

Thiago Barbalho

The Man  
Without  
Limits

I remember well the time when I was able to talk. Everything was in order. Everything was complete. The world was made of the unity things, facts and living masses. In the midst of the wholeness of living masses were people – and in the midst of people, people like me, who were confident they could give their own contribution to the world. Yes, because us humans, as living and imaginary masses, assumed we had power: the power to contribute to creation. And how were we supposed to create? By naming things and people and by explaining facts. The names and the explanations were our main offspring – and how proud they made us. We acted this way because, thanks to our ability to explain, we covered ourselves with another welcoming layer. Speaking gave us a feeling of understanding and happiness.

And I was a professor of this. I taught the use of words.

At that time, the time of communication, everything made sense. We all talked. Each word I said corresponded to existing things. Words only existed in function of reality, which could be communicated through them. Every explanation we gave about the world was true. We lived and understood ourselves through something like a universal language. We were sure that before having been explained, things were confusing and chaotic. But from the moment someone defined them, everything became calm, familiar, clear, and then we could accept them. Because of this, one can say that, when we spoke, it was out of a will to peace.

I spoke as well. And spoke a lot. It was not by chance that I became a communications professor. It was not by chance that I kept all those trophies in my living room before silence. I refer to the silence that traversed me and my truths and took away all my words along with my attachment to them. The hurricane of freedom, the hurricane of acknowledging impossibility.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Back then, I expressed my thoughts fluently and listened to others attentively. I understood the world through words and I liked to be able to understand it. I believed in everything that was said to me because I thought there was honesty in what was being said. Because I thought that between words and things there were no gaps for anything. Thus words had the unrelenting power of convincing, from whose force man could not escape. After all, when we are convinced we take something as true. And it is only by believing in some truth that we can carry on.

So, if someone told me I love you!, I experienced this love because it was true to me. Or if someone said The Earth is round and there is void in space!, I took this as pillow onto which my head, relieved by one more explanation to the mystery, could rest. Besides, some explanations were loaded with beauty.

Words were the masters of truth. And men, the masters of words. Therefore men were immediate. Even when they said inexact things or when they lied, I knew that even these imagined words came from the same place where all words come from, and for this reason everything was honest.

This is why I considered words fundamental. I needed them in order to feel human and rest.

Without words I couldn't live. Without them there would be no strength, calmness, coziness. Without words nobody would be capable of going beyond oneself and, in the delirium of communication, to be less alone.

Since I was a child, I could see people benefiting from words, getting them wrong or right, saying and unsaying things, so I took upon myself this game of dom-

inating the world by naming it. We humans mastered the world and the sensations because we created explanations. And these explanations made us feel knowledgeable. And knowing meant mastering, which is a delirium in itself.

It was impressive that everyone felt so special, collecting certainties in their attempt to understand. These victories over doubt were quite risky, because we could draw despairing conclusions about the world. At the same time, we were unable to stop our ambition to transform imagination into reality and unveiling our more obscure zones.

I realized that for us, humans, it was important to feel special. And this sensation came from owning words, which resulted in certainties, which resulted in comfort. So I became a part of it. I leaned on the arrogance of truth. And I could only consider myself human when I embraced the illusion of knowing.

I wondered through places and said the names of objects, facts, people. Mum, the rose is pink!, Dad, the sea is blue and green and sometimes yellow! I described everything with precise attributes: The mouth is where speech comes from, but the fingers can speak by writing. This is why communication lies in thought, and the rest of the body becomes an instrument for bringing thought into the world. The body is the zone where the non-physical world enters the physical world. Then we can exist beyond existing.

Every explanation corresponded to something. Every name pointed clearly to the named reality. Somehow, this made me happy: I was also human, I also believed in this effort. This gave me the feeling of certainty and belonging. I could smile. And my smile was reflected into other people's smiles. Like all children, I was joyful by innocence. I was naïve by ignorance.

It happened little by little that, in order to say the things I wanted to say with exactitude, using only one name was no longer enough. Everything required more detailed explanations, more careful descriptions, precise reports: My house is blue and it's cold between May and October. My house is being renovated. My house was built half a century ago. It's 56 square meters. None of this was enough to define the house and to explain why one could say: The house exists and it is different when I'm happy and when I'm sad. So I would gather a bunch of other words that surrounded each thing and made it appear. These gave rise to phrases, discourses, beliefs. I learned this mechanics and got attached to it. I attempted to understand phenomena – thunders, seas, the architecture of mountains -, I affirmed hypothesis and feelings and convinced myself not to affirm any others: I nourished my body with words and values.

I built a life like this. I hanged out. I got wrinkles. I woke up and slept. I said a lot. I made numerous speeches. I convinced my friends to fall in love with the tremor of truth. I despised and cut ties with those who didn't want my truth – I took those who didn't agree with me as ignorant, and in my arrogance I considered them incapable. I got into universities. I made friends. I completed graduations and post-graduations. I earned scholarships and then I got students, I started to teach. I saw myself as the middleman of knowledge. I collected lovers of my way with words who believed in my quest and were dedicated to me, offering me their youth and beauty. I had communication on my side. And even more: I was spellbound by words and took up speaking as a kind of goldsmith. I studied deeply. I studied the whole surface of language. I won prizes. I earned teaching positions. My daily bread was increasingly to find the gold, to split my certainties and argue in their favour. I wanted to talk all the time. I wanted this like every man who wants something: without exactly knowing why.

It was precisely at this point that something happened. In the stability of my conviction I came across a blind spot: the question turned upon itself and asked: Why? Without knowing how, I realized the strangeness of this will to speak: I particularly realized that this will would never be fulfilled because there would always be a crack that made was being told imperfect. The words I uttered could be more exact. What I had said could have been said in a clearer, more complete way. It was as if everything carried within it a spiral of fragmentation and wearing for which we could create inexhaustible explanations. In whatever I said there would always be something lacking. There was something missing in order to reach the perfection I called truth. One less word or a sentence that was formulated too late was enough to provoke a feeling of frustration and failure. Thus I realized I wanted to be exact without ever being able to do it, because being exact equals being perfect, which equals being impossible. I didn't know why I insisted so much in attaining the unreachable. I didn't know why I didn't give up and rested, why I didn't enjoy the brevity of things and started to live without the ambition of touching the unchangeable.

The lack of explanation to my desire for explanation, an impulse that moved me in spite of my cry to understand it, turned my own desire for explanation into something unspeakable. My enigma was given.

Then, contradiction astounded me and generated muteness. It was as if my ability to engender explanations looked at itself in a mirror without seeing itself.

Thus I could understand myself as made of hurricane. As if I could never know myself fully, my own will to speak didn't know what it wanted to achieve. And this quest to say things and to be exact didn't know how to express what it was made of

or why it existed and pursued.

Discouraged by my lack of understanding and without seeing a purpose, I started to hesitate with words. I began to be bored with speaking. Words only made me promises they never delivered. In the classroom, I stared at my students and had nothing else to say. I lacked the willingness. I was giving up. Now I was interested in silence. Because I knew that there would always be an unreachable point: I had the feeling that the matter of my enigma was the same as that of silence. Previous matter. Pre-matter. But this meant that I no longer wanted to be what I had been, what I was, what I had become: a living thing that thinks and talks. I didn't want to communicate anymore. All the explanations lead back to myself, but within myself I never found a final stop and everything pushed me towards silence.

Why had I spent so much time letting myself get drawn by the fluidity of that willingness to communicate if I knew that willingness only made us exhausted and hungry, while silence is anticipated satiety?

But now I was silence.

I overheard the comments in the corridors of the department; the students whispered and stared at me. The Speech Man is silent, what does this mean? But I restrained myself because I was meaningless.

Without being able to explain myself, I began to accept that words were, in spite of everything, perfect by nature, and that I was the wrong one, the one who couldn't find the exact names and the most adequate combinations, so I preferred to accept this and give up. Silence was within me.

Nature, I thought, is so complete that it produces even its own imperfections and we are the lucky animals who carry the gift of failure. We are erratic and enigmatic

by talent, and this is why I can never conclude the explanation of the world.

This is why I have insisted so much. Because I fail. Because I am a limited being with a willingness to being limitlessness.

Therefore, by accepting failure as part of my own nature, I resumed my speech and, after several weeks of silent lectures and embarrassed students, I started to speak. To speak more. Much more. Did I do this due to my excessive attachment to an ideal onto which I had gotten used to lean my restless conscience? Everything was already delirium and I wasn't interested in ceasing to imagine. Before, I was interested in being grateful and enjoying what was given to me.

The students loved my return to speech. It seemed that I was spilling truths I had accumulated over all these weeks of quietness. My fame only grew.

I spoke, spoke, spoke. And when I had said all I wanted, I looked for cracks in between things that had been said and attempted to say them even more precisely. The more I said the more I realized that what I had just said could have been said better. And now it no longer mattered that I could not complete the world due to my inability to grasp it in a complete definition. It was fun to see the understanding of everything as a hallucination. I could see that my students understood and accepted me. They adopted my own thinking to themselves. The world was a common delirium: a delirium made of the impossible beauty of that which traverses one another.

By observing which points were more confusing to people, the ones I could dig deeper into and explain, I noticed everyone's search for a sense of solace to their disquiet. It's that people, exactly like me, would rather accept things rather than struggling endlessly, and acceptance is only possible as long as we understand that we must live together with otherness. Humanity seemed to be asking for the help of those

capable of explaining all that is obscure in a kind of perfect handbook that gave us the perennial satisfaction of acceptance and togetherness. And the I was, happy and proud to be one of the helpers that would take humankind to the long-awaited word YES.

In my delirium, I thought humanity was asking for my help in order to create a definitive treaty on everything; and I, taken by the illusion of power, a Doctor of Words and a Master of Saying, thought myself capable of this. Particularly because us humans always drive the world with hope as fuel and I, also because of hope, wanted to collaborate. I had the conviction that this would allow us to have better lives. I was more or less like everyone: I had the greed of being fulfilled by reaching other people and extending myself into them.

The strange thing is that no one was convinced enough to change their own behavior in face of what I was showing them, nobody was willing to change. People were touched, they identified themselves, found themselves in my words, congratulated me, thanked me, but that was it: nobody budged from the place they've always been in, nobody even agonized like me. While I was restlessly looking to annihilate all agony, people flowed through agony with intervals of confluence. They could sleep, age, have children. Even my dearest students. Everything remained the same. Each of the followed their own path. I was incapable. An idealist.

At the end of the day, I thought, words are not the place of the definitive encounter, they are rather vessels we build to take us to our most intimate caves; but, when we reach these caves, we need to abandon ship and remain being only our own bodies, because the gateway to the intimacy of the encounter is so narrow that only silence and meditation can slip through. And then nobody else can help us.

Was it perhaps my mistake to think that my words had the power to modify people? Is the course of the world unchangeable? Is that which I see and learn only useful to me?

And I carried on. It was all I could do: there was within me this command for continuity. I resumed my vice for seeking the definitive encounter. The longer I lingered on it the closer I felt to it, and the closer I felt to it, the more certain I was that I could get even closer.

And then the lack of understanding of my willingness to say things left me perplexed once again, to the point my speech became paralyzed. During the classes, before a group of fifty, sixty students drooling for knowledge I, feeling bored and perplexed, became speechless in my astonishment and crisis. I started a sentence and:

My silence crisis returned and they were like a weak spot, like a hole through which I fitted and got hurt in an ongoing birth: the same hole, the same starting point, the same grey area whose light source is always too far away to be revealed. I was stuck to this movement and I wasn't having fun anymore.

Where was all this restlessness and need for an encounter with the definitive coming from? Where did I want to arrive at? What would I do once I understood and convinced so many people? And why did I want to understand even the willingness to understand? Why did I not continue my search without questioning even the search itself?

I had beautiful feelings that wouldn't let me stop, such as faith, willingness, strength and determination. I had the innocence of believing that the world was capable of perpetuating itself in the reflection of the most beautiful definitions and that I would no longer be surprised. It was as if the events and feelings could jump out from

the cycle of time in order to become perfect, paralyzed, wholly understood by us.

To explain, to explain everything. To expel the world in a free and beautiful cosmogony shared by thought, to see myself understood and to see all of us understood at once. My ideal, like every belief, was too seductive to make me give up. It meant welcoming. Without searching for it, I would be helpless for not knowing and not being capable. Without searching for it, I would realize the helplessness in which living things flow freely, as if they were falling. Including myself. At that stage I took my crisis as a danger, and not the possibility of starting anew.

After all, who doesn't require certainties to lean on and develop? Who is able to grow, to nourish themselves, to walk in search for food and laughter without having previously established some kind of attachment, identity, certainty, purpose?

Acceptance was the name of my lack. What didn't I accept? I believed that by speaking and talking I would help us get even closer to things, so that we would face the explosion of the world with integrity and openness, until everything would be transfigured into satisfaction. Then we would abandon words and become whole. Then smile would become the definitive expression.

Wasn't this all a big useless delirium? Was my life a waste of time?

Exhausted for not ever reaching an end, I had nightmares in which I was visited by disturbing questions:

Is there a final stop?

Am I really getting closed to some kind of breakthrough of kindness that makes me feel pleasure?

Is reason a legitimate quest?

Can I trust that the grin of achievement, this small muscular effort, is indeed

the aim to be pursued, instead of the sometimes happy sometimes sad lips of those who not have within them the ambition to control that which affects them but, on the contrary, accept oscillation as their fate?

But the way I thought about words was a fallacy. Because I expected something more than what they already gave me, which was exactly what they could give me. I expected closure. I expected to seize the future. I wanted to leap out of words and still use them. But it's not of reason's nature to find completeness. Words are not made to keep silent. Silence is only attained through the humility of not attempting to conclude anything.

I was leaning on the belief that humankind, endowed with verbal language and the ability to formulate knowledge, was capable of encompassing things, penetrating them with its tongue and translucent saliva until it shifted the world towards a gelatinous orbit where the sunlight would be even more venerated and its temperature more pleasing because it was understood.

But then, in my delirious ideal disguised as reason, I didn't allow myself to be what I already was: contradiction.

Contrary to my gesture of studying the mechanics of what escaped me and searching for new lines of dimension in the reality that may support them, nobody else devoted much energy to find with their own bodies what I wanted to find.

Was my search merely a distraction? Why did avoid so much the joy of events and hid in the observation of darkness waiting that from within it a newborn thought would arrive to explain everything?

But, finally, would there be an option, a life path without words? Would we be capable of establishing the empire of silence against the monopoly of speech? And how

would we be able to choose this regime when we have arrived at a world supported by the anatomy of the alphabet, fed by the multiplication of news, educated in the mortar of opinions, equations, statistics and theories without being given the chance of an unfulfilled world and nevertheless complete; a world in which void was affirmed.

It was too late to lament. I was a mature man and didn't have time for this. There were bills to be paid, travel plans, sex, sports, meals, sleeping nights to be enjoyed. It was better to act like what I had become, to accept that I was my own invention.

Because I got tired. At some point we get tired, we give up our ambitions and decide to live with what we've got, we decide to become what we are. Thus I decided to exercise the acquaintance with my lack: with the lack of clarity.

When I finally got tired I accepted doubt and truth's inability, and I also accepted that we falter and get into crisis, but nothing is as definitive as our fear leads us to believe.

It was only maturity in installments that led me to approximate the terrain of sparse words, a much more satisfactory terrain than the thick swamp of anxious communication. Is this restraint? Is it balance? How can we name this so far? Permission to have the same lack as everyone else? Yes. All of that. A lengthy, painful, wondering road; the one that brought me here. A slippery road where disaster served as fuel not because of romanticism, but because of despair and recycling.

It was tiredness that provided me the detachment from the urgency of understanding. I took silence as a kind of intensive therapeutic care unit from which I escaped every time I felt like coming back to common life and feeling thankful for the support of multiple things. Arriving there was like acquiring a sort of nudity that

I could only reach after decades of collecting a million wrongs and all kinds of actions linked to arrogance of being the one who knows what matters. I stopped presenting myself like the doubting one, the one who scares through lucidity, the one who reflects because reflection is the only support. I diminished myself, I accepted helplessness and started to exercise in tranquil walks into silence.

How long have I searched for? How much energy had I wasted? For how many years did I agonize? But without the mistake of searching for ecstasy of understanding the world, would I have reached the lucidity of the recognized enigma? Would I have lived the ecstasy of darkness, fall and joy? And I say this not like someone who now smiles and accepts things, but as someone who, unable to control himself, enjoys silence as a sporadic exercise. As someone who already knows that happiness is brief and that helplessness is also brief, but each wants to linger a bit longer and therefore each dominates its own moment, and that human sensations, born of the innocuous, dance, and reign, before our willingness to control.



Translated from Portuguese into English by Kiki Mazzuchelli  
on the occasion of Thiago Barbalho's exhibition at Kupfer, July 7-28, 2018.