

## **Whoever wants me**

Every person is unique. At least, that's what he'd like to believe. But he's not unique because of his race or sexual identity; black heterosexuals and white homosexuals are a dime a dozen. And somebody isn't unique because of his height, weight, or appearance. I mean, for the average European, one 5-foot-six, 120 lb Chinese man without pimples, looks very much like every other Chinese man of that size. Nor is a person unique because of his convictions. Millions of people believe in democracy, Islam, or miracles. What's more, one human-being is no different from another in his basic needs: everybody wants to eat, drink, sleep, and have shelter over his head. No, a person is at most (and then only a tiny fraction) unique because of the combination of products he displays in his shop window. One has a fruit shop filled with bananas, grapes, and strawberries; the other has a showroom with self-designed furniture. One sells 500 different designs of earrings; the other breeds miniature horses for people who enjoy showing off with something exotic.

As time has passed, more and more "services" have found their way into shop windows. Today, we even talk of a service economy and that implies that you can arrange everything for yourself. One person advertises "professional tax returns," another "expertise in corporate reorganisations," and yet another "training managers in social skills." In hospitals, people operate, nurse, and revalidate and in schools, people educate in biology, social sciences, or Russian literature. It takes a long time before people realise that they count for nothing "as human-being" and have to start their own shop if they wish to receive even a hint of admiration. And in that shop there has to be a shop window to attract passers-by for what the shopkeeper has to offer.

Starting a shop that has a window displaying individual products is, of course, no guarantee whatsoever that potential purchasers will actually spend their money there (just looking, just looking), but it's a start. To make such a start, every person has to invest a lot of time, money, and effort in creating a mature combination of products. You do not do that by lying back in a hammock staring into the endlessness of space. You can only do this if you get moving, get working, get learning, get studying, or, as that is now so elegantly termed, get working on your own development. Fortunately, that development begins quite spontaneously in your childhood; at least, as parents you hope it for your child. Children develop physically through games and play, motorially by running, making things, and climbing, and emotionally by talking, laughing and fighting with contemporaries.

Everything new that children discover is immediately put in their shop window: many a parent will have been deafened by the constant repetition of "Look, Dad, how far I can jump" or "Look how far I can cycle." If, by the time you are sixteen, you can walk, talk, write, read, add up and understand why it is not acceptable to throw an empty chip wrapping on the pavement, then you've put yourself in a good starting-position. But that starting-position is nothing more

than that, because millions of other children have, with more or less effort, achieved the same thing. It is hardly surprising that many children, with their high-school diploma in their pocket and just about to start further education, walk around with the idea that real life has still to get under way. Something that can offer some comfort at that age is friends, or even better, an exclusive boyfriend or girlfriend. Although... even at that age, one thing becomes clear, often in a very painful way: you can fall for your dream boy or girl, but that doesn't mean that the attraction is mutual. The energy that is released by a blossoming love can implode in a cruel way if that love is unrequited. And this brings me, quite conveniently, to the main theme of this chapter: the value of each person is determined by the demand for it. In other words: you can grow the best tomatoes in the world, but if they are no customers then those tomatoes will simply rot in their boxes. And then they are not even suitable for some third-rate ketchup.

Of course there will always be people who insist that everybody has an intrinsic value. This is like saying that Piet is a nice person because he is naturally such a nice person. But that's not right. Incidentally, Piet's "niceness" can only emerge in his relationship with other people; being nice is only possible in a relationship between two people. Piet's "niceness" gets its value from the fact that somebody else recognises that niceness. By the way, it is ridiculous to accuse somebody of doing their best "to be found nice" by other people; any person worth his sorts will want to be thought of as nice. Only people who are sure of their popularity can allow themselves to be "not nice". Jaap van Zweden, the conductor and violinist, recently said in an interview: "I don't stand there because I want people to think I am nice, but to get the job done." Now, he can say things like that because, if there is an argument about something important, a member of the orchestra is more likely to lose his job than the conductor. It's the same with popularity as it is with money (or power): if you have a lot of it, you can say it doesn't mean anything to you. Until you are in such a situation, you have to make sure you get enough of it. Only people who do not have any money, power, or charity, know how worth-less life is.

To feel of any worth a person has to offer things that other people want. As we have said, young people do not have much in their shop window. We can see an important phenomenon particularly in young children: if parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents ask the children to help them (making a cake, vacuum-cleaning, washing windows or cleaning the car), then generally they will help with considerable enthusiasm. Children love feeling that they are "needed" and glow with pride when the job is finished. This phenomenon is remarkable because people gradually lose their enthusiasm for "being made use of". This is wrong for three reasons: (1) the fact you can do something is taken for granted; (2) the fact that you are needed is ignored because you have the arrogant idea that you have better ways of spending your time; (3) you throw away your chances of developing further.

A good example of this is when the eighteen-year-old gets his driving-licence. He will love driving anybody in the family round (in his parent's car) to show off his new skills on the road; he will enjoy his new status as driver and won't object in the slightest if others make use of it. In fact, the newly-qualified driver will offer his services to anybody who wishes to make use of them simply so that he can get behind the wheel. But it isn't long before this ability is no longer considered special, and requests to be "taken somewhere" are seen as "bother." Some people would say that people get into problems when they start having airs and graces. The

idea is that they get a little above themselves. Jews call this “chutzpah” or *gotspe*. A good example is this joke: Sam arrives home and finds his wife in bed with his best friend Moses. Sam says to Moses: “What are you thinking of?” Moses answers: “I’m thinking that if you hang around you might learn something.” The Americans simply say: “Don’t push your luck.”

Now that I have touched on the subject of unfaithfulness: being unfaithful is the ultimate arrogance, because the result is often that the unfaithful partner loses both their regular partner and their “bit on the side”. Anybody who is unfaithful takes their marital status for granted, does not recognise their usefulness in the marriage, and therefore gambles away the chances of improving as a partner. But I digress.

We are talking about whether a person is capable of opening a shop: a shop that has such attractive products in the window that inquisitive passers-by are attracted in. Talking about shops: at present it is an increasingly common practice for reintegration offices, outplacement organisations, and other departments set up to get those wandering about without work back on the right track, to ask candidates to produce a folder about their one-man business. In this folder, they have to describe in clear language exactly what services and products they have to offer. This assignment is extremely helpful because it forces job-seekers to promote themselves and their abilities. Most people are not used to advertising themselves, and certainly not used to laying out their abilities in a shop window. Of course, candidates can also discover that their folder is extremely slim and that extensive retraining is necessary if they are to attract any customers at all. It is also possible that the folder is filled with potentially useful products, but alas: society doesn’t need any of them. Luxury articles such as diamonds, sports cars, or elegant fur coats will be difficult to sell in periods of economic recession. The same is true of luxury services such as beauty specialists, investment advisors, or architects.

In Holland, social security is still well organised. That means that people do not need to work if their exclusive products and services are not required. But it won’t be long before society is unable to pay for this. Then the time is past when people are able to demand a job “that matches their abilities”. Even now, people find themselves in difficulties because they refuse to take a step backwards: there is a lot of work, but people are reluctant to accept jobs that are “lower down the scale”. I admit that I too would have to swallow hard before I exchanged my luxurious psychology practice for a snack bar. But I would much rather have a long queue of people outside my snack bar than be forced to go to a shelter for the homeless. It is really a matter of cutting your coat to suit the cloth.

A love variation on this theme is aptly worded in the song: “If you can’t love the one you want, love the one you’re with.” Apparently it is difficult for many people to live according to that principle. All too often I have “love-starved” singles in my surgery sighing: “I can’t seem to get into a relationship; I sometimes think I have a far too romantic ideal of love or that I place too high demands on my dream prince(ss).” That sigh reveals the seat of the problem: people go after the most expensive crown jewels but forget that they simply cannot permit themselves something like that. Put a different way: if you want to own something of value, you have to have something valuable on offer yourself. Anybody who wonders why the most stupid or ugly men attract the most beautiful women can rest assured that those stupid or ugly men will have a very healthy bank balance. Somebody on a “lower level” is not in a position to make demands;

of course, he can still make demands, but nobody will take him seriously. Horses for courses, we say, as long as we don't imagine we're all thoroughbreds. Many of my love-starved singles are generally initially quite insulted when I suggest that they should set their sites a little lower: "Are you suggesting that I should make do with the housekeeper?" Such arrogance produces nothing by laughter in me, if only because I immediately get visions of spiders that refuse to eat insects because they think they are crocodiles.

I also mustn't suggest to such arrogant people that they scout the market for a relationship by replying to the many classified ads that appear. Their reaction is predictable: "You must be a wallflower or a real failure if you have to find love through an ad in the paper. For me, it has to happen spontaneously, and I have no wish to debase myself in such a manner." Nobody likes to think of themselves as a failure, but the truth of the matter is that it takes a failure to find a failure. Tortoises don't fall for zebras or *vice versa*, and the same is true of people. Only in films is the star likely to fall in love with her chauffeur. Now that I've mentioned chauffeurs: fortunately there are still a lot of motorists that are prepared to offer a lift to a destitute student. The chauffeur knows that he is in control: he can stop or drive on. The lifter knows that he must depend on the benevolence of the motorist; that he cannot afford himself the luxury to write on his sign: "Cheap cars don't bother; I only accept rides from Mercedes." No, a lifter with any sense of reality is grateful for any kilometre that he can travel. And as repayment, he will entertain the motorist with pleasant conversation.

So anybody who is prepared to do their best can, in time, make everything that is interesting, useful, and useable for their fellow man. And with a bit of luck they will have enough on offer that is in demand. If you wish to develop a sense of self-worth, it is essential to be available, accessible, and productive. That is why simply doing a job is the very best way to live a useful life. Of course, the occasional moment of play, chatter, and having fun after all that work is necessary to recharge the batteries. But the sound of the alarm calling the faithful to his duty is essential if the human soul is to sing. Strangely enough, the word "duty" has fallen into disuse during the last few decades. Duty is old-fashioned, and "work ennobles" is no longer in current usage. And there are a whole lot of people who insist that "nothing is obligatory." Such a statement fits in comfortably in an atmosphere where personal freedom, individuality, and healthy egotism rule. These are privileges of western civilisation that are certainly worthwhile, if only because they mean that people who dream have the chance of realising their dreams.

Nevertheless, the "nothing is obligatory" principle is a *cul de sac*. In fact, it's downright untrue. People are obliged to eat, drink, sleep, and earn a living to keep themselves and the ones nearest and dearest to them alive. Naturally you can leave the vacuum cleaner in the cupboard for a week. But sooner or later, the living-room is so dusty that it begs its owner to clean things up. And this appeal from the surroundings (react to me) is a greater stimulus than most people realise. A writer does not only need pen and paper, the pen and paper are in turn a means of getting a writer to write. There is a mutual interdependence between a person and the tools of his trade. The painter is helpless with a brush, but without a painter, the brush is of no value. The doctor is helpless without a stethoscope, but without a doctor, the stethoscope is destined for the trash. For creative people, it is generally not practical to sit on top of a mountain in the Himalayas and wait for inspiration, because then they can wait until the cows come home. The rock drummer, for example, can far better take his place at his drum kit and,

inspired by his instruments, set the beat for his life. In this light, duty is not the same as “dull,” “boring,” “bourgeois,” or “mind-numbing,” but rather a wonderful and inspiring symbiosis between man and his surroundings. That fact that a bicycle needs a cyclist in order to achieve a useful existence means that the cyclist can only call himself a cyclist if he has a bicycle. The bike obliges the person to make use of it and if the person fulfils this obligation, then he turns himself, thanks to the bicycle, into a cyclist. What is so interesting about this observation/reasoning/philosophy is that it places people and appliances on the same level: living and dead material are, thanks to their mutual interdependence, of equal value. The juggler is nothing without his balls, and the balls are nothing without the juggler.

This phenomenon is more than just an interesting train of thought. In practice, there are billions of blossoming relationships between man and matter. Many motorcyclists are in love with their Harley Davidson, and any true photographer forms an inseparable duo with his camera. It wouldn't surprise me if the odd head chef can only go to sleep if his favourite wooden spoon is under his pillow. Personally, I am extremely attached to my Apple computer and I experience withdrawal symptoms whenever my computer man tells me I really should get a new one. This intense and intimate relationship between man and his things assumes such proportions that they can destroy marriages. Wives see their husbands' yachts as a competitor and many men have made tracks because their wives showed more devotion to their washing-machines/tennis rackets/violins than to them.

This mutual interdependence also exists between people. The artist is nothing without spectators and the officer directing traffic is nothing more than a gesticulating idiot if there is no traffic around. The dentist derives his value from the patient with rotting teeth, and the psychotherapist would be worthless if everybody went through life without a care in the world. The one is worth nothing without the other. This fact is so essential for human existence that everybody must do their best to be useful to others. Anybody who is of no use to others is doomed to a meaningless existence. That is why it is ridiculous to consider reaching the age of retirement as the start of the golden years. Only those seniors who, after their sixty-fifth birthday, find ways of continuing to be of use to society actually enjoy life. Somebody with a pension does not need to have a paid job – their value can also lie in being a grandparent, doing voluntary work, or organising local activities.

Does this mean that a person has to jump up as soon as the telephone rings? Can he allow himself to just sit there with the excuse that “if it's really important, they'll ring back”? Should a person feel that he is fully blessed if he notices that other people need him? Isn't he sometimes allowed to slam the door and refuse to answer important or less important demands? Before answering all these questions, we must first understand that a person tends towards opportunism: acting without principles and doing things that suit him best at any given moment. A simple example: if my diary is full of appointments, then I can let the phone ring as much as I like. Even then, if, despite my crammed diary, I answered the phone, I could still tell the caller – a new patient who can't afford my rates – that I only accept patients who are prepared to pay my standard fees. My behaviour changes instantly if I notice that the gaps in my diary are taking on frightening proportions. Then I don't only rush to pick up the phone, I get visions of impending bankruptcy if the phone doesn't ring for several days. In other words, the

concept of “assertive refusal” is only applicable if there is an over-demand for your services. Once again we see the principle of supply and demand: the greater the demand, the greater the price a person can ask for his services or products; the smaller the demand, the more modest a person must be with his prices. And if there is no demand whatsoever, then he will simply have to do more for nothing.

And what about that girl who is so popular because she jumps into bed with any guy at the first opportunity? Won't she, after hundreds of sessions in bed and the predictable rejections, feel totally worthless? Won't she feel like a discarded rag, even though she's a popular appliance for randy men? The answer is obvious. Anything that is offered free-of-charge is eagerly sought after, but at the same time is considered of little value. Only if you have to take some trouble to get something, will people think it is “worth all the trouble.” And yet there is nothing wrong with the girl putting her sexuality on offer. To get a guy to commit to her, she just has to make sure he has to go to some trouble to get what he's after. And then I'm only talking about a romantic relationship between a man and a woman. The woman who has nothing to offer but her sex and what's more really enjoys it can make a career for herself in the porno industry. And believe me, there are enough women (and men) who have found there their true destiny (and a luxurious life-style).

The art of living means that you, me, and everybody has to learn to play a role that is considered useful, useable, and productive. Make yourself useful, and you will suddenly find that you are an eagerly invited guest. It can be the role of father, mother, Dutch uncle, or baby-sitting-granny; it can be the role of conflict negotiator, refuse specialist, or creative copywriter. As far as I'm concerned, you may become a professional joke-teller, prophet of God's word, or a mushroom grower. Whatever you do, do it well and understand that your value as person, your value as human being, is totally in the hands of other people. Only with this understanding can you find satisfaction in your duties and enjoy things when others ask you to perform.

A daily ritual has grown over the years between me and my wife. When, after a bicycle trip of 15 minutes, I arrive fresh at my practice, I call her up to wish her good morning. I sit there with pen and paper at the ready and ask her: “What are today's chores?” I work through this list of obligations during the day and, when I return home at the end of the day, I tell her how I have handled the obligations. Some friends consider this the behaviour of a well-trained dog. And perhaps for a reasonable man this is the case. But I would hate for the day to come when I phoned my wife and she said to me: “Well, I don't really need you for anything anymore; take care of your own work and stop bothering me.” If a person has no use, he is ready for death. “Whoever wants me” is my motto. And it is tattooed on my forehead.