



Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of
The International Conference on Parallel Problem Solving
From Nature
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Distinguished researchers, scientists
and others who have travelled from afar to be with us.

It is, if I may say so, highly appropriate that you should assemble here in Iceland, because no other country is such a suitable place for a dialogue on how nature can serve as an inspiration for the solutions of complex problems.

You may perhaps cast doubt on this statement, but let me then draw your attention to the role which Iceland has played, and is still playing, in the ongoing process of creation.

We all know the account given at the beginning of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, where we read how God created the Earth in six days and then decided to rest because the work was finished. There is, however, one problem with this description. It is not entirely accurate, because when it came to the creation of Iceland, the Almighty became so fascinated with the possibilities that the process of creation has continued in our country until this very day: with new volcanoes, new lava fields, new islands, new geysers, earthquakes and other activity reminding us how we are still able to see creation going on before our very eyes.

This ferment of activity that can be seen in all aspects of the natural environment in Iceland has also moulded the souls and the culture of our people, and in recent decades it has led to many innovations and pioneering projects in the fields of science and technology.

Iceland is indeed one of the youngest countries in the world in geological terms, placed on the geographical boundary of Europe and America, the meeting-line of the tectonic plates running through the country. Here we can literally walk from Europe to America in less than five minutes and even find places where you can touch the American continent with one hand while keeping a firm grip on Europe with the other.

For centuries, millennia, Iceland was uninhabited, waiting for the arrival of human settlers to give the land its identity and clothe the naked landscape with language. They named the rivers and the fjords, the mountains and the valleys, the lakes and the inlets – and went on to write their own history and that of the land in sagas of timeless value. In this way the language became closely associated with discovery and exploration, with journeys across the ocean towards the unknown.

A thousand years ago, some of our ancestors went as far as to discover America long before anyone had ever heard of Christopher Columbus. Following Leifur Eiríksson's journey, his sister-in-law, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, decided to travel to the new continent and settle there with her family for a while, giving birth to a baby son, the first child of European origin to be born on the American continent.

Thus the Icelanders are the nation that discovered America more than a thousand years ago but did not tell anybody about it. We just noted down the discovery in ancient books written in a language that nobody could understand but ourselves.

If, however, Leifur Eiríksson and Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir had decided to stay on the American continent, the consequence would have been that we would all be speaking Icelandic here today.

From the time the first settlers arrived and down to this very day, nature has always been close to us in Iceland, an inseparable part of our image of ourselves, a mirror of memory and longing in the works of our poets and the ever-active playground of cultural creation. Admittedly, it could often be a cruel master and taught our people many a harsh lesson in their struggles, but it also spread a table of plenty before them in its more generous moods.

The natural environment is such an integral part of our culture that it is difficult to separate the two. The Icelandic national character bears the stamp of the natural world, with its rapid changes in weather, its seasons, its ever-present contrasts, with the long nights of winter and the soft and mild tones of summer.

This strong affinity to nature has also found an expression in the creativity present in our culture, both as a frame of reference and as an influence on our way of thinking.

I have often, in recent years, emphasised the importance of creativity in human progress, in the evolution of our societies, our economies, in the transformation of the entire world.

Perhaps creativity has in this new age become the most important element in the future evolution of mankind. Whereas the Industrial Revolution made mass production the main means of development, the digital revolution and globalisation have now made it possible for innovations to spring up anywhere. Intellectual products, specialised services and information systems originating in small states can now become profitable and relevant in the global market. The new century has given small nations their turn to flower; never before have we had such opportunities for prosperity and progress.

I have often pointed out that in the new world economic order, small countries may in many ways be an attractive venue for creative developments because there it is easier to see interrelationships, gain access to information and find solutions to difficult problems; and collaboration between unrelated entities can be arranged without a lot of effort or complicated negotiations.

Small states can thus serve as laboratories, particularly in the areas that are most likely to prove crucial in human development in the years ahead, in fields where thought and talent, initiative and innovative ability are fundamental to our future course.

There are also many indications that culture will become an ever stronger element in determining the competitive position of nations, that creative energy could be the decisive factor, more so than financial strength or production capacity. There is plenty of capital available in the world, but original and creative thought is not in abundant supply.

A delight in inventions has always been one of the strengths of Icelandic culture, and it will stand us in good stead in years to come. But creativity is not something that can be taken for granted. It cannot be produced by a formula or drawn out of a bank account. It is the product of a culture, a society, a national memory and the interplay of traditions of many types. It is a gift that past years and centuries have given to the present, and is perhaps the most valuable asset in the modern global world.

It is also notable – and perhaps this is the core of the matter when we look for an explanation of Iceland’s recent international successes – that things here are in a state of creative ferment in all sorts of unrelated fields – in business, in science and in the arts – and growth and innovation in one area has an effect on the others. This interplay of mutual influences produces a dynamic whole.

Owing to the smallness of our society, active players in all fields – commerce, the arts, science and research – are in closer contact; they mix and exchange ideas on a number of levels and are in touch with the bustle of daily life. In other countries, distances, the size of the population and big bureaucracy constitute dividing walls, keeping people in separate categories, which may reduce cross-fertilising effect.

In this respect, Iceland is like a Renaissance society, where flourishing growth is based equally on business, science and the arts, conducted by a community of people who excel in their various fields; creativity in each discipline is nourished by successes in the others.

I decided to dwell on these aspects in my opening address here today because your dialogue and deliberations are directly related to how all of this can be brought together, how the relationship to nature and creativity within our societies can serve as an inspiration and the basis for scientific progress.

I hope that the lessons which Iceland can offer will enlighten your discussions and continue to enhance the success of your efforts in the coming months and years.