

Verruwing  
(spoken at MI Christmas dinner 2011)

Dear colleagues, boy friends and girl friends of colleagues, husbands and wives of colleagues, and others present,

Some six years ago I earned my first invitation to the MI Christmas dinner by spending one-day-a-week at Leiden in the framework of the NDNS+ cluster. I have participated ever since. I have even tried to port the idea of the dinner to my home university, VU University Amsterdam, so that I would have two of these wonderful events, but without success. This dinner seems to be still a unique Leiden event, and it is a good one.

Given that my formal relationship to Leiden is flimsy, just a one-day-a-week visitor, mainly with the purpose of being invited to the Christmas dinner, it is a special honor to speak tonight. I suppose it has something to do with the fact that fairly soon I'll become a regular Leiden person. Back at this wonderful university... Well, Peter has told us already, as usual, how wonderful the MI is. Let me focus on Christmas.

When I contemplated the contents of a Christmas address, I thought of the Christmas addresses by the Dutch queen. Like most people I never listen to her speeches, but one reads about them in the papers, and sees a little excerpt in the television news. The main message, of course, is always the same: we should all be nice and friendly to each other, care for the weak, and remember there is more to life than material gain. Strangely enough in the past years her addresses have drawn criticism from some political groupings. The bottom line of the criticism, I think, is that one should be nice, but not to everyone.

This brings me to a theme that I would like to talk about tonight: "verruwing". This Dutch word is translated by most dictionaries as "coarsening". Exceptionally the LISA online dictionary gives "brutalisation". This better expresses one aspect of the meaning, although I might perhaps translate brutalisation back as "hufferigheid" rather than "verruwing". Some parts of my speech indeed concern "hufferigheid", an extreme form of bad behavior.

"Verruwing" has its origins in sports, I believe; we speak of

"sportverruwing". Rather than kicking the ball, players kick each other. Nowadays supporters are more prone to "verruwing", and from my own experience at my son's soccer club I would say that parents are sometimes more "hufferig" than players. (The adds running at the moment on television are correct.) Although 13 year olds can do their part, as I experienced as a trainer, from verbal abuse to nose bleeds. You start with a nice exercise that involves gently throwing the ball so that the other player can learn to accept it the air, but soon some of the boys will be lancing the ball as a bullet, ostensibly with the deliberate aim to hit their partner in mid face.

Nowadays "verruwing" is everywhere. Many forms have to do with money. Bankers who fill there pockets. But, more abstractly, the desire to express everything in gain. As an example connected to sports: last week a cite official defended cutting municipal subsidies of sports clubs saying that sports clubs are just big enterprises, and it is about time that they take their responsibility, by which he meant: make the profits that big enterprises are supposed to make. Be aware he was not talking about Ajax, but about a local amateur club. This is "sportverruwing" in a new guise.

By the way "taking responsibility" is something we are all supposed to do, which is not a bad thing, except that it is increasingly used as a justification for "verruwing". ("You think I should not have fired so and so; well, I had to take my responsibility".)

Closer to our home, consider the new Dutch policy on science. It is called "kennis, kunde, kassa", which you can translate as knowledge, skill, cash, or science, skill, money, money, money, money, ... The beautiful alliteration "kennis, kunde, kassa" is not a KKK that I made up, it was written by our minister of Economic Affairs in his report "Naar de Top". The "top" is a place that apparently can only be reached by "verruwing". "Taalverruwing" to begin with. The deliberate "Jip and Janneke taal" is undoubtedly meant to convey the seriousness of the policy. And do understand that the "top" is closely related to money.

But we should not only blame politicians for "verruwing". We scientists play our part.

For instance, did you falsify your research lately? You should consider it, it can give you great gain: prestige, publicity (some of us manage to

make television just for what they do and are, but this is not for everyone), a higher salary (I understand the potential gains in Asean countries are particularly enormous). Do it smart though, because when found out you will drop deep. Imagine this interesting theorem. You know that it is true, and you even have a proof of it, except for a minor detail. It is a technical detail, and obviously not the core of the matter. You can just write a phrase like "it is easy to see" or "it is well known that"; somebody else may fill the details later. Of course we mathematicians never engage in this kind of "wetenschapsverruwing", perhaps because it won't bring us far, or perhaps because we are such good people. For my part, I am afraid that all my published mistakes were made totally unwillingly.

Even if you did not falsify your research, did you engage otherwise in some form of "wetenschapsverruwing"? Surely you understand what I mean by "refereeverruwing", probably from both ends? As scientists we are required to be judgemental continuously. Sometimes a judgement can be easy and fair, but not rare are the occasions that we go home, or should go home, with some sense of disgust, having ranked very talented people based on tenth of points. We can complain that administrators and politicians are nowadays measuring us continuously (write many papers, write papers in high-brow journals like Science and Nature, be excellent in the research evaluation, rank high in the Times index, be excellent in teaching, get grants, make money, money, money..), but we started this ourselves. Aren't we boasting all the time that our department, or our science mathematics ranks so high? Yes, with good intentions: get more money, money, money for our valuable business.

Has it gone too far? In a letter in the VU university newspaper an earth scientist posed the question: why do we have to be excellent? It was a response to a VU University policy plan, in which the strive for excellence dripped from on all pages. Ridiculous question, right, "why do we have to be excellent", clearly posed by a loser? But worth deeper contemplation, in particular around Christmas time. What if I change the question slightly into: why do we all have to *look* excellent? Or I rephrase to: why do we have to be excellent *in everything all the time*?

I could also ask: Why can we not just all be nice to each other, care for the weak, and remember there is more to life than material gain? What

if I change the latter to: remember there is more to life than scientific gain?

A younger colleague told me that as a student he looked up to scientific life as something very worth while and big, perhaps in the way we look back at the careers of people like Einstein, but was disappointed that it seemed to turn more around appearances. An older colleague told me that in his view a scientist works or should work independently of external judgements (and university policies) so that he or she can truly develop original insights. So my older colleague entertained the romantic thought (I think it is) of the scientist engaged in his investigations, whereas my younger colleague saw the "wetenschapsverruwing" I talked about. A sample of size two, not even a random sample, many possible confounding variables. Very bad for a statistician. But still I wonder: does it indicate that the world of science has changed? No doubt, it has. Has the world of science changed for the worse? I am not sure. The old world was not ideal either.

When I entered VU university almost 25 years ago the math department was populated by professors who really liked math. Some were excellent teachers, but not great researchers. Some just really liked math. Perhaps some external pressure and "verruwing" was appropriate at the time. Over the years the department changed. People still like math, but also really contribute.

The reason that I'll be moving to Leiden is of course that the MI is so wonderful, in particular its Christmas dinners.

But it is also the recent "verruwing" at VU University. The VU Math Department spent too much money in the last few years, because of bad bookkeeping and because there were big reserves from savings in past years. A freshly appointed dean assisted by our own department head considered the current budget deficits an opportunity to make big decisions. The mathematicians with less "earning power" had to be laid off. "Earning power": this key word came from the dean right to us in English, I can translate it in Dutch for you: "geldkracht". A mathematician with too little "geldkracht" is a bad mathematician. The dean and department head failed to check that the money had been counted correctly, the budget deficits turned out to be temporary only. However, an attempt to mend the situation was pushed aside. Next to "geldkracht" the key term was "beleidsrijk (policy rich)". Laying off

people is "beleidsrijk", and therefore good. As an administrator you must take your "responsibility".

It is hard to say how this could happen. It could only happen in this time of counting only money, money, money, and general "verruwing".

Now Christmas is approaching our administrators send us letters saying that we are a big family, working together to make everything excellent. They are not nice letters to get when you are being laid off after a career of proving theorems and really liking mathematics. This is something I shall contemplate during Christmas.

I conclude with a list of good advice.

Be nice and friendly to each other, care for the weak, and remember that there is more to life than material (and perhaps scientific) gain.

Be nice to your colleagues; they are probably working hard, on something valuable.

If ever you become an administrator, remember to remain the nice person you have always been.

aad van der vaart  
December 2011