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# Patron Saint's Day 2016: "A little folly brings utopia closer"

11 February 2016

**With a nod towards Erasmus and Thomas More, Rector Rik Torfs held a plea for a healthy dose of folly as well as utopianism. In other words: we have to dare to dream, just like the six individuals who received an honorary doctorate during this year's Patron Saint's Day celebrations.**



Even this year's reinvented Patron Saint's Day would not be complete without the traditional procession of academic regalia | © KU Leuven - Rob Stevens

For the first time in its history, Patron Saint's Day was not celebrated on Candlemas itself, but one week later. This gave the students the opportunity to join the celebrations. They were treated to pancakes, fries, and music at a student party in the evening. But first, there were the traditional elements, including the procession of academic regalia and the conferral of the honorary doctorates. This year, the great honour went to four pioneering researchers, an advocate of human rights, and a writer of world level.

All six, they have shown the courage to translate their dreams into specific steps towards a better world. To achieve something that is close to a *utopia* you need that nerve – a healthy dose of *folly* – said Rector Torfs in his speech. These words were a nod to Erasmus and Thomas More, two great minds who have contributed to the image of the university. It was a well-timed reference: exactly 500 years ago, More published his *Utopia* in Leuven, together with Erasmus, who had sung the *Praise of Folly* some years earlier.

The university, too, has to leave room for folly and for utopias, said the rector: "Those who take the dream out of life are left with nothing but the nightmare." The six new honorary doctors no longer need convincing of that fact. "It is partly the reality of your work that has earned you our highest distinction, but, even more so, it is your dream that justifies this distinction", concluded the rector, after which he gave the floor to the promoters of the honorary doctorates.

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Honorary doctor Carrie Menkel-Meadow  
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"An unflagging desire to heal the world". That is how promotor Alain Laurent Verbeke (*co-promoters: Martin Euwema and Koen Matthijs*) described the motivation of **Carrie Menkel-Meadow**. The American Professor of Law and Political Sciences gives shape to that passion in her pleas for mediation, creativity, and empathy in dispute resolution. For one thing, a good lawyer has to find solutions in conciliation, not in conflict. Cooperation, dialogue, and listening skills are the core concepts of her teaching and her influential publications. Both in minor disputes between individuals and in major international conflicts, these skills can be the decisive factor, Menkel-Meadow argues. International work is her current preference: she wants to examine how her mediation concepts may be used in different cultures, as a kind of Esperanto of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In her acceptance speech, Professor Menkel-Meadow admitted that her job – unlike that of her fellow honorary doctors – does not involve 'tinkering' with the human genome or complex chips. But her work – tinkering with something that is very hard to change: humankind – may be even more complex. In a dispute, it's not about how you can win or prevent loss. It's much more productive to look for a real solution with the input from various parties. To do so, you have to "think out of the box. Create your own field. Alter the ones that already exist. And most importantly: realize that, while we all commit ourselves to the betterment of this life, we can only do it together".

Afterwards, the new honorary doctors signed the Book of Honours (in Dutch, 'Gulden Boek'). A reception in the Jubilee Hall and a student party in the Museum Hall brought this year's reinvented Patron Saint's Day to a festive close.

*Ludo Meyvis. Translated by Katrien Bollen.*

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