The Trivial Pursuit of Happiness

Happiness: reconciling oneself to everything one has not attained
(J.C. Bloem)

The Low Countries are ageing at a brisk pace. In 2007 Dexia Bank carried out an extensive survey in Flanders, in which it asked for as many as 160 different statistics. Based on these it compiled a complete socio-economic profile of every municipality in Flanders: incomes, size of dwellings, number of cars per family, number of internet connections, population, crime rate, size of road network, unemployment... it was all there. Municipalities were also ranked on the degree of ageing. You could see from a map whether there were a lot of older people in your municipality or whether, on the contrary, you happened to live in a 'young' community. The key to the map shows a *'very ageing population'* in the west (West Flanders) and a *'distinctly young population'* in the east (Limburg). In between there is, literally, a grey area with a *'somewhat ageing population', 'average degree of ageing'* and *'predominantly young population'*.

All in all, then, Flanders does not look very dynamic and young, but that should not be a reason to doubt our well-being. Granted, it means that modernisation and reform are essential, but demographic ageing is, of course, the result of advances on an individual and social level (better healthcare, to name but one factor). In other words we do not, on average, kick the bucket as soon as we once did, and of course that is a good thing. Or, as the French singer and actor Maurice Chevalier once said: *'old age is not so bad when you consider the alternatives.'* But Chevalier also sang, in the musical *Gigi*, *'Thank heaven for little girls'*. And if we look at the birth statistics in Flanders that young blood is not doing so well. So the estimated cost of ageing continues to rise, spending on pensions will increase considerably and healthcare will become noticeably more expensive. In addition, it appears from the figures that our pensioners run a considerable risk of poverty. Those who like to look on the dark side might describe the future of Flanders (and equally of the Netherlands) as follows: the grey leading the grey.

That, of course, is the doomsday scenario. In a recent interview the former Belgian Prime Minister Yves Leterme spoke much less apocalyptically about the phenomenon: *'We are, in general, much too negative about ageing. That our life expectancy has risen so substantially is actually the amazing dividend of progress and our excellent healthcare. (...) In fact I think it's a luxury problem. I see ageing mainly as a fantastic opportunity. When are people at their best? When they are taking care of each other.'* That sounds at once very 21st century and *'yes, we*

can'-ish (problems are challenges and challenges are the motor of our existence) and at the same time reassuringly old-fashioned. A bit like that solid piece of advice that used to be found on a nice wooden plaque in many a Flemish house in times gone by: *'Dàar alleen kan liefde wonen, / daar alleen is 't leven zoet, / waar men stil en ongedwongen / alles voor elkander doet.'* ('It's only there that love can dwell, / It's only there that life is sweet, / Where with no fuss, in pure good will / We help each other in every need.')

Altruism...with fringe benefits

So without other people there can be no happy person, you cannot help thinking. Charles Darwin spoke of 'social instinct' in that regard, which according to him is good for the survival of the group. He noted that amongst animals that gained from life in a close-knit group the individuals who derived most pleasure from living in a community were those who most often escaped dangers of various kinds. By contrast, those individuals who concerned themselves least with their fellows and opted for a solitary life died in larger numbers. This is the survival of the nicest: the 'survivors' not only experience pleasure in social interaction, but are also ready to suffer to preserve the well-being of the greater whole.

The Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan wrote about that greater whole in his magnum opus, *In Care of the State. Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* (1988): a well-wrought study of the present welfare state and the long history that leads up to it. According to De Swaan, in the course of history people began to identify more and more with other, unknown individuals. Initially solidarity concerned mainly the immediate family, but little by little the circle kept widening. The solidarity of the welfare state also extends to anonymous fellow countrymen. And that circle could just keep on growing, because at the end of the book he argues for a basic welfare state at a global level, partly as a way of avoiding problems with immigrants from the Third World. You can never be too visionary when it comes to happiness and well-being.

There is very little mention of *'with no fuss, in pure good will'* in De Swaan. When he discusses the history of poor relief, individual motives are subordinated to the collective action. And that collective action serves a collective good. True, he does see charity as a largely altruistic form of behaviour, but it is not a purely two-sided relationship between the donor and the person on the receiving end. *Caritas* must also be seen in the context of collective action on the part

of the 'haves' designed to benefit collective interests, such as defending against factors that threaten society and maintaining a reserve of labour. He refers, for example, to the early agricultural communities, where donations were supposed to prevent the poor resorting to crime or even rebellion. Besides, the starving were easy prey for diseases which, in epidemic form, could undermine the community. On the other hand, if you kept your 'have-nots' strong by feeding, clothing and housing them, you built up a reservoir of labour that could be put to use when needed.

These are all ulterior motives. But does that tally, then, with the real meaning of altruism, which is a traditional virtue and a basic tenet of religion in many cultures? Whether one is Christian or Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist, altruism always stands for 'selfless concern for the welfare of others'. It does not tolerate selfishness and will have absolutely nothing to do with such concepts as loyalty or duty. It is the art of goodness for goodness' sake, without moral obligations (to God, for example), higher ties (social benefit) or even abstract concepts (such as, for example, patriotism).

Mercy's interest rate

St Paul wrote that *'love seeks not its own interests'*. This is reminiscent of the maxim that Joannes Zwijsen gave his congregation in 1832: *'Love without self-love'*. Zwijsen, later the first Archbishop of Utrecht, but in 1832 still the parish priest of St Dionysius in Tilburg, asked a couple of young nuns to devote themselves to giving an education to poor children and looking after the sick and the elderly. Starting with only three women, this congregation of Sisters of Charity of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy grew rapidly to almost 4,300 members at its height in 1940. As the name suggests, mercy was central to Zwijsen's spiritual experience. He put it as follows: *'What is a Sister of Charity? A person who, without neglecting her own perfection, helps her fellow-men to the best of her ability.'* So one was required to put oneself entirely at the disposal of one's fellow-men without, however, losing sight of the prescribed prayers and spiritual exercises.

Mercy as the theme of a devout life has its origin in Christ's words in the Gospel according to St Matthew: *'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'* This lists six out of the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy, or the core of altruism in Christian faith: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter strangers, clothe the naked, tend the sick and visit those who are imprisoned. Not until 1207 did Pope Innocent III add a seventh Work: to bury the dead, taken from the Biblical Book of Tobit. There was a practical reason for the choice of this additional Work. In those plague-ridden days the difficult and dangerous work of burying the dead was indeed of special value, not least for public health. So there you have it once more: ulterior motives.

But let us stick to unselfish activity for the moment. Then mercy is, quite simply, taking care of our fellow human beings and offering them help and support in word and deed. The February Strike of 1941, the first large-scale act of resistance against the German occupation in the Netherlands, gave the people

Burying the dead: one of the Seven Works of Mercy, sculpted by Albert Jansz Vinckenbrinck for the pulpit of the New Church in Amsterdam (1649-1664).

of Amsterdam the word 'merciful' in the motto on the city's coat of arms. The motto was bestowed upon them by Queen Wilhelmina in 1947, as a mark of respect for the sense of justice and compassion for their Jewish fellow-townsmen which led to the strike, because – as we already said – people are at their best when they are concerned with the welfare of others. Or, more universally, in the words of Martin Luther King: *'An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.'*

Of course, one doesn't need religion to be merciful. But it certainly helps. I myself first became acquainted with the Works of Mercy as a child, in Willy Vandersteen's *The Seven Strings* (De Zeven Snaren). One of the heroes in this Flemish comic book asks passers-by and friends about the works of mercy, but nobody manages to name them all. What is worse, a magician has hidden the Harp with the Seven Strings. As a result the Seven Works of Mercy are no longer practised and the world is in serious danger of going pear-shaped. The story dates from 1968, and the concerned tone was obviously a sign of the times. In 1973 the Flemish magazine *Kreatief* published a special edition in which Jan Pieter Ballegeer did *'a research experiment into the topicality of an old theme in art'*. He collected more than 300 pictures of the Seven Works of Mercy spanning several centuries and from all over Europe. When he showed them to a number of young art students, he realised that *'the message'* no longer came across. Only one student in a hundred recognised the Works in the illustrations. Moreover, the young people reacted mainly to the form of the art works. That was also apparent when Ballegeer set them the task of illustrating the Seven Works themselves. One of the students sceptically turned everything around. In his work the thirsty were buried and the naked visited. Another made a *Suitcase of Mercy,* with two rubber hands attached to the inside of the case which if they were inflated could touch each other. Ballegeer concluded somewhat despairingly: *'Several solutions are purely formalistic and therefore completely miss the human content.'*

Once upon a time it was mainly about that human content. The Master of Alkmaar, whose seven panels from 1504 can be found near the front of this book, was commissioned to paint his Works of Mercy by the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit for the Church of St Lawrence in Alkmaar, where they were intended to inspire the worshippers to concern themselves with the welfare of others. In Flanders, from the Middle Ages onwards such pictures were often hung above the so-called 'Table of the Holy Ghost' or alms table, because it was the Church that organised alms for the poor. And Caravaggio's well-known depiction of the Works hangs in splendour above the altar of the chapel of the Naples Mount Mercy, Pio Monte della Misericordia, where the needy could pawn their miserable possessions.

The Fleming Wenceslas Coeberger had become acquainted with these *Montes Pietatis* during his stay in Italy, and as court architect he pleaded with his bosses, the Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella, to establish similar charitable institutions in the Southern Netherlands, where the needy population could raise money on their possessions at reasonable interest. Starting in 1618 he built 15 Mercy Mounts in various cities, of which he became the superintendant. For centuries the less well-off could go there for a cheap loan if they left something behind as security. It even says *'Interest-free loans made to the poor here'* on the facade of Ghent's own Mount Mercy, the Gentse Berg on Abrahamstraat, which now houses the city archives, and above the entrance

Hofje van Noblet in Haarlem, built in 1761.

door is the inscription '*Mons Pietatis*' and the Implements of Christ's Passion.

Where the relief of the poor was concerned, then, the Church was never far away. What's more, long before social services were organised by the state the weaker members of society – the poor, unemployed, sick, elderly, disabled, widows and orphans – were dependent on their families and/or the Church. Gradually private initiative too began to play a bigger role, and it did so hand in hand with the Church or with church communities. Ministers and priests often received money from richer parishioners or members of the community to spend on poor relief. In the Amsterdam City Archives, for example, we find the will of Lijsbeth Cornelis Bruntendr who in 1565 left money to Amsterdam's two parish churches, to convents, monasteries and institutions such as the hospitals, the insane asylum and the orphanage. The Minderbroederskloosterr (monastery of the Friars Minor) received 50 guilders a year for 6 years, and every child in the Burgerweeshuis (orphanage) was supposed to receive a farthing's worth of white bread and a pint of milk on the anniversary of Lijsbeth's death. But she also included clauses that were supposed to take care of her own salvation, because in return for all that posthumous mercy she stipulated that masses should be said for her and she also expected people to pray for her soul.

The Implements of Christ's Passion above the entrance door of the Ghent 'Mons Pietatis'.

Other childless rich people who wanted to spend their money in a worthwhile way after their death had *hofjes* (almshouses) built – the forerunners of old people's homes and sheltered accommodation – where old people with little money could live for free. In Flanders these almshouses were called *godshuizen* or God's houses, but the principle was the same. They were meant to provide a limited number of impecunious elderly women, men, or married couples with accommodation and an annual allowance, and they were founded by people who saw charity as insurance for a nice spot in Heaven. To play it absolutely safe, the inhabitants of the almshouses were often obliged to pray regularly for the welfare of their benefactors' souls. It says in St Matthew's Gospel: '*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me*.' Those who did good were all set for the Hereafter – that was the dividend that mercy paid.

Private initiatives and civil involvement in general welfare have long played an important part in supplementing the efforts of the Church (and later also of the government) to relieve poverty, sickness and other afflictions. The first public playground in the Netherlands, at the Tweede Weteringplantsoen in Amsterdam, was opened in May 1880 by the manufacturer Nicolaas Tetterode. That was the start of the 'playground movement', which had people all over the Netherlands working to get a playground in their own district. And indeed, it was in the nineteenth century that the Dutch first started to be really concerned about the education and care of their own and other people's children. More and more reception houses or 'houses of correction' appeared, where children were subjected to *'re-education to become good citizens'*, with religion as the medicine because *'poor people hear nothing but swearing, shouting and yelling, one single proverb may perhaps calm the unhappy and rebellious mind.'* Society could only become more orderly, happier, and better as a result.

Inside the Amsterdam poorhouse, end of the 19th century.

At the end of the nineteenth century, especially, the *'social question'* started to play an important role. Industrialisation changed the Netherlands fast, and not only for the better. The factory worker was born. And worked fourteen hours a day in dangerous, filthy factories. Dodgy working conditions, low wages and housing shortages gave rise to an urban proletariat and that caused the well-heeled middle class a lot of headaches. Benefit payments did not yet exist, children worked alongside their parents and often just as hard, and because of all the misery many workers took to drink as well. Poverty, alcoholism, *'rough manners and a lack of civilisation'* could not fail to have their effect. Concerned citizens founded associations to fight prostitution, alcohol consumption and visits to the fair, as well as to educate the workers. They wanted to help solve the *'social question'* – partly out of sympathy, but also from fear of a complete collapse of the social order. Gradually the government began to do its bit as well. A range of laws – such as the ban on child labour (1874) and a housing law (1901) – were supposed to make workers' lives pleasanter little by little. Initially, of course, the main purpose was to create more joy rather than more equality. In that sense Derek Philips' observation in his recent study, *Well-Being in Amsterdam's Golden Age* (2008), still applies: *'From the perspective of the politi-*

cal elite, the maintenance of existing inequalities and structures of privilege was crucial. (...) Social order required hierarchy and subordination. All should be in their proper place.' Social services were first and foremost supposed to maintain the established order. There was a price to pay for everything. In the poorhouse the impoverished elderly did indeed find shelter, but they had to work hard for their bread: weaving, spinning, combing flax, knitting, sewing and unpicking old rope. This compulsory work in the poorhouse was only abolished in 1957.

New words and old-fashioned concern

Nowadays you can read the history of welfare work in the Low Countries on the websites www.canonsociaalwerk.be and www.canonsociaalwerk.nl, by clicking a number of digital windows that mark out the long path from mercy and charity to the modern welfare state. The Flemish site starts with the Second Council of Tours where, as early as 567, a law was issued that every local community must feed its own poor and needy. So the needy should be taken care of in their own parish, from that parish's resources. And at present it ends in 2007 with the 100th edition of ALERT, a publication of the non-profitmaking organisation, 'Pluralistisch Overleg Welzijnswerk'. There are quotations from previous years, too: '*"Let us make it quite clear, the criticism quite rightly levelled at all the drop-in welfare centres is that there has been much too much 'seat-of-the-pants' assistance." (1990-1), "In recent years there has been a good deal of talk about counselling, but it is not always clear what comes of it." (1994-26), and "With preventive campaigns one is often aiming at very vague raising of awareness. Or with attempts to change behaviour one risks setting about it in a rather moralistic way." (1991-10)*'. Which shows more than anything that the modern welfare state with its street-

'Big City, Big Loneliness': a slogan in Rotterdam on the occasion of the Erasmus Year (2008).

'Students for sale' for a noble cause, *Music for Life*, Ghent, 2008.

corner workers, care farms, development pilots, volunteer care, youth work and guidance for senior citizens has also given us a welfare Newspeak.

Has this structured approach with all its facilities led to an erosion of mercy, as Ballegeer seems to argue in his 1973 essay? After all, he blames the ignorance of the young people he questioned on the welfare state – it has all become a matter of course, the government takes care of everything and personal involvement is extremely limited or non-existent. That is, of course, to take a very dim view of things, because not everything is left to the powers that be. The soldiers of the Salvation Army still jump into the breach for all those who fall through society's net. The homeless, addicts, prostitutes and the lonely can still count as much as ever on the support of this *'church community with its sleeves rolled up'*, as it is called. In December 2008 the third edition of *Music For Life*, an annual fund-raising event organised by the young people's radio station Studio Brussel and Red Cross Flanders, managed with all sorts of spontaneous activities to rake in € 3,503,246 for 'Mothers fleeing war and violence'. In the Netherlands thirteen large social organisations have joined forces in Coalitie Erbij to tackle loneliness, because a good quarter of the Dutch feel lonely and this number is growing. *'Magna civitas magna solitudo'*, wrote Erasmus – big cities mean big loneliness. It was one of the slogans that were prominently displayed all over Rotterdam during Erasmus Year in 2008.

Artists, too, are still socially involved. In September 1999 the artist, Ida van der Lee, set up her *Wasgoed is goed* (Laundry is Great) project in her own long street: Vrolikstraat, in Amsterdam (see photo on p. 10). She roped in the people from the neighbourhood for the purpose. 175 lines of colourful washing ran from one house to another, literally joining up people from different backgrounds. It turned washing into a personal and human sign of life amongst all that urban stone. With this playful contravention of the rules – because officially it is not permitted to hang washing in public or on the facade of a house – Van der Lee wanted to make it clear that the environment, which is more and more defined by regulations, looks livelier and more cheerful with a bit more freedom. It made the street appear more southern and less cold, and that encouraged a sense of community. Beauty is consolation, and both should be shared. Just as in a more recent project by Van der Lee that can be seen at www.allerzielenalom.nl, in which artists and volunteers transform graveyards and memorial sites into attractive and hospitable places to meet in the evening, with snacks and drinks for the relatives. Artists help to turn memories and emotions into words, pictures or sound, and bring the living and the dead together again in the process.

A subject of ongoing concern

So yes... it is not only the government that is concerned about the welfare of the community – although the government's concern should certainly not be underestimated. In the Netherlands the Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP) keeps a finger on the pulse of the population's welfare, and in Flanders, too, the mood of society is checked on a regular basis. In February 2009 studies by organisations such as Vrind (Flemish Regional Indicators) and SCV (Socio-Cultural Shifts in Flanders) still show that Flanders is a rather contented region, *'rather community-oriented, with high socio-economic expectations vis-à-vis the govern-*

ment, but with only moderate trust in that government, and always looking for a greater subjective experience of happiness and contentment.'

So, we may be at our best when we are taking care of others, but when it comes to happiness that subjective factor should hardly be underestimated. In scientific terms happiness is defined as subjective well-being. Of course, that makes it an extremely relative idea. Kant thought happiness a vague concept and Hegel called periods of happiness the empty pages of history. So happiness is pretty hard to grasp. Nonetheless, people are still trying to measure what they call 'gross national happiness' and to record the results of these measurements in a World Happiness Database. There is even a *Journal of Happiness Studies*. It was founded by the Dutch Sociology Professor Ruut Veenhoven of Rotterdam's Erasmus University. He has been doing research into happiness for years. According to him, people's happiness depends on *'freedom of choice, the extent to which one can lead an upright existence, enjoying a basic prosperity and having the chance to run your own life.'* Although he readily admits that a number of more banal factors also play a part; a moderate climate, for example – and we haven't even mentioned Wellness Centres and Prozac yet.

Wellness in Rotterdam.

The Pavilion of Temporary Happiness, built out of 33,000 beer crates in Brussels in 2008.

In any case, Veenhoven's calculations show that the role of the welfare state is not unimportant to the happiness of the individual. People need a few certainties to help contain the unknown. They want to be able to function within a social network. And it is not only Facebook that *'helps you connect and share with the people in your life'* – a good government system helps with that too. But, as we have said already, ulterior motives obviously come into it as well. At its best you could call the welfare state a form of management, at its worst it's crowd control. And that is why the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis put his finger on the problem when he pointed to the increasing dependence of the individual in the welfare state and wrote that social utopia leads almost inevitably to enslavement and totalitarianism. Welfare may be a subject of ongoing concern, happiness should not. Happiness exists precisely by grace of the imperfection of our existence, in which we are, at best, caught between uncomfortable contentment and more-or-less comfortable discontent. Or, as Maurice Maeterlinck, the only Belgian ever to be so fortunate as to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, put it: *'Being happy means that you no longer worry about happiness.'* ■

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