

## Letter to a Friend

*"Parce que c'était lui ;*

*Parce que c'était moi"*

Montaigne

João

It's 12h 24m on Saturday, 29 October 2016

I just got home and I wanted to write these lines to tell you, with the ingenuity of the 18-year-old teenager from Alentejo you met, that I'm sorry for your departure and I know that it will not be easy for this emptiness to be appeased over time.

With your usual discretion, you have left us poorer and lonelier today, after a long period of suffering, which you faced with great courage, lucidity and serenity and greatly increased the respect and great admiration of all who knew you.

I promise not to bore you with what I'm going to say to you here.

The first and most important is, following our last conversation over an entire afternoon, to reassure you about one of your concerns and to tell you that despite the superhuman toughness of the last few weeks, you have remained the *same until the end*.

There were difficult, very difficult days, which you overcame with determined resignation, superior dignity, courage, and the *elegance with which you have always lived*.

It could not be otherwise for you, João.

As I told you, you had nothing to fear, because everything about you was so genuine and natural that nothing could change. Even if a catastrophe happened and some uneasiness emerged to disturb you, nothing would change because *you and your essence were your skin and, and your skin, João, you could not take off*.

Yes, João. Be at ease because until the end of this *Stage of your Life*, you have kept the *Elegance* of always.

The second line is to tell you that the country has behaved well towards you these days.

The higher state authorities, past and present, paid homage to you in a way that I felt to be sincere in the way they were expressed, true in the acts and sober and elegant in their interventions.

There were messages from patients, both renowned and anonymous ones. I know the latter to be the ones you would appreciate the most, as their words were of recognition and gratitude to the Surgeon, of course, but above all, to the Man who had helped them, often even in their *way of living*.

Of the very extensive coverage of the media, I think it was your newspaper, the one you read every day, who defined you better, placing on half of the first page the statement "*the man who linked science to culture has departed*".

This is true, this is the most synthetic, complete, and best definition of the "*public man*", of the authentic, proactive and coherent citizen they knew. It was in this same edition that three of your most esteemed Friends, Manuel Sobrinho Simões, Luís Portela and Walter Osswald, lamenting the loss that your departure represents for them and for the country, wrote: *Surgeon, Academician, Intellectual, Scientist, Humanist, in ideas and acts, possessing a vast, global and multifaceted culture, a man with excellent memory and remarkable intelligence, bustling and dazzling in his reasoning ...; a perfectionist, intellectual, with a great clinical sensitivity, the delicate, competent and rigorous manner in which he treated his patients was unparalleled, something that only they can talk about ...; ... He combined his great analytical capacity with a great synthesis ability ...; ... He reasoned deeply about the most diverse subjects, wrote very well and had great oratory qualities...; ... He was a very educated man, distinguished, with high intellectual capacity ...; ... his Essays are works of obligatory reading due to the importance of the topics, the lucidity of his approach and virtuosity of contents ...; ... his intellectual dimension and his professional competence, together with his enormous inner strength, his great sensitivity, his humanism and his powerful common sense, made him an unusual being with whom we learned a lot and of whom we will keep a very beautiful image ...; ... Essayist and writer, producer of ethical doctrine, a pursuer of truth and beauty, this is the portrait of a HUMANIST ...; ... In him we will inspire ourselves to try to serve, better and better, the health interests of the people ...; ... it is difficult, if not impossible, to find anyone who identifies himself with what is (good) health practiced in Portugal as much as João Lobo Antunes.*

Besides this *Public Man* facet there are two others that completed the *essence of your being* and your identity. Those referring to the *Institutional and Private Man*.

Regarding the *institutional* aspect, you were absolutely formal, because *the institutions are more important than each one of us and responsibilities are to be taken seriously*.

*A man of principles, causes and objectives*, always affirmed with clear transparency of attitudes and opinions sought with nobility of spirit and unbreakable will, not even your

health condition prevented you from being, to the extreme limit of your physical capacities, yourself. To these particularities you associated an unwavering *will to do*, which, absolutely overwhelmingly, overcame all the obstacles which, irrespective of intentions, came your way, the way you knew would be right. Examples include the *Institute of Molecular Medicine* and the *University of Lisbon*.

Most of the other institutions where you worked also expressed their sense of loss with sobriety and nobility. Still, I regret that one of the institutions, perhaps the one that benefited the most from your presence and intervention, *was not fair to you*. It reported your departure as if in a *footnote*, in such a blatantly bureaucratic way that, while upsetting everyone, it deeply hurt all your friends who accompanied you daily.

A remarkable person as a doctor, teacher, writer, ethicist, and organizer of a modern and different Health Building, where, I am sure, you would want a *NEW MEDICINE* based on service and respect for the dignity of the sick to be practiced, based on knowledge and ethics and certified by cultured and quality work. As you always said, recalling Professor João (Cid dos Santos), remember that *Medicine will always be richer and better, when practiced by Men of Culture*.

It was in this field that some, *saying that they knew you without having the faintest idea of who you were*, mistook determination for intolerance, consistency of principles for arrogance, and cold analysis of strategies for disparaging distancing.

They did not know you, in fact, but there is one detail, João, that I want you to know. No one dared to associate your name with *lack of truth, disloyalty, fear, intrigue, cowardice, or envy*. If the other adjectives left you indifferent, I am sure that these fill you with pride and that you would like to know about it.

Of you, of your essence and condition, I can say nothing that you do not know already about what I think, but I want to recall three things.

My respect and admiration for you began on a morning in January 1962, when we returned from the first Faculty Christmas holidays and our group stated how much we had missed each other, proposing that during the Easter holidays we spent a couple of days together somewhere. You said that you had to check if you could and ... saw in your diary that you already had commitments. A Diary? Commitments so far in advance? At the age of 17?

A Diary was something my father had! I did not need a Diary!

Not many years ago, during one of our conversations, in which we talked about our lives and intimacies, which I will always remember but *have already forgotten*, often in long silences, which is *how we say the most important things*, you said that *your secret was that*

*you never wasted time!* Of course, I answered, if at 17 you already had a Diary to know how to use time well!

We talked several times about the not always pleasant environment of the Patient Waiting Room in Cuf Hospital. I once mentioned the fact that I realized that the noise in the room decreased as we passed. "It is how patients express their respect", you replied.

Some time later, you were a few meters ahead of me and I felt ashamed about the comment. When you went through the noise did not diminish. It stopped. There was an almost liturgical silence, and I had the opportunity to confirm afterwards that the ritual was always the same. Quite rightly, because, after all, *you were the expression of the distancing of the surgeon who operated the brain.*

As it happens, only a few knew that this distance ended shortly after two or three minutes of conversation, when the patient realized that *the mask with which you protected yourself from your natural shyness had fallen, and you could really show yourself as you truly were: gentle and with a huge heart full of love to give.*

*A Good Man, of whom someone recently said: João did not do what he liked, he liked what he did.* And I can add that *he liked it and did it with passion.*

You were passionate about the art and craft of Neurosurgery, about the clinic, but also about the laboratory. You were passionate about the FML, the HSM and the IMM too. You were passionate about thinking, without barriers. Therefore, you were Free, a Humanist and a Citizen who assumed himself as an anguished metaphysician who believed in the *good heart* of the Portuguese, despite the grief of seeing the *inadequate development* of a society that *kept the Portuguese as they were described in Eça's book.*

You taught kids and adults with passion. You felt passion for what you read, thought, said and wrote, with no less passion for music and painting. You felt passion for the simple limitation of the capacities of others. You felt passion for your family. You felt passion and optimism as you lived, despite saying that pessimism is a prophecy that is fulfilled. You felt passion for integrity in criticism, thorough, hard and relentless because you never wanted less than perfection. It was still with passion that you did not tolerate laziness and irresponsibility, and that you fulminated arrogant ignorance, immediately destroying it overwhelmingly.

But it was still *with love* and this time with *COMPASSION* that you welcomed those who suffered and that you knew you had little more to offer than the warmth of your hand and the compassionate comfort of your gesture and words.

You had a unique WAY OF BEING, where there was no place to hide doubts or concerns, and which enabled your commitment to the life of the profession to emerge, consistent with the courage and values of ethics, morality and science, respecting the dignity

of the sick, who you treated with the same efficiency and affection with which our grandmothers embroidered, in linen cloths, the masterpieces of their trousseaux.

These conditions and circumstances, irreconcilable with irresponsibility, lack of rigour and disloyalty, made you feel that the fulfilled duty gave you the liberating serenity of conscience that allowed you to live IN A HAPPY CITY.

*Like all of us, surgeons, you fulfilled the Art of Neurosurgery, with your brain to evaluate and decide, with your heart to determine the gesture of the moment and with YOUR HAND, this extraordinary instrument the Creator has equipped us with, to exercise the artisanal component of the Craft and also OTHER ESSAYS where, in conflict with the paper, you wrote what you thought, what distressed you and what freed you.*

*In short, as a result of his conditions and circumstances, João Lobo Antunes is a Person who, in the world of culture and science, is an international reference in the scope of his Areas of Medical Knowledge, Arts and Culture.*

*But he is also a reference in other diverse and multifaceted areas of intervention, such as Ethics for Life Sciences, which, according to what they think is the essence of that same Life, are influenced by Carrel when he says "...the fundamental thing is attaining the progress of the human person. Because the quality of life is more important than life itself...".*

When I was responsible for your *laudacium* in 2009, when we awarded you the Pedro Hispano Academy Prize, I said "... *Due to his Work, Example and School, he marks a generation and leaves an ECO which, contrary to what he wishes and similar to Pedro Hispano, will not be SILENT, and, just like that of John XXI, will vibrate as an example of competent and lucid intelligence, enthusiasm and motivation, in a constant struggle for the development of knowledge and societies...*".

By the way ... do you remember João, that unlike the innumerable occasions when the opposite happened naturally, this was the second and last time that "I have won over you". The first was, for reasons we talked about at length and repeated afterwards in such intimate conversations that will remain just ours, when you felt forced to finish the degree in September when I finished in July!...

Of our Faculty Professors, I think that João Cid dos Santos and, with greater impact, Juvenal Esteves, were the ones that had more influence on you.

You shared *our Professor João's* perspective of culture and view of work, which you both cultivated in a hard, continuous, practical, and silent way, an attitude that João Cid dos Santos illustrated by saying "... *it is not enough to say that the life of a doctor is hard ... it is necessary that it is so ...* ", a sentence which, as you know, I had written on the wall of the Meeting Room of the Service.

The young people of our time will speak of *their Professor João*, YOU. Do not look at me *with that naughty spirited smile that says it all*, I know that you are proud of the comparison, and you can be sure that it is the truth and not the friendship that is speaking now.

Of *our Friendship* you have already spoken of and written about. I must add that it was total friendship of full giving, without limits or restrictions, which involved saying everything and doing everything according to what each other thought, always respecting the decision of the other. *Why is it that only you tell me these things in this way?* Because I'm your friend and I do not mind you getting upset, I would say.

The conversation followed its course, often through long silences, until the end ... *well that's right!* ... without further problems or doubts. It was like this, lived in full, absolute, unconditional, discreet, and silent.

Our friendship was and will always remain silent and present and, as My Friend Charles Proye of Lille told me, now not only with metaphorical meaning, *comme les étoiles. On ne les voit pas tout le temps, mas nous savons qu'elles sont toujours là.*

Today's students will say that their *Professor João* lived in disquiet about knowledge, about what is good and beautiful, knowing that there are always open questions and a source of endless pursuit. They know that they have the responsibility to give the best of themselves individually and, in some way, contribute to the quest for the path that you, because *You Heard With Other Eyes, saw lower and heard further away secrets that revealed the truth to you* about the ways that others did not see because they could not hear.

Admittedly, you were one of the most brilliant minds, multifaceted in the things you did, in what you said, thinking solidly, profoundly and reflectively contradicted. You, João, will be like a radiant beacon of this Generation.

You were one of those persons our Professor João had in mind when he said in 1949 that it was necessary "*... for a new generation of navigators to arise ... this time stationary ... but with wings in the spirit ... because ... only then could a new Dawn be born ...*".

We are happy and quiet, because we know that your example will make *New Dawns to Arise*.

Your essence, made of values and principles of respect, dignity, rigor, work and ethics, with which you have always lived, expresses a character made of the alliance of *friendship* with compassion, tenderness and love, and has turned you, through elegance and culture, into a *Prince of the Renaissance*, and for that reason, you also maintained the cult of elegance and vanity with beauty ... in the arts, in the letters, in the environment, in music and, of course, in the feminine.

You succeeded not to leave anything unfinished and as far as possible, you did not leave loose ends. I am waiting for you to bring me the *Report on How You Became a Neurosurgeon*, and, because *Les Éssais* would be *what you would take to a desert island*, you will now be able to talk and laugh, in *Torre* or in the *Maçãs* at length with your Master and Friend Michel, *Seigneur de Montaigne*.

The time I spent with you was always very good because, as you know well the Lesson of My Grandfather Henrique when I was ten years old, you made me feel smarter, stronger, more educated, and richer.

Now you do not have to tell me ... *do not make me cry* ... because now, with your usual correctness, when I cry, it is mainly because of me that I will do so.

Meanwhile, I will miss very much, as always,

See you soon, My Friend, My Brother.

Henrique