These are times of *meeleven*

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Though I've been living in Canada for a bit more than four years, after living in the Netherlands for a bit less than 20, I keep reaching for words in Dutch. This surprises me because, apart from my North Brabant-born dog, I have no Dutch family. And although I began learning the language within my first months as a grad student in Amsterdam, I never had to use it regularly; my study programs welcomed internationals, and employers hired me specifically because I'm a native English speaker.

Yet, here in Midtown Toronto—where I'm camouflaged among many native English speakers and surrounded by neighbors whose first languages are Ukrainian, Brazilian Portuguese, Hindi, or Tagalog—sometimes Dutch is what first comes to mind.

For the record, these words are not fixtures on those impossible-to-translate lists, such as *gezellig*. Nor are they globally circulating institutions of Dutch culture preserved in their source language, like the stroopwafel. Most are mundane nouns and verbs that simply feel more precise in Dutch than English.

One I've been conjuring a lot lately is *meeleven*. It means "to empathize." Usually, it comes up in Dutch conversations around hardships. Occasionally, it's invoked when sharing in others' happiness.

For beginners, this is a tricky separable verb. When conjugated, the prefix *mee-* (meaning "with" or "along") gets split from the root *leven* (meaning "to live") and moved toward the end of the phrase. To extend empathy to someone you're addressing, you would say, *"Ik leef met je mee."*

Literally translated, that becomes: "I'm living with you."

This is what puts *meeleven* in an expressive category of its own. The combination of multivalent morphemes makes the word expansive enough to convey close—co-habitationally close—proximity to what another person is going through but without overshadowing or overidentifying with it.

By contrast, the focus in "I'm sorry"—for which Canadians are both famous and infamous—boomerangs to the speaker, whose pain carries the emotion. "I feel for you" is less solipsistic sounding, though it still creates distance, since the emoting is for, rather than with, someone.

I remember when I first learned about *meeleven*. It was February 17th 2012, shortly after a Dutch teacher suggested I improve my listening skills by watching the *NOS Jeugdjournaal*. The public broadcaster's evening news show for children had a leading story on Prince Friso, King Willem-Alexander's brother, who had been injured in an avalanche skiing off-piste in Austria. His condition was critical, and the vox pop interviewees consistently replied with variations of *"Ik leef met de familie mee."*

Their message was concern for Friso and care about the well-being of those close to him; I got that. However, I couldn't help but also hear these elementary schoolkids saying, "I'm living with the family." The idea evoked by that literal interpretation moved me, even if—or perhaps especially because—the logistics regulating the Royals render them one of the least accessible families in the entire Dutch population.

Today, there's no shortage of news events to provoke feelings that run deeper than the notion of sympathy often captures. Or things hit so close to home that they demand something longer than a single dose of empathy. These are times of *meeleven*.

A decade after that episode of the *Jeugdjournaal*, I moved to Toronto. It was February 2022, when masses of people began fleeing Ukraine. Weeks later, returning from a trip, I stood in an immigration line at Pearson International Airport with several Ukrainian passport holders seeming tense and weary. That felt like an intimate experience of meeleven with a global crisis.

Since then, their compatriots and I have had brighter moments of living alongside each other, such as when my neighbors doled out candy to my trick-or-treating nephews and I was a customer at their daughters' lemonade stand. A feisty terrier from Ukraine is now one of my dog's fellow European friends in the neighborhood.

The other day I was on a video call with my sister. She was visiting our brother, diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's. The hardest manifestation of the disease so far has been aphasia, his loss of ability to communicate. As my sister and I talked from our respective countries, I found myself wishing I could be there in person.

Ending our call, I said I'd be thinking of them and—hesitating to add such a mouthful last minute—told her to know that, as the Dutch would say, "I'm living with you. *Ik leef met je mee.*" Following a pause, she responded. The expression had touched her, and she wondered if for an upcoming birthday I could make flashcards of that phrase along with other Dutch words I've mentioned over the years. She never lived in the Netherlands but wants to remember them too.



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