



**New Year Address
by the
President of Iceland
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My fellow Icelanders

Good afternoon, and happy new year!

A new year has begun, with all its challenges and opportunities. It is to be hoped that most of us can look to the future with optimism. It is good to have a “land of hope,” as Bjartmar Guðlaugsson wrote in a well-known song – and an old image of happy times. But at the same time it is essential not to conceal what has gone awry, to admit remorse that can still be hurtful, to accept that sometimes love does not flourish. Let us give thought to those who have encountered adversity during the past year, those who are dealing with grief and loss, those who are in need of our support and sympathy.

And let us take a brief look back to the past. During the year that has just come to an end we marked the centenary of Iceland becoming a free and sovereign nation. Much has changed in this country since that time. Generally speaking, Icelandic society provides a far more favourable environment, from cradle to grave. A hundred years ago, childbirth was a risky event, and there was no guarantee that a newborn baby would survive. Today infant mortality is almost unknown in Iceland, which has the lowest rate in the world. Life expectancy has increased dramatically, and Icelanders now live longer than most other nations. Most of us enjoy better health, thanks to medical and pharmacological advances around the world, to treat diseases which in past times led to incapacitation or death.

We must safeguard and promote all improvements in the field of health and welfare. In addition we must recognise the value of other advances: today far more people have the opportunity to study, to travel, to work and devote themselves to what interests them, to love, believe and express themselves in every way, to be in charge of their own destiny, in a society of freedom, equality, diversity and kindness.

As we rejoice over these and other aspects of our progress over the past century, we must not forget what has gone wrong. Poverty and inequality have long existed here, and still do so today; myths that maintain the contrary must be resisted.

In Iceland's progress towards prosperity, some people were left behind. People with physical and mental disabilities were marginalised, instead of receiving the special care they needed. Last year saw the welcome news that legislation on user-managed personal assistance took effect, and new legislation was enacted on services to people with disabilities with long-term support needs. These legal advances enhance personal freedom and are conducive to the dignity that people deserve.

Let us also recall that over the years people with mental disabilities or disorders were placed in institutions of various kinds. Many of the staff did their best with limited resources; but our collective memory tells us that cruelty was commonplace – and in some cases despicable abuse. The victims of such injustice have now, happily, been awarded compensation; but we must continue to give our attention to the position of those who were subjected to ill-treatment.

Let us also rejoice that the past year saw the overturning of wrong verdicts in one of Iceland's most controversial criminal cases of recent decades. "The sun is shining outside," was remarked in the courtroom as it became clear that justice would prevail. "Let there also be sun in our hearts."

Yes, let us rejoice when appropriate. But so much remains to be done. Take our young people. We are losing our young people. In this prosperous country, suicide is the leading cause of death of young males. In this land of freedom and progress, too many young people fall prey to addiction.

We cannot simply let them fall – our young people who deserve help and hope. In his novella *The Good Shepherd*, published in the early 20th century, Gunnar Gunnarsson wrote about Mountain-Bensi, who set off into the mountains at dead of winter in search of lost sheep "in the midst of this ice-world." Few works of literature express so powerfully the value of empathy, conscientiousness and altruism. "Out there were... the left-behind sheep that he was on the look-out for," the story reads. "Sheep that had been missed in all three of the autumn round-ups. They shouldn't die of exposure or starve to death up in the mountains solely because nobody could be bothered, or dared, to search them out and bring them to safety. They were living beings, too."

We have, fortunately, people who go looking for people – we have loved ones, experts and others who want to help those in need of help. And we must educate, not terrify. These are the words of Bára Tómasdóttir, the mother of Einar Darri Óskarsson, who died of an overdose of tranquillizers last spring at

the age of 18 – one of the many we have lost long before their time, in our own ice-world.

My fellow-Icelanders: Gunnar Gunnarsson’s story *The Good Shepherd* praises more attributes than self-sacrifice: modesty and moderation; even-temperedness and simplicity. Have we lost sight of such values in the hustle and bustle of our times? Burnout and anxiety, tension and stress: too many people’s lives are impaired by such evils. The impact is of course worst for the person involved and their family; yet these ailments touch us all. People stop attending social events, withdraw from the labour market, and must have recourse to medical insurance and disability benefits, entailing huge costs to society, as trade union leaders have been pointing out in recent months,

What is to be done? It is vital to respond to the situation. “Anyone can be overwhelmed,” says Eygló Guðmundsdóttir, a Ph.D. in public health: there is no shame in admitting the problem. It is no longer seen as the ultimate virtue in Iceland to work all hours and “be a good provider.” “We need to rest,” says psychiatrist Ólafur Þór Ævarsson: “We need a change of mindset about priorities and values in life.”

Yet we should also extol the qualities which have stood us in good stead for more than a thousand years: perseverance and stamina, energy and diligence. Adversity, problems and worries will meet everybody on their way through life. “If we didn’t know what sorrow was, we wouldn’t know what happiness is,” says psychiatric nurse Salbjörg Bjarnadóttir, quoted last year in a valuable series of articles on Icelanders’ mental health by journalist Guðrún Hálfðánardóttir.

Let us also listen to Salbjörg’s advice to parents, guardians and others: “Teach children positivity, unity and tenacity, and above all, be present... Put phones and digital devices down when we gather around the dining table, and talk to each other. The time we have together is so very important, and don’t forget that we will never have that time again.”

There’s the nub – time can be lost, too. People’s unhappiness is invariably attributable partly to social media; it is regarded as proven that the self-image of many young people is influenced by the response they receive from others on *Instagram* and *Snapchat*; the constant comparison with others gives rise to a sense of inferiority. It is excellent that young and old alike can exchange ideas, strengthen their bonds and keep up with each other’s lives. But what we see in the digital world tends to be a glamourised image. So many people talk about how cheerful and happy they are – how popular and hardworking. But life is more complicated than an idyllic post – and what can be more fickle than a Facebook *like*?

The internet and its media play an ever-growing role in our society: people have so much more freedom to express themselves than in the past, more means of making their voices heard. And that is a good thing. On the other hand, these merits are, sadly, not always applied for the good. In his New Year address five years ago, my predecessor in office pointed out that the new technology might open up “floodgates of negativity, slander and even hatred.” Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson’s words still apply today, and it is also appropriate to recall the words of another man who lived for a while here on the Álftanes peninsula – admittedly three centuries ago.

“He who is angry, is foolish,” thundered Bishop Jón Vídalín in a famous sermon: “Rage... warps all a man’s limbs and joints, it lights a fire in the eyes, it floods the nostrils with blood, inflames the cheeks, pervades the tongue with frenzy and uncontrol ... It shakes and convulses the entire body, as when the sea is agitated in a storm. And, in a word: it makes a man into a monster.”

Thus spoke Bishop Jón from the pulpit at mass between the New Year and Twelfth Night. It is of course true that anger can be justified. In some cases it may provide the impetus for good deeds; but unbridled rage does no good – and abusive language even less. We should also take account of the Biblical precept that *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone*. On one occasion the bishop’s cousin, scholar Páll Vídalín, is said to have walked out of church in the middle of one of his sermons, muttering to himself: “What a sermon! What execrable nonsense Jón speaks.”

But back to the problems of our own times: So weren’t things better in many ways in the past, on closer scrutiny? Is some of our so-called progress not so beneficial? I have mentioned many subjects here today. But I have yet to come to the challenges which justifiably give rise to fears among people all around the world: environmental degradation and climate change; destitution and conflict which compel people in need to flee *en masse*; the threat of terrorism and growing support for extremism; rising tension in international relations; inequity in division of the world’s resources, and so on.

Yes, it seems clear that the outlook is bleak; the signs are not good. Or are they? Let us not forget that living conditions have improved greatly in this country – although we could do even better. And, in spite of everything, it is safe to say that mankind as a whole is doing better than ever before – although nothing can be taken for granted, and simple solutions do not suffice in a complicated reality. But the future is in our hands – and it is a promising one, if we do not depart from the path of humanity, common sense, science and reason.

That is a big *if*, but let us not lose heart. Hopefully we can unite precisely around the philosophy that it is better to look to the future with hope than to give way to pessimism and gloom. “Pessimism leads to lethargy,” said President Vigdís

Finnbogadóttir in one of her New Year addresses: “And lethargy gives rise to apathy.”

We must also be united in times of peril; a nation which fails to do that has no right to the name. Unrest has recently been monitored in volcanoes which have long been dormant, and they may erupt, with grave consequences. If that happens, we will face great challenges. But I have no fears on that score. The people of this country have shown before now what they are capable of, and we have rescue teams, Coast Guard and Police personnel, as well as many others in whom the nation has well-deserved confidence.

In times of calamity, we Icelanders have a single soul. But otherwise we go on arguing and bickering. Improvements in society never happen of their own accord. They have to be worked for: it is necessary to win support, to promote the issue and persuade the people of the country and the authorities that change is required. In a strong democratic society, people should always pursue such activities. But we must acknowledge and accept that there will always be disagreement over how to achieve our goals. Such differences of opinion should not be a source of concern. On the contrary – so long as the debate takes place in terms of reason and justice, and arguments are made and defended resolutely but at the same time with fairness, respect and courtesy.

Last year the nation marked a century of sovereignty, as I mentioned before. And some of us also celebrated personal landmarks. I myself had my fiftieth birthday. At such times one is grateful for having a loving family, good health and happiness. In addition I enjoy material security. Those who do so sometimes fall into the temptation of telling other people that it is not so important in life. Such arrogance and lack of empathy is unfair. But I wish to add that in my childhood I saw wealth around me. Yet the child’s mind could tell that happiness is not necessarily measured in square metres. In more recent years I have taken as timeless wisdom the words of Nobel-prizewinning author Halldór Laxness: “For what are riches and houses and power / If in that house blooms no lovely flower?” (Translation by J. A. Thompson).

My fellow-Icelanders: I am far from wishing to tell other people how to live their lives. At the start of a new year, when we often set ourselves objectives and strive to improve ourselves, I would nonetheless suggest that we give thought to what I have said here about burnout and stress, which are grave threats in our time. We are all human. Let us do our best to nurture what is most important – people’s health and wellbeing.

On behalf of my wife Eliza and myself, I wish you all happiness, good fortune and success. Happy New Year.