



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



## THE ALPHABET OF HOPE



W R I T E R S F O R L I T E R A C Y

# FRANCESCO SIONIL JOSÉ



PHILIPPINES

Francisco Sionil Jose has been called a Philippine national treasure. Born in 1924, he is one of the most widely-read Filipino writers. His series of novels and short stories depict the social underpinnings of class struggles and colonialism. He attended the University of Santo Tomas after World War II, but dropped out and plunged into writing and journalism in Manila. In subsequent years, he edited various literary and journalistic publications and started a publishing house. *The Pretenders* is his most popular novel.

## To the young writer

In a moral crisis such as what grips the country today when a handful of Congressmen betray the people's trust in obedience to their powerful leader, what can the ordinary Filipino do? What can a writer do?

The German writer Stefan Heym who lived through Nazism and East Germany's communist regime had this advice: "the writer's duty is to survive."

"What" I asked, "if survival means acquiescence or surrender?"

"Then," he replied, "survival is also a test of his moral strength."

Do our writers today have that strength? Every so often, when I am asked by young writers for advice, this is what I tell them:

Memory and sentiment are never enough. You must master the craft of writing and use the language you know best – respect the word and know the rules before you break them. Having mastered the word, use it then as one would create a window – polished, untarnished, so that you can see clearly beyond the crystal. Don't cover the frame with frills and fancy drapes for it is these decorations that will attract, and hide the view. Review, revise, rewrite till it hurts, till the hand that holds the pen is numb, till every sentence reads easily, every word in place and you know by then that the window is made.

You are a storyteller, a singer – so learn rhythm, music, resonance, narrative technique, until these are in your marrow. You can learn all these by writing letters, notes, exercises, journals. That concert pianist, that prima ballerina – everyday they practise and limber up before they go on stage.

Do not be waylaid by the latest literary fads, by fashionable ideologies. They will surely pass as unremembered seasons and what will remain are those verities – love and death, faith and forbearance, which you have made permanent in prose. Look at your craft with humility, and be your own severest critic. Do not for once believe that ancient panegyric that the pen is mightier than the sword. Nunca! It is always naked power which triumphs and rules, against which you must always rail till your voice hoarsens. Beware, too, of early praise for it can destroy, and remember again that only time will tell if your work will prevail.

Write with all your senses, and some of your ulcers working, so that what you write will throb with life. Live, be observant, be the eternal child aglow with awe and wonder of

the world, amass memories for they will all be retrieved as dialogue, color, plot, action.

Ask yourself, what is literature, who is your audience. Literature is the noblest of the arts and writers should, therefore, be of noble bearing, affirming in their very lives the Socratic precepts of virtue and excellence. This is difficult to achieve; perhaps, it is enough that you strive to be able to look at every man straight in the eye and to sleep soundly at night without the nightmares of a bad conscience.

Be an honest witness to your time, and be strong when they revile you for telling the truth. Your vocation will also condemn you to solitude, but remember – he who stands alone is the strongest. Even in your shattering loneliness, remember you are writing, not for critics, academics, or other writers, but for your own people who, in their silence and perhaps poverty, cannot express their aspirations and anguish. You are their voice but only if you have not deserted or betrayed them.

Whatever suffering might be heaped upon you, never, never lose your equanimity, your humor. Much of what you will write be bleak – just the same, learn to laugh at yourself first, and your critics, and certainly at the antics of the wretched among your countrymen.

Nurture in yourself that abiding sense of urgency, of passion – deep and volcanic – but always keep it in control and with it, that profound melancholy wrought by our history, by our own leaders – no matter how effulgent our fiestas and how bright our smiles. This passion, this melancholy, must surface as literature if you are to be an artist. So Lenin said all art is propaganda, but remember, not all propaganda is art.

I make writing seem difficult because it really is. Worse, it may not even make you live comfortably, and you will grow old like so many of us who tried without ever being appreciated in your own country. Just look at all those books piled in bargain counters – nobody buys them for though we have a novelist as a national hero, we do not read novels.

Why then must you write at all? Do it because there is so much hypocrisy and cussedness in us and, who knows, you may be able to exorcise a bit of these. Do it because many of us have lost our moorings, and it is in literature where history lives, where we can know best ourselves so that we can then live ourselves and be rooted again in native soil. Do it because it is a vocation which will give you such pleasure, so lasting and so deep – it transcends anything those sybarites and sensualists covet. I assure you, this old man knows.

What, after all, is literature but pain remembered. In remembering, we adorn it with our imagination, our craftsmanship, ennobling it perhaps, imbuing it with permanence; it

then exists beyond our puny lives, a testament to our humanity for all the world to witness. And having witnessed it, it is our hope that what we have written will evoke compassion, for it the end, this is what draws all men together.

One final word: write wherever you can do it best, in exile perhaps, but never, never leave your village, your town, your beginning. Enshrine it in the heart, sanctify it in your mind for your beginning gives you your soul, your humanity. In remembering with passion, you will be writing about a particular place and a particular people but you shall have given them also what all men will recognize, the universality of man and of art itself.

Francisco Sionil José

