Alberto Alesina would have cut it short: "Of those who have gone away, you can only speak well". And yet, that he was one of the greatest economists of his generation is testified by his work, his academic recognitions, his ability to be the first to even imagine new areas of research. He revolutionized an entire research field - political economy - and for thirty years stayed at its zenith. Less known, however, was his ability to dissolve that sacral aura every outsider would imagine he was surrounded by. Being his students, we would like to remember this side of Alberto.

The stereotype of the luminary perched on the ideas that made him famous was far from the Alberto you could meet in the corridor at Harvard or at a seminar. If you shared your fears with him, he would have told about his hard time at the start of the PhD, when intercontinental calls were a weekly luxury, and seeing your family was only a Christmas' gift. He confessed how badly he spoke English back then and how much he feared for failing the general exams. One would think a scholar like him never faced the same obstacles as ordinary students. Instead, Alberto was not afraid to approach you as a friend and disclose his past challenges.

Alberto did not just "normalize" the fear of failure and the insecurities that everyone encounter in their professional career. Along with reassurances, there were always exhortations to do better and to throw the heart beyond the obstacle. He gave you the courage to argue and expose yourself, accept mistakes, and make sure your reasoning was supported by strong ideas. Like when skiing on his favorite slopes, in front of a couloir, he launched himself downhill with a quick leap. Immediately before an important presentation he used to tell you to pray for criticism to be loud, but at the same time jokingly warn you: "remember: don't screw up!"

To a generation rarely given space in public debate, Alberto's example was an infusion of courage and optimism. He was the person who reminded you that the ideas and the content of work come before pedigree and seniority. For this reason he always worked with many young researchers, scouting talents now established internationally.

As an academic advisor, Alberto knew how to listen without ever imposing himself. The research was not his own: he was interested in the answers. He was strict in that ideas had to come from the student genuinely and independently. Only then, when the project had started to move forward, he was happy to contribute, giving his advice and motivation, but always letting you free to think and be creative. Provided that your idea was clear, sound and, above all, that it answered an important question.

Perhaps Alberto's secret was knowing how to reach out to whoever was less strong than him, to be humane in the academia, where appearing fragile is seen as a symptom of weak ideas. And when you were in a bind, he gained your trust and pushed you to try again. At the door of his office in Harvard, a poster of a skier on the slopes of Jackson Hole reads: "College degree, good job, big house ... We all make mistakes!". Go off your fears and the beaten tracks, follow the great ideas.

Ciao Alberto

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