



Address
By the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
On World Health Day
April 7 1999

Older Persons
Honourable Minister of Health
Ladies and Gentlemen

“Older persons” is in many respects a peculiar term: a modern, perhaps fashionable notion which we are constantly using and think has a clear meaning. We can ask: Does it imply a judgement about a particular type of behaviour, action or lifestyle? Is it a ticket to leave the hustle and bustle of routine, towards idleness and a quiet life? Or is it a convenient formula which social developments have gradually devised in order to make more room in the labour market and create rules and customs that suit younger people?

What is age or ageing? Is it a definite milestone, a turning point in the course of life when a legally sanctioned announcement is made that your life work has gone far enough, the best thing is for everyone to stop at the same point in time, then you persuade yourself and others that afterwards it is impossible either to create anything new or be of use to anyone – and you accept being, by official definition, a mere burden, a burden on the pension fund, a burden on the national insurance scheme, a burden on the treasury?

How on earth have we and other western societies managed to incorporate this nonsense into an organized legal framework and thereby point the way out of fertile pastures and into a bottomless swamp?

Where did it originate, this notion that people’s creative power falls dormant the moment they receive their first pension payment? Why does society relinquish the resources represented by the innovative abilities and force for progress of people who are of an advanced age?

Nonetheless, there are countless examples of the way the vital force for new action lasts more or less throughout a whole lifespan, the force for new discoveries, new creativity, new ideas, new tasks, the force for influencing the very history of humankind by shaping decisive events and a new world vision.

In my first year at university in Britain, I listened to the philosopher Bertrand Russell, then in his nineties, give a lecture to a capacity crowd in an auditorium seating 2,000 people; speaking without notes for almost two hours, he stood alone on the stage and displayed such genius and verbal skills that the lecture could have been written down verbatim and published without making a single change. And aren't there many impressive museums in the metropolises of the world that attract hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people every year to see paintings produced by Picasso and other artistic giants of this century at a point in life which the regulations of so-called developed societies have decreed should be characterized by stopping work and being idle.

Wasn't Winston Churchill, legally speaking, "too old" when he led the democratic nations of the world to victory in a bitter war against Hitler's criminal regime? Wasn't Ronald Reagan an ordinary pensioner when he won the US presidential election and then was triumphantly re-elected close to the age of eighty? Are we to suppose that Einstein stopped thinking when his hair started turning white?

Wouldn't it be more sensible now to search for approaches that will enable society, business, the arts and the sciences to benefit from and enjoy the creative work of older people and stop disqualifying almost everyone as soon as a specific age limit is reached?

Today we will hear two officially retired scholars, Jónas Kristjánsson [former director of the Árni Magnússon Manuscript Institute] and Páll Bergthórsson [former director of the Icelandic Meteorological Office], both of whom have devoted their so-called old age to writing books which have revolutionized our ideas about ancient times. Gunnar Eyjólfsson's performance as XXX will certainly be inspired by the genius which has typified the gallery of characters he has created at the National Theatre in recent years. If I were asked whether Gunnar Eyjólfsson is a better actor today than when I saw him perform Hamlet and Peer Gynt in my youth, I would say that personally I find him more brilliant now than ever before, even though the regulations say he really should have given up that sort of thing at his age.

And Kristján Davíðsson's paintings: in the past few years, at a grand old age, he has been creating such magical art in colour that his recent works are already ranked with the best that Iceland has produced this century – and in fact with the great achievements of European painting. Who would have the nerve to dismiss the music of composers Jón Nordal, Jón Thórarinsson and Jórunn Vidar, even though they are challenging the age limits set by law for stopping work? Or uproot the forestry plantations that Leó [??] and other enthusiastic and energetic older people have been cultivating through their hard work and devotion? Or write off the contribution made by elderly entrepreneurs, farmers, workers and fishermen, who despite the letter of the law are still creating opportunities in industry and the labour market?

It is to be welcomed that World Health Day, which is dedicated to the affairs of older people, has been chosen to convene this gathering and make its message clear: That older persons possess a dynamic and innovative force which we should applaud and harness, and subsequently adapt our laws and regulations so that this resource can generate the utmost benefit for our society, culture, life and advancement.

In a letter which I received recently, the new Secretary General of the World Health Organization, Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway, urged a new attitude towards these issues and asked for support for such changes from the President of Iceland and other heads of state. It will be a particular pleasure for me to describe in my reply the wealth of imagination reflected in the programme for today's gathering, and to send Gro Harlem Brundtland your best wishes and your encouragement to her to go on forging ahead in creating, throughout the world, a new understanding of the issues affecting older persons.

Thank you for allowing me to join you here today and I wish you good luck and every success for the future.