



**Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the VI Nordic Family Therapy Congress
Reykjavík
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Distinguished scholars,
researchers and family therapists,
ladies and gentlemen

In the western world, the development of our cultural heritage, the economic and social progress of the past few centuries and the influence of philosophers and thinkers have provided us with a vision which implies that we are continuously moving in a positive direction.

We tend to see the structure of our societies as the most advanced in world history, and the experience of recent years has reinforced this thinking in dramatic ways. Science and technology have transformed our way of life. We have fascinating means of communication at our disposal and the information revolution has empowered the individual to an extent that was unthinkable only a few decades ago. Measured in material goods, our standard of living has reached levels which exceed the greatest hopes of those who, only a century ago, created social and political movements dedicated to improving the lot of the common man.

In the Nordic countries we share the belief that our societies have excelled in the course of this transformation, that we have succeeded in making the best of these opportunities, that our democracy and social arrangements are superior to others and that our welfare, education and healthcare systems are the best in the world.

Certainly, the progress made by the Nordic countries during the 20th century is both outstanding and remarkable, and we have been blessed by a good fortune. Our people have escaped the tragedies, hardship and oppression that have greatly influenced the fate of others. The opportunities open to our young generation are among the most challenging and rewarding that this new century has to offer.

But within the framework of this wide-ranging advancement, upheavals have taken place and some of the basic elements in our social fabric have been put under strain. The individual has been faced with conflicting demands and the role of the family as the main provider of harmonious and cohesive personal relationships has been threatened.

The family is the oldest social institution, and ever since ancient times it has formed the core of social and economic assistance and the basis of our self-awareness and how we see ourselves in relation to others.

The Icelanders are indeed an excellent example of this historical legacy. Our early sagas describe the families who settled in this country more than a thousand years ago, and their fate became the subject-matter of the extraordinary books which the Icelanders wrote in the thirteenth century. Ever since then, we have put great emphasis on being aware of our family relationships, and the ability to trace one's ancestors back through the centuries to the early settlers has always been treated with great respect in this country. And now we have seen how this wealth of family data has become a major resource in modern medical research, bringing genetics laboratories in Iceland a strategic advantage in global scientific competition.

We have somehow been able to become modern while at the same time keeping faith with the traditional relationships within the extended family. But even in Iceland we have in recent years seen the rapid emergence of the problems which are increasingly challenging the family in advanced societies, problems which in the other Nordic countries and the rest of Europe are becoming almost an epidemic of social ills.

However, like our friends in the other Nordic countries we have had difficulty in recognising the nature and the extent of the crisis now facing the modern family. This has been primarily because the intellectual framework in which we view ourselves is still dominated by the progressive outlook we have inherited from the standard-bearers of western philosophies and the view of social advancement that inspired the pioneers of the social sciences.

There is therefore an urgent need to give greater priority to understanding the forces that have brought about changes in the family and to recognise the important contribution made by various research projects and how they throw light on many of the problems which now dominate the evolution of the family. These include the treatment of children, the struggle of single-parent families, the tendency to conceal the crisis situation in many households, the problems associated with

increased social mobility and the ever-growing pressures put on young and old alike.

We live in times when the market and the forces of competition have been granted greater and greater prominence in our societies, and globalisation is seen as the great modernising force of the future. The gospel of supply and demand and the optimal solution as it is found in the market place has become the dominant theme in political dialogue.

As a result of this, the family has been removed from centre stage and the individual, alone and independent, the buyer and the seller, the investor and the producer, have become the central figures in the prevailing analysis of social and economic progress.

Certainly the market is an important element in the transformation of our societies and it has brought us a wealth of rewarding opportunities. But as the predominant criterion of the state of our societies, it has grave limitations and could lead us astray if we do not balance it with sufficient emphasis on other fundamental elements.

Dialogue and research on the role of the family in the transformation of modern societies is therefore of the utmost importance. It is a necessary counter-balance and helps to keep our vision clear. Only through a deep understanding of the problems facing the family in the coming years can we hope to formulate the programmes, projects, regulations and laws necessary to help the individual to take advantage of his or her capabilities and achieve fulfilment, both in private life and in the work-place.

It is therefore highly appropriate to welcome the Sixth Nordic Family Therapy Congress to Iceland. This is the first time the congress has met in our country and the agenda before it certainly reflects a strong determination to deal with the problems facing the family in an open and challenging way, and it is clear that you recognise the need to tackle the critical aspects of the modern family with vigour and frankness.

The influence of stress, the changing ethnic composition of the Nordic societies, domestic violence, the burden of bringing up children who are sick or have serious disabilities, the experience of various institutions or professions in attempting to help families in need, the affect of divorce and new step-parents on the emotional stability of children and the interaction between the family and the schools – these are only some of the issues which you will be discussing. Your agenda thus shows that you are indeed determined to face many of the most disturbing aspects of family life in our modern society, and you will be making a serious and honest attempt to show the reality behind the

positive picture of ourselves that we Nordic people tend to present to the rest of the world.

I congratulate you on your endeavours and thank you for the important contribution you are making, not only to the health of the Nordic societies in the years to come, but also to enabling the social sciences in general to keep their focus on how the transformation of modern societies can have a deep influence on each and every one of us. Only in such a way can we serve the ideals which centuries ago inspired great thinkers to challenge the prevailing view of the good society and point towards the reforms necessary to enable every man and woman to achieve a better life.

I welcome you once again to our country and will follow the outcome of your deliberations with great interest. The Sixth Nordic Family Therapy Congress is hereby opened.