

A backpack for the road — José Sanders

Your Majesty, dear former rectors, members of the Supervisory Board, members of the Executive Board, deans and former deans, representatives of the municipality, the province, the ministry and the Church, colleagues from the university community and sister institutions, dear students, dear all who are here today.

What do you need to come and study at Radboud University? When I first came here 40 years ago, as a first-generation student from Twente, to study Dutch Language and Culture, I brought nothing with me except myself, and a backpack full of curiosity and uncertainty. And it was enough. That *is* enough here, and it *is still* enough. Gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin? Lack of wheelbarrows or posh manners? None of it matters. Just bring *yourself*, as you are: all of it is welcome, although it is not ultimately what matters most. Because what matters most are your motivation, your talents, and your open questions. After all, you don't know yet what you are going to discover – it's what you've come for, isn't it? You may also not yet know what you want to become, or rather, what meaning you want to bring into this world, or even who you want to be.

When this university was founded, a century ago, people mainly envisaged clear academic professions: teacher, judge, doctor, politician, administrator... Our very first Rector, Jos Schrijnen, single-handedly enrolled the 189 students of the first cohort, of whom no less than 20% were women – he was proud of this, because it was, in his own words, a 'generous percentage'! The goal of the new university was not a narrow identity institution, but the emancipation of many who had previously not managed to find their way to the university. The motivations, talents, and questions they brought have led to great research and important teaching over the past century; and we want to take it much further still in the next century. But that original emancipatory goal continues to hold up a mirror for us, even today. We need more students and staff from many different groups. Someone from a different background may bring different motivations, talents and questions; these are relevant and even indispensable, and will lead to even more interesting research, more important teaching. Take, for example, Katalin Karikó, who was awarded an honorary doctorate here last year and recently received the Nobel Prize for her vaccine research. She told us how she left her country and moved on to new places each time with nothing but her stubborn questions. Her curiosity kept her going, for decades.

As Radboud University, we can do more to open our doors to those who have not yet found their way to our university. Are we inviting enough? Do we connect enough with schools and organisations around us? Are we welcoming enough to people who come to us from far away with nothing more than their curiosity and their motivation? Let's have a long hard look at ourselves and have this conversation; we should try our best to put more colour on our cheeks. *Anyone* who is willing to bring their best is welcome, and they need not bring anything else but themselves. Let that continue to be what we have in common: the will to make a meaningful contribution by getting the best out of yourself.

Just you, and a backpack full of curiosity and uncertainty – is there anything left to be unearthed from our hundred-year-old history? A word, an image, that we can take with us as provisions for the road? When this chain was hung around my neck a moment ago, I could see something you could not, which is that a new image has been added on the inside. On the occasion of our university's 100th anniversary, the image of Saint Titus Brandsma has been engraved on the back of the bottom shield. He was Han van Krieken's predecessor, as well as mine, and one of a total of sixty rectores magnifici to this day. During the Second World War, he refused to surrender the Catholic freedom of press to the occupying forces, and paid for this with his life in Dachau.

We now have his image to wear close to our heart. How can doing so help us? Looking at a martyr is like looking straight into the sun: the image is too sharp; it's too much to handle. Titus' courage in standing up for the truth, the benevolence with which he accepted his fate, the inner freedom he never gave up: all that is too great to comprehend. Truth, benevolence, freedom – these are very big words, words that we can only peel off into something manageable and portable, to put into that rucksack of ours, full of curiosity and uncertainty.

To start with the truth, which we are not going to relativise into 'just another opinion'. Here at the university, we are indeed looking for facts, for theories that we can test, for arguments that we can support, for knowledge that can be shared and help us understand our increasingly complex world and face its challenges. The university is not an opinion factory, but a nursery of critically exchanged knowledge, knowledge that is never done. The search for truth is never done, never *finished*, and in the context of the university, this realisation is not limiting, but *liberating*.

Secondly, benevolence, which we are not going to reduce to something that should only make ourselves and others happy. Here at the university, it's okay that there is friction, and tension, because we are not gathered here with people we have all handpicked ourselves. We should treat each other with respect, we are allowed to have different opinions, and we can make mistakes. And not just with a failed experiment or a failed exam. We can get things wrong; we can change. Nobody who comes here is completely done, is already *finished*, because if they were, they wouldn't need to come. In the mutual exchange, we can learn and grow, and that exchange, that conversation never ends. Benevolence offers both clarity and confidence to people who are never *finished*, but who *remain* in conversation with each other.

Thirdly, there is freedom, which we are not going to stifle into something that can barely breathe through a thick blanket of learning paths, assessment frameworks, learning outcomes, and labour market prospects. Here at the university, we are training young people for a world that we do not yet know and that can hardly be predicted. The disciplines we formulated yesterday may not meet the needs of tomorrow. University study programmes should also offer the freedom to choose, combine, and develop. To study is to learn to experience what you want to contribute meaning to, or, in ancient terms: to discover and explore your own dignity as a person. As scholars, let us embrace this freedom, and trust in paths towards meaning that are not done, never *finished*, but discovered and uncovered by students time and again.

That is what I wish for our students, our staff, and our entire university community, and it is what I will put my heart and soul into. What a wonderful idea it is that for the next 100 years, rectors and vice rectors may do their jobs with a message of truth, benevolence, and freedom in their hearts, thus adding a little to the backpacks of students and staff at our beautiful Radboud University.

I thank you, dear members of the Supervisory Board, members of the Executive Board, deans, colleagues, and students, for your trust that I will do my best to serve the truth in freedom, and I in turn trust your benevolence because, of course, I am not *finished* either.

I thank you for your attention.

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