

Guido Altarelli Memorial Symposium: Memories and Recollections

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Guido and I have been very close friends over a very long period, more than fifty years. The day I received the sad news of him passing away I felt the urge to write down something, a short recollection of our friendship. After many months those words are still valid and I cannot think of anything else to say. Therefore I shall read for you the translation of a part of that text.

“Guido went away quietly, as a gentleman, in his usual style. His departure has left an empty space in the hearts of those that, like myself, have been close to him. From the moment I learned of his death, I keep thinking at the time we spent together. And memories keep returning to my mind, where they have always been, even if I was not aware of them. There are so many things that could be said, but a single word summarizes them all: friendship. An abused word, how many times we say of somebody “he is a friend of mine” but it isn’t true, he is simply somebody we only superficially know, an occasional fellow traveller. Guido was a real friend, one with whom you can just stay silent and the silence is not felt as embarrassing. One that you might not see for months, or even for years, but when you meet him again you feel like having left him the day before. Guido was that type of friend, you can have just a few of them over a lifetime and when you lose one it’s a part of your life you lose.

[...]. Guido was among those that followed Raul Gatto when he became professor of Theoretical Physics in Florence. Gatto changed completely the atmosphere of the Institute and formed a lively group of young theoreticians. The group included Franco Buccella, Luciano Maiani, Giuliano Preparata and Giovanni Gallavotti, just to mention a few.

Soon after his arrival, Guido and I discovered to have common interests and tastes, we became friends and started exchanging views on all possible subjects. Guido was a naturally refined person, never showing off. I liked the way he talked, in a fluid, often ironic way, his easygoing roman accent somehow giving lightness to the speech.

[...]We liked to go skiing together. One day coming back from the mountains close to Florence, we got caught by a snowstorm. We had no snow chains and braking was difficult and dangerous. The car was an old one, with doors opening towards the front, so we would try to slow down by stretching out our legs and sticking the heels of the boots into the snow. But Guido’s legs were longer than mine and the car would turn rather than go straight...

[...]We spent together two years in New York, Guido at NYU and me at a NASA Institute. Guido left first, I had applied for a grant of the European Space Agency, but the answer was slow to come. I remember him saying: “If you do not leave, I will not leave either”. It was a complete nonsense, but I was immensely pleased.

[....]After we came back to Italy we had less occasions to stay together. But we would profit of every one of those occasions to meet again, in Italy or abroad. He would visit me every time he was in Florence and I did visit him in Geneva, where I met Monica and Guido's new family. He was my reference person for all that concerned particle physics. When the news of neutrinos travelling faster than light spread around, deeply shaking my relativistic faith, I immediately called Guido to have firsthand news. His answer: "It's bullshit" relieved me a lot.

Talking to him has always been a pleasure. Guido was looking at the world from a sort of external point of view, like he was observing it with a detached interest, with his typical sense of humour. John Kennedy did define himself as an optimist without illusions, Guido was rather a hopeful sceptic, he was looking at the future with hope, even if the present did not please him. I shall miss the conversations with him."