

Zorgen voor elkaar

Ronald van Luijk, 16 December 2015

Dear colleagues and partners, everybody here, dear friends,

It is an honour and a pleasure to talk to you at this 19th Christmas dinner of our Mathematical Institute. Arjen Doelman explained to us three years ago how this event fits into the nonlinear evolution of December traditions. I hope he will forgive me for using the term tradition a bit more loosely. For example, it has only been a five-year tradition to deliver the Christmas speech in English during the odd years and in Dutch during the even years. I will happily use this as an excuse to continue in English.

Speaking of evolving traditions, in 2010, Frank den Hollander said it was a tradition to balance the heavy speech by the scientific director with a lighter story. As most of you know, Peter Stevenhagen, who was our director until just a few months ago, is a little bit of a rebel. So, challenged by the words “heavy speech”, he started giving speeches that became more and more entertaining each year.

Perhaps in order to balance out these lighter and lighter speeches, the stories by the so-called mystery speakers have evolved to contain a deeper moral. Since 2010, we have been educated on religion, on brotherhood, and on “verruwing,” or society becoming harsher. I will try to follow this new tradition by talking about a traditional Christmas topic: “zorgen voor elkaar”, which means “caring for each other” or “taking care of each other”.

Don't worry, this is not meant as a political advertisement for what our government calls a “participatiesamenleving”, or “society of participation,” which refers to a society in which people should take more care of their family members. I will in fact try to stay away from politics, though that will soon turn out to be difficult.

Caring for others often takes very little effort. It includes getting up in the train to give your seat to an older person, or taking the time to help them cross the street. These are small sacrifices that make a big difference to somebody else. Like our national mail delivery service, the KPN, has been saying for years: “kleine moeite, groot plezier”, which means that if it takes only a small effort to bring somebody else a lot of happiness, joy or comfort, then it is worth putting in that small effort. Even changing the color of Zwarte Piet does not seem like a big deal anymore if you live life according to this slogan “kleine moeite, groot plezier!” But sorry, I was going to try to stay away from politics...

I want to tell you a story about caring for your neighbours. In a couple of months I will be moving to a new house. In many ways it is considered a much better neighbourhood than the one I currently live in. I have already signed up for a neighbourhood alert group on whatsapp where people can warn each other about abnormal activities. In contrast, just this summer, a hundred meters from my current apartment, a man was shot. Of course everybody from Amsterdam will think this is completely normal, he didn't even die, but here in Leiden, shootings don't happen very often. Still, I can only hope that in our new neighbourhood I will find neighbours that are as caring as my neighbours now.

Last week, when I came home, one of my neighbours, DJ, told me somebody had tried to steal my nice new bicycle. When he called them on it, they even started yelling at him. Only after DJ jumped down from his window and threatened to fight them to defend my bike, they ran away.

I will also miss my direct neighbour. The funny thing is that I don't know his real name and I am pretty sure he doesn't know mine. This is not because we never talk, because we do. And we could easily check each other's name on the mailbox, but who cares about names? We call each other "Buurman", Dutch for "neighbour." Buurman and I have been in each other's house only a couple of times in the seven years that I have lived there, but some of those times were because one of us needed help. I am a hundred percent convinced that if something ever happens to me in the middle of the night and I scream for help, that Buurman will immediately come to my rescue, and the other way around as well.

Buurman is originally from Sudan, but his teenage son grew up here. They are Muslim, like most people from my neighbourhood. From the outside, the neighbourhood doesn't seem to have changed much since the attacks in Paris, but people are definitely worried about the increasingly negative sentiments towards Islam, especially in social media.

This brings me to a topic that is unavoidable in a speech about caring in 2015: Syria and its refugees. This is where it is going to be hard to avoid politics. So let me at least stay away from the question whether or not we should bomb IS. Let me even try not to say anything about how many refugees we should let into our traditionally tolerant country.

I will focus instead on the refugees that are already here. I said that I would try to stay away from politics, but I will fail briefly. I understand that in general it is wise to ignore the crazy, but the moment that politicians start talking about fences around refugee camps, I'm afraid we cannot afford to be silent anymore, not even during a Christmas speech. The suggestion by Geert Wilders and Donald Trump of fencing in innocent people as was done during the second world war is appalling, outrageous. I don't know any better words.

Even if you don't naturally care for people in serious trouble from an ethical or emotional point of view, and you only care rationally –or out of fear– about reducing the trouble that comes from minorities, then still taking care of these refugees is the right thing to do. Any sane person understands that rounding up innocent refugees is not likely to benefit the integration process...

I am not saying that all people that worry about the refugee situation are bigots, though. Worrying is natural, and taking care of so many refugees does take effort. Effort that I have to admit I have not put in myself. When 120 refugees came to the nearby town of Voorschoten, which happens to be my home town, I convinced myself that I was too busy looking for a floor for my new house. In the meantime, my mother was handing out clothes, while my brother, a doctor, was checking the health of all the children. Their stories made it clear that it was worth the effort. Taking care of Middle Eastern young families that seek shelter, how much more Christmas can it get?

But enough about politics, what about caring for each other in our own math department? Of course it is our job to take care of our students, at least mathematically. But also nonmathematically we can mean a lot to students who feel discouraged, or not good enough, or even to those who are a little bit overconfident. The best place to give the appropriate support is of course our foobar.

But being the close family that we are, overlooked by mother Kathelijne, we also take care of each other. Without wanting to get too cheesy, let me thank especially Hendrik and Peter for always taking care of me.

The last couple of years we have had at least three people with heart problems, of which two in 2015. Now I am not a doctor and I don't want to imply at all that this is all stress related, but I hope three victims is enough to remind us that stress and heart problems are correlated. It is worth remembering this in our caring of each other and of ourselves.

Fortunately we have people like Elisa, Dino, Roland, and Mima to organise football matches to keep us healthy and sane, mens sana in corpore sano. And we have Maarten who keeps asking me whether I will come to join yoga. Maarten, I will, thanks for not giving up on me.

Unfortunately, we were recently also reminded by the fact that no matter how stress resistant you are, no matter how many healthy apples you eat, bad luck might still strike. Peter, you are doing a great job at pretending everything is fine, so I won't say much except that we are all here to take care of you when you and Armelle can use some help.

For those of you who have fallen asleep or kept eating, let me extract some morals from this story.

- Try to keep the slogan “kleine moeite, groot plezier” in mind.
- Even when it does take some effort or time, it is still worth caring for somebody who is close to you, or even for a complete stranger.
- Let's have another sporting event. Perhaps we can even invite some Syrian refugees.

Maybe next year this speech can be a little lighter again. Until then, take care of yourself, and each other.