

THE YEAR 2020 *Severely edited recapitulation of Van der Laan year*

MILESTONE AT ALL SCALES: for our planet, for our continents, for our countries, for our enterprises and professions, for our families and for our individual lives. This story would become a big book, a book already being written a thousand times over. No point to add one here.

This recap is focused on aspects of the smallest scale, of our family life. There will be no mention of aches and pains; I'd rather concentrate on people and events. A good week after New Years day, the tree and all the festive paraphernalia discarded or safely stored for next December, we packed for our 2020 skiing holiday. For the fifth time we left in a bus, on Friday January 10th already, with more or less the same group of more than 50 people, travelling overnight in comfort to arrive in time for breakfast in our wellness hotel in Austria's **Lech Valley**. There was plenty of snow and having our bus with us the whole week, all the wonderful slopes, the villages and towns of the region were within easy reach.

Renate is a superb skier and she belongs to a subgroup of half a dozen with more or less matching skills who enjoy each other's company and speed. Amazingly the weather was sunny nearly the whole time so in spite of short days, plenty of hours remained for this exhilarating sport. Unfortunately I (Harry) had to stop skiing after my 80th birthday, on my doctor's serious advice: "you may be careful and skilled but if you are hit by a 'pisten rowdy' at great speed you will not fully recover". So reluctantly I stopped, missing that special joy of wide slopes and mountain vistas. Instead I made long walks with our friend Ria, whose husband does ski while she, an excellent photographer, walks and pictures the mountains and the character of quaint villages. On January 18th we came home again and then a mild winter month was filled with visits to Opa Dieter, 95 yrs and 140 km from here; a trip to Hannover where Larissa is a research student in glaciology. The photo on the card was taken there.

We did our sports at least twice each week, there was the Australian Open to watch and be delighted by young new tennis talents, we went to concerts, went walking and talking. There was news about a soccer match in Bergamo on 19 February as well as huge apres ski parties there. Vague rumours about a virus outbreak in far-away China were ignored. On 26 February we boarded a TUI Boeing Dreamliner and flew in comfort to Varadero, Cuba for an all-in holiday in a dream resort between Varadero and Havana. Sister Rika with husband Grant flew in from Toronto and for ten days we revelled in resort joys of sunshine, beaches, pools, daily morning aqua gym and friendly service

over good meals plus classy entertainment. Some excursions nearby, a long and interesting day in Havana with a visit to Cuban art treasures in national musea. It was a privilege to be together as two couples with so many common family memories and shared cultural interests; nine days flew by, days without television or newspapers, just for once we ignored the info floods that normally rush through our lives day by day. Not once did we hear the words COVID or virus. Torontonians flew home and two days later we did too, this time via Mexico. We were home on Monday 9 March and watching the 8 pm news that day we realized we had blissfully missed the warnings of a viral pandemic engulfing the human world, with thousands of superspreaders from Bergamo events efficiently contaminating much of Europe. Life was about to be turned upside down, plans for concerts, museum visits, meals with family and friends, excursions to neighbouring countries cancelled, cancelled, cancelled.

Larissa and her friend Chris von Rüdiger were in their winter sports centre, Serfaus, Tirol, both instructors in the skischool. A few days after our homecoming Serfaus was abruptly closed, L and C had to leave but their respective abodes were sublet for the winter holiday period. They called, where do we go? A ski friend gave the two a ride to the city of Siegen and we decided to meet our couple there and take them to our home, vaguely realizing the risk we were taking, but ya, they cannot sleep under a bridge. The drive to Siegen was exactly 300 km, L&C arrived within minutes of us and Chris drove our Prius all the way back -good for me- to our house. Good driver! Little were we aware that this togetherness of the four of us would last sixty days...!

L&C moved into the downstairs guest room with its own full bathroom, so each couple had the requisite privacy. We quickly settled into the new normal routine of meals, exercise sessions, walks and talks, happy hours, games, dinners cooked in turn, TV programmes and Netflix series. For entertainment there were two possibilities, with the four of us on the big corner couch in the living room or the young couple by itself in the smaller room where the second smart TV is. This reminds me to mention the often taken for granted functioning infrastructure we enjoy, to sum up: sewage, pure drinking water, totally reliable electricity, natural gas for heating and hot water, fixed and mobile telephone, internet and WiFi/Wlan. Also we had the amazing luxury of four fully stocked supermarkets and a pharmacy within a ten minute bike ride, a farm store for fresh eggs, fruit and vegetables 500 m along the road. The open air market in the heart of WbD on Wednesday morning continues throughout the lockdown periods. Count your blessings...!

Rare is the opportunity to get to know a prospective son-in-law by having him in your household for sixty days...! Honestly we not even once had a shouting match, a war of words or other very stressful circumstances. Chris is an interesting young man, full of humour, multilingual like the rest of us, with a lot of cultural affinity and an appreciation of family life much like ours. By university training he is a financial engineer, working for a major French multinational consultant. After the two of them left, C a week before L left for Hanover (12 July) the house felt too quiet but also more restful....

It was a bonus from the virus to have such a unique family period, where we of course missed Kolya, who was working from his room in a three men apartment in the heart of Berlin. We had daily FaceTime iPhone contact but he felt he was missing a lot and we shared that feeling. C'est la vie...

Both C and L worked from our home a lot of the time; Renate had a steady stream of translation assignments which she managed to complete in the agreed timeframes at her home office, the kitchen table, with meals in slow cooker/oven and on the stove within reach! R did her extraordinarily accomplished multitasking with gusto, often on her bike to the outdoors tennis court, sport centres long as not closed, market, supermarket before we were ready for breakfast...

The spring and summer of 2020 in Holland were more sunny than average. Our house has a spacious garden with a lawn and abundant flower borders as well as quite a number of sculptures. It borders on a waterway, as often in Dutch towns meant to control the waterlevels under both wet and drought circumstances. Our canal is 7 m wide, the water steadily flows, there are water plants and fish as well as insects. We have a hardwood dock 30 m long, 1,5 m wide that separates the garden from the water. This dock has one deeper space where one can sit and read, enjoy a conversation with a visitor or people who are walking across the water towards or from town, all this in the shade of our huge walnut tree. When it rains or it is too cold to be on the terrace or by the water, our haven is the wintergarten / conservatory, the roomy space entirely of steel and glass (in Dutch called *serre*) which has floor heating so we can use it ~300 days per year -only when it is very cold and windy can we not reach 20C; a half hour of sunshine is enough to raise the temperature to 24C, after which eight sliding doors can be opened as well as half the glass roof to have ambient temperature again. The south wing has a large glass dining table, the East wing a large hardwood high table which we term the party space and where one can also do standup work on a laptop. Connecting them is a wonderful lounge corner, perfect for

conversation, reading or caressing Giulia and Luca, our two British-shorthair cats, who love to sleep on these chairs.

The circumstances just sketched made it possible to come through the Covid-19 period, now 9 months long, with good productivity, good moods and a lot of happy interactions. All the things we normally do, like most people, visit interesting cities and towns, eat out, go to concerts, festivals and expositions and the like, failed us. But thanks to many sunny days, we were able to invite many friends, mostly couples, for coffee/lunch/tea/drinks/dinner with little or no virus risks. The large terrace with sunscreen plus parasol for shade and suitable tables and chairs, also provided for excellent social conditions. With this house and garden we are privileged and so are our guests.

By the end of July it seemed the virus plague was abating enough to risk a trip more than our typical ~100 km range. We have retired friends on the Loire, between Parnay and Chinon, who have insistedly invited us and we decided to drive there, in our new Prius PluginHybrid. On Sunday 26 July we drove through Belgium to Lille, the next day to the Loire and our friends. They had also been alone for ages and our greetings were met with less than formal Covid precaution! By the way, Lille is a beautiful place, well worth an extended visit, the beginning of the Chunnel to England.

Spending two days with Martine (a retired French chansonniere) and Jos (Dutch emeritus veterinary professor) was a delight. With them we had agreed that from their place the four of us would drive to Bordeaux, ~300 km to the SW, for a touristic visit of two special places. That became the highlight, at least to me, of this year!

On German TV I had a glimpse of a new level of digital cinema in Bordeaux and these few seconds convinced me that we must go there. Now we were in a central hotel, very warm weather, quite memorable dining on the street around the corner. Jos had made our reservations for the show and we took a taxi to get there. Destination Bassins de Lumieres or the WWII monstrous concrete structure, an indestructible submarine base the German occupier constructed on the Garonne river mouth about 6 km from the Atlantic, west of the city. The building is so impressive to be oppressive, made between September 1941 and summer 1943. It is a huge submarine hiding place consisting of eight bays more than 100m long, designed to hold up to 14 submarines. The dangerous labour was mostly done by POWs driven relentlessly by their tyrannical masters. The place was hell on earth, both for

the men who worked to the death as for more than sixty thousand victims on all the ships sunk on the Atlantic by submarines from this base. My hairs stood on end when we entered this ugly, cavernous building through enormous, soundproof, dark airlocks.

As you came through, the transition was overwhelming, a transition from hell into heaven. Grand space, colourful light on walls, ceilings and water-filled pools, wonderful music. You saw movement everywhere, sharp, colourful projections of beautiful art, transformed from stills to flowing movement, all of Gustav Klimt's oeuvre revealed, bathed in the sound of classical music by the great European composers including the Germans Bach and Beethoven. The contrast between the demonic history of this space and the heavenly transformation to beauty and joy moved me to tears. One could freely wander all over this place, seeing many perspectives, surprises, as one looked through wide openings from one bay to the next. Hundreds of projectors, perfectly synchronized, countless loudspeakers harmonized, an art-recreation without precedent and made possible by state of the art digital techniques in the hands of creative Italians Gianfranco Lannuzzi, Renato Gatto and Massimiliano Siccardi. In addition to the long cycle on Klimt there followed a short cycle on Paul Klee's work, equally imaginative and dynamic. It was a unique experience which came back in my dreams time and again. I wanted to go back in the autumn but Covid rules made that impossible. I believe there are more than a dozen locations in France alone where this work is performed. I feel sure that in years to come other artists like Van Gogh, Picasso and Monet will be brought alive by these techniques. Sorry, this story is exceeding its intended length so I must cut short our journey's report.

Several old colleagues in their nineties, good friends of Harry, died of old age -not Covid- , painful losses in spite of gratitude for their lives. Otherwise life in the next several months passed in the quality routine mode we adopted during the first Covid wave in the spring. At home, in the garden, in our town and region; lots to read, discuss, to weed and mow, to long for more freedom.

Restrictions were keenly felt when thirty people, mostly family members, a very few friends of the bride and groom, came to nearby castle Sandenburg -to the family highlight of the year- to celebrate the marriage of Ruben, Harry's second son, with AnneMarie. The couple lived together for ~4 years, time for vows and rings! In beautiful surroundings, with a radiantly happy couple, we shared their joy in a simple but stylish ceremony. There will be a photographer's URL soon to show how beautiful love shines through all restrictions.

Let me finish by mentioning that Kolya lives in Berlin and has an interesting job in an innovative startup company where he is learning all about big data and AI analysis. Larissa and Chris live only one metro stop from K in a fifth/sixth floor apartment which they have turned into a very attractive home. L works with a data set of hundreds of glaciers by refining models that can do back- and forecasting of their behaviour and fates, testing mathematical models with up to thirty years of 'ground truths' in the data, in order to understand the influence of climate change on these crucial sources of drinking water for hundreds of millions of people. For mental relaxation from arduous computing, Larissa the artist creates new work every week, work you can enjoy on the internet.

Renate was mentioned earlier in this tale. Finally me, I spent too much attention on brexit and on US politics. I am glad with both the November election results which pulled the great American nation away from disaster and the brexit deal signed this very day (30.12.2020) which spares our British friends from the worst. I sign off with eager anticipation of my vaccination...!

Harry

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