

I'm one of the dozens of students that Alberto Alesina advised, which means he changed my life.

He started before we ever met. As I was doing my Masters degree back in Brazil, another of my dear mentors, Chico Ferreira, introduced me to the famous Alesina & Rodrik 1994 paper on how inequality can be detrimental to growth because of its impact on politics. This turned me away from my early interest in New Keynesian macro, and into a political economist. In other words, a proud member of the field of economics that Alberto, along with others such as Torsten Persson and Guido Tabellini, essentially created, in its modern version, back in the 1980s.

Then what had been a "paper" became a real human being for me. My letter of acceptance into the Harvard PhD in economics bore his signature – he was in charge of admissions in that distant year of 2002. Because of that, as I landed in Boston (and in the US) for the first time in my life -- having missed the reception for admitted students because of a delayed flight – I went straight into his office. I already knew he was the person I wanted to work with at Harvard, so when he mentioned how he loved to write with his students and "hey, maybe someday we will!", I was more than a little star-struck. (I know some senior folks' co-authoring with students involves some, shall we say, disproportionate allocation of work and credit. As I eventually learned from my own experience, nothing could be further from the truth with Alberto...)

Over the 18 years that followed, he taught me so much. A lot of it was direct advice on papers and ideas. Some of that was career-changing, as when he convinced me that, of course, that silly idea on capital cities that QA Do and I had been playing around with would interest economists, are you crazy? – and that eventually turned into my first top publication. I still pass on to students and friends the words of encouragement that he always gave me before important talks – "Remember: don't screw up!" – though I cannot add his inimitable laugh and Italian accent...

A lot of it was by words and example: always (always!) focus on the big ideas, and on the questions that interest you most. I can't say that I've lived up to the former, but certainly to the latter – we're in this to learn about the world, not to work on what you think the job market or the journal editors want. I still remember when I was sitting in his office – I was his research assistant at the time – and as we were discussing a project, his assistant came in with his mail. It makes me feel very old, but one of the letters was from the American Economic Review, on a submission of his. He glanced at it, and said something to the effect of "Screw them, I will send it somewhere else." I said, "It got

rejected?” And him, matter-of-factly, “No, but they want us to split the paper, and this doesn’t make any sense.” I remember thinking to myself that I wished someday I would be in a position where the AER would accept my paper and I would say “no, thanks, you’re asking me to make my paper worse...” For the record, I don’t know that he actually followed through on that reaction, but the lesson was indelibly etched onto my mind: that’s why we do what we do.

A lot of it was just plain old encouragement and support. I will never, ever forget that Alberto literally paid me not to teach on the year I was going on the job market, so I could concentrate on my paper. But that steadfast “I’m here for you” went way beyond my PhD years: he remained my true mentor (as were my other fantastic advisor Andrei Shleifer, and my quasi-advisor Ed Glaeser), through my junior faculty years and beyond. Many times, when I was down on myself or my research, I went into his office and unfailingly left feeling buoyed and uplifted. He was always there.

Yet on this gray morning, as the terrible shock was sinking in that Alberto is no longer with us, what Renata and I were talking about, over the kitchen counter, was not so much any of that. Instead, it was about all the little things: how we would grab your arm in excitement at some thought or story; how he would ruffle his own hair, eyes closed, as he thought about an idea you were asking him about; the emails filled with so many typos (so many more important things to think about than correcting damn typos!); the warmth with which he received the wife of a mere second-year PhD student, as she had just arrived in this new country.

We also talked about Susan, Alberto’s lovely and beloved wife. I can only imagine what she is going through right now – which is to say I cannot possibly imagine what she is going through right now. Maybe it helps a little to hear how much Alberto has meant to the lives of so many of us. She already knows it, of course, but I wanted to tell my own little piece anyway...

Ciao, Alberto. As I always joked with you, it’s so weird that Italians use the same word for “hello” and “goodbye,” but this time the meaning is painfully clear. You will be sorely missed.

Filipe Campante