Artikel in de Hindustan Times, door Harsh Mander,

in herinnering aan Ferd Koolwijk

I have lost another dear friend to cancer. In a small Dutch town Driebergen on an overcast autumn afternoon in November, I joined a large crowd of mourners as they lowered his body into the ground in a church cemetery amidst falling leaves. The story of the bond which grew between

Ferdinand van Koolwijk, Dutch business and development consultant not just with me, but with a few thousand of India’s most disadvantaged children, is unlikely. The tale begins some 28 years ago, when his wife Loes, a nurse, and he heard in a church of a little baby dying in an orphanage in Karachi because of a congenital heart defect. They spontaneously decided to adopt the baby to save her life, and flew to Pakistan, returning home a week later with her bundled in their arms.

She survived, and grew into a healthy, happy child, until a brain tumour in her teens suddenly impaired her sight and hearing. Her parents were devastated, but helped their precious little girl grow strong and self-reliant despite her multiple disabilities. Ferd did not allow his suffering to turn inwards, festering into bitterness and anger. Instead, he turned it outwards as compassion, resolving to establish 50 homes for orphaned and homeless street girls so they would not have to suffer the hunger and neglect that his daughter had lived with in the early months of her life. Since it was difficult to work in Pakistan, he decided to build these street girl homes in India, a country with which he had had no association until then.

Ferd established the Partnership Foundation, dedicated to realising his dream, and looked mainly for high net-worth individuals, inviting them each to commit support for many years for a street girls’ home for 100 children in India. He first located Sister Cyril in Loretto Convent, Sealdah, who had made the radical resolve to open her elite girls’ school for homeless street girls, assuring them safety, food, education and love. She was looking for money to support her work. Ferd helped her take care ultimately of 700 street girls in five schools, in a unique model in which day schools were refurbished to create residential spaces for homeless children. They called these ‘rainbow homes’, where children who had families and homes studied, played and made friends with girls who had none.

When Sister Cyril could expand no further, he began a search for another partner in India. He did his research, and found me. With some friends we had by then, in 2006, established Aman Biradari, envisaged as a movement for justice, peace and caring, and we had resolved one of its tasks would be to work with homeless children. Ferd and I met memorably for breakfast in a hotel in Delhi, and a friendship took seed which flourished until his death, and beyond. When he left the world, he had helped establish 30 ‘rainbow homes’, and there were 15 more created with other resources, with around 3,500 street children in six cities.

There was little that gave him more joy than meeting the rainbow children, which he did as often as money permitted. During one such visit over a year ago, he complained of nagging stomach pain. Back in Holland, doctors told him that he had colon cancer. His subsequent surgery and many painful rounds of chemotherapy still did not vanquish his spirits. He emailed me that when he was well again, we should take the rainbow model to other countries. Bangladesh, he suggested, and maybe South Africa.

April this year his doctors advised another surgery. But they sewed him almost as soon as they opened him up. There was no point, they told him. His cancer had spread too far. He had no option except to await his death. I went to Holland to see him a month later. It was too early for him to go, he told me. There was too much work to be done.

As his body failed him, he devoted himself to strengthening the Partnership Foundation, so that the work with homeless girls in India and elsewhere would not end. He also planned life without him for his wife and feisty daughter, now married and a mother. His final weeks were particularly painful. In his last email to me, a week before he died, he wrote that he was reading my book Ash in the Belly, “It is incredible”, he wrote, “in what circumstances poor people live, try to survive and especially the role that food plays as a day to day tormentor. I cannot find the words to express my compassion to all those people mentioned in the book, it is horrific that these lives are still called a ‘life’”. He added, “Perhaps it is the painkilling stuff, but my thoughts wandered to a next life — sorry, I am aware of your views on this topic — where you and I joined hands to initiate an even larger worldwide social movement…(which) will be needed as long as there are people on the roads as the ones you describe”.

His demise leaves me with too many questions, impossible to answer, about why a man of such goodness had to suffer so much and leave so early. But also why it took a Dutch man to dream of an India in which no child has to sleep hungry and uncared for under the open sky? Why not an Indian person of wealth, one who sees these children on city pavements every night returning from work or a party? Unlike Ferd, why are we able to look and just turn our faces away?

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The views expressed by the author are personal

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/comment/analysis/children-at-the-rainbow-s-end/article1-1165795.aspx>