

THE APOSTOLIC TALES



Dear Friends,

I was not surprised to see that most of the messages stressed Alberto's unique personality.

Alberto was a scientist who contributed some seminal insights to pattern matching, for example the Augmented Suffix Tree, parallel algorithms for Stringology, or the study of quasiperiodicity. He was also one of the founders of our community. Nevertheless, what everyone remembered and reminded was his generous personality: generous to students and colleagues, generous to the field and to the founding of other fields. Computational Biology started at the pattern matching community, and Alberto always wanted to encourage growth and collaboration with others. We all know of research areas where one needs to constantly walk with one's back to the wall, lest he be stabbed in the back by a colleague. Pattern Matching is the opposite of that! My wife, who joined us this year for CPM, and who is used to medical conferences, remarked with amazement at what a great atmosphere there was at the conference! Friends, this is clearly a result of the years of personal example shown by Alberto. We all grew up soaking that kind of behavior, and we all emulate it.

About 1700 years ago, a rabbi came from Israel to Babylonia. He was asked to teach some new insight about the Torah. He started out by saying: "Jacob the Patriarch did not die!". You have to understand that there was an inherent difference in the way the Talmud was studied in Israel and the way it was studied in Babylonia. In Israel the study was more allegorical whereas the Babylonians were more technical and literal. Thus, when this famous rabbi from Israel proclaimed that Jacob the Patriarch did not die, the Babylonians immediately asked him: "it says in the Bible that Jacob was mummified, and interned - did they mummify him for nought? Did they bury him for no reason?". So the Israeli rabbi explained to them what he meant: "As long as his descendents are alive - he is alive".

As long as there is a string to be matched, a periodicity to be recognized, a genome to be sequenced, an LCS to be computed - Alberto is alive. As long as we meet, help our colleagues, support the junior researchers, teach the students with love and care - Alberto is with us.

And now for a more practical proposition:

Another trait of Alberto that has been mentioned is that he was not a narrowly focused scientist but a true intellectual. It was always a pleasure to discuss with him all topics - from art to literature, music, and philosophy. All this was well packaged in the mind of an orator. It was a pleasure to hear Alberto discuss a topic, not only for the insights, but also for the presentation. While some people with such talents are pompous, Alberto was easygoing and fun. He could use his oratorical skills for any topic, and the famous stories that grew from this talent are witness. I propose, in Alberto's honor, that we collect the Apostolic Tales for posterity.

- Ami

Rafaele Giancarlo

Dear All,

This is a message from an undergraduate at University of Salerno. I met Professor Apostolico in November 1978.

He was teaching a first year course in the Computer Science Curriculum at Unisa: Teoria e Applicazioni delle Macchine Calcolatrici. It became immediately clear to all of the student body that Professor Apostolico was very special. Indeed, over the next few years, in addition to this new thing of pattern matching and compression algorithms, his storytelling was a strong magnet for many of us.

As many of you in this list, I had the privilege to listen to his stories, work with him, even meet during Christmas vacations for a chat in Salerno. For many many years.

The last story comes from Lipari. It is short chronicle. After CPM in Ischia, an island that he was very close to, he sailed for a couple of weeks the Eolian Islands, with friends and family. He went from Salerno to Maratea, then crossed to Stromboli. Finally, he got to Lipari for the school. When I saw his boat docking in the harbor my undergraduate heart started beating very fast: more stories, more fun and more things to do.

More Alberto!!!.

I called him up immediately.

Unfortunately, last night, this came to an end and I went through moments that I do not wish to anyone.

I feel a void, but thanks to you this undergraduate does not feel lonely tonight.

I can still see Obliqua docked, so the only thing that I can say is:

Buon Vento Alberto.

- Raffaele

The Raincoat of a Lifetime.

In 1991, Costas organized the second of the meetings that would become CPM. It was in London, It was at the beginning of summer and there was a perfect English rather: rainy and kind of cold. I had finally gotten my Ph.D. and I had a real salary. The trip to London and the new economic status gave me opportunity to plan to buy a Brit raincoat. The real "in" Italians would buy Burberry, so I was sure of my choice.

I met Alberto at the meeting, which was indeed small. Livio Colussi was also there. I sat at the lunch table with them and shared with them that a dream was just going to come true: the Burberry raincoat.

As usual, Alberto, very politely and sensibly, decided that matter needed a more careful investigation. It became evident that I wanted a real Brit raincoat, Burberry being a special case. So, Alberto suggested, with Livio fully endorsing each word, that WE should not make such an important choice without proper documentation. I thought...well, let's hope that Greek philosophy does not come up.

A professor from the hosting university was sitting in front of us, listening to the conversation. Alberto, with Livio completely agreeing, asked the gentleman whether he could offer advice for the successful achievement of OUR goal. Now I had a team of advisors. The gentleman replied very politely that he was not an expert on raincoats, but he would certainly get information to help. Sure enough, next day he told us that he had asked his wife. A real Brit would never buy Burberry, which at the time had just been acquired by SEARS. The real thing was Acuasutum and the proper thing to do was to buy it at Harrods. So, Alberto, Livio and I went shopping: my raincoat first and then shoes and cashmere for Alberto. Livio kindly allowed our urgent clothing needs to take precedence over his, that could wait until his return to Padova. When we reached the right section of Harrods, I started trying raincoats on, with Alberto and Livio giving me opinions on how the particular coat would wear: the shoulder is not right, a bit too long etc etc. Finally, the perfect one materialized. Really beautiful in each and every detail. Well, we were all very happy. The price even fit into four digits only. I felt a little unsure, not really though. Alberto and Livio shared with me experiences of analogous spendings of theirs, praising the many virtues of what they had bought. I bought the coat. I still have it and wear it regularly, even if in Palermo we do to have much rain.

Never regretted my choice, never had senses of guilt.

When I wear it, I think of a very pleasant day at Harrods, with two exceptional human beings. Just by looking at it, puts me in a good mood.

P.S. Do you know that, the bigger the geometric figures of different colors making up a cashmere sweater, the more expensive it is ? Some of them can even exceed 7000 dollars.

Tennis Balls

I got my Bachelor Degree in Salerno, with Alberto. He was my undergraduate mentor. My BS thesis was entitled "Algoritmi Combinatori su Parole". After I graduated, he encouraged me to apply for admission in a Ph.D. program in the US.

I was admitted at Columbia University where my new mentor would be Zvi. Alberto had played an important motivational part in my choice, so when I left my small village in Italy for the city that never sleeps, I thought that paying a visit to Alberto in West Lafayette was the thing to do. I expressed this desire to him and he communicated that Titti and he would be pleased to host me for a few days.

Before leaving, as a sign of appreciation for the hospitality, I bought a present for both, which was carefully packed because it had to travel.

After a couple of days in Titti and Alberto's house, I decided that I should give them the present. So, I did. I handed the present to Titti. In seeing the outside of the present, Alberto said, with delicate humor: "did you bring us Tennis Balls..how nice!!" Titti opened the containers, that indeed resembled tennis balls cans in their geometric look.

A Swarovski cat and a dog came out. They thanked me and Titti pointed out to me that Alberto loved cats. The other night, Titti told me that the cat and dog are still in their apartment
in the US

Gregory Kucherov

After reading this, I cannot refrain from sending this picture of Alberto, with Maxime (and a cat), that I took at SPIRE'13 in Jerusalem and that I personally like very much.



Mikhail Atallah

The \$1400 Cashmere Sweater

Alberto had a few hours to kill before his flight from Heathrow, so he decided to spend some time at Harrods. While looking at a cashmere sweater, a salesperson invited him to touch it and feel how soft it is. Alberto obliged, at which point she invited him to try it on. He said he would, but warned her that he was not buying, only looking until the time came for his flight. She thanked him for the full disclosure, and said “try it on anyway”. So he did, and as he was looking in the mirror she said “you look so good in this!”. When someone half your age tells you that you look great in a sweater, how can you disagree? He did look good in it. So he said “yes, this looks and feels great, but it is too expensive” to which she replied “yes it is very expensive, but you deserve it!”. Alberto knew how hard he worked, the salesperson was right: He did deserve it. He bought the sweater, and thereafter had a case of “buyer’s remorse” that lingered for years.

Cashmere Sweater, part 2

Alberto was heading for lunch wearing the cashmere sweater, when he ran into a colleague in the corridor of the Haas building that housed the Purdue CS Department at the time.

After a brief chat, the colleague said “this is a very nice sweater, I would like to buy a similar one of a different color: where did you buy it from?”. Alberto said “I do not want to talk about this sweater, it is a sore topic for me because it was sinfully expensive and I should never have bought it”. The colleague was offended because he perceived Alberto’s reply as implying that that Alberto thought that the sweater was above the colleague’s budget and price range. He said “if you can afford it then I can afford it, just tell me where you bought it and how much you paid”. Alberto again was evasive about providing the price he paid, so the colleague tried to remove the reluctance by guessing a price that, he was sure, would be an over-estimate:

“How much could it be? Could it be, could it be ...” he said, as he tried to remember the price of the most expensive sweater at the most expensive store in the local Lafayette, Indiana mall, “Could it be \$50 ?”

The Flight from Paris

As a teen-ager Alberto visited Paris on a shoestring budget, and when the time came to leave he had spent all his money. He arrived late at the airport: The boarding gate was already closed, and the plane detached from the terminal. It was against policy un-do these operations. Alberto explained to the airline agents that he was completely out of money, that unless he could get on that plane, his life would be forever ruined: He would either starve to death, freeze to death, or resort to desperate measures that would make him a fugitive from the law. He was so persuasive that the airline agents talked to their superiors, who authorized re-attaching the plane and re-opening the gate for Alberto to board.

Amihood Amir

The Mormon Conversion

While attending a conference in Salt Lake City, Alberto had a free afternoon and went to visit the great Mormon Temple.

He was assigned a dutiful young guide who showed him around and expounded the basics of the Mormon faith.

At the end of the visit his guide asked him if he would consider converting to Mormon.

Alberto's response, to the best of my recollection, was:

"Young lady. You were indeed very eloquent. Your explanations were faultless and one can not deny the cogency of your arguments.

However, I carry a heavy mantle of historical duty. As you can see, my name is Apostolico, with all that it implies. You can easily imagine the consternation of the leaders and fathers of the Church, if I converted to Mormonism. In fact, I don't doubt that the disappointment of the Pope himself would be immense. Thus, it should not be taken personally by you that, notwithstanding your excellent exposition, I shall need to decline your generous offer to join the Mormon faith".

<try to imagine Alberto saying the above sentence, and you will be, if only for a brief moment, back in his presence.>

A Kosher Experience

The late Renato Capocelli is still remembered by us for the lavish dinners in the meetings he organized.

On one of the first such meetings, he invited Aviezri Fraenkel.

Alberto prepared Renato in advance for the fact that Aviezri only eats kosher food, and told him to not take it personally, but he has religious restrictions and will not be partaking in the banquet.

Renato heard, and agreed, but such heresy could not penetrate deeply into his psyche.

Throughout the meal he tried to contain himself but, as time went on, as everyone was getting happier and fuller, and all this while Aviezri was just eating his tomato and cucumber, the superego was burst and Renato reverted to his gregarious hospitable self. "Avitsri", he said (Renato never mastered the pronunciation of Aviezri's name) "try this food, it is very good!". Aviezri, with his quiet smile declined, saying he is assured it is good but, unfortunately, he can not eat it. This calmed Renato for a minute only. A moment later, he exclaimed: "Atsivri - you must try this, it is excellent!!!". Again Aviezri quietly and politely declined. Finally, Renato could not take it any longer. He speared some morsel with his fork, grabbed Aviezri by his shoulders and waved the fork back and forth in front of Aviezri's face and toward his mouth crying with exasperation: "Azviri - eat, eat, THIS IS MARVELOUS!"

Ricardo Baeza-Yates

The Tourist

In 2001 we invited Alberto to give a keynote at SPIRE 2001 in Santiago. He thanked me for the great time he had but the last day his wallet was stolen, including passport, and, more complicated for him, the green cards of his daughter and his.

After telling him that I was really sorry of the incident and that the police had recovered the passport and his driving license, he wrote to me something that only Alberto could write:

"First let me say that I should take at least half the blame for what happened as I would not walk around my hometown in Italy in such a blatantly touristish attire and attitude."

The last time I saw Alberto was in 2013, again at SPIRE. I will remember him as in the second picture attached, in the center of our community, relaxed and apostolic in the perfect place, Jerusalem.

We will surely miss and remember him.





David Sankoff

The Tourist Guide

When I came to Rome for the first time a few years back to speak in Alberto's seminar, he picked me up in his car at the hotel and asked me which of Rome's grand sites I wanted to see first. I insisted that I just wanted to hang out, and that I wasn't interested in seeing antiquities; we could just go for a coffee. Images of Rome and her monuments were familiar throughout the world and I was a particularly jaded traveler. No Colosseum, no Forum, no Spanish Steps, etc. Alberto listened patiently, leaned over, locked my passenger-side door, calmly warned me not to touch it, and proceeded to drive me by the Colosseum and various other glories, all for my own good.

And it was good.

I regret I didn't get to spend more time with Alberto the way many of you have. Nevertheless, his generosity toward me emerged at critical points every five years or so, and I got to think of him as a mentor, though substantially my junior. I will never forget his magnificent but genial presence at RECOMB 2006 in Venice, where he turned me on to Prosecco long before it became the "in" drink in North America. I still always have a bottle in my fridge.

Simona Rombo

Gastone and the Boating License

The story started to be told because Professor Apostolico said that he had renewed his boat license recently. Then, he started to remember when he was an undergraduate student and he used to repeat several times the notions he was studying, before taking the examinations.

Often he used to repeat in front of one of his friends, Gastone, who was attending his same classes. Now, Professor Apostolico was very curious not only about the technical matters of what he was studying, but also about historical anecdotes related to those matters, which he usually recounted to Gastone as well. And Gastone was very good at memorizing what he had listened. So, you can imagine how much the teachers were impressed when Gastone answered questions they posed, starting from historical tales colorfully recounted. Too bad that, as it came to the more technical issues, the memories of Gastone were more and more blurred. But anyway, how a great success passing the examination without reading a book!

The best of the tale comes when Gastone told Alberto that he had decided to get a boating license. Luckily for sailors and seafarers, in that case the usual approach was not successful, since in addition to the theoretic test, there was also the practical one.