



**Ávarp
forseta Íslands
Ólafs Ragnars Grímssonar
á ráðstefnunni
Dialogue of Cultures
til heiðurs Vigdísí Finnbogadóttur
á 75 ára afmæli hennar
Hátíðarsal Háskóla Íslands
14. apríl 2005**

Kæra Vigdís,
Distinguished scholars and cultural leaders,
Ágætu ráðstefnugestir

Menningin og tungan, ræktun lands og lýðs voru stefin sem tíðum hljómuðu þegar Vigdís á forsetastóli flutti þjóðinni boðskap sinn.

Efniviðurinn var jafnan sóttur í sögur og skáldskap, reynslu og arfleifð kynslóðanna, en einnig í nýrækt á akri hinna ungu, bækur höfunda sem bera svipmót nýrra tíma. Vigdís leitaði víðar fanga, naut þekkingar sinnar á menningu norræna þjóða og hve heimavön hún var og er á franskri grundu; og reyndar einnig annars staðar í veröldinni.

Hún sameinar á einstakan hátt íslenskar rætur og hugarflug heimsborgarans, skilur betur en flestir aðrir að áhrif úr ólíkum áttum leiða oft til nýsköpunar, að menningin ber fegurst blóm þegar samneytið við aðra er öflugt og sterkt.

Hvað er okkar – hvað hinna? Það er sú spurning sem vísar veginn að boðskapnum í lífsstarfi Vigdísar og því er vel við hæfi að heiðra hana á tímamótum með því að efna hér til Dialogue of Cultures, alþjóðlegrar ráðstefnu um fjölbætta flóru menningar og tungumála, um hve samofin tungan er sjálfsvitund þjóða, hve gífurlegt tjón það er þegar samfélög, smá en með merka sögu, týna tungu sinni.

We welcome here today a distinguished gathering of scholars and cultural leaders, representatives from near and afar who have assembled in Iceland to participate in a Dialogue of Cultures and to honour our

beloved Vigdís for her outstanding contributions to the dialogue between nations, between communities, large and small, honour her for her vision, for her understanding that in cultural diversity resides the spirit which enables humankind to reach for the stars, to achieve the impossible, to journey where no one has trodden.

Without the cultural diversity of nations the earth would certainly be a boring place, our lives filled with dullness and repetition. Through the experience of different cultures our being is enriched, we gain a poetic spirit which inspires our endeavours.

There is a tendency in our times to make largeness the essence of our existence, to assume that the greater the scope the more impressive the results, the larger the market the more pronounced the progress, the bigger the company the greater the profit.

We tend to forget that the excellence created in ancient times was the product of communities that were small by our standards. Classical Athens and classical Rome were similar in size to Iceland in our day. Renaissance Florence and Venice were also equally small when their cultural creativity gave us many of the greatest treasures of the western world.

Iceland in medieval times was populated by only sixty thousand people but that was the era which gave us the sagas and remarkable poems, the foundation of the cultural identity through which we gained independence, the legacy which provides our modernity with a profound meaning.

These are the yardsticks by which we should measure, by which we should judge. They are historical examples which prove that small communities have indeed given the world the essence of our culture:

Democracy by classical Athens
Rule of law by classical Rome
Arts by renaissance Florence
Literature by medieval Iceland

When we journey throughout the modern world and witness the threats to cultural and linguistic diversity we should gather inspiration and encouragement from these examples, from the proof that smallness can indeed be the foundation of greatness, that without the dialogue of different cultures our humanity would be starved of its spirit.

It is difficult to find a person who symbolises this better than Vigdís, who proves by her contributions in many different fields how diverse

cultural experiences can strengthen our roots and give our life an enormous fulfilment.

Throughout her presidency Vigdís carried that vision to different places, was a messenger as well as a visionary, an initiator as well as a pathbreaker.

The people of Iceland are deeply grateful for her contributions, honoured to have made her the first woman in world history to be voted head of state in a general election. Fascinated by how she has continued to create new endeavours, to bring people together.

The conference which we open here today is certainly inspired by her message and I am sure the deliberations and the discussions will – as she would wish – be both lively in spirit and substantial in content.

Kæra Vigdís.

Við óskum þér til hamingju með afmælið og þessa merku og spennandi ráðstefnu. Íslendingar samfagna þér innilega á þessum tímamótum og þakka framlag þitt, einstæðan þátt í þjóðarsögu, þakka fyrir gjafirnar sem þú hefur fært þjóðinni á góðum stundum, þakka hvatningarorðin sem jafnan hafa fylgt.

Líf þitt hefur verið litríkt ævintýri og mikil forréttindi að hafa fengið að taka þátt í því með þér.