

PEOPLE WHO LEAVE A MARK

# José María Rotella

October 19, 1951 - March 13, 2020



It was no easy decision to accept writing these lines for the obituary of José María Rotella. His death is a huge loss both to Orthopedics as well as to the Hand Surgery world. Of course, I should refer to him as “DON” José María Rotella. The reason for said honorific title will become apparent once I have addressed his qualities.

We met when we were very young, in 1978, soon after we got our medical degree. He was 26 years old and I was 25. That year we both got in the Instituto de Rehabilitación del Lisiado to work and train under chief Eduardo A. Zancolli. José came recommended by Dr. Jappas. It did not take long for us to forge a friendship that would last a lifetime.

As my words are both for those who didn't know him, or never really got to know him, as well as for those who did, I'll write these words of tribute to highlight three aspects: the *scientist*, the *human being*, and the *friend*.

Rotella the *scientist* received awards and recognitions which only a limited group of people may aspire to. He was president of the Argentine Association of Orthopedics and Traumatology, of the Argentine Association for Surgery of the Hand, and of the South American Federation for Surgery of the Hand. For years he served as Associate Professor of Orthopedics and Traumatology at the National Tucumán University. As a result of his distinguished career, he was named Corresponding Member of the Cordoba Academy of Sciences. Last but not least, he was the creative and agglutinative factor that led to the formation of a renowned Orthopedics and Traumatology group that worked at the Tucumán's Sanatorio del Norte. He led and they followed him because they believed in him and knew of his huge leadership and management skills and, sure enough, his good nature.

Besides all these impressive qualities and achievements, there is another side of Rotella's scientist aspect that I always admired. Under Zancolli, we learned not to cherish what we knew, but the percentage of what we are ignorant of. If we knew 95% of a certain topic, our interest and energies should be devoted to that 5% we knew nothing. And José lived by that rule, as only a few can.

Similar in nature to Santiago Fazzini, he worked by his side to help him in his brachial plexus dissections. This experience had a lasting effect on José, who, with his inextinguishable and unbound curiosity together with his untiring perseverance in terms of study and research, would later describe a new comprehensive concept on the evolutionary development of the upper limb and the brachial plexus, which will remain as part of his legacy.

If asked to summarize in a few words this aspect of his, I think there are no better words than “SCIENTIST” (capital letters).

Let us look over now another of the aspects I previously mentioned: the *human*. This aspect has as many facets as a priceless diamond may have. Better still, a heart-shaped diamond. Let us remember his several facets.

He loved his family unconditionally. His deep love imposed no conditions and prevailed no matter what. He was always hyperattentive to anything he could do for each and all of them.

Another noteworthy human aspect was his love for his homeland. I remember it was in the early 80s that we were visiting the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art and he told my wife and I that he would go to any lengths to prevent the culture of Argentina Northwestern Region from being in another country museum. True to his words, for decades he collected *suplicantes*, which so dazzle Pablo Picasso, and masks from the *alamito* and *cóndor-huasi* cultures to assemble a museum that would reflect such pre-Columbian culture evolution of his homeland. His en-

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visioned museum stands, probably, as the one unfinished project of his prolific life. However, I must highlight that he did publish a book on the subject which was patronized by the Argentine Senate.

In November 1988, with 37 years, he decided to undergo surgery with Cooly, in Houston, due to an aneurysm in the ascending aorta. “Why did you go there?” I asked. “Here in Argentina we have a 75% mortality rate, and theirs is 4%,” he answered. The surgery was very long, it involved several days in the intensive care unit, intubated, and in a pharmacologically-induced coma. Although we never talked about it, today I am almost certain that he had a close contact with the beyond. Why? Because, after that once-in-a-life-time episode, his life took a significant turn. Since then, he lived as if he was “playing in overtime” and with such powers of observation that most of us do not possess. He passed away 22 years later due to dehiscence and filtrations of the prosthesis that was then implanted. When admitted this March, it came to light, in his medical record, something only he knew. A tomography study from March 2016 had already evidenced the process that had begun with his implanted aorta. He told no-one about this, nor his family, nor his friends, nor his partners. Today, looking back on this event, I have no doubts that it was his love for us all that made him keep it a secret. Such was his capacity to love.

José, the human, had virtues and defects, like all humans. Was he ever angry? Yes, but not for long. Did he make mistakes? Yes, but not many. However, he cleverly conducted head-on with whatever life threw at him, as only the best could. He was gentle with others, as only a few can. He was high-spirited, as only a few can.

To summarize: José was a wonderful human being, filled with love for others, with defects at insignificant doses and virtues at substantial doses.

Finally, the last aspect which I promised to address: the *friend*. This is likely to be the hardest for me.

A week after his passing, Lily, his wife, sent me an audio message. It went something like this: “Hello, Eduardo. As I went through José’s briefcase, the one he took every day to the office, I found his telephone agenda and inside of it a well-folded paper. It is a letter you wrote to him for his 1995 birthday.”

I have given a great deal of thought to what I will write about the friend aspect. Despite being a private communication, between us two, I have decided to speak of it for two reasons. The first reason is that today I was not able to find better words to describe Rotella the friend than those I was lucky enough to tell him while he was among us. The second reason is that after asking his wife she was delighted for me to do it.

TUCUMÁN, October 19, 1995

My dear Rote:

On this birthday I want to give you something different. A gift I had never given you. Something that no “object” may convey. I want to give you words that come from my mind and my heart.

Life has given me some incredible presents during this incarnation. One of life’s most valuable presents is you. The friendship of a human being such as yourself is one of the greatest honors one can be bestowed with.

I admire your heart, your kindness, and your professional conduct.

We have been through thick and thin together, but always as *brothers*. You are like a blood brother, but a chosen brother. A brother I would have in all likelihood chosen if given the chance before being born. My beliefs make me certain that I actually did.

You are one of the best things I will take with me as blessings of this Life.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

*Eduardo R. Zancolli*

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