

The broker of Madras

Ode to Vinod Subramaniam by writer Ernest van der Kwast

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I always think of a magician when I see Vinod Subramaniam. I think it's because of his stride. Some people trudge through corridors, others run or rush while they almost run over others. There is also his pace, the steady step, step by step towards the end. Subramaniam's step is magical. He does not walk through the corridors, he seems to float on the marmoleum. Like a silent ballet. Like a deer walking through the woods, that's how Vinod Subramaniam strides through the university. But he does not flee if he is seen. He looks at you, slows down, smiles and before you know it, he'll stand still and listen to you.

'I want to be an approachable rector,' said Vinod during the opening of the academic year in 2015. 'And if your heart says that you really want to say something, don't hesitate to approach me.' A scientist who studied electrical engineering, who has a PhD in technical physics *and* who listens to the heart: this is Vinod Subramaniam.

He wants to connect. Bring people together. His secretary Paulien Oosterhuis calls him a broker. I think that's perhaps an even better description than magician. Not a real estate agent, a broker in people. He connects students with deans, professors with professors, teachers with board members. We can learn from each other, and together we come up with better plans and a more beautiful university - that is the broker's conviction. I secretly suspect that he practices another religion. Maybe that's because of the background I share with the broker from Madras. I come from India too, and when people in my culture talk about coupling you quickly arrive at marriage.

I have no proof, and his secretary won't talk about it, but I'm sure that Vinod Subramaniam, in his six years at VU Amsterdam has also coupled lovers. Our mothers would be proud of him.

Even when the right life partner wasn't found, there was passion. 'Everyone falls in love with Vinod,' said rector magnificus Rianne Letschert of Maastricht University in a podcast. It's his magic, his stride, his smile. A heart that finds an ear. According to his secretary he has a mega-memory. 'He knows a lot about people and remembers names. People feel seen.' He likes to put them in the spotlight.

And the magician himself? He is modest. He is not the boss, he said recently in an interview. And he doesn't see the rector magnificus as the 'face of the university' either as Carel Stolker of Leiden University described it. Vinod Subramaniam prefers to be the conscience of VU Amsterdam. A place where many different voices should be heard, where there should always be room for dialogue and debate, where people listen. Maybe that is the reason why he moves silently through the corridors: His steps should not drown out the words.

'As you set out for Ithaka/ hope the voyage is a long one,/ full of adventure, full of discovery,' Vinod quoted the Greek poet Cavafy when, as rector magnificus he opened his first academic year. His journey continues, the odyssey continues. We will not hear the echo of his steps, but we will hear the heart speak from now on. That is the power the magician has given us.

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