

# Letter to the Editor

## The fortitude of Vicente Forte and his living art dedicated to medicine in Brazil\*

O sertão de Vicente Forte e sua vivente obra dedicada à medicina brasileira

Geraldo Roger Normando Júnior

### To the editor:

If I were someday allowed to speak about the surgeon Vicente Forte, I would begin by comparing him to the writer Guimarães Rosa. Certainly, this would make clear the magnitude of his contribution to surgery in Brazil. Both had a certain *sertaneja* (backwoods, pioneering) view of the world, which can also be translated as fortitude: in the geographic sense and in the spiritual sense.

The backwoods in which Vicente lived was that in which one does not hesitate to visit the most distant locales in order to teach the noble art of surgery. He dedicated himself to many themes; that is certain. However, the trachea was the territory in which he was most at ease, even as he cleared away all of the chirping “crickets” of our questionings.

In this aspect, the all-too-human side of Vicente was the same as that of Rosa, and those who read the works of the latter perceive this clamor for humility and to go forth into the vast Brazilian interior. Among the numerous memorable passages, there is one in which the writer fervently expresses the difficulty of dealing with loss: “*arriscado e conturbado é a gente se tirar das solidões fortificados*” (“to come forth from the fortress of solitude [that is grief], we must [be willing to] face [the] uncertainty and inquietude [that await us]”). This defines, therefore, how fragile is virtue in the face of disgrace, silence in the face of tumult, peace in the face of war and life in the face of death. It is through these meanderings that we come to question out absolutism regarding that which we touch, see and feel. When we are truly able to glimpse some ray of light, however dim, such as that created by the passing of Vicente Forte, that is when lassitude devours our pioneering souls like the throes of a lingering fever.

When we opened Vicente’s chest last April, we saw that his pacemaker was no longer the conductor of his rhythm. The drum that beat therein no longer sounded in synchrony with the rest of the organic orchestra, and, against all hopes, the news was whispered through the forest, to the great river, the backwoods, the scrublands, the plains, the hills, the sea, and finally to our trembling ears. The actin drained from our muscles. The cell failed to repolarize, and Vicente stopped. Everyone stopped. It was a myasthenic storm. We all cried tears of remembrance for one who was, in life, the

embodiment of ethics, morality and wisdom, the elements that compel the earth to continue spinning on its axis.

Miss Lilian doesn’t huff and puff as she once did. Her heart drifts through the house from corner to corner, seeking the part that it has lost, broken by this sudden, irreversible departure. The children wander aimlessly, murmuring in the same silence with which a spider weaves her web. Thus, they pass judgment on the life of their father: a noble, clad in simplicity and shod in solidarity. Know this, children! Silence is only found in the souls of the jubilant. Know also that we are in mourning, recounting tales of a man thick of marrow. Our lungs have collapsed and, therefore, our chests are empty.

The critical angel of our community has gone away without even leaving a forwarding address. How then can we escape the tuberculous solitude that has entered through our airways? Our orphaned wings have been clipped, and we will certainly fly much lower to the ground now, since it was Vicente that always drew the plumb line straight and true, no matter which way the weathervane turned.

The “strength” in the story of Forte was when, in 1997, he laid the cornerstone of the Sociedade Brasileira de Cirurgia Torácica (SBCT, Brazilian Society of Thoracic Surgery), of which he was also the first President. He always put the SBCT and the Brazilian Thoracic Society in his “ship of ideas” and set his sails by the science of Laennec and Sauerbruch. How many times did we see Vicente vivaciously sparking discussions among young and old at our conferences? That was his ideological trademark.

Now, without the image of the ideologue stamped on its prow, our “ship” lies rudderless in the water, at the mercy of the ocean swells and eddies. We embark for our conferences with the certainty that, in that chair up front, always reserved for the most brilliant critic, there will be only a vacuum. Still mourning, we will instinctively follow in his shadow, and we will tell his tales together with the story of surgery itself, a story of which, in Brazil, he was one of the main authors. By polishing it with loving care and great energy, he transformed the rough-hewn stone of the “*Tórax do Brasil*” (“Brazilian Thorax”) into a gem.

Vicente’s fortitude was so impressive that we cannot fully express the reverence that we have for him. On the tombstone of this polished gem, which is in the shape of a

torso, it is written that, in addition to providing the chisel, Vicente gave us his experience, the same that he applied to "his" tracheas, in order to uplift this biblical segment of surgery. He charged himself with unraveling secrets reminiscent of those of Leonardo da Vinci's "La Gioconda" and with seeking out a vast terrain in which to impart the specialty to others, with the cunning of Napoleon. To that end, he first transformed the contours of the rugged rock until they resembled the walls of Gaudi's "La Pedrera". He added details and glitter to the surface in the way that Michelangelo put the finishing touches on "La Pietá". He used impressionist expressions that shone

like those of Monet's "Nymphs". He had the vitality to translate the muscles and tendons of Rodin's "The Thinker", and he painted the upper part of the torso with the sun-drenched colors of another Vincent (Van Gogh). In the end, he gave his very soul to the torso, as if it were an autologous transplant.

**Geraldo Roger Normando Júnior**  
**Head of the Thoracic Surgery Department**  
**of the João de Barros Barreto University**  
**Hospital of the Federal University of Pará,**  
**Belém, Brazil**