

“What in the end keeps everything together?”

“Do not let it fall apart!”

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When Luc Stevens posed this question to us, I started wondering why is he interested in the answer?

And of course, gradually the question also started triggering me.

In a meeting like this afternoon, paying tribute to Luc for the important work has achieved, we could think of what does bring us together here? What did Luc do to us, so that we all wanted to come, join and reflect on what we owe to him?

His question invites us to think about the importance of education, in the sense of helping others to develop and grow. Not only as individuals, but also as relatives in our families, our professional circles as well as citizens. What creates our sense of meaning and belonging?



The painting of Peter Paul Rubens shows the three graces holding each other. The graces of beauty, joy and blossoming, share this strong sense of belonging, whatever their reason and meaning is. Peter Paul Rubens depicted his own wife – Hélène Forment as one of the graces (the one to the left) short after their wedding. It is a rather complicated, but not uncommon way of artists to express relatedness. Rubens never sold this painting and always kept it in his studio.

Influenced by centuries of art history, we feel very familiar with the theme of the three graces. It goes back to the Greek mythology, where the graces were considered as the radiant daughters of Zeus. Many artists presented the three ladies. And each period showed them according to what the fashion considered as beautiful, feminine, desirable, sensual and perfect. The three women hold each other in a tender way, expressing that they feel why they are together. And we like that a lot.

Education, upbringing, coaching, mentoring, guidance and leadership, all these activities and efforts try to exert influence on others to finally create that sense of shared meaning and belonging. And we all appreciate that, as long as it feels common and trusted.

And then appears this painting by Herman Gordijn. We observe exactly the same theme, the same poses, the same gestures of holding each other in a tender and caring way. But an image of three naked men in a field of poppies is far from common and trusted. Despite the familiar theme of a sense of belonging, it is difficult to perceive conventional beauty, joy and blossoming.



Does it mean that an education of traditions, conventions and common experiences is holding us together, attached as we are

to what we already know and what makes us feel comfortable? Is the common school curriculum - with its fixed content, examinations, standardized test and selection and exclusion - leading to a meaningful sense of belonging, based on deep rooted values that act as the tone in music?

When Luc poses the question *“What in the end keeps everything together”*, I wonder whether he is interested in the social glue that makes us stick. Does he want to learn more about the power of social capital that acts as invisible threads that create a web and cocoon, where we feel comfortable and secure? A web with strong ties and knots that offers structure and stability?

Strong ties that keep you inside where you belong?

However, these strong ties may also act as the barriers that do not let you escape? Of course, they do hold a lot together, but at what price? Is this education for autonomy and freedom?

Where in our living systems will the rules and regulations, quality measurements, facts and figures, and accountability instructions, take over the pedagogical wisdom that is so deeply rooted in the encounter of human beings?

Today, we pay tribute to Luc and we show our appreciation for what he has achieved for our professions and for how he has influenced the sensitivity of our antennas for what is meaningful and not. We do so because Luc steps back from NIVOZ, the center of pedagogy that he has created; a center that could act as a free haven for exploring the values and principles that guide us in our approach of children, youngsters and of those who are professionally engaged in this process.

Luc is preparing for leaving. And then it is not too difficult to interpret his question *“What in the end keeps everything together?”* as: *“What will happen when I am not there anymore?”* He may feel worried about what is coming. How do we prevent that falls apart what is dear to us?

Is it the strong inspirational and charismatic leader who weaves the web of shared interests and values? The ties that make us feel secure, attached to each other, and that offer a sense of belonging?

Let us explore this a bit further.

Maybe, holding together means creating a safe and secure environment, where you can freely move and still feel protected.

The earliest embracement of the newborn child by its mother is the basis for lifetime attachment, stability and ultimately the stepping stone for self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is probably the most important predictor for successful development, learning and professional career. Self-efficacy is the basis for independent thinking, emancipation, autonomy and happiness. Self-efficacy is this deeply engrained sense of *“Yes, I probably can do this!”*. Maybe, this is one of the reasons why, according to the UNICEF research (2013), the Dutch children are among the happiest in the world.

Such basic foundation is probably more important in someone’s future life than IQ and formal grades, diploma’s and degrees.

It can develop and be nurtured by creating a safe environment, offering abundant freedom for exploring autonomy and experimenting with new and uncommon experiences. It is the basis for becoming competent, capable, diligent and proficient. It will happen, not on the basis of obedience and power, but out of sheer joy.

And then comes the difficult part. We promote freedom, autonomy and independence; and we accept the creative turmoil that will inevitably be a result of these qualities.

Let's say we accept these acts of freedom as long as they are not too unconventional.

And at the same time, we hope for strong connections of relatedness, shared values and the well-tuned tone of the music that creates this fulfilling sense of togetherness and belonging.

Nevertheless, this potential danger of bumping principles - granting autonomy at the one side and hoping for relatedness at the other - is a never-ending fear for parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, managers, leaders, as well as for dear friends and beloved partners. It is the attractive, but also chilling risk of letting go.

On the very day that Luc Stevens steps back from NIVOZ - NIVOZ that is so dear to him and to all of us - he confronts us with the question *"What in the end keeps everything together?"*. As an academic he probably invites us to continue his pedagogical quest for joy in learning, school and research. From that perspective we could translate his question into: *What in the end keeps autonomy and relatedness together?*

However, as the founding father of NIVOZ, he might also be confronted with the challenging but chilling risk of letting go. Today, his intriguing invitation to reflect on *"What in the end keeps everything together?"* could also be interpreted as:

*"Listen, what we have achieved over the last 15 years: Do not let it fall apart! Because you are so beautiful".*