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On Wisconsin!
¡Adios amigos!

To: Robert Byron Bird

My warmest wishes for a very happy celebration on the occasion of your 90th birthday!. I feel sorry for not being able to greet you personally, but we are too far away and the winter time is very rough in Madison this year.

We have known each other for more than 40 years, which seem to have flown past us at a record speed. It seems like it was a couple of years ago when, as a postdoctoral fellow, I sat in the Transport Phenomena course you taught in the spring of 1969. Those were turbulent days in US universities, and Madison was not an exception. But the Chemical Engineering department had its own "microenvironment", with a group of inspiring professors that motivated students and we almost were not aware of what was happening outside the building.

That Transport Phenomena course was exceptional. The enrollment was more than 70 students from very different departments: Mechanical Engineering, Nuclear Engineering, Chemistry....and, of course, Chemical Engineering. Those were the days of the "hippy wave" and among the attendance were also a baby and a dog. The dog was sleeping all the time under the seat of one student and the baby slept also on the left arm of his father. One day he started crying, and you said with a smile: "Oh, we have a baby in class". On the last lecture you presented briefly some of your research topics and at the end there was silence (that silence that follows a famous pianist performance) and the class enthusiastically applauded as a sign of approval and recognition. I will not forget that moment in the rest of my life.

Bob, you have been, in your long career an inspiring teacher of the highest scholarly reputation. Your meticulous preparation of the subject, pace of presentation and careful writing with a piece of chalk on the board (no use of transparencies and powerpoint did not exist in those days) was what students needed to feel that time spent in the class had not been lost.

During the many years I have been in Madison teaching the Summer lab, we have interacted quite often. You have a deep view on education, and worry that our society may not be doing the best for the education of our children. In spite of the fact that you are always busy with new editions of Transport Phenomena, you manage to solve the crosswords of the Wisconsin State Journal, before 7:45 in the morning.

Now that I have seen the whole picture and putting things in perspective, I believe the structure of Transport Phenomena is the same as a crossword. This principle can be applied to any scientific area, because science does not follow a linear model, it is more of a branched one (like a crossword).

I feel very lucky to have met some great teachers, as you, in the path of my life and I have to express my tribute to all them. By emulating them, it has not been too difficult to pass on their legacy to my own students.

I hope you will reach the “Kowalkee age standards” and I may try to help you solving crosswords that ask for names of European cities or mountains.

Have a great celebration, my congratulations to the department and my best wishes for you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'J' followed by 'Coca' and a long horizontal flourish.

José Coca Prados
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