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*Organised by De Nieuwe Liefde [www.denieuweliefde.com](http://www.denieuweliefde.com)*

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## **Ton Veerkamp’s Biblical Theology Applied in Practice**

**elke vandepierre**

‘Ton Veerkamp’s Biblical Theology Applied in Practice.’ This is to be my topic for the next 30 minutes. I must confess that I find it a very challenging assignment, not least because I feel a bit like an outsider in this company, being neither a theologian nor a biblical scholar. Although I have been supervising lehrhäuser for 20 years now, I am an emancipatory educator.

Above all, however, it is a challenging assignment because the ‘biblical theology’ of Ton Veerkamp has become second nature to me. Over the years, Ton’s ideas have become so intertwined with insights of critical pedagogy, with the narratives and experiences of those participating in our education programmes, and have also been coloured by my own thoughts and experiences, that I cannot simply set this second nature aside and view the subject from a distance. It feels like self-dissection. Moreover, the areas of application of Ton’s approach are so diverse – from ‘LEHRHAUS’ to educational work within trade unions – that I could easily fill an entire week with practical examples.

Given that my time is limited, I will try to outline the whole in a slightly anecdotal way.

My account is based on key insights that I have obtained thanks to Ton and that determine our educational work at Motief each day. I will use a few ‘small stories’ that I feel say something about our shared Grand Narrative precisely because ‘learning by telling stories’ is at the core of our identity and is perhaps also one of our strongest weapons in the battle for a liberated society in which THE NAME rules.

For the sake of clarity, my account is structured in four parts:

1. Regarding ideology production: ‘If only I had become a shoemaker...’
2. Stories as codifications: the parable of the swimming pool
3. The decoding of a dominant ideology: ‘Anna-Lies has a problem’
4. The reinvention and incarnation of a liberating ideology

**I must briefly turn to the title of this speech before proceeding.** Obedient as I am, I adopted the title from the organisers in unaltered form. Nevertheless, I have some difficulty with it. I feel that it reverses reality by suggesting that there is a theology that one can practise, whereas of course the opposite is the case. There were practices, and reflections on those practices, from which a frame of reference arose. An exodus story grew from the prior experience of oppression and efforts to free people from this oppression. This development was in turn followed by all kinds of interpretations of that exodus story. In my view, the next step is not about applying one of those interpretations in practice. I feel that the next step is for people to incarnate these stories and points of view and themselves become a new story that, hopefully, God only knows, proves to be life-giving for future generations.

To be honest, I have never thought about how I might apply Ton’s biblical theology in practice. I was deeply moved and influenced by an *attitude* that Veerkamp adopted as a political theologian in his reality. An attitude that led me to discover how much creative power there can be in rage. An attitude that caused a personal paradigm shift and made me suspicious of the class into which I had been born. An attitude that simply gave me grandparents I never met and gives me children I did not bear. Veerkamp awakened a desire in me to listen to the ‘crushed silence’, that Voice that is silenced each day but is begging to be heard. In the chaos that is our world, he offered me and my organisation a roadmap, a compass and a driving force.

In other words, I have ‘gelernt’ from Ton. Which is not something I can say about all the teachers I have had. I internalised his reflections, and that process gave rise to an attitude and a way of doing things in practice. I suspect that the same applies to many who are here today. As to whether the results can be defined as the ‘application of Ton’s biblical theology’ ...? I wouldn’t put it like that. They can perhaps more accurately be described as Midrashim on Ton’s testimony.

## 1. Regarding ideology production: 'If only I had become a shoemaker...'

My first introduction to Ton Veerkamp's theology was an IKON documentary broadcast in 1984 in which Ton explained, his view of the Sermon on the Mount. Around eight years after the documentary was made, I was then 19, I saw it as a participant at my first LEHRHAUS, which was supervised by Remi Verwimp. At a previous meeting, as a homework assignment, Remi had asked us to rewrite the Beatitudes based on our own contexts. For reasons that will soon become clear to you, I did not keep my completed assignment, but I still more or less remember its tendency.

At the time, I considered myself eminently qualified to write a modern version of the Beatitudes: I had just started my studies in philosophy. I was earning a modest income by working as a freelance journalist in my free time. A critical mind in formation and a sharp pen: what could *possibly* go wrong? I had set out all my newly acquired insights from my textbook on ethics and had so overloaded my text with philanthropy that I probably could have won a Miss Universe title. I proclaimed my personal Beatitudes in the group with dramatic earnestness before accepting the compliments of my fellow participants with appropriate modesty. I also remember the sense of shame that I felt when another participant, a retired shoemaker, read out his version. The man had failed to understand a thing and was clearly stuck in a literal reading: one who is 'poor in spirit', I concluded.

In any case, the meeting in which we had presented our rewritten Beatitudes to each other was followed by the one in which we watched the documentary featuring Ton. It was, to put it mildly, a rather sobering experience for me. Ton started by immediately emphasising that the Sermon on the Mount was *not* about a universal ethic that would apply for everyone throughout the world at all times. Matthew had not written a philosophical treatise. He had also *not written* a plea for pacifism. That's what Ton said. And I was thinking: Sh###! There goes my chance at winning the Miss Universe title.

Ton went on to state that the 'poor in spirit' -referred to by Matthew (Matthew 5:3)- should not be interpreted in a 'spiritual' sense. This expression had to be understood, rather, in terms of the author's idiom. The prophet Isaiah could clarify that idiom: it concerned people who were so poor that material poverty had wrought destruction *even* in their spirits. Yes indeed. And there went my sense of superiority with respect to the retired shoemaker.

Finally, Ton placed the text in the specific political context in which it had been written, probably around 80 AD and in any case not that long after the capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the all-powerful Roman Empire. Ton explained 'Do not resist an evildoer' (Matthew 5:39) using an image that still comes to my mind today when I am trying to explain the impact of the Jewish defeat in a LEHRHAUS. Ton expressed it more or less as follows: 'The power relationship must have been like the one in extermination camps during the Second World War: recall the image of Carl von Ossietzky, a weakened and defenceless Jewish prisoner, opposite a tall, heavily built Nazi with a neck like a bull.... If *that* is the hierarchy, resistance in that specific context would simply mean suicide.' Ton's statement cured me at once of my fundamental pacifism and, by extension, of my bourgeois reading.

What I learned above all while watching that documentary with Ton, was the following:

- My studies in philosophy did not guarantee wisdom, clearly, and the profession of shoemaker perhaps provided an even better way of understanding ancient biblical texts.
- Each story, however subversive in nature it is originally, that is read in a '**narrative culture that confirms the system**' can be rendered harmless, *even* stories that form part of the Great Story of the Israel project.
- It is important to be aware of the existence of different narrative cultures. There are narrative cultures in which people learn to **understand** why society is as it is. There are also narrative cultures that teach people how to formulate **problems**:

Why is our society not the society that we would like it to be?

On the one hand, there are narrative cultures that **banish** real oppositions from reality and, on the other, there are narrative cultures that **reveal and criticize** existing oppositions. In other words, in terms of effect, there are narrative cultures that confirm the system and there are narrative cultures that change the system.

(PowerPoint slide:)

Narrative cultures that <b>CONFIRM THE SYSTEM</b>	Narrative cultures that <b>CRITICIZE THE SYSTEM</b>
Learning to <b>understand</b> reality	Learning to <b>formulate problems</b> with respect to reality
<b>Existing relationships</b> and real oppositions are covered or <b>legitimised</b>	<b>Existing relationships</b> and real oppositions are <b>criticised</b>
<b>Interest of those in power</b> as the perspective and	<b>Interest of the powerless, minorities, the weakest</b>

focus	<b>and so on</b> as the perspective and focus
Serves and acts to confirm the system	Serves and acts to change the system

Israel's Grand Narrative came into existence within a narrative culture that criticizes the system. This does not intrinsically mean, however, that the stories of this tradition are also *read* within a narrative culture that criticizes the system. Veerkamp made this very clear to me with respect to my Miss Universe interpretation of the Beatitudes.

Different interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount are therefore possible. I set it out here in somewhat black-and-white terms:

Narrative culture that CONFIRMS THE SYSTEM	Narrative culture that CRITICISES THE SYSTEM
The <b>poor in spirit</b> are bunglers but we must do our best to be nice to them and help them.	We wish to promise the future to the poor.
In <b>conflicts</b> , rather than resorting to violence, one must be a gentle lamb in order to prove one's moral superiority over one's opponent.	Current Roman supremacy means that armed resistance is not an option.
Do not <b>resist</b> powers. Always opt for pacifist strategies.	Within the given context, opt for the right resistance strategy that takes <b>power relationships</b> into account.

Based on these considerations, I have drawn the following conclusions over the years for my work as an educator.

For me, the first priority is *not* to convey the *content* of the Grand Narrative of the Israel project to groups of people. As an emancipatory educator, the most important thing to me is for people to learn to internalise a narrative culture that criticises the system. 'Resurrection' cannot be taught, one can only teach people to doubt the death imposed on them. In addition, form *is* content. An emancipatory project will therefore only remain viable if it is introduced into a new context in an emancipatory way. The method you use must serve the message.

For me, it is about people asking, regardless of the story that they are considering (from the Bible, a newspaper or a political party programme), the following questions, which I refer to as 'Contextual questions':

- **Who is speaking?** From what position and in what context is the speaker speaking?
- **Who is being spoken to?** What are the identities and social and economic positions of the people being addressed?
- **In which social debate** must we place the viewpoint that is being formulated? What social tensions and conflicting interests play a part in this debate?
- How is justice or injustice being done to the **weakest**, to minorities, the most vulnerable and so on? Are **their interests** the main focus or not?
- **What practice/strategy** is being put forward and does this practice or strategy serve to **confirm** the system or **change** the system? In other words, is it in the interest of those in power or in the interest of the powerless?
- And finally, **how do I and we as a group relate to the author's viewpoint?** From which position and in what context do we do so?

These questions do not automatically lead to a classless society characterised by autonomy and equality. Nevertheless, these questions strengthen a political attitude. In my view, repoliticising individuals is not a bad start to evolving towards a society as dreamt of by THE NAME.

## 2. Regarding stories as codifications: the parable of the swimming pool

The subtitle of Ton Veerkamp's book suggests both *the need* for a Grand Narrative and *the absence* of one in today's world. 'A society that can only view human relations as relations between competing individuals and in which freedom is essentially the freedom to accumulate personal wealth, -such a society **does not** have a Grand Narrative. A society of unrestricted free trade does not offer people a place to live, it makes them homeless,' writes Ton in the book that is presented today.

Although postmodern philosophers may claim that great discourses like those of the Jewish tradition or the labour movement have ended, *one discourse* is very much alive today, namely the great discourse of neoliberalism; or -as you wish-: the monotheism of the free market. We may find it a worthless story, but it is one that assigns to each of us our place in society, it tells us how we should behave and relate to each other, and it tells us what our goal in life should be. Even if it is only a small minority that consciously and enthusiastically professes the neoliberal story, each one of us forms part of it -if you want to or not. We live in it, even if it is not a habitable home. We get lost in it, but it

remains our landscape. We serve it, even if it is abhorrent to us. It is a Great Story disguised as 'No Story'.

Clearly, one cannot resist an invisible and intangible enemy. The first step in organising opposition must therefore be to give a face to that which is oppressing us and keeping us in slavery today. A good pair of reading glasses is required for the purpose. Fortunately we have such a pair. In his book *Der Gott der Liberalen* ('The God of the Liberals'), Ton comprehensively illustrated how we, standing in the prophetic narrative tradition of the Israel project, have been given pointers as to how to expose Baal, how one can learn to recognise his mechanisms of enslavement and siren song. Much thought has been given to this subject in our tradition in both theoretical and practical terms, through actual trial and error and by reflecting on why one attempt at resistance failed while another was more effective.

The 'openness' and stratification of a story provide access to deeper learning. A story takes a person seriously in all of his or her dimensions: in our reason and emotion, in our histories and dreams for the future, in our autonomy and in our dependence. In my view, the Midrash nature of the Jewish Grand Narrative, with its small, fragile life stories as a starting point and its pedagogy that encourages a continuous search for new meanings and practices in new contexts, is precisely what makes our tradition so strong. I continue to consider **exactly this** to be of tremendous added value with respect to our socialist allies, who are capable of using a Marxist framework of analysis, and who therefore ask similar questions about the world that surrounds us, but who often lack a pedagogy that forces them to always start their analysis with the concrete, daily experiences of the downtrodden.

Influenced by Tontextual theology, we at Motief feel challenged to 'reload' the parable, that dangerous weapon of our tradition, for the purpose of more clearly crystallising the dominant Grand Discourse of our time. This moved, for example, to write the following contemporary parable:

*Living in neoliberal times is like unto a woman whose skin was always irritated after a visit to the swimming pool. The itchiness was unbearable and she was worried about the scars left by the scratching. She visited a physician, who prescribed a salve that had to be applied before and after swimming. The itchiness disappeared like snow in summer -but, after a number of visits to the swimming pool, the woman again began to experience discomfort, this time in the form of asthma attacks. The physician prescribed an inhaler that had to be used before and after swimming, even during the swimming session if necessary.*

*The asthma attacks decreased. One day, however, the woman started experiencing symptoms of paralysis while swimming: her arms suddenly felt very heavy and her legs refused to kick. While slowly descending into the depths, she saw the legs of other swimmers passing by in slow motion. They were all bright red and irritated. When she had reached the bottom of the swimming pool, her consciousness gradually diminishing, she saw a rescuer approach. He carried a sign with him. Just before everything faded to black, the woman managed to decipher the words on the sign: 'If you are here, there is something wrong with your swimming technique.' And in tiny print underneath: 'The swimming pool is not liable for accidents that may occur.'*

This parable is what Paulo Freire calls a codification<sup>1</sup>. Using a single image – a cartoon or a photograph, for example, or in this case a resemblance – a codification evokes a recognisable situation from everyday reality that prompts learners to look at their own reality in a new way, it makes them ask new questions and discover connections that they had not seen before; It is an instrument that creates distance from an everyday situation in which we are at risk of drowning and thereby enables us to analyse the situation more clearly and exactly.

Precisely because our prophetic narrative culture always proceeds from the concrete to the general, the Scriptures are full of useful 'codification stories' that can help groups of people learn to see connections between dynamics in one's own everyday life and the broader context.

The swimming pool parable was written after carefully listening to professionals and volunteers who perform a very wide range of work in the non-profit sector and for whom we organise training courses. From education to care for the elderly, from work with youth to work with refugees, and from combating poverty to trade union work, we always heard the same complaints: we no longer perform our core tasks, namely protecting and standing up for the fundamental rights of the people with whom we work and achieving a better quality of life for them. All spoke of the absence of a shared vision within their own organisations, an acute lack of long-term thinking, an absurd increase in administration, they spoke about discouragement and burnouts.

During a symposium titled 'Freeing the caged consciousness', we used these laments to analyse how the neoliberal

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<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

story is affecting those who are working to emancipate. We took the lamentations of these professionals and used them as a starting point to analyse what exactly was paralysing them. We departed from stories and questions, not theories and answers. Questions that emerged included: Why do we all seem to be suffering from the same kind of 'itch' or irritation at the present time? Is the irritation the result of my own sensitive skin or, given that we *all* seem to be suffering from it, is it caused by the water in which we are swimming? What is causing the toxicity of our swimming pool water? What do all our experiences of reality say about the context in which we operate and about our political and economic system? What might be a better strategy to deal with the cause of our problem? If it is not possible to stop swimming, how can we at least learn to swim against the current - each of us within our own organisation, but above all: together?

Many organisations felt triggered by the questions this parable raised. Some organisations stated that the parable generated a considerable amount of discussion among colleagues and in their management boards; discussions that had not taken place for years. The training and education staff of the two largest trade unions, the Christian and the socialist, asked us to help them with the modernisation of their politicising education. I will say more on that shortly.

Because of the willingness to listen created by the parable, Motief looked for partners in civil society to maintain the momentum, and we subsequently organised 'hearings' among professionals in the non-profit sector. And so we compiled more experiences resulting from the concrete impact of neoliberal market logic and a management culture in which productivity, professionalisation and efficiency are the cardinal priorities. The social workers described a tendency to hold the most vulnerable citizens personally responsible for their social 'failure' and to set these citizens against each other as competitors, and in which the social workers were in danger of confirming the idea of blaming the victim in their working practice. These social workers said that, in order not to risk losing their subsidies, they are increasingly having to fulfil the role of 'subcontractors of a right-wing policy'. The sense of indignation was amplified by the mutual recognition of each other's experiences.

Based on the experiences shared, we drew up a 'Strengthen the Politicising Power of Civil Society' manifesto. This manifesto could be signed by social organisations and social workers provided they were prepared to play an active part in a collective process of change. To date, 40 organisations and 180 workers have signed their commitment. There's no time to further elaborate on this. But, the point that I am trying to make is that with the expertise we have acquired in tontextual reading, we can start a *broad* political movement today, also with people who have never leafed through a Bible and will perhaps never do so in their lives. What is essential for us to do today is: in the many places where we cannot immediately convey and further develop the *content* of our Grand Narrative, let us at least pass on the *attitude and the reading glasses*. It is essential for us to ensure that we can continue to use that narrative culture that is critical of the system and that asks penetrating questions, that emancipatory discussion through which we learn, to real effect. We must ensure that this narrative culture at least constitutes a good foundation for organising resistance against the 'powers'.

In short, the narrative character of our ideological frame of reference offers both a vision and an emancipatory pedagogy that can help to decode the Great Discourse of neoliberalism. Discussions aimed at formulating a problem through the use of codification stories such as a parable, and practising tontextual questions are politicising exercises that can be of value -not only in LEHRHAUSER. Which brings me to my third point.

### **3. Regarding the decoding of a dominant ideology: 'Anna-Lies has a problem'**

I stated earlier that the education services of both the socialist and Christian trade unions contacted us for inspiration with respect to politicisation. You did not burst out in spontaneous laughter on receiving this information, which probably means that you are unaware of just how tiny my organisation is. It is in fact surreal that trade unions that represent a combined 3-plus million members, and supported by thousands of syndical personnel, approached *my organisation*, Motief, boasting a grand total of five employees, to learn about the methods that we use to raise political consciousness. In any case, we were somewhat astounded.

Of course this says something about the devastating impact of the dominant Neoliberal Discourse on our society -even on the labour movement:

- how it fractures even well-organised groups of people until only individuals remain
- how deeply the logic of market and competition subsequently embeds itself in the minds and bodies of those individuals
- how in this way it immediately declares all other Great Discourses, even that of the labour movement, to be discredited, outdated and defeated
- how it renders any 'WE' strategy useless with its 'ME' religion

Nevertheless, the question of the trade unions today also says something about the strength of our Grand Narrative, which teaches us to wage a struggle not only in ideological terms but also, by starting out from material reality. There is no starting point other than the very real experiences and positions of people in situations of oppression. Trade unions are also becoming increasingly aware that their slogans and campaigns fail to take into account the concrete reality of their workers. It is no longer enough to simply inform employees because a superabundance of information is now available and employers' organisations have more efficient propaganda machines. **There is no need** for more or better information and communication, there is a need for a stronger pair of reading glasses to see exactly what is making us feel so powerless, how we always relinquish our instruments of power and what scope for negotiation we are forgetting to use.

We therefore attempted to cast questions formulated according to Ton's method in a pedagogic instrument designed to help trade union members decode the dominant discourse. It would take me too long to explain this instrument 'Anna-Lies', as we christened the instrument, in detail. However, I will briefly visualize a number of questions this instrument raises.

'Anna-Lies' always starts by specifying a concrete resentment or dead-end situation that people experience.

1. Describe that situation. Describe how you would like the situation to be.
2. Who are involved in that situation in your immediate environment, the wider environment and in society?
3. What is your social and economic position and how does this position affect your *ideas* about your problem?
4. What are the positions of others involved? What do *they* think about the problem?
5. What conflicting interests are involved and who are potential allies in terms of defending those interests?
6. What are the power relationships between the different people and groups?
7. What coalitions can be formed in the short term and which allies can increase our scope for negotiation and impact in the long term?

Although the questions appear to be self-evident, they are seldom examined.

In the case of trade unions without usable emancipation tools, I dare to assert that we – I mean all those who have been trained over the years to read in a Tontextual way – are capable of providing the tools to politicize. Our practice of analysing stories and experiences has made us experts in criticising an ideology and forming a countermovement. In my opinion, this is the essence of our story and our identity: allowing ourselves to be asked a question that is open but at the same time offers the prospect of justice, just like THE NAME, which does not have a monopoly on 'The Truth' but does, however, ask the dangerous questions that always prompt a search for autonomy and equality, and resistance against slavery and accumulation.

It is not only a matter of asking the right questions, it is also a matter of practising with those questions. It is important to make them second nature. This instrument is an attempt to contribute to the struggle against Baal with allies who do not know our Grand Narrative but nevertheless share our utopia.

#### **4. Regarding the reinvention and incarnation of a liberating ideology: resisting assimilation and isolation**

In the context of the last point, I would like to briefly say something about our Lehrhaus-practice; briefly because all of the foregoing is also practised in our Lehrhäuser:

- learning to doubt
- learning to ask questions
- learning to decode the dominant discourse
- looking for allies and strategies in order to rise from powerlessness and oppression

The only aspect that can be added is: reinventing and incarnating a liberating ideology. The Lehrhäuser are also the places in which we **explicitly** discuss Israel's Grand Narrative with people who have really chosen to learn about that Grand Narrative. This does not mean that all the participants in our Lehrhäuser are Christian. What is striking is that, in recent years, we have an increasing number of people who describe themselves as being non-believers, or agnostics. In one Lehrhaus we also have a Muslim participating, which is an absolute gain for the common quest because she sheds light on a situation of oppression of which most of us remain blind. Whether Christian or of another faith, what all participants have in common is that they allow the 'Grand Narrative of the project Israel' to question them as a 'difficult friend', one who is well informed and critical but loyal, and who is capable of introducing entirely new and somewhat strange perspectives into our search.

How a lehrhaus manifests itself in practice depends on the positions and everyday lives of its participants, since *they* determine the agenda and speed of the learning process. Different realities therefore result in diversified Lehrhäuser.

In our Lehrhaus with white people who live in poverty, their experiences focus on feeling disadvantaged with respect to black individuals who live in poverty. And so, we opted to read the Book of Ruth with this group. In our lehrhaus with highly educated young members of the middle class, the stories are about being in the rat race of performance in which they are expected to be the best parent, the most successful employee and the fittest 30-something. With *this* group, we read stories about imperialist 'occupation' and 'being possessed' as set out in the Gospel of Mark.

As a supervisor, I experience my role as being a kind of 'mechanic' who mainly tries to provide usable instruments and keys to reading to keep the group's vehicle moving. I note that the aids that the Great Story provides in this regard makes the engine run differently and at times slightly alters the course of the route taken. The exact effect on the individual lives of those who attend our Lehrhäuser is difficult to gauge, however. Of one thing I am certain: the experience of forming a group, the experience of acknowledging a shared context and the joint search for a liberating attitude provide strength and identity.

I am therefore convinced that the lehrhaus is the ultimate place to practise and master the narrative culture that criticises the system. I am convinced because I see people change into a group, I see that participants find in that group of people a home in a world that has been made uninhabitable. I see that – through dialogue with each other and with that Gran Narrative- they gain nourishment, breath and strength of spirit. They also develop the imagination to try out new practices. They reconnect with their true identities, with who they are *meant* to be: human beings, not supermen or -women; not demigods; fragile but powerful, connected to other human beings, connected to preceding and succeeding generations, connected to a soil that provides not only a right to exist, but also room to live in humane way.

Ideally, Lehrhäuser will become bastions that prevent us from losing sight of who we are, what we stand for, what god we do and do not worship, and how we act as a consequence. In other words, they will be havens in which we can systematically **arm ourselves against assimilation into the existing order.**

Ideally, they will also be places at which we can **arm ourselves against isolation**, against the delusion of possessing the exclusive truth and against a 'members only' mentality. Our identity is not national and it is not religious. It is certainly not ethnic. Our identity is determined only by our choice in life to make the world a home for the vulnerable and fragile, and to link our fate to those who are denigrated.

It is what Franz Rosenzweig meant and explained at the opening of the Free Jewish *Lehrhaus* in 1920: 'A new way of learning is coming into being, or, rather, has come into being. It is about learning in the opposite direction. It is no longer about learning from the Torah and engaging in life. It is, rather, the other way around, it's returning to the Torah from a life, from a world, that knows nothing of the Torah or pretends not to know....'

Only God knows what the significance of our practice will be for the future. We can only try to incarnate the questions and the mentality, we can only try *to be* the Grand Narrative. There is no other dimension in which we can make our story a living reality. It is this consciousness and life's aim for which I am more grateful to Ton Veerkamp than I can express.

Thank you.

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