

PERSONAL STATEMENT

My father was a teacher. He retired a few years ago. A respected teacher loved by the students and fellow teachers alike, he gave it all to teach not just sociology and history (his subjects), but also about noble causes (equality, democracy and citizenry).

Thus, even today, years after they graduated and moved on, many of his students visit him as he was more than a teacher to them, but a mentor as he also taught about life and what it means to live worthy.

But his last paycheck was for \$4000 after 30 years of service because he never got promoted whereas most of his peers are principals and directors with close to six-figure salaries.

However, my father *chose* not to go after promotions because he headed up the teachers' labor union to fight for the rights of the teachers.

Thus, although he was tempted by promotions, salary increases and other perks to give up his activism, he never succumbed.

Instead, this man of uncompromising ethics and iron will fought not only for the teachers but also for the marginalized have-nots as well. During college, for instance, he ran a night school for the working poor for four years, teaching pro bono until midnight. And as a teacher, he organized demonstrations for the return of the teachers fired unfairly. He also went on a one-person picket protest in front of the Ministry of Education to oppose a potentially damaging policy.

At the same time, however, he also ensured that the practice of taking bribes from parents is rooted out by training both the teachers and the parents alike, which in many ways speaks for his fairness (not someone who divides the world with them versus us mentality).

In sum, my father was a progressive open-minded activist, a champion of the have-nots.

And these set of noble principles he fought for and taught, were also taught at home (in many ways, I learned by observing as my father, a man of few words, taught mostly through action rather than words).

Thus, these principles were also what I cherish, and they became mine.

And although I cannot dare to compare my own actions with my father's, still I tried my best to this day to live up to this family motto.

Besides volunteering for children with Down syndrome, for instance, I also took care of my younger brother (my only sibling). Suffering from severe Voice Tic Disorder since he was nine years old, he would make weird high-pitched sounds in public. I took him everywhere with me – but it wasn't easy as the moment we stepped out of the house, we faced discrimination (whether spoken out loud or cold silent stare).

But I never let my kid brother feel belittled. And instead of trying to protect him, I helped him to stand firmly on his two feet, teaching him how to not buy into the others' perception of him.

Moreover, I also accompanied him wherever he was taken by our parents to look for a cure. All in all, we must have gone to Seoul at least 100 times. I wanted to be there to simply be by his side if nothing else.

Today, perhaps because of all our efforts, his tick has diminished significantly. But regardless of this, I am proud of my brother and love him as he is.

This tendency of mine also spilled over to my work. At my first workplace, STEMCO, a plant where the labor union was first started, I was the first among the non-plant people who joined the union. I did so to protect the rights of our plant people who were often from marginalized backgrounds; those who had to work as college was a luxury for them.

The union later presented me with a plaque of appreciation for sending out a powerful message to my fellow colleagues (the white collars per se) to stand by the side of the plant people.

Looking back, empathy for others, and the courage to act, are what I learned from my father. He is my greatest teacher and mentor in life.