

Remembering Heike Sperber

Staas de Jong, 22 June 2011, Leiden.

Heike was a student in the first full course I ever taught.

For her work, I gave her the highest grade possible.

She deserved it.

I seemed to recognize in her a certain kind of perfectionism, which I appreciated.

A perfectionism not driven by ambition in the common sense of the word.

A type of perfectionism, also, that can lead persons subject to it to pursue their interests in relative isolation.

This is not necessarily the result of a desired or even consciously made choice.

It may simply be the result of experience having taught how hard it is to explain to others why they, beyond putting in a certain level of effort and care, should continue to come along, further.

Why should they, indeed, when the persons in question may at times be hard pressed to fully explain and justify the necessity of their conviction; even to themselves.

Still, it is there.

Since that course, I had only had a few brief chats with Heike, but I was very much looking forward to seeing more of her and of her work.

But then, last week, there was a phone call with horrible news.

Personally, I am not one who would second-guess or judge what has happened.

One reason for this is knowing so very little of what actually happened.

And another reason is that in a sense I am not sure I could ever know enough.

It seems that, at least to some extent, we live our lives as individual islands of feeling and consciousness.

Ultimately, we cannot switch experiences, nor can we put everything we experience into the words we share.

Who is to say what someone may have been through?

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How I wish that Heike would somehow have found something  
that would have turned things around for her  
and made them better.

As when, at a time in our life when everything is to us as an endless fall through smoke and mirrors,  
we finally, suddenly, feel a leap of faith happen again.

Perhaps when doing something for someone else;  
perhaps when allowing them to do something for us;  
perhaps when simply being together.

Somehow, we regain some trust in the world of which we are part;  
the confidence, consolation and hope of something real.

Somehow we again start to feel that this is not an alien place;  
that not everything is smoke and mirrors;  
that yes, love is real;  
that it indeed has brought us through the ages.  
And that *we can find it too*, here and now, in all that is unknowable, and other, around us;  
not just around us, but near us;  
very near.

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From now on, when people will search Heike's name, it will bring the memory of deep tragedy.

I hope it will also bring the memory of a person much valued by those around her  
and much missed by those she left behind.

I would like to extend my heartfelt condolences to everyone in this room who feels close to Heike.

Dearest Heike, farewell.