Gefeliciteerd's power

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Some Dutch words that arise in my majority-Anglophone brain do so because they're more efficient than their English counterparts. Invoking the single noun of *meevaller*, I can blurt out that something has proven better than expected. Deploying *uitbuiken*, I name the process of relaxing into digestion by going from dining table to couch with, as the verb literally translates, "belly out."

Most of the Dutch that piggybacked on my emigration from Amsterdam to Toronto offers this kind of lexical-level elegance. Some words, however, do more by semantically expanding how I even think about the concepts they signify.

When two cousins from two branches of my family across two countries recently had birthdays, one expression lit up my mind in marquee letters.

The first celebrant was the wife of my partner's cousin once removed. Degrees of separation notwithstanding, I feel wholehearted affection for her and on her birthday sent an emoji-ful message, which she warmly acknowledged. But less than an hour later, when her husband texted me about another subject, I found myself citing the Dutch habit of congratulating someone not just for the occasion of their own birthday, but also for their loved ones' birthdays. Accordingly, I ended our exchange with "*gefeliciteerd*!"

At its most literal, *gefeliciteerd* means "congratulated" or—leaning into its Latin etymology—"made happy." As a past participle, the birthday greeting inherently conveys retrospection, reflecting the reality that the now-older individual lived through many days, at least 364, to receive their present-day laurels.

Although I'd been living in the same city as this Canadian couple since moving in 2022, it never felt more pressing to cheer them on. Their prior year was volatile—from the loss of her mother, long ill and painfully missed, to the arrival of their first child, an easy baby after a not-so-easy birth. And it was impossible to overlook how our indefatigably good-natured cousin played a role in his wife's resilience.

Absorbing this Dutch habit began a decade before at a quintessentially Dutch institution. When de Wereldomroep, known in English as Radio Netherlands Worldwide, hired me as a freelance web editor, the public broadcaster's multilingual services were ending, and its media operations shifted to fulfill a new mission. While 1947's founding aim was to provide news from the Netherlands to international audiences and Dutch citizens abroad, by 2012, the organization's budget was cut by seventy percent, and most staff lost their jobs. The workplace transition into becoming a digital-first social development-focused NGO was tumultuous, yet throughout my two years there, one everyday practice stayed steady.

Typically before 11 AM, a mass email would announce the presence of birthday cake and beckon everyone to its source. Before long, people would stream by, holding small plates heavy with custard-forward pastry and stalagmites of *slagroom* (whipped cream). This was prime time to hear the formal birthday-specifying phrase of "*gefeliciteerd met je verjaardag!*" It was also the setting in which I fully experienced the performative effect of congratulations-by-association. Around 5 PM, colleagues' wishes to one another for a birthday celebrant they were on their way home to fête was one thing. But when someone from another department congratulated me for the birthday of someone from my own department, I got recognition I didn't know was due.

Gefeliciteerd's power was in attesting to collegial relationships that went beyond our desk proximity or bonding through too many polder-modelled meetings. Yes, we belonged to the same department, but more vitally, our daily interactions created felicitous conditions for interbelonging—the understanding that survival depends on those around us.

Last month, my attention turned southward. In an email postscript, my uncle in Pennsylvania noted that exactly forty years ago his son "was partially born over the Delaware River, with the other half of him being born under the Phillipsburg, New Jersey, tollbooth."

I recalled this origin story so dramatic it merited an article in the local newspaper. My cousin's first breaths were taken in a hospital-bound van driven by a bridge maintenance worker who, near an interstate tollbooth, grabbed the wheel so my uncle could join my aunt in the backseat and deliver their youngest child. Replying to the email, I had to extend congratulations as well as ask: Was there ever any follow-up with that day's bystanders? The response: "We haven't spoken to them. YET!"

My imagination fast-forwarded to my cousin's next milestone party. Could the bridge maintenance worker, tollbooth operator, hospital employees, and journalist who covered the story all be invited? Would they accept congratulations for their unequivocal contributions to the emergence of someone who eventually became a loving son, husband, and father, not to mention a hard-working lawyer and diehard Eagles fan?

On first moving to Amsterdam, I frequently heard the Dutch capital referred to as a global village. A twenty-minute train ride away in Hilversum, de Wereldomroep corroborated this: people from a record-high number of countries espoused a fiercely cosmopolitan outlook, speaking multiple languages and broadcasting their desire to connect with the world. Yet, these same people were quick to honour their most local of connections, bestowing on each other the sense of interbelonging along with generous slices of *vlaai* (pie).

Canadian and American relatives reminded me that using one word, albeit five syllables and starting with that notoriously guttural G sound, the Dutch recognize it takes a village—not just to raise a child, but to raise each other up, each day and year after year.