

Le mur des je t'aime

Beloved person,

Last week I visited Paris. Under a soft spring sun, I was on my way to the Sacré-Coeur, winding through the charming streets of Montmartre. On a small square, I unexpectedly walked past a wall that slowed my pace. It turned out to be *Le mur des je t'aime*, the wall of 'I love you'. In front of me appeared a dark blue tiled wall, with hundreds of white letters in graceful handwriting, on which was written 311 times, in more than 250 languages and dialects: *I love you*. It was as if the whole world, in all its differences, spoke together in that one sentence. It touched me. Not only because of what was written, but because of what was meant. Because who doesn't long to hear those words?

The strange thing was that I instinctively went looking for the Dutch 'I love you'. Then I searched for translations that I knew; German, Frisian, English, South African... I had to find recognisable language in the midst of all those signs that were unknown to me. But in the end, what touched me the most were the very words I didn't understand, because they too were love. This sentence is spoken all over the world. Apparently, that is within the human being: the need to speak love, to hear it, to give it. It did me good. In an turbulent world where so much separates us, this gave me a sense of trust: that love, no matter how differently it is worded, connects us all.

The words 'I love you' are more than a declaration of love. They are an anchor. They give language to the feeling that you are acknowledged, that you matter, that you can know that you are loved. Words that appeal to exactly that desire that lives in every person: to know you are connected and are able to trust it. How essential that is, often only becomes apparent when it is lacking. When love is not spoken (anymore). When closeness is not (or no longer) felt.

The first experiences of love and closeness – often already in our childhood - determine how safe we later feel when in contact with others. When a child is acknowledged, heard, and surrounded with trustworthiness, an inner compass grows that says, "I am worthy of love." From that secure attachment arises trust; in the other, in yourself, in life. But if that foundation was not there, or is shaky, or has ever been violated, it can be difficult to allow that closeness. Then we withdraw, or cling. And that is precisely why it is so precious that we help each other to find trust again. By being reliable. By truly being present. By repeating that one sentence: *you are loved*.

I believe that we are called on to do so. With our highest talent. In bringing to life words that would otherwise remain on walls. 'I love you' must always be given a voice which then translates into how we live: in encouraging looks, in outstretched hands, in listening without judgment, in caring for our earth... Even science underlines the impact of this: research shows that loving environments leave traces in the functioning of our genes which can even continue to work through generations.

That is why I feel it is an honour to start this letter with the words *Beloved person*. My favourite two words. Not as a pattern or a formula, but as an essential recognition. Because you are loved. Not only when you achieve something, not only when you have everything in order, but because you are human. Because you are alive. And especially when it is quiet around you, or when love is difficult to receive, it is all the more important to keep saying it: to each other, to ourselves and in everything we do: *you are loved*.

With a warm-hearted greeting,

Brother Marten van der Wal



We remember those who left a trail of love