

***“Academy and Freedom”****Koen Schuiling*

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SPOKEN WORD APPLIES

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Good afternoon everyone.

It feels like a lifetime ago

that I stayed with my grandparents from Finsterwolde and Nieuwolda.

As a twelve-year-old boy, I cycled through the city.

I crossed the Broerplein.

On the steps of the university, I saw students and professors gathering.

When I got home,

my grandmother asked if anything interesting had happened.

I told her what I had seen.

And that I wanted to go to university.

I think she was surprised.

Perhaps she wondered what I was thinking.

No one in my family had ever gone to university.

The grandparents I stayed with were a butcher and a maid.

My other grandparents ran a vegetable shop on the Schuitendiep.

But I made it—I graduated from the law faculty.

My twelve-year-old self could never have imagined standing here,

and yet here I am.

It's a great honor for me to open the academic year,

not far from the same steps where it all began.

Of course, my story is not unique.

So many young people from this region  
started their climb up the social ladder at this university.  
And even if they didn't come here to study,  
the university

has always been a source of work, well-being, and prosperity  
for so many people in Groningen and the wider region.

It almost makes me feel twelve years old again,  
when I think of all  
the great minds that gathered here throughout the centuries  
to discuss freedom and its boundaries;  
where great minds still discuss these topics,  
like associate Professor Berend Roorda,  
who studies demonstration law;  
or professor Tom Postmes,  
who studies the sociological aspects of demonstrations.

It was the academy and its relentless pursuit of truth  
that often paved the way for freedom and progress.

In our own time,  
campuses around the world are breeding grounds  
for a fairer, more equal, and freer society.

It is no coincidence that in dictatorships,  
intellectuals and universities fall victim to censorship and intimidation.

I hope I can offer you a perspective today,  
not often heard in academia.  
Indeed, the perspective of a mayor.

In the Netherlands,  
the mayor must ensure  
that the rights of citizens to exercise their freedoms are guaranteed;  
and that the exercise of these freedoms  
does not jeopardize  
the safety and order in the city.

And very much like a referee during a football match,  
whatever decision I make,  
about fifty percent of the people involved disagrees.

There are always people who feel that their freedoms are unjustly curtailed  
or that the freedoms of others are not restricted enough.

Some of you  
may have found yourselves on one side or the other over the past year.  
But whatever side you were on,  
I hope you realized chances are,  
that on a different day,  
on a different issue,  
you might be on the other end of the discussion.  
Or that someone who has an opinion that chafes now,  
might turn out to be right in the future.

I try to take the attitude of Herman van Veen,  
who decades ago sang:

*I have that tender feeling  
For everyone who expresses themselves loudly  
Who experiences every gesture as cold  
For those who shun every herd  
(..)*

Many of you are oscillating constantly  
between scientific curiosity that refuses to be restricted,  
and your role as an engaged citizen that understands  
that what you do in the academy,  
influences the world outside.

Academic freedom is about being able to conduct research in freedom,  
to be able to present the results - whatever the outcome.

The limits of that freedom are set by academic standards:  
transparency, diligence, honesty, independence and verifiability.

Freedom of speech is about being allowed to express yourself,  
within the boundaries of the law.

The norms, standards, and protocols of academic freedom  
and the freedom I have  
to speak or act in the real world  
are not separate worlds.

They have permeable boundaries.

Both move with the heartbeat of history.  
Both come with their own responsibilities and safeguards,  
but they cannot be viewed in isolation from each other.

That's why the president of the University  
attended meetings with the police and with me  
where we discussed the demonstrations in Groningen.

We did not expect the president to make any decisions,  
that's my responsibility,  
but he helped us find a way forward, with both freedoms in mind.

I am very reluctant to limit the freedoms of the people of Groningen.  
Especially when it comes to fundamental rights  
such as freedom of speech or the right to demonstrate.

But at the same time:  
exercising these freedoms has an impact on the world.  
It affects not only people, but also public spaces.

So, much like you, I oscillate between the law and the real world,  
the best and the most sincere way that I can.

And with all that back and forth movement,  
it sometimes feels as if we are moving in still water ,  
stirring up sand as we wade through it.

A murky reality indeed, and sometimes this makes me wonder:  
How do we exercise and guarantee our freedoms,  
in times of distrust, discontent and disinformation.

How can we have a civilized conversation about the limits of freedom,  
in a time where mud-slinging seems to be the nations preferred pastime.

I stumbled upon a lecture by Peter Paul Verbeek  
of the University of Amsterdam.

He offers that

“academic freedom requires that  
you don't want to impose your own scientific or moral truths on others  
but are always willing to enter into debate.”

And he also suggests that

“demonstrating is part of instigating the necessary doubt  
and is therefore a very good thing.

But demonstrations must also respect the scope for doubt:  
as soon as demonstrating turns into making demands  
without any discussion being possible,  
then academic freedom is lost.”

In a way, he argues,

at least that is how I interpret him,  
that political discussions *at the academy*,  
should also be held to academic standards.  
Permeable boundaries, indeed.

Honesty;

willingness to engage in conversation,

to listen to what the other has to say;

willingness to critically examine your own views

and test them against the facts;

these are standards we can uphold in our political conversations as well.

But The Netherlands Institute for Social Research

suggests this is actually difficult in the Netherlands.

The Dutch are very proud of ‘their freedom’.

but how they define ‘freedom’ is rather shallow:

“to be able to do what you want,  
without other people interfering”.

But this is not how democracy works.

A democratic conversation starts with the premise that I live with others.

Others with aspirations, desires and fears.

I will not always have the final say.

To make coexistence possible under these conditions

requires tolerance and understanding.

The overly simplistic interpretation of freedom

that seems prevalent in the Netherlands will not lead to greater freedom.

Maybe professor of psychology Liesbeth Woertman was right,

when she argued that instead

“we have become boundless, and as a result, completely unfree.”

“Despite all our freedom, all our abundance” she analyzed,  
“there is a fundamental sense of lack.  
A lack of attention, respect, and kindness,  
as if these are drying up without boundaries”.

This might sound bleak at first.

But if you give it a second thought,  
it is actually very hopeful.

Because attention, respect, and kindness are within our reach.

They are not innate talents;  
they are behaviors we can learn.

We can pass them on to our children.

We can teach them in schools.

And certainly at universities,  
where constitutional law and philosophy of law  
should be part of every curriculum,  
because they foster respect and openness.

We can set an example in both the smallest and the largest moments.

By being transparent about financial interests and relations  
so that we can see that teaching and research are independent.

We can practice them, every day, in our encounters with others.

Especially in a university community,  
where the core values of the university  
should be discussed from freshmen to president.



If the university wants to remain a place  
    where value-free research can coexist with meaningful impact;  
if discussions about the university and the world  
    are to be held openly and freely in this city,  
    and within the walls of the university too!  
then we have a shared responsibility to make this happen.

There is no place here for protesters who destroy other people's property.  
Who make it impossible for others to study.  
Who stand up for their opinions through intimidation and threats.  
Because they then deny others the rights they themselves evoke.

With exercising your rights,  
also comes the responsibility to recognise and defend the same rights of others.

I could quote Voltaire once more,  
    but I think Salmon Rushdie also put it beautifully:  
“One of the problems with defending free speech is you often have to defend  
people that you find to be outrageous and unpleasant and disgusting.”

Whenever we find ourselves at one end of the discussion,  
we must remember that we are part of the same society.  
A society that can only work  
    if we are willing to exercise our freedom to think and speak,  
    and are ready to fulfill our duty to listen.

So even when your patience is wearing thin,  
when the other seems only to utter stupidity after stupidity,  
let us approach each other with empathy,  
    healthy self-doubt and critical introspection.

With tenderness.

Living together is not an exact science.

The values of the latter do not always apply to the first.

It is a constant dialogue,

in which we must always bear in mind

    that we are lucky to live in that very small part of the world

        where the debates can be as free and intense as they are.

Where people indeed have the freedom

    to say outrageous, unpleasant and disgusting things.

In recent years that freedom has been mainly about speech.

And for me that has made it all the more clear

how important it is to propagate

the other necessary condition of democratic debate.

Because in the end,

we will only be heard,

we can only be free,

    if we foster a culture of listening.

If we have tender feelings for those who oppose our deepest beliefs.

Thank you.