In Memory of Harm

Living life with its randomness often requires us to reflect on the meaning of pain, death, and the loss of loved ones. We do not celebrate loss, but in responding to it we celebrate what that life stood for, and amounted to. In that context, Harm de Blij, our valued and now deceased colleague, was many things, but having known him as I did I believe that three threads tied much of his intellectual life together and gave his work its passion.

First, he believed above all in the importance of geography as a force and constraint to be understood and reckoned with in the modern world. To Harm, where things were was a feature inextricably linked to a place’s identity because it helped determine, among other things, its physical and human resources. Harm would probably argue that, if history is prologue, how that prologue unfolds depends on where it is played out. He strongly objected to the current “geography is history” and “the world is flat” viewpoints espoused by some who now see technology as a great global leveler, and he would probably point to recent developments in Crimea and Ukraine as evidence of the “power of place” about which he wrote so much.

Second, he believed in the power of one. He was indefatigable writer and lecturer who thought that only by speaking out could we each effect change in the world. On numerous occasions he urged his student audiences to get involved by writing letters to local newspapers or other media outlets and was impatient with apathy and self-indulgence. Always one to practice what he himself preached, he emerged as one of the most publicly-visible members of our discipline by being passionate and persistent about expressing himself in the media.

Third, Harm was avowedly non-religious and was deeply concerned about what he saw as the rise of religious fundamentalism around the world, which he saw as a divisive and ultimately retrograde development. In turn, this concern led him to his last manuscript, “The Endarkenment,” which examines the many ways that the world (and especially some parts of the West) seems to be turning back to religion while retreating from the values of The Enlightenment, and why we should be alarmed by this development. In important ways, this manuscript is both his most controversial and heartfelt.

Finally, and most personally, I knew Harm as a very generous person willing to go to lengths to help others. He and I had many conversations about the importance of putting to pen our thoughts and ideas, and as much as anyone he was responsible for the encouragement I needed to complete my most recent manuscript.

To say that he will be missed is to utter an understatement. Fortunately, through his energy and passion he managed to leave behind a large footprint of achievements and contributions. For that, in our moment of loss, we can be thankful. If the measure of a life is its impact on others, Harm had a good one.