

# ANTONIO MARTORELL

HUMANIST OF THE YEAR 2006



Master Conference

**"HUMANITIES ARE..."**

The word humanities was foreign to me, when not confusing, until I went to the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras. Then I became even more confused. The fact that it was plural, humanities, added to my perplexity since for that young man from Santurce, humanity was a whole, the plural was too much, it was going nowhere.

I had already known enough humanity, my own and that of others, as harmonious as it was controversial, despite the catechism of he who was an altar boy at the San Vicente de Paul parish during three adolescent years plus listening to my mother's sententious ways, the snappy Luisa Cardona, who with a far away look in her eyes and puckering her deep fuchsia lips said: "We are all equal but some of us are more equal than others". Something was already pointing to that plurality which, I would soon discover, entailed other problematic meanings.

Because, when it comes to pluralities, where does human begin and end? When did it multiply, reduce, or disappear? Why was it said that certain people, situations, and attitudes were inhuman? Therefore, when I fell into the whirlwind of the university dazzle in that basic Humanities course in 1956 and I allowed myself to be swept away by readings that proclaimed dehumanization of art and quoted words as definitive and defining as: "Nothing human is strange.", I felt lost without the grip of catechism of Paul's parish church nor the lapidary classist testimony of my saint of a mother.

Brought up between the small general store self-designated as Bazar Las Muchachas [Girls Bazaar] that my mother ran with Aunt Consuelito Cardona, and my Majorcan grandfather Antonio's window and door shop, I was the first in my immediate family to go to college. Going to college. That was a popular phrase of the time: an obliged goal, a supreme ambition of a society that was hardly coming out of agrarian poverty and jumping with hope into an urban misery.

I believe that at the University I suffered and enjoyed my first great orphanhood. Humanity, and with it the humanities, revealed itself to me as something ungraspable and changing, plunging me into a perpetual state of perplexity with hints of great truths that like the waves at Condado beach — that was then palm trees, pine trees, sand and sea, with no access control — these truths grew large in the close horizon, shook you, forcing you to make salty somersaults and returned you to the sand with glazy eyes in a kaleidoscopic vision decipherable for only a wet instant before the next big wave.

*The Iliad*, *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot, *El Canto General* by Pablo Neruda, *Leaves of Grass* by Watt Whitman, and *Gypsy Ballads* by García Lorca, those divine words in "dual language" took turns in my alert ears with *El Carrillón de la Torre* (Bell Tower) that could still be heard, and on the stage at the University's Theater, *El Gran Teatro del Mundo* debuted before our amazed eyes from so much hierarchical revelation in the temple of knowledge.

Humanity was also that velvet curtain that opened and closed uniting and separating two worlds as fantastic as they were real; they were times of initiation in great mysteries, of losing

innocence and the hints of experiences as human as inhuman that expanded and complicated a universe that until then we thought was simple. Because the University meant entering the universe and the universe was wide and foreign.

Especially for us, formed and deformed by the dogma of geographic smallness, feeling and knowing that we are a minuscule island in an immense ocean, always close to foundering, to shipwrecking like a fragile sail boat at sea, island, hardly floating between the nostalgic Hispanic past and the futurist fascination of the giant of the North, weak link between the language of Cervantes and that of Shakespeare, heirs of everything and owners of nothing. And let's not even mention Indigenous and African inheritance. Those were still waiting for us in the future.

Humanity was, hurt humanity, that of the Korean War veterans with whom we shared classrooms and gatherings. Those so-called "crazy veterans" that came a decade before the ones from Vietnam. What I never saw but was told in varied versions was the story of the Korea veteran who heard the engine of a Pan American airplane when walking across the Río Piedras Campus and threw himself on the ground convinced that the bombardment was imminent and that he was a fatal target.

That humanity of a youth shattered before our eyes dazzled by Hollywood movies of warlike patriotism sugared with national anthems and heroic acts that moved us to tears with Glenn Miller's music and Jane Froman's semibreve voice singing "With a song in my heart" from the trembling lips of the martyred redhead Susan Hayward.

What humanity did I belong to from all of those? That of Mexican gangsters Carlos López Montezuma and Juan Orol, or James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, the handsome young mafia men of Hollywood? To the tearful tangos by Libertad Lamarque or Doris Day's singsong freckles? The masters of raised eyebrows María Félix and Pedro Armendáriz or the idealized and blonde normalcy of James Stewart and June Allyson?

Maybe it was one of those moments late at night when returning from Cine Delicias from watching four movies in English on the same day I had seen three in Spanish in the afternoon at Cine Oriente when in front of the mirror in the solitude of the bathroom while everyone was sleeping in the house, I practiced hairdos and looks, gestures and smiles that echoed the big screen now reduced to the narrow mirror on the medicine cabinet. Who knows if it was then that I discovered something within me that was more than ignorance, of not knowing, the full conscience of the absence of a necessary knowledge, indispensable, an emptiness that cried out to stop being so, an unavoidable worry that I still experience here tonight in front of a multiplied mirror, that without you knowing, you are for me tonight – more than half a century later.

Not knowing and wanting to know, identifying through words and images a changing world from an adolescent's perspective that, hopelessly, and despite the years, will continue to be so as he will need, he will feel the absence, he will hurt forever for what he doesn't know and he will try to remedy his problem, search for comfort, relieve his sorrow (to quote some bolero verses I am fond of) recurring to the act of creating and recreating.

But the road has been neither straight nor easy, but rather tortuous sometimes, always elliptical, defying the syllogisms learned from the Jesuits at Georgetown University, captivated by the tradition I refuse to give up, in a constant temptation of being someone else in order to be myself, walking and grasping a color, a smell, a taste that takes me from one word to another, from one image to another in a vain determination (again the bolero), my love is impossible. However, that impossibility is the challenge that forces me to what my friend Antonio T. Díaz-Royo has called "La aventura de la creación" [The adventure of creation], title of his lucid and generous book regarding my work.

Looking at that voluminous summary of my life and work, I realize that the conjunction and between life and work is unnecessary, because life and work, for good or evil – in my experience – has been a single word that I prefer to coin as *trabavida* [lifework] (from

the Spanish *trabajo* and *vida*) because it is that twisted; this immersion is indissoluble from my not-so-young humanity in the ancestral humanities.

Because that admission to the University of Puerto Rico, that first encounter with the Humanities was not to be taken seriously. My mother, snappy Luisa Cardona, had enrolled me in my absence in the basic course oriented toward a bachelor's degree in what was then known as "pre-med". In her infinite ambition for her first-born, she had already decided on my profession. It would not be that of a Catholic priest, although she was devout, but rather it would be the priesthood for physical health because the Holy Mother Church was an intolerable competition for her maternal plans.

And here I should allow myself a digression of the many that tempt me and it is this: we still suffer from the tyranny of words that separate and box disciplines of knowledge, even though for centuries they had been together. Arts and science do not have to suffer an apartheid, which confuses and do not unite areas of knowledge that are compatible and complimentary. We have very rich evidence in our country, a marvelous legacy, and we just have to quote Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances, Dr. Agustín Stahl, and Dr. Manuel Zeno Gandía with substantial work in science as well as the humanities.

And we come back to this plural word that follows me like an unsatisfied lover, expectant and possessive. Because science seemed cold and distant to me, numbers scared me and still do in their effort to quantify the universe; only words captivated me with their tireless arabesque calligraphy on the school workbook or their closed and vigorous typographical architecture on a printed page. Let's not even mention the seductive voices that whispered in my ear when reading silently, but, Oh!, so audible in written texts to dance to their chords, waltz, *danza*, *bolero* or *plena* that brings the rhythmic saying of one word after another, hugging and moving away to come together in a different position and meaning. Perhaps that is why signs, the image of a word, its form and orientation on the page combined with the sound, beat, rhythm, and melody added to the concept or image it evokes and announces are inseparable and multipliable to me, mutant inhabitants, resounding humanities that call me from inside the enchanted house of books.

We have the word *patriota* (patriot) as example. Its sound is round and unappealable. It does not allow fissure or decrease. Augmentative and diminutive are impossible: no big patriot or small patriot. On the page, the two t's that detonate the word, shine like two towers in a fortress under siege (I am talking about the word, any similarity with the current situation is a semantic coincidence) and with its ending vocal letter a, associated to womankind, this is when it gets a forcible vigor, a resonant opening and ultimate conclusion that extends itself beyond the silence that prolongs it; *Patriota*.

Nothing is further from the truth in which that word, patriot, reached me, wrapped in bloodstained clothes, isolating criticism, synonym of crime and madness, fanaticism and condemnation. In my childhood and adolescence, the word patriot meant inhumanity, cruelty, and crime, nothing to do with the haloed humanities of my recently-begun university career. Various years would have to go by for that word to lose its colonial burden, assume its restoring role and acquire historical, social, and most of all, human perspective.

If I tell you about this prolonged and painful process, it is because this slow conversion from human to humanist that we celebrate tonight, forces me to prove to you, my equals, how, when, and where the change came about, because in you honoring me tonight, you also honor, consciously or unconsciously, a time, a season of fearful elves, a sad carnival in which instead of having masks, masks lose themselves in a progression of revealing nakedness regarding truths that hurt but are necessary.

Because it was in a Catholic university in the United States in the metropolis' capital where these truths were uncovered with such an antique vision, with arguments as convincing as the ones that tend to be born in the heart of imperial power, without shame,

otherwise unnecessary as power can do without shame, and with the clarity of thought, theoretic eloquence, and humanist intention of Jesus' soldiers.

Power was uncovered before me in such an irrefutable way that once I finished my diplomatic career, I gave the diploma as a gift to my proud mother, the snappy Luisa Cardona and I took refuge in what I would later acknowledge as a long, risky, and pleasurable learning process in the arts, in that thing that humanities study. But since I had already been contaminated by the passion for knowledge, the how, when, where, and why human beings do what they do, from that time on I would forever be a dual artist, the one who does unfolded and taken apart by the one who observes that work, comments on it, analyzes and questions it.

My already long voyage through the arts – where I have learned about drawing, engraving, painting, three-dimensional environmental installations, theater, dance, movies, television, radio, newspapers, and literature – has not been a lonely road. And I do not refer to the fact that I enjoy it and it is indispensable for much of my work that it be done as a team. No. I mean that particular dance partner, that alter ego who I sometimes lead by pressing on its vertebrae on its slender back and who at other times captivates me in dizzy turns that take my breath away and to whom I surrender my will. The couple of the creator and the critic, the one who does and the one who explains what has been done.

Now, this dance of creation is governed by a desire to communicate, to have a meaning; nevertheless, the more ambiguous the sign, the more indifferent the addressee. Perhaps the most noticeable event that this process points to is what happened to me less than a month ago at a gas station in Hato Rey while I was filling up my car's gas tank. A young 30-something woman approaches, recognizes, greets, and congratulates me for the recent exhibition Martorell D.F. in the Museo de las Américas. I was surprised by her insistence in what she says and I quote: "Your work, Master, and your words, making fortune of misfortune mean to people like me". I was unable to resist the temptation, under penalty of indiscretion, of asking her what she meant by "people like me". She then tells me – looking at me with eyes where both fortune and thankfulness shine – that she is a cancer patient.

After saying goodbye, getting into the car, and moving away from my new friend, I realize that unconsciously, but now with full and unavoidable knowledge, my co-workers and I had returned – even if it was only that one time – to art its power of meaning, transcending, of returning to its original sense of transforming reality, of making one thing out of another, of amending, healing, and curing. In an artistic environment that has become more expensive because of excessive consumption and exorbitant prices more suitable for the stock exchange than for the art market, where the strictly formal, aesthetic, or decorative value or that guaranteed by the signature of a sought-after artist is the guiding criteria of the arts, my new friend's comment acquires a bright and encouraging dimension. Wasn't this the best proof of humanity in the arts? Of the essential relationship between producer, process, product, and recipient? Between us and them?

I cannot finish this testimony without saying that in this entire process of creating and believing, of looking and being looked at, of feeling, doing, and being felt, the fact that I am part of a country that is questioned, questionable, and questioning has been and is a determining factor in my work. The institution that grants me this valuable prize today – in this hall that is named after José Campeche, outstanding Puerto Rican painter – is the Puerto Rican Endowment for the Humanities. It is not the National Endowment for the Humanities in the United States or the International Endowment for the Humanities. It is the Puerto Rican Endowment for the Humanities. That difficult nationality, which my brother Luis Rafael Sánchez once said was one of my essential attributes, was not born with me.

In our case, the geographical place is not enough of a reason for a nation. It is not the right to land or the right to blood the one that I evoke here in this meaningful evening. Nor is it the right of language as there are those who were born and raised in the United States and

whose first language is English and still refer to themselves as Puerto Ricans. Essentially, this right does not have much to do with the international rights I studied in my youth as much as it does with the desire turned into will, as well as doubt and confusion translated into the imperious need of being even in an unequal fight against imperial plans, military activities, and economic authorities.

One isn't born Puerto Rican; at least, I wasn't born Puerto Rican despite the fact that I was born here to parents who were born here. I was born, raised, educated, and configured to be a good American and tonight I confirm the failure of that project.

If I am a humanist as you proclaim, it is because I am Puerto Rican and my work has cost me, although I should state that the humanist vocation has been the best tool to take on a national conscience that in other countries and in other times are taken for granted.

I know that in these times of such popular globalization it is "in" to sweep under the rug what some consider "the old dust of nationalism". Beware! The dust under the rug, when it accumulates, grows mountainous under our feet, slows down the careless step, and as my beloved friend Tony Maldonado would say, can cause a "fall and break our nose."

We have ample examples in Europe, Asia, Africa, and in our own America. The international community is that: international, not supranational or subnational, but rather international, in parity and respect, not in subordination. If I sound political it is because I am. I am Puerto Rican and that is in itself a political position.

I appreciate the patience with which you have listened to this Puerto Rican humanist of the year.

Good night.