

Annelieke Damen, PhD student, introduces professor and honorary doctor George Fitchett Dies Natalis, University of Humanistic Studies, 29 January 2019

PIONEER

Welcome/Dear George, and also a warm welcome to your wife Judy,

It is with great pleasure that I witness the awarding of the honorary doctorate of the University of Humanistic Studies to you. Congratulations! You more than deserve it, looking at your extensive forty-year long career dedicated to chaplaincy, in Dutch: ‘geestelijk verzorging’.

You’ve started as a chaplain student, became a chaplain, a chaplain educator, and in the last decades one of the pioneers of chaplaincy research.

As your PhD student I have the honor of telling the audience a little bit about you. Hereafter, Carlo Leget will speak about your academic achievements, but I would like to focus for a moment on the man behind the science.

George and I met on a cold February morning in Chicago, almost exactly two years ago. Some months earlier I had had the idea of visiting some chaplain researchers in the United States to learn about chaplaincy research. Carlo Leget immediately told me: in that case you have to visit George. I wasn’t particularly keen on moving to Chicago for some months, due to negative stereotypes about the city. And I have to confess that I had to look Chicago up on the map. It was a cold and snowy day that day in ‘the Windy City’. But then a friendly tall man warmly welcomed me into his office and invited me to sit down at the round table between the bookcases. And while I grew fond of the city, George opened up the fascinating world of chaplaincy research for me.

I already described George as a pioneer in chaplaincy research. This word, PIONEER, suits him well. It is a common thread in my memories of him, and when I think of his personality.

For example, when I think of the big Canadian silver metallic canoe in George’s parking garage. George would tie this canoe on the top of his car and drive to one of the rivers in the Chicago area. There he would unload the canoe and embark on the rivers, following as a history lover the pursuits of the French pioneers and furtraders of the 17th century.

Another moment that comes to mind, has to do with maple sirup. I grew up with the Little House on the Prairie book series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. You might know the books; they narrate about Laura’s life as the daughter of American pioneers. In one of the books Laura writes with much detail about the tapping of maple sirup. When I told George about this childhood memory, he invited me to the annual maple sirup event. With Judy, their children and grandchildren we drove outside the city to the maple wood trees in the tall prairie grass. Warmed up by a hot chocolate against the cold, we learned about the cutting of the tapping spout and tasted the tree sap. Which actually just tastes like water and needs to be boiled down at least 40 times to thicken into the actual maple sirup we know.

A third memory that comes to mind is a gift he gave to my family when they visited the United States. It was a book about the Dutch pioneers who founded New York. George’s ancestors came to New Amsterdam from the Netherlands in the 1600’s, his grandfather was called Van Brunt. George grew up in New York and can tell you a lot about the Dutch history of the city.

A pioneer has an inquiring mind, he tries to push back boundaries and roams undiscovered areas. George dared to walk untrodden paths in chaplaincy: namely research, something that in the 1990's seemed contradictory to the profession itself. He especially dared to ask the question if not only qualitative research, but also quantitative research would result in valuable outcomes for chaplaincy. In my quantitative PhD-research project about the outcomes of chaplaincy, he teaches me to ask that question. Thank you for this George, I hope we can pioneer together in the coming years for the sake of this wonderful profession that we practice. And that I as a researcher, can inherit some of your precision, perseverance and patience in research.

Again: congratulations on your honorary doctorate!