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Obituary

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1922–2015

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Obituary

Rev. Fr. Jaime C. Bulatao, SJ 1922–2015

Friends fondly called him Father Bu, short for Fr. Jaime Carlos Bulatao, SJ. To me he was Tito Jim, youngest brother of my mom. Father Bulatao was born in Paco, Manila, on 22 September 1922. Both his parents were academicians. Dr. Emilio Bulatao headed the Physiology Department at the University of the Philippines (UP) College of Medicine, while Encarnacion Ungson spent a few years teaching in the public school system before she married. His father was a true-blooded researcher. One family story tells of the Bulataos' hurried escape from their Paco residence during the Second World War's end-game carpet bombing. Emilio Bulatao brought nothing else with him except his research papers.

Aside from a kindergarten at St. Theresa's College, Manila, with Mother Redempta, Father Bulatao studied in Jesuit schools throughout his life. He graduated valedictorian of high school class 1939 in Ateneo de Manila, when it had its campus on Padre Faura Street, Ermita, Manila. He then entered the Jesuit novitiate in Novaliches as a 16-year-old college freshman. He pursued graduate studies in New York, first obtaining a theology degree from Woodstock College, subsequently proceeding to pursue graduate degrees in psychology:



Photo courtesy of the Department of Psychology, Ateneo de Manila University.

MA in experimental psychology and PhD in clinical psychology at Fordham College. Both experimental rigor and clinical sensitivity contributed to the appropriate mix of scientific discipline and localized insight as he built the field of psychology when he returned to the Philippines in 1960.

Father Bulatao and I were twice related, my having spent most of my career as his colleague at Ateneo de Manila's Department of Psychology. At work, he was known for giving personalized cryptic advice that hit their punches right at the crux of one's heart. Three of his favorite one-liners were: "Go beyond borders," "Just do it," and "Transcend." And this was how he lived out his public life on this earth.

Go Beyond Borders

To create is to bring something into existence, to go beyond what the landscape already holds. As soon as he returned to the Philippines in 1960, Father Bulatao started to build Ateneo's Department of Psychology. Today this department is a Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Center of Excellence.

Father Bulatao was a team player. Going beyond university borders and the arid land of umbrella professional organizations, he cofounded the Psychological Association of the Philippines with stalwarts like Alfredo Lagmay, Agustin Alonzo, and Sinforoso Padilla from the UP; Jesus Perpinan from Far Eastern University; and Estefania Aldaba Lim from the Philippine Women's University. In 1964 he likewise cofounded the Philippine Guidance and Personnel Association with colleagues from various local universities.

As Philippine psychology institutions matured, Father Bulatao explored international collaborative work in psychology as an exchange professor at Stanford University (1967), University of Hawaii (1969), Xiamen University (1987), Tien Educational Center (1989), and Taiwan's Fugen Catholic University (1997). He fell in love with foreign languages, self-learning a little of French and Japanese and loads of conversational Chinese. His French helped save one Psychology Department secretary from unwarranted torture during martial law. Sometime in 1980, Marcosian intelligence agents went to pick up Susan Cellano from our office in Bellarmine Hall. Another secretary Nits del Rosario, who was then studying the French language, spoke in French as she phoned Father Bulatao at the Jesuit Residence so that the arresting agents would not understand the plea for help. Immediately he went to the Psychology Department and protected Susan from receiving more harm.

Although, or perhaps because, he was a Jesuit priest, Father Bulatao did not mind going beyond the borders of conventional Catholic rules when human well-being was at stake. He entered the world of Filipino indigenous spirits to heal those who suffered from various forms of psychological anguish. He respected local faith healers, encouraging his students to observe or even participate in their sessions. He was invited by families suffering from what they believed were poltergeist visitors, successfully healing the home environment of such distress by invoking Western or indigenous religious scripts. Below I say more about Father Bulatao's indigenous ways of healing when I describe his psychological practices as a healer and scholar.

He also went beyond the borders of traditional Catholicism in his stand toward contraception, emphasizing the importance of personal spiritual discernment rather than external laws. When I was a young married woman, I wanted to take birth control pills during the height of martial law pursuits by intelligence agents. When I asked my uncle what he thought of it he said, "Just follow your conscience." And so I followed my conscience.

Just Do It

Father Bulatao preferred being a role model to directly exhorting colleagues to perform well in the university. He set a high bar as a teacher par excellence. He cared for his students, and ensured the high quality of his courses. He was gentle and supportive to those who worked hard, participated intelligently in class discussions, and easily fell into altered states of consciousness. But he was tough to latecomers (they would have to struggle with a locked classroom door) or those who did not read the assigned chapters (face a teacher's walkout). Once Father Bulatao tried to hypnotize an undergraduate class, but no student successfully fell into a trance in spite of his efforts. When the end-of-class bell rang, the story goes that he did not leave the room, and he hypnotized the next psychology class that used his classroom!

He was not a picky teacher. He accepted without fuss whatever class schedule or course was assigned to him by Psychology Department chairs, who were generations his junior. Even in his advanced age, he enjoyed teaching undergraduate hypnosis classes and graduate courses like Quantitative Methods, Research Seminar, Abnormal Psychology, Test Construction, Projective Techniques, Rorschach Inkblots, and Seminar in Consciousness Explorations.

In an era marked by commercialization of service to others, Father Bulatao stood out because he offered gratis clinical service to anyone, rich or poor, who needed his psychological help. In his admirably messy office room—with a sign that read “This is my mess, and I love it”—he received visitors and talked with their *dwende* (dwarfs), listened to the stories behind their tears, played with imaginary butterflies expanding their colorful wings between his client’s two hands, and induced trance states with the aid of Tibetan chimes. His clients would leave his room less pained and more at peace with themselves. He also paid house calls to homes occupied by poltergeists. By the time he left these places, the occupants would feel less distressed, less fearful, and more peaceful in their place of abode. He did not hesitate to enter the cultural world of tarot cards, faith healing, and *sanib* (possession), believing that true healing takes place by entering the subjective world of those who ask for help.

Father Bulatao’s scholarship merged with his psychological service. He published about local psychological phenomena in well-placed academic journals such as *Philippine Studies* and the *Philippine Sociological Review*. In his earlier years, he investigated the cultural and sociological landscape of psychological phenomena. His intellectual creativity burst forth in original insights about the *hiya* (shame) system as he described the Filipino self perpetually in-relation to others and his almost-scathing commentary on split-level Christianity in the Philippines. Other related writings in his earlier years described local value systems in papers about value formation and “The Manileño’s Mainsprings” (*Philippine Studies* 1962:45–81). As he grew older and settled into a deeper sense of the Filipino psyche, his psychological practice and theorizing turned more transpersonal, yet continued to be saturated with local Philippine colors. In various journal articles he narrated and theorized about altered states of consciousness, faith healing, poltergeist, possession, and cure. His other writings bordered on the mystical, yet remained in conversation with the academic community. He wrote about modes of mind, consciousness mapping, and methodological considerations in paranormal research.

Transcend

Father Bulatao’s explorations of transcendence permeated his psychological work especially toward the end of his career. He explained mind reading as a function of a consciousness that unified rather than divided humanity.

He progressively saw more and more clearly how the human family was collectively singular. By inducing hypnotic trances, he bridged psychological divisions within and among persons and accessed this subjective singularity.

His sense of transcendence was likewise practical. At the height of my midlife crisis, I got entangled in big-time fights within our Psychology Department—not their fault! I went to Father Bulatao and emotionally poured out all my blame and excuse scripts about why I was so unhappy in the department. After around an hour of listening to me, he held my hand and said, almost inaudibly, one word, which brought me to my senses: “Transcend.” It took me more than a decade after our talk to appreciate the deeper meaning of transcendence in daily life.

It was during his end-of-life sufferings that his belief in transcendence intensified. During his last five years he was bedridden, but continued to hold a sharp and clear mind. As his lungs weakened through the years, he lost physical strength. During one of our conversations when he was already ill, I asked him, “What is helping you now, your being a psychologist or a priest?” He replied: “A priest.” He was lucid almost till his last day, as he asked to go back to the Jesuit residence from the hospital. Without much anger or frustration, he calmly surrendered to his earthly deterioration and pain. Thus he left this world on 10 February 2015, quietly going beyond earthly borders, unto his Transcendence.

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