

In memory of Franco Rotelli by Benedetto Saraceno*



A few weeks ago Franco Rotelli left us. He worked with Franco Basaglia and, between 1979 and 1995, directing the Mental Health Department in Trieste. He also acted as a WHO consultant for the development of psychiatric reform in Argentina, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic.

I first came across Franco Rotelli in Trieste in 1976, when he was the head of the ward in which I had just finished my first month working as a voluntary young doctor. In his usual abrupt manner, he brusquely asked me where I was living and how I was supporting myself. I told him I was sleeping at the hospital and living on money I received from my wife, who had remained in Milan. At that, he pulled a wad of crumpled banknotes out of his trouser pocket, put some (a lot) into my hand, and said he had just been paid and this was “communist redistribution”. With that, he went chuckling on his way. That was the beginning of my long association with Franco Rotelli, initially as an intimidated follower, and then as a friend but still and always a devotee. For forty-seven years. I have re-evoked that brusque gesture of generous goodness precisely because the principal virtue of Franco was his goodness. Some, perhaps many people would let themselves be frightened by his brusque intransigence, implacable acceptance of conflict, and aggressive verbal style, but it is worth remembering that they were often teaching strategies or simply various means of disguising his shyness. The single-minded purpose of all of these forms of dialectic violence was to find the roads leading to the good and (I insist on using the word) goodness. Malice travels rapidly by the shortest route, spreads like wild-fire, and overwhelms goodwill and intelligence by smothering them with suffering, injustice and ignorance, whereas the length and trials of a journey along the slow, tortuous and tiring roads of goodness generate well-being, justice, freedom, and beauty.

That is why Franco Rotelli believed in the tireless, meticulous, everyday work of meetings, attentive listening, curiosity, alliances, and synergies. He combined the administrative common sense of his brother Carlo, a much-loved mayor of Casalmaggiore where he was born, with the discernment of his Jesuit brother Gian Giacomo. It was these gifts that forged his extraordinary capacity to construct practical collaborative relationships between people and institutions. His discernment, which his Jesuit brother defined as “a refusal to submit to the slavery of fearing to make choices and an awareness of not being able to trust in a series of pre-ordained norms and behaviours” (1), was the indispensable complement of his radical sense of liberty.

The liberty of Franco Rotelli was the freedom to imagine and concretise the meeting and collaboration of different people (artists, physicians, craftsmen, users), and the freedom to create synergies between healthcare and welfare, between professional and administrative work, and between public and private bodies. All of these meetings and collaborations were characterised by his decided refusal to accept the defensive notion of the separateness of institutions and disciplines, or the rigidity of predefined and unchangeable identities, in favour of the common good. For Rotelli, it was a question of seeking the good that is in each and every one of us with the aim of continuously “kneading the dough” of goodness, justice, freedom, and beauty. As he said, all of this can be done by means of the same simple common sense that never tires of declaring whenever the Emperor has no clothes.

One day 47 years ago, we were both looking for a man (a patient, a resident, a user, or whatever you prefer to call him) who lived at the mental hospital in San Giovanni. We were looking for him because he had not been seen for days, and Rotelli was becoming distressed. We found him huddled up and frightened, hidden in the dark of the attic of a disused ward. Bending down over the man, Franco took him in his arms and spoke to him like a brother: “But why... how did you get yourself into this?” He spoke gently, happy to have found him, as if this were always what everything comes down to in the end: looking for the other even when the hurtful things of life have distanced him, isolated him, or made him disappear. Seeking, finding, and bringing someone back into the human community, with infinite patience, respect and discretion, and with the optimism that comes with believing that good exists – it is simply a question of bringing it out at whatever cost.

Rotelli’s career was a political quest in the search of humanity and its continuous flowering, like that of his beloved roses in San Giovanni: doing something to relieve pain and ill-being.

However, to do this, we have to go beyond psychiatry, and good community services must be seen as a final bulwark against the coercive regulatory stupidity of the psychiatry practised in hospital wards and residential facilities. It is necessary to activate the networks of everyday life, bringing together and synergising the myriad threads of goodness, beauty, and morality. Only such a collective “symphony” can give rise to the political struggle needed to construct profound democracy from the ground up. Politics was always a quintessential part of Franco’s life, the indispensable means of ensuring that the theories and practices of liberation become visible and widespread.

Franco was sceptical about the possibility that subjectivity could become knowledge and therefore a science: do not pursue the chimera of such a science because a subject is unknowable. However, he was convinced that there is a need for a way to deal with a body and its needs: be receptive, listen, treat with goodness, and propose concrete measures that make everyday life easier to bear.

On Wednesday 8th March, I and other friends spoke with Franco Rotelli at length for the last time. When we were alone and I was about to say goodbye, he told me:

“If you treat the mentally ill (but also everyone else, children, men and women) well, and they do not act maliciously, a lot of things can happen; needs emerge, desires arise, affectivities are created”.

There you have it: the practice of doing good for the sake of the good – as a political project, as a generator of affects, justice, freedom, and beauty.

1. Rotelli Gian Giacomo. *Alcune brevi riflessioni sul discernimento*, Roma, 2020.

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