, Doreen had such a way of making people feel good. Not in the superficial pleasantries fashion but in the deep affirming way as she found something to genuinely appreciate in most people—particularly her students. Both my children Carlo and Andrea had Doreen as a teacher at the Ateneo. When she had them in class and even after, she would always have nice observations and accounts about them—little vignettes to warm a mother’s heart. I always thought my two laid back children were so fortunate to have Doreen as a teacher. But listening to Doreen, bless her generous heart, you would think *she* was the lucky one.

But we were the lucky ones. We are lucky, you and I—all of us—for having had Doreen in our lives. And I thank God for that blessing.