

### ***In Memoriam* of José DAVID-FERREIRA – Founder of GAPIC**

On 7 February last José David-Ferreira, Professor at the Faculty of Medicine and the founder of GAPIC, passed away. It was with great emotion that I clipped the picture next to his obituary, which was published in a mass circulation weekly newspaper, for future remembrance. It is the image of an elderly man that makes me miss him so much. It is true that getting older is hard, but knowing how to get older is even truer. David-Ferreira knew it. He probably did not have to do anything for it to happen. What he accomplished and passed on, in due course, would have been enough for his message and example to keep him in tranquil company in his later years. However, even retired, he continued to impress other people in distinct contexts, always working for the students and for his university. He was a great friend of students.

**The first contact.** My first contact with Professor David-Ferreira took place in my first year at this Faculty, as a student of the Cell Biology Degree. At the time, David-Ferreira was the director of the very prestigious Cell Biology Laboratory of the Gulbenkian Institute in Oeiras. He was known among students as a famous scientist who enjoyed international prestige and experience, which in those days (this was back in 1977) was almost unheard of in Portugal.

He was surely no one who could go unnoticed. In his ways and attitude, he was unlike anyone we could have met before. He taught in a peculiar way, and did not resort to lukewarm standard pedagogy. Any aspect of cell biology was introduced as if it was a discovery, by means of an emotional and personalized recreation of the original. He strongly embodied the discoverer and he almost transfigured himself in the process. Thanks to David-Ferreira, I learned that a true discovery is undistinguishable from his author, from his style and way of interrogating nature. We were also often surprised by his calculating use of disproportion. As such, he taught us how a really important scientific question could be very simple, almost childlike, and how a complex problem could have a simple solution. He highlighted the role of human ingenuity, because he really admired the human genius. He conferred emotion to the critical analysis of a scientific discovery, and this is what enveloped us and captured our attention. The knowledge that results from discovery, nowadays frequently disguised in the form of “pedagogical content” was tersely synthesized, as he did not bore us with excessive information or details. His were really master classes. I only realized later the reason why they had such an impact. It was obvious that when he taught us cell biology, he tried to awaken our curiosity about the origins of knowledge and make us understand its strengths and weaknesses, and pass on to us his interest about scientific research, which he saw as his mission. It was certainly as part of this mission that he decided to set up the GAPIC. He did so in order to give his students a chance to formulate a scientific question and test it, and to be able to share the true thrill of discovery – in the same way as he lived it.

**A Professor with a plan.** José David-Ferreira had a very peculiar character, and so was his fine and intelligent sense of humour. He was extremely multitalented, even quite unique, and somehow contradictory. Those who were closer to him knew his idiosyncrasies well. Sometimes he could look as if he was angry, then he was not; he was just stressing his point of view. On other occasions, he got really angry, but normally he was good-humoured and affable. He felt annoyed at the thought of making decisions that could genuinely hurt someone. The picturesque side of the human character amused him,

as befits those who like people. But the balm for his soul was issues and ideas, sometimes naïve, and the internship proposals made by his students. His wreath of laurel was seeing the awakening of a scientific vocation, even just one, as he used to say with irony and amusement.

One day, at the former Institute of Histology and Embryology located in the building of Santa Maria Hospital, when discussing the attributes and vocations of Professors and Researchers in their multiple facets, I asked him, looking straight into his eyes, how he saw himself. He replied without hesitation that he was much more a teacher than a researcher. I was flabbergasted! I had always seen him as a researcher. That had been my first impression and it had not changed until then. David-Ferreira had contributed with pioneering observations, and I stress this point, truly pioneering, in multiple areas of cell biology. He enjoyed international recognition. This is why I was flabbergasted. But his claim stood up to the future.

Over time we all realized that the Professor had a plan that he stuck to firmly, not deviating from it. It hurt him deep down that the Portuguese had contributed little to the advancement of science. In the scope of his activities, he wanted to be involved in changing this situation. He wanted to improve the level of scientific culture in his faculty, beginning with his students. It is in the context of this plan that his creation of GAPIC fits in. He did it with his students in mind.

**The imprint of a Master.** Masters are not imposed upon us, rather, we choose them. David-Ferreira knew it only too well. I heard him repeat this statement several times, especially when commenting the devotion he had for his former master, Professor Augusto Celestino da Costa. For this reason, freedom, in its fullest meaning, was a top value for Professor David.

But the real masters are not chosen for the admiration they provoke on us. And Professor David-Ferreira had notable characteristics well worthy of the highest admiration. However, as stressed by G. Steiner in his essay “The Lessons of the Masters”, the true master stands out for leaving an imprint and a distinctive and lasting mark on his disciples; the Master’s imprint.

Professor David-Ferreira left several marks on his many disciples. I will not make comments about most of them, so as not risk self-praise or presumption. But I have selected one of the indelible marks of our Master – a way of reading nature.

I normally tell my students that nature speaks to us, and that it awakens us to the discovery of its laws through signs. Sometimes we see them, but do not think about them; or sometimes we do, and do not understand what they are telling us. I tell them about the exemplary story of gravity, and how everyone had seen objects falling, but only Sir Isaac thought it corresponded to a force of attraction, and, as such, it should have a corresponding physical law. Nowadays, gravity radiation continues to be a mysterious force! Maybe there are more signs waiting for us!

All of the Professor’s disciples know, without exception, how to interpret encrypted signals in the structure of the cells. They take the cell as a starting point and as a privileged platform for analysing their work hypotheses, even when this work mostly consists of dissecting a mechanism or a phenomenon at molecular level. David-Ferreira was a superb microscopist and had an extraordinary

intuition when it came to interpreting images. We can only understand how difficult it is to transmit this type of extremely complex competence when we reach maturity. Still, he succeeded. He taught students how to analyse functions by reading the signals within the cells' structure, like no one else could!

Jorge Luis Borges said, with sadness, that everything leads to oblivion. He is quite right. The good part of Borges' message is that it only depends on us.

On 7 February 2012, **José Francisco David-Ferreira**, a good and distinguished Man, a Friend of his friend, an exemplary Citizen, a remarkable Professor, an outstanding Scientist, a much missed Master, physically left us. But only physically!

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