

Whispers of Resilience

A Conversation with Dirk Tirez

About Leadership, Life, Illness, Death, and the Power of Human Connection

Interview by Christa Cantieni Cunin

CHRISTA: Over the past 15 years, we have had countless conversations about leadership and life. In recent years, illness has touched both our lives, my husband's battle with lymphoma, from which he has thankfully recovered, and my brother's long struggle with brain cancer, which he sadly lost. You, Dirk, have also faced illness in a profound way. Can you tell me about the moment that changed everything in your life?

DIRK: On May 3, 2019, I was rushed to intensive care at Saint-Luc University Hospital in Brussels and diagnosed with a severe Guillain-Barré Syndrome. A Moroccan on-call intern doctor made the critical diagnosis in time for treatment to begin, saving my life. Suddenly, everything I had taken for granted, walking, speaking, even drinking water, was gone. I had to re-learn everything. I spent several months in the hospital, did endless physiotherapy sessions, and recovered after a year. In that hardship, I discovered the quiet force of resilience.

CHRISTA: That must have been overwhelming. What gave you the strength to get through it?

DIRK: The support system around me. Nurses, doctors, family and friends. They carried me when I couldn't stand. Daily walks in the park with my wonderful neighbor Lisa and other steadfast friends became quiet poems of support in the story of my healing. And, most importantly, my family, Philippe and Noane. They were the ones who truly saw the suffering behind the mask. Their presence and support allowed me to focus on the real issues in life.

CHRISTA: What did you learn from that experience?

DIRK: For a certain period, I could not speak and had to learn it again. I learned the power of silence in conversations, and noted that it can serve as a mirror, compelling the other person to reflect on their words. This awareness has helped me navigate discussions, and even criticism, with greater clarity and purpose. At times, I have chosen silence as a response, not out of avoidance, but to uphold dignity and integrity and maintain

perspective, while keeping discussions constructive and being able to focus on what truly matters.

CHRISTA: In 2021, you learned you had a gene that would eventually lead to an aggressive form of cancer. How did you feel when you learned this diagnosis?

DIRK: While it was no surprise, it came as a shock. My sister had suffered from cancer and undergone several long surgeries and a long treatment. Several of my family members were affected and eventually died. Yet, at the time, I didn't worry. I felt invincible, certain it wouldn't happen to me. I even named a WhatsApp group with my team "Invictus", a reflection of the unshakable confidence I once had.

CHRISTA: So, this all coincided with you becoming CEO of bpost. While you weren't initially eager to take on the role in 2021, what ultimately convinced you to accept it?

DIRK: I saw this company as a kind of 'Harvard' of operational excellence. A place where talented, thoughtful people work with extraordinary discipline to serve customers. But what drew me in even more was the deeper spirit beneath it all. I believe in creating a workplace where people can truly be alive, where excellence doesn't come at the cost of humanity, but is fueled by it. And here, I saw that possibility: a culture where people bring not just their skills, but their whole selves and are met with purpose, kindness, and respect.

CHRISTA: What kind of leader did you want to be in your various positions?

DIRK: I wanted to be a leader who serves rather than commands. One who leads with humility, empathy, and genuine care. For me, leadership was about creating a workplace where people felt valued, empowered, and free to bring their true selves to work. I believed in continuous learning, in helping others grow both personally and professionally. Instead of rigid hierarchies, I wanted to foster a culture built on trust, authenticity, and shared purpose.

CHRISTA: And then you faced another challenge, after some early signs, you were diagnosed with cancer. How did that moment affect your perspective?

DIRK: Yes, then came the lingering pain, tests, scans and eventually a cancer diagnosis, already in an advanced stage. The irony of facing this while still recovering from Guillain-Barré was undeniably life's strange way of reinforcing its lessons. Stepping away from work in December 2022 became a quiet but profound turning point. That final day didn't feel like an end, it felt like a release. A rare chance to pause, reflect, and begin focusing on what truly matters. I learned that growth isn't always about forward motion. Sometimes it's in the space we allow ourselves to step back, and in the stillness, that renewal begins.

CHRISTA: What was it like being in the oncology ward?

DIRK: A paradox. It's a place of both despair and hope. I met many cancer patients. One of them was my neighbor Jay, diagnosed with pancreatic cancer that had metastasized to the bones and liver. He is a true hero, and a master of resilience. I also met Olivia*, a little girl with cancer, whose spirit was ten times her size. Her joy was radiant, her empathy astonishing. Even when her own battle intensified, she brought love and light to others. Her presence changed me. One day, she saw I was down. She rolled into the corridor of the Radiology department with a mountain of stuffed animals and said to all the other cancer patients, "I will show you my friends who keep me company." That moment... it turned something in me. Her toys became symbols of hope. Her spirit, boundless and bright, taught me how to be brave.

CHRISTA: It sounds like she showed you what it truly means to live, even in the face of death.

DIRK: Precisely. Atul Gawande once wrote, "*Our ultimate goal, after all, is not a good death but a good life to the very end.*" Olivia embodied that. She didn't just cope, she transformed the space around her.

CHRISTA: How did that impact your journey through your treatment?

DIRK: Like other cancer patients, she helped me see that even in the worst moments, there is beauty. We'd sit together with puzzles or dive into storybooks. In those stories, we both became heroes, conquering imaginary battles that mirrored our real ones. When I learned that Olivia had passed away, I was devastated. But I also felt an overwhelming gratitude. She had left me and many other cancer patients a legacy of love and resilience. One day she gave us all a handmade card that read "*Hoop doet leven*" (Hope keeps us alive), with a sunset drawn over the ocean. That card still grounds me today. A child became one of my greatest teachers. Manfred Kets de Vries, told me, "The awareness of mortality is the key to authenticity." That's what Olivia gave me: authenticity. Facing death stripped away all that didn't matter.

CHRISTA: What did you come to understand about the people who were there for you?

DIRK: Through my own illness, I came to better understand not only what it means to be a patient, but also the quiet strength it takes to stand beside one. I saw, through friends caring for a partner with cancer, how profoundly the illness of a loved one becomes their own emotional burden, how much worry, exhaustion, and silent heartbreak they carry. It opened my eyes to something I hadn't fully seen before: that those supporting us often need just as much care, attention, and compassion as we do.

CHRISTA: Dirk, how are you doing now?

DIRK: I've completed chemotherapy and radiotherapy and spent a recovery period with other cancer patients in Pellenberg, near Leuven. I'm truly happy, rediscovering what it meant to live with intention. Like in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych", where the main character confronts what matters most at the end of his life, this experience has deepened my understanding that true happiness comes from embracing authenticity and being fully present. It has reaffirmed my commitment to living in alignment with what truly matters: spending meaningful time with family and friends, and contributing to causes close to my heart, such as LGBTQIA+ rights, the fight against antisemitism, and supporting patients in need.

CHRISTA: What did you learn from other cancer patients in the hospital?

DIRK: If someone believes there are no heroes in this world, they've never walked through the quiet halls of a cancer ward. There, you'll find warriors, not with armor or swords, but with trembling hands, and eyes that have seen too much pain and yet still hold onto hope. These patients wake up each day to fight a battle most can't begin to understand. Their strength isn't in the absence of fear, but in facing it head-on, with every needle, every diagnosis, every uncertain breath. They comfort one another with the gentlest words, hold hands during the hardest moments, and share laughter that feels like defiance in a place so heavy. Their survival instincts burn quietly but fiercely, every step taken, every tear wiped, every moment of rest earned. And yes, they are afraid of the next scan, of the next goodbye, but they keep showing up, heart wide open. If you want to see what courage truly looks like, look into the eyes of a cancer patient. There is no greater hero.

CHRISTA: Over the past few years, we've both spent a lot of time in hospitals, you as a patient, and me supporting loved ones. In your experience, what truly defines a great hospital?

DIRK: A hospital's true strength lies not in its efficiency or statistics, but in its culture, the caring, the compassion, the spirit of the people who work there. As Maya Angelou said, *"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."* What healed me wasn't just medicine, but the deep humanity shown by staff, patients, and even strangers. That's what makes a place sacred.

CHRISTA: Did you meet people at the hospital who truly inspired you?

DIRK: Yes, my oncology professor and the medical staff. My professor is brilliant, intellectually sharp, always direct, yet incredibly caring and optimistic. She brought clarity when I was in doubt, comfort when I was in pain, and laughter when I least expected it. Her leadership and humanity are unforgettable. She showed me what it means to heal with both science and soul. The whole team and medical staff embodied a rare blend of

professionalism, compassion, and unwavering dedication. Beyond their clinical expertise, they bring empathy, integrity, and a deep sense of purpose to every interaction. They don't just treat symptoms, they support the whole person, offering comfort in vulnerable moments and strength when it's needed most. Their values, respect, dignity, and commitment to human well-being shine through in the quiet gestures, the long hours, and the emotional presence they offer every day. In many ways, they are the heartbeat of our healthcare system, grounding science in humanity. My family was surprised I liked hospitals, but I felt really welcomed, supported, and taken care of.

CHRISTA: What good advice did you receive in your life that helps you stay energized and grounded every day now?

DIRK: I'm married into a Jewish family. My mother-in-law survived the Holocaust because two orphanages for Jewish children hid her during the war. She once told me something I've never forgotten: "Whenever I meet someone, I quietly ask myself: would this person have risked their life to hide me?" That question has become my compass, shaping the relationships I build and the people I trust. Surrounding myself with people I know would show courage and compassion gives me strength and keeps me energized every day.

CHRISTA: I believe time is a quiet companion in healing. It gives us the distance we need to accept, and space for emotions to settle and for clarity to return. What role has time played in your healing?

DIRK: Time has taught me to see the beauty in the present. Toshikazu Kawaguchi wrote in "Before the Coffee Gets Cold", "*No matter what difficulties people face, they will always have the strength to overcome them. It just takes time.*" I've learned to appreciate simple moments now, like sitting quietly with my family, savoring conversations and connections that I previously might have overlooked.

CHRISTA: What leadership do you aspire to today?

DIRK: Being a servant leader has always been a guiding principle for me. As Simon Sinek writes in "Leaders Eat Last", "*Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge.*" That quote by Simon Sinek captures what I try to live by. Over time, I've come to understand even more deeply that true service begins with authenticity and a community that nurtures it.

CHRISTA: What do you hope people take away from your story?

DIRK: That we can find meaning even in suffering. That resilience is not about avoiding pain but moving through it with grace. And that even in the face of death, love and connection endure. As Atul Gawande says, "*Being mortal is about the struggle to cope with the constraints of our biology, with the limits set by genes, cells, and entropy. But*

most of all, it is about how we want to live.” Today, I choose to live fully: immersing myself in Spanish, feeling alive in nature and sports, and engaging in meaningful activities that offer support and purpose, such as supporting others going through difficult times. Most importantly, I cherish staying closely connected to my parents, family and friends, treasuring every conversation and shared moment with gratitude and joy.

CHRISTA: Thank you, Dirk, for sharing. Your journey is not just about survival, but a reflection of resilience, courage, and perseverance. And together, through this conversation, I hope we can pay tribute to all those affected by illness and cancer, my husband, my brother, and the many others whose strength continues to inspire us.

DIRK: Yes. It’s a tribute to every cancer patient whose spirit still guides us, and to the quiet courage shown by those who walk alongside them.

** Name changed to protect privacy.*