When I took this leap, I left a teeny bit of financial security, a lot of great friends and a little bit of love back at home and jumped in with a some excitement, some expectation and a lot of fear, something else, which I did not realize until later on – fear. Copious amounts of fear.

Day 1 of EPA

Prof. Tina Comes walks into class on a grey rainy day in The Netherlands and talks about Understanding Grand Challenges.

We all seemed to agree in that class the number of grand challenges increased in the last few years. And she asked us “Do we have more problems now or do we just know more?”

And I thought, hey, that’s a great question to ask. And so we all worked on that first ever assignment in EPA more seriously than we took our theses even.

We learnt of wicked problems, and multi actor systems, Bangkok’s plastic problem and Amsterdam trying to push for electric vehicles.

And so time went by, more assignments, more late nights (or early evenings? You can’t really tell in the winters) and I still did not know I had fear in me.

Quarter 2. Introducing Alexander Verbraeck, I’m very sorry if I introduced his name incorrectly. The man who is a robot, that has the same energy about Discrete Event Simulations at 10PM as at 8AM, got us thinking really hard about delivering relief goods on time to flood ridden areas in Bangladesh.

More wicked problems. Floods, global warming, HIV and TB spread and soon COVID-19.

We thought of them but we still did not know what to do about them. We just learnt how much we do not know about wicked problem.

Like what is the rate at which temperature will change, how quickly does COVID really spread? How bad will the next flood be? What is this fear in me?

Hey we did not know a lot about them but I think halfway through EPA we started asking the right questions.

But I slowly started to get frustrated, neither was I finding answers to questions outward nor inward.

Is the answer to everything really “It depends” or do I just not get this? What do you do in the face of this uncertainty?

The way to dealing with fears is much like dealing with wicked problems.

Offering them a tradeoff. Wicked problems are connected to other wicked problems I think mostly because we keep making these backend deals. Do not cite me on that. Oh I want faster internet, here I’ll give you my privacy, or

You’re solving one before the next appears mostly because you’re making tradeoffs. You heighten the dykes to stop flooding, you’re causing envrionemntal damage, you allow water to flow to protect the fish and the downstream gets flooded, you put a reservoir and block the water and agriculture doesn’t get supply, now there’s a food shortage and

Solving one problem opens the next, fear becomes anxiety becomes imposter syndrome becomes a voice in your head

So you try to soften the blow, do not make a large tradeoff, replace fossil fuels with electric vehicles, slow down the climate change You try to atleast slow the process down.

And you start thinking of tradeoffs. Reduce the intensity of the blow, reduce the number of people that could die from a flood, reduce the environmental damage by incrementally reducing meat consumption

You start to see that you are in a complex system. As with time it is only going to get more complex.

You start to reduce the imposter back to fear and then turn that into a healthy amount of self doubt.

When you start trying to balance I finally thought, okay, so now, at the end of two years, what does it depend on?

Turns out you can deal with fear the same way as you deal with wicked problems

With preparation.

EPA taught me that

We don’t solve one problem after another  
We build a system.   
We don’t put out one fire after another  
You find the source, call for a systemic change  
We are only as prepared as the robustness of our systems  
And the resilience of our spirit  
The rigour of our research and the time we put in it  
  
When I walked in here 2 years ago I wanted to be around people who cared that the IPCC report released a few days ago and we have about a century before islands start to sink  
We’ve got no time for one last drink  
With the world at a brink of disaster  
We need to be moving faster  
And farther that we did today   
We have no time for fear, alarm or sorrow  
We need to be thinking past tomorrow  
And we cannot throw away our shot.

The world conspired to put us all here  
And it’s the greatest conspiracy theory of all time  
The concept of privilege, or as you will learn in agent-based modeling, path dependency.  
We are here because our parents were where they were  
We are here because we were all looking for this kind of a degree  
The kind that uses technology to contribute to a better society  
The society we live in today   
Allows less than 10% of its people to be university graduates  
Is inequal, unjust, and unkind at worst and beautiful, fair and kind at best.   
We’re in one of those best rooms and we have the time to think of problems way more wicked than our own fear  
And we cannot throw away your shot

I wish for you to find a cause worth your time  
And a heart for any fate  
I wish you make your lives sublime  
And in the process, help another mate  
I wish for you days of stressing over the right problems

I wish you find the problems you want to solve  
I wish you a heart with a deep resolve  
I wish for you days of challenges and struggle, these problems are worth the stress  
But most of all, I wish for you days with a lot of happiness.