

June 4th 2014

A walk down the memory lane with.....

B. Lawrence, a Refined, Righteous, and Renowned Math Teacher from St. Patrick's College - Jaffna.

St. Patrick's College Jaffna has been producing prominent quality teachers of various disciplines and B. Lawrence is one of them who will fit into the area of Math.

He was a gentleman, a model, a scholar and an exceptional teacher with over 25 years of experience teaching Pure Math for A/Level students and General Math for O/Level students at St. Patrick's College. He also tutored them privately although he stopped teaching General Math at O/ Level in school during our times. He, like many other prominent teachers from St. Patrick's College has a policy of not accepting Patrician students into their own tutoring classes if they are already being taught by them at school.

If it was good to be schooled at St. Patrick's, it was great to be tutored by a Patrician, and B Lawrence was the chosen man, for his ability to assess the learning & application gap in a person and applies the right strategy to help take that person where he or she needs to be.

The man devotes more time to listen than to talk. He listens with patience and a gentle smile and talks with an assertive tone. He nods his head, to acknowledge our presence, response, or our acceptance of guilt. He shakes his head if our outlook was displeasing, our response was less assuring or our acceptance of guilt was not turning into admission of fault. He was very spiritual but occasionally religious. He could be seen at the church on Good Fridays, wearing full white and standing still. He could sometimes be sighted standing on his rooftop watching us after tutoring classes. He could be seen walking down the school hallways, with head straight up, a notebook carried closer to his chest at 1 O'clock position, pen(s) in his pocket and a pleasant smile. He reads a lot and that made him a complete and coherent person. Personal problems are never reflected in his attitude towards students. He gives himself a time off when he's stressed out and comes back into the class after taking a break.

He loved hunting and bird watching. Premier Café was his favorite eat-out place and rolls with egg coffee and sponge cakes would be his preference. He had a motor bike, and if I remember correctly he had a green sort of camouflaged wagon. He mostly uses the former for commuting to school and short runs and the latter for leisure. Both vehicles are always clean and often driven at uniform speeds. His preferred leisure dress was, white golf shirts and khaki shorts; foot-ware was hunting boots with knee-high socks. I've been inside his house a few times as his

son L. L. Ravi was my classmate and a good friend. His house looked great inside but always looked “unfinished” on outside.

The Year was 1979 and the Patricians of class 10, at St. Patrick’s were gearing up for our O. Levels. Getting tutored to do well on the forthcoming exam was norm of the day and Math was at the fore front.

B. Lawrence’s tutoring was many of our obvious choice, and getting into the door is not that easy.

It was a three step process. One on-one meeting will be first and the noticeable question would be why we feel a tutoring is needed. The answer to this will have to convince him to proceed to the next step. This will be followed by an “informal” background check and a brief sizing up of our appearance.

Once you are “qualified” to attend his tutoring classes, you can be confident you are one step closer to your goal of getting a Distinction. Each person is assigned a place to sit after many rounds of shuffling, and that’s the place you’ll be sitting for the remainder of the year. He has a very good memory and is well structured. He will map out the entire seating and entry - exit pattern of the students in the class and lock into his memory. If you are late, skip a class, quit early or swap your place you’ll be tracked and will have to provide a good explanation.

Seating layout is based on gender and height. Boys are seated in the front and girls are in the back. The taller you are the closer you are to the Sir. There are two doors to enter and exit. One is at the front and the other in the back. The class will last for about 90 minutes, from 7 PM to 8:30 PM.

Once you are in his class everything is muted except his voice with occasional answers from students to his questions. The writing board is green, lit up and about 6 feet high 12 feet wide covering almost the width of the class. He writes sequentially on the entire area of the board – from left to right before wiping out. The cleaning of the board at times takes a minute or more with a pause to allow for chalk dust to settle. He sits down only when we are given a mini test or an assignment. There is a drop box by his desk to deliver our tuition fees. If missing your tuition payments was reasonably acceptable skipping home assignments are completely unacceptable. He would not hesitate [especially the guys] to put us in any embarrassing situation in order to get our home assignments done and correctly. I learnt out the hard way and as time progressed I spent on average 2 to 3 hours prior to the class completing assignments and ensuring correctness.

Mr. B. Lawrence had an ingenious personality with a strategic approach to every situation and has the ability to maintain consistency in implementing that approach. Your home assignments, as I mentioned above are expected to be completed fully and although he doesn’t check everybody’s work, he’ll guess by scanning our eyes with a characteristic smile. After that he’ll selectively call us by names to standup and will ask to give the answers to our assignments.

Failure to complete assignments can result in, receiving a punishing lecture from him, even further, giving wrong answers would invite a cynical comment from the master, usually bringing about a gentle, constrained smile from the boys seated around and depending on whom the question was asked, it could trigger a vengeful laughter from the girls seated at the back. If the smile from the boys is construed as an act of unity, getting laughed at by the girls can be taken as “payback” for past provocative deriding rendezvous. This could put you in a very awkward situation and in turn would motivate you to “show well” and get your homework right next time.

When our fellow female students are asked questions, they will be called upon only by their last names and you would not risk turning 180 degrees to see who that person is, as his eyes are on you whilst asking them the questions and you’ll know very well what’s in store for you if you did move out of curiosity or pass any distracting comments.

The man answers your logical questions eloquently; legitimate questions considerately, and immature questions mathematically. Let me give you an example. During one of our classes a female student at the last bench asked a question, and one of the guys waved and said he couldn’t hear the question. He wanted the question repeated. Lawrence Master turned to another guy sitting further away from the first guy and asked if he heard the question clearly and he replied yes. The first guy was asked to stand up and I vividly remember what Lawrence Master said to him...”mahane vattathin parythyil irukkum avanukku vilanginal vattathukkulle irukkum unakku eppadi vilangamal irukkum?”

There was also one other reminder he occasionally gives us. “Ungadai pettror ehen enn mahanai pesinir endru kettaal, neengal seitha pilaikalai naan avargalidam kanitha murayil niruvi kattuvan”.

Inadvertent minor errors on home assignments will prompt him to say “ mahane unakku kootta kalikka theryathu”. Skipping home work on multiple occasions or uncooperative behavior will tempt him to say with a frustration “Mahane... Nee.... Varunkallathil...Oru...Assal Kaluthaiyaha Varuvaii.....” He will complete all the above proverbs with a smile unique to Lawrence Master and will echo them throughout his sessions.

Whilst we had our own opinion and may have resented his approach during those teenage years, looking back now we’ve realized, admired and appreciated his way of encouraging us to: regularly do our assignments, pay close attentions during the classes, actively involve in problem solving steps, ask productive questions and to be self-disciplined.

Bike parking also has rules. Girls’ bikes are lined up along one side of the wall and the Boys’ on the other. Girls will leave the class first, and the boys will have to wait until about 2-3 minutes after the last female leaves the place. He will be staying with us until then and will take a peek outside to ensure no feminine presence in the property and gives us the go ahead to leave.

Unfortunately, most of the female students live around the vicinity - within a 5 minute bike ride and by the time we are out on the road they're out of sight.

The 2-3 minutes delay enforced on boys in exiting the class cost us dearly. It denied us the thirst to venture out on the roads and instead made us go home early in time for dinner.

But Tuesdays were exceptional as we turn our bikes and head to St. Anthony's church for a quality time eating kachan & kadalai.

Big Match Season Fridays were times to hang out on road intersections after our classes unaware that our Sir will be watching us from the flat part of the roof of his house as to which direction we are heading after our class. Up from there, he has a good view of martin road and chapel street junction, martin road and main street junction, north and south side of the main street and also chapel street and 5th cross street junction. These were our favorite pull-over & chat locations and he's well aware of it. After realizing that we were being watched we moved our meeting place away as closer to Chapel St. and 4th cross street or 3rd cross streets junctions as we "were made aware" that this area is off his rooftop field of view.

On some occasions he'll pull his motorbike out and follow us to a short distance if his rooftop watch was not conclusive or there was a cause for concern. This is sometimes anticipated and we are invariably on alert for the sound of his bike.

On one occasion, we were hanging out at a busy intersection [I think it was Hospital Road and Main street junction] on our bikes with our friends and tuition mates from St. John's College. It was at the height of the Central/St. John's Big Match season and we had joined this noisy group of revelers shouting the popular slogans "College - College St. John's College...engada College..." Bells, horns, whistles and drums were all there together with dancing was cool, invites attention from public as well as rival school friends and there was a lot of fun. A couple of Green and Gold flags were also present and waved in a show of solidarity with our Johnnian Friends.... The time was around 6PM, about an hour before our classes started. Then the unexpected incident happened. B. L. was driving by in his wagon and was making the turn but the car slowed down to a halt as the green/gold flags may have caught his attention. We knew at that point we were in trouble as the car had come to a halt long enough for a close scrutiny of our group.

Sitting in the next class would be quite embarrassing [because of the seating layout] as we will be asked to explain where we were and what we were doing on that day before and after the class. He would specifically ask each of us whom he confirmed was involved and whom he suspects may have also involved in the reveling, to stand up and he would pause for a minute or so with a devious smile (I suspect the one minute pause is to silently tell us: "What I am about to say is not going to get into your head but I would say anyway") and then he would say with an assertive tone: "Mahane.... Eppothum.... Enthanerathilum....Engalal mattravarkalukku evvitha idainchalhalum eetpada koodathu....."

He would then go on explaining why street corner reveling is an unacceptable behavior and how distasteful it is to the society and unhelpful to our community. Little had we grasped from what he had said back then, but looking back at the above sentence [he used to repeat] we realize how much he meant to say in one sentence.

Although I spent only a few months as his student in the Pure Math class at the A/L in school, it was clear that B Lawrence was loved, admired, honored and remembered not only by Patricians but by students from various other schools. There was a culture of unwavering reverence when his name is spoken or discussed. There was an atmosphere of fear out of respect even though like many of our other teachers, he didn't believe in nor resort to physically disciplining students. Instead he believed in coaching us to do the right things, take accountability for our own actions and expected us to adhere to our commitments. He developed our moral and taught us the importance of social and academic values. He would do all the above in a consistent and repetitive manner until we get the message.

Level of aggressiveness in the class was near to none. Tolerance was abundant and motivation was prevalent. Yelling is never heard of, rage is hardly seen but solemnity.

There was always a serious, methodical and educational environment during the class and more of a fatherly atmosphere after the class.

It's been 29 years since B. Lawrence departed this world, but his views and bearings still echo throughout the world among the Patricians and others who were educated by him. He will be truly missed by us.

St. Patrick's College had produced yet another intellectual who taught his students that trying to direct the wind to reach our Destination "D" is wasted but adjusting the sails on our boats would do the job. The beauty in that is, he designed and gave us the boat and sails based on our strengths and weaknesses so that we all can reach our destination on time no matter what path, tuning or speed are taken.

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Comments and add-ons are welcome.

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