

St-Michielskerk, Gent
Zaterdag, 26 juni, 2010

Dear friends, colleagues,
Dear Isabelle, Veronique, Caroline and family,
Dear Patrick,
Dear Magda,

I'd like to say a few words on behalf of the lab. Please, allow me to do so in English. This is probably more appropriate given the vast number of international visitors, students, PhD, and other, that have enjoyed Magda's touch, many of which found a way to be here today.

Magda was our colleague for almost 25 years. For most of us, she was in the lab for as long as we know. But Magda, you were *so* much more than a colleague. As you probably know, Magda was a trained nurse and although she worked as a nurse only for a couple of years, she has never stopped being a nurse, that is, she has never stopped taking care of people. Caretaking was her nature. Because that was what you did, Magda. You cared about people, and you *took* care of people. Unrelenting. Colleagues, students, family, grandchildren, Patrick alike.

When I accepted to speak on behalf of my colleagues I asked everyone around for stories or memories that would typify what Magda had meant for them. I collected numerous stories but I couldn't hardly use any. All of these stories were so personal and intimate. Of course they were, I should have known. Because that is the whole point: Magda knew each of us on a personal level. Magda went for friendship, not collegiality. Magda *knew* when who had a tough period, or health problems, or anything. Part of it can be attributed to her legendary curiosity but there's more to it. She knew because we came to her and talked to her. Because we knew Magda would listen, would understand and help wherever she could.

Oh you have no idea the number of students and colleagues she helped in unimaginable different ways. Especially the foreign students, those who were here for longer periods without any family or relatives to fall back on. You would make sure they'd have a decent room, see landlords, look for better rooms, see more landlords, make sure they had what they need, get them furniture and household stuff, help them to feel home, and when they made it a little too much like home: see the angry landlords. You would take care if a student got sick, or depressed, or pregnant, or both. You would go to doctors with them, generalists, gynecologists, internalists, dermatologists, ... you name it. No wonder you were invariably considered as their Belgian mother. You took pride in it and cherished it. In return you earned lifelong gratefulness and friendship, or rather love, from an ever-growing number of your '*foreign children*' as you liked to call them. Well, that number has stopped growing now but I promise you that as long as we live, that number will never decrease. You have mothered so many of us through so many different hardships it will never be forgotten.

And on the other hand, Magda, you were also at the heart of the good cheer that is so typical for our lab. With your disarming straightforwardness, your sense of humor and slightly mocking smile, your comforting disrespect for authority, protocol or hierarchy, you made everyone feel at ease right from

the first time one would set foot in the lab. Let me describe you what would happen when someone would get to the lab for the first time. Typically, you would first be tested, probed and assessed by Magda. She would then decide whether she would like you or not. That testing period would generally take about... 2 ½ seconds after which you could either do nothing wrong ever after or else you better stay low and quietly accumulate bonus points and eventually she would come round. But you liked to make fun and numerous are the memories we have of the tricks you laid and the laughs we shared.

Matchmaking was another of your talents. You had a curious allergy for bachelors and you wouldn't rest before you had cured the occasional single colleague from his or hers aberration. Initially your allergy took the form of gentle teasing but if the bachelor persisted in his or her deviant behavior, you evolved to compassionate advise, followed by more or less discrete counseling up to downright matchmaking. Closely linked to this allergy was your deep concern for the worlds depopulation. In other words: the only good colleague was a reproducing colleague which lead you to gentle inquisitions that only stopped at pregnancy. Obviously this was nothing less than an expression of your immeasurable passion for mothering.

But of course, above all you were a mother to your daughters, a grandmother to your 11 grandchildren and a partner to Patrick. You're daughters and their extended family where your pride and joy. As our part-time secretary we perfectly knew what the remaining of your time was dedicated to. You had a strict scheme of grandchildren's visits and caretaking, supplemented with non-scheduled visits or emergency babysitting. The stories you spread in the lab showed how you loved and knew each of them through and through. You had no standard "grandmother" approach, on the contrary, you treated each individually according to their own temperament and personality. Although I barely met any of your grandchildren I really had the feeling that I knew them a little. Even in these last weeks, when it became increasingly clear that they would have to miss their grandma soon, you never ceased to put *their* feelings of distress first, gently preparing them for your departure. Even under these devastating circumstances you didn't allow your own pain and sorrow to stand in the way of the peace of mind of your grandchildren. What a truly remarkable, strong woman you were.

Finally, maybe your biggest talent lay in your unique relation with Patrick. For anyone who would know Patrick only professionally it must be a real mystery how someone could share her life with a person so dedicated to his work, travelling half of his time, and with a metabolic rate at least double of an average human being. Actually, it is only when you got to know them better that you could understand the exceptional bond Magda and Patrick had. Magda was not the sailor's wife type, knitting by the window in quiet resignation, waiting for the husband to come home. Not quite. Magda was in every way supportive of Patrick's career but she had her own agenda. In persistence and headstrongness they found their match. As the cliché goes: behind every strong man there is a strong woman. But in Magda and Patrick's case I'd rather say that they were side by side. They inspired and supported each other, carried by a love that grows stronger as years went by.

Also, in the lab, Magda was Patrick's antenna for all social affairs. Patrick is an excellent teamleader and an unmatched motivator. But thanks to Magda he stayed aware of occasional frictions between staff or colleagues' personal problems that called for some extra indulgence. Patrick may be a great teamleader but Magda enabled him to be a great but human teamleader.

The last couple of years Patrick and Magda took to go for a short trip together at least once a year. Italy a couple of times. Magda loved Italy. Scotland, Lissabon. When Magda got sick they still were able to go to Lourdes, an old dream of Magda. Their scheduled trip to Hungary never happened. We secretly were delighted to see Patrick somewhat cutting back on his working time at the benefit of some quality time with Magda. It is tempting to regret that they were not granted more time to do so but I'm sure Magda would not agree and argue that, on the contrary, they were lucky that they still had the chance to enjoy these couple of trips.

A few weeks ago, Patrick arranged on Magda's request, for the whole lab to pass by their home for lunch. After all she had been ripped away from the lab without warning and was eager to see us again while she still had the energy. It was a beautiful day and we sat around the table outside. None of us knew what to say and there was a moment of awkward silence. Once again Magda was ahead of us. "Tell me something funny, some happy story.", she asked, "My doctor prescribed me exclusively cheering news". Lucky enough we have some notorious clowns among our staff and the lunch turned to a pleasant visit. The goodbyes of course were emotional and silent. Only afterwards I realized what I had wanted to say to you, Magda. So I wrote an e-mail to Isabelle, Veronique and Caroline: "Please tell your mother that we will take care of Patrick as much as he allows us". All three returned me your reply. You said that you already knew we would, but that it comforted you to have it repeated. You also asked to pay attention to Patrick's health. And his clothing. Check for acceptable color combinations and occasional stains. That may be a tough one, we may want to pass this one to your daughters.

Whatever care we take, Magda, it will seem bleak and meaningless compared to your caretaking, but we promise to do our best. After all we were privileged to learn from the master. We were privileged to know you, Magda. A strong, warm, sparkling person. You meant so much to so many people, this will never be forgotten. You remain forever in our minds and hearts. Goodbye now, Magda. There's someone else to take care of you now.