

GALA REMARKS
DEAN JULIO FRENK

Good evening and welcome. Being here tonight—sharing this celebratory evening with all of you—is truly an honor. Looking around this room, I am filled with inspiration and hope. Yes, we face daunting public health threats, as so eloquently described by our earlier speakers. But with you as allies I have no doubt that we are embarking on an age of unprecedented progress.

I would like to extend a special welcome to several of our many distinguished guests: Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway and Director-General of the World Health Organization; Felipe Calderon, former President of Mexico; Harvard's own President, Drew Faust; and my three dear predecessors as deans of this School—Howard Hiatt, Harvey Fineberg, and Barry Bloom.

Earlier today, we had the honor of hosting another former head of state—President Bill Clinton—who, along with World Bank President Jim Kim and Gro Harlem Brundtland, received the School's Centennial Medal for their decades of extraordinary service. We also had the pleasure of hosting Chelsea Clinton, who received our first-ever Next Generation award.

Gathered here tonight is an impressive group of leaders that is also very diverse. You come from all walks of life and all parts of our planet.

Yet, for all this rich diversity, there is something that unites us. Despite our myriad occupations, we have all chosen to be *here, now*, sharing a common perspective, a set of core commitments:

- We are here now because we are dissatisfied with the world we live in—and we believe that it's within our power to create real and lasting change.
- We are here now because we believe that improving health is a crucial part of making the world a better place.
- We are here now because we resist the tendency of far too many who fail to use their education, power or wealth to promote the common good—what has been described as a dangerous empathy deficit.
- To the contrary, we are here now because we understand that the world is interconnected—that the future of each one of us and those we love is tied to the fate of others. *I am because we are*. This is how Ubuntu translates. To quote Bono, we aspire to be Ubuntu in action.

For many of us, these commitments have their roots in personal history—that is certainly the case for me.

My father and his family were refugees who would have died had they stayed where they lived, which was Germany in the 1930s. They escaped to a much poorer country, yet one rich in culture and open to diversity, which welcomed them with open arms. That country—Mexico—saved their lives.

I grew up with a strong sense of indebtedness, of the need to give back, but I did not have a clear idea of where this would lead until I was 16 and spent two months—the summer after my junior year in high school—living in a very poor indigenous community of the state of Chiapas in Southern Mexico.

At the time, I was trying to decide whether I would study medicine like the three generations of Frenks before me or anthropology. I went to Chiapas because there was a famous anthropologist working in this little town, and I wanted to see him in action.

Then one day, as I was sitting there observing, in came a very, very poor woman carrying her grandson in her arms. It was very cold—we were way up in the mountains—and she had walked more than three hours to get this sick child to the town's small health post. While traveling, she had injured her head, so when she arrived, she was completely covered in blood—in need of care for herself as well as her beloved grandchild.

And there was no one.

The person who took care of the health post was not there, and the anthropologist couldn't do anything to help. And, of course, neither could I. *Neither could I.* For me, this was the turning point. I remember thinking: *I am not only going to study these people. I am going to serve these people.*

Many—perhaps most—of you have such stories. The facts may differ, but the dynamic is the same. A personal experience plants the seed for something far greater. We are moved to engage with—and transform—the larger world.

Christy Turlington Burns just shared such a story—how her own complications at childbirth motivated her to take a stand for mothers everywhere, especially those most desperately in need of basic medical care.

I have also been inspired by witnessing the way in which my wife Felicia turned her battle against breast cancer into a larger calling to provide every woman who suffers from this disease with the same access to quality care that she received. As I accompanied her, I went from *leading* to *living* a health system. In the process, I gained insight and inspiration. After her treatment, Felicia could have simply moved on, pursuing her own goals without much concern for the plight of others. But she did not. And neither have you.

Each of us faces a fundamental choice between indifference and caring. Then—once we have decided to care—we must choose where to focus our efforts. For me, public health is the obvious best choice. From economic development to education, good health is the necessary underpinning for every other social good. As a physician, I could have treated that poor woman in Chiapas and her grandchild—no small thing—but public health offered me the tools to give back on a broader scale, drawing on disciplines from the basic sciences to—yes—anthropology. This has been my life's calling.

To paraphrase Schopenhauer: *Health may not be everything, but without health, there is nothing.*

Those of you here tonight recognize this truth—and you also understand the need for quick and decisive action. You recognize what Martin Luther King called “the fierce urgency of now”—the fact that delay carries devastating human costs.

You do not have to look far to appreciate the urgency of the four public health threats at the heart of our campaign. Just read the daily paper or listen to the news.

- In China, a deadly new strain of bird flu has emerged, with some 45 people having died to date.

- In Madagascar, bubonic plague—yes, the same disease that killed an estimated 25 million people in medieval Europe—is on the march.
- In the United States, for the first time in two centuries, children may have shorter lives than their parents. The culprit? Obesity.
- Meanwhile, the U.S. also continues to struggle with the expansion of affordable health care—critically necessary given that, among other things, a full 75% of health care costs are related to preventable conditions.
- Worldwide, by 2047—less than 35 years from now—our planet’s coldest years may be warmer than the hottest years of the past, according to the *New York Times*.

But for all the stories that worry and scare us there are also many that offer hope—that remind us that we can make a difference.

That is why we are here—now. Because, together, we can change the world.

As we celebrate the achievements of this School’s first 100 years, we are reminded of this fact and of the enormous power of public health solutions.

Consider that, over the course of the 20th century, global life expectancy soared by 30 years, 25 of which are attributed to public health. That’s the difference between dying at 55 and 85—or, as is increasingly common, between 75 and 105, like my dear grandmother—the one who escaped from Nazi Germany—who lived to the age of 106.

Such changes do not just happen. They reflect the cumulative impact of decades of effort by people like you—and by the generations of students, teachers, and researchers who have passed through Harvard School of Public Health. I often think of our School as the bow and its people as the arrows. We propel their work into the larger world through the force of knowledge.

No one more powerfully embodies this metaphor than our students and alumni.

They are people like 1970 graduate Don Hopkins who played a key role in the global eradication of smallpox and is now closing in on guinea worm disease.

They also include *future* leaders such as doctoral candidate Shaniece Criss, whom you heard from earlier, and master’s degree candidate Leo Grimaldi.

Leo grew up in violence and poverty on the streets of Argentina, selling cigarette cartons, flowers, newspapers—anything to get by. “In that place there was no hope. People did not believe in a way out,” he recalls.

But, remarkably, Leo *did* find a way out. Surmounting unimaginable obstacles, he became a physician in Argentina and ultimately made his way to Harvard. His goal: To become minister of health and, in his words, “to carry out a deep health reform in my country that will hopefully benefit millions.” As a former minister of health myself, I could not be prouder—or more inspired.

President Drew Faust has reminded us that we are living in what she calls “a public health moment.” As you have heard this evening, we are face to face with four urgent public health threats. At the same time, this is a moment of tremendous opportunity. Never have we had a greater capacity to close the gap between realities and aspirations.

As part of our Centennial celebrations, we have prepared a time capsule, not be opened for 50 years. Perhaps some of you will be here for that celebration! One of the items to be included is a letter from me to whomever is the Dean in 2063. Here is one of the things I say to my successor:

Each generation has one overriding responsibility: to safeguard the legacy it has received from previous generations and hand it enriched to the next one.

Tonight—as we enter a new century—we are taking a major step in that direction. Each of you has faced that defining choice between caring and indifference—and you have made the right choice. You have chosen to care. Beyond that, you have chosen to focus your efforts on science and public health, the most enlightened and lasting ways of making a real difference. Finally, you have chosen Harvard—because it is the best place to invest in research and education to deal with the largest problems of the world. This is the chain of choice that brings you here—now. And this is the chain of choice that will improve health for everyone, everywhere.

Thank you.