



New Year Address
by
President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
1 January 2022

Good afternoon, people of Iceland,
and Happy New Year.

Greetings to all of you from my wife Eliza and myself, with thanks for all the good things in past years. Hopefully, most of us are looking forward to what the future may bring us. At the same time, I am aware that the last year has been a difficult one for many – and the problems we face will not disappear, even though the calendar and the progress of the planets are signs of new beginnings and longer days. For some, last year was a time of sorrow and grief. Let us think with care of those who are suffering, those who need help and support.

Last year we were reminded once again of the overwhelming power of nature. The volcanic eruption at Mt. Fagradalsfjall will go down in history. In Seyðisfjörður in the east, the massive landslides of a little over a year ago were followed by the task of clearing and salvage. Landslides in the Kinnarfjöll mountains caused damage. But in face of all these challenges, people did not lose heart, and all over the country it remained true, as before, that those in peril received assistance from search-and-rescue teams, and others who rally round when they are needed.

And we should always be grateful that it is so. In recent months we have indeed been reminded of the importance of thanking those who do their work in the national interest – the importance of solidarity and unity in society, and not least the importance of optimism and daring. All this remains true, for we are still grappling with the virus – that unwelcome pestilence. Just before the New Year the National Hospital was placed on an emergency footing, due to the pressure it is under. On the other hand, the virus variants appear to be growing less virulent as the pandemic progresses. Hence I permit myself to reiterate what I have said before: we have seen worse, and we will see better times. The pandemic will not wreak such havoc as former pestilences, not least due to the

huge advances in science and knowledge, welfare and health, vaccines and other remedies.

But people are, of course, becoming tired. Of course, those whose livelihood is impacted by the situation must be assisted, and of course our response must be in a constant state of reevaluation and revision. Yet undoubtedly it will be best for us all – the public, the experts and the government – to strive to maintain the solidarity which has proved so successful. And to seek to maintain it on a basis of conviction and debate, not intimidation and commands, and without differences of opinion giving rise to deep divisions in society – without falling prey to fear.

Fear is not necessarily unfounded – far from it. It can lend us the vigour we need in times of adversity. But fear is not a desirable companion in our daily lives. Its devious power is well described in Nína Björk Árnadóttir's poem about the Bird of Fear, which seizes a person in its claws, and flies into their breast and howls there. That is how fear works. And then it may lead us to become touchier than usual, more intransigent, more reluctant to consider other viewpoints. Many of you may recognise the symptoms – and I have experienced them myself. But let us try to do better. Let us try not to allow irritation or anger to get the upper hand.

We are, assuredly, not all in the same boat, nor do we all share the same opinions – naturally not. But nonetheless there is more that unites us than divides us. We live here together on this island, young and old, in towns or in rural areas, some of us descended from the medieval settlers, others recent arrivals from elsewhere with their roots in faraway places, some with academic and professional qualifications, others with deep knowledge from the school of life – or even both. We are all kinds of people with all kinds of tendencies and dreams, beliefs and customs, big or small, talkative or reticent, judgemental or tolerant, helpless or resourceful.

And then there are hope and joy. Believe it or not, we Icelanders are generally deemed one of the happiest nations on earth. That is a good sign. Optimism can facilitate the work which must be done and urge us on, setting us free from the fetters of apathy and gloom.

But optimism must be grounded in realism, otherwise it is delusory. Much can spark fear – many factors in individual lives, and not least the problems we all share – the climate crisis, and conflicts around the world. I recently read that if we do not soon find ourselves a new home somewhere in the Milky Way, our days will be numbered.

The world is on the eve of destruction – or is it? Hans Rosling's renowned book *Factfulness* does not evade the burdens of our time or the challenges in our

future. But in his book the physician and professor, who died nearly five years ago, demonstrates that overall humankind has never been better placed than it is today. Never before have so many people enjoyed the benefits of freedom, education and human rights. Life expectancy and quality of life have generally improved, and the tasks that await us can certainly be resolved by applying our ingenuity and desire to do good.

Here in Iceland unceasing efforts are made to improve people's lives and circumstances. Much remains to be done, yet there are few places where gender equality is ensured as it is in our country. Entrepreneurs and businesses make their mark in innovation and hi-tech. This economic sector, grounded in mental energy, must be promoted and supported even more than hitherto. In Iceland's universities important research is pursued in many fields. In the fisheries the aim is sustainability and utilisation of the entire catch – although we can always do better. In the farmers' periodical *Bændablaðið* I read about creative thinking in agriculture – that traditional pillar of Icelandic society. In tourism there are many new enterprises which will withstand the challenges of recent times. In sport, culture and the arts new talents are constantly emerging, while their elders continue to show what they can do.

Yes, my dear fellow-Icelanders. The future is bright, if we handle things properly. I have no desire to tell people what to do. But here at the conclusion of this address I permit myself to urge you all to care for body and mind as well as you can, to enjoy exercise, and to talk to friends, relatives or others if you experience anxiety or other malaise. There is no shame in doing so – and by the same token one should seek expert assistance if necessary. Good health is worth its weight in gold – and here we should bear in mind that government preventive approaches in the field of public and mental health enhance wellbeing, and also, in the long term, save society huge sums.

But are we not each responsible for our own lives? We all create our own destiny, as the old saying goes. Yet I sometimes think that it should be phrased as a question: Do we all create our destiny? We do not have control over everything we encounter in life.

But our own response is something over which we have a lot of control. Earlier I mentioned that the eruption at Mt. Fagradalsfjall would go down in history. And a unique achievement in medical science will also go down in history: last spring a medical team in France transplanted new arms onto one of our fellow-countrymen, Guðmundur Felix Grétarsson. He had lost his arms in an electrocution accident at the end of the last century. One can hardly put oneself in the place of a person who has faced such tribulations, and indeed he went through difficult years, with periods of darkness and despair. But medical advances brought hope, new knowledge and new drugs. And Guðmundur never gave up. He never threw up his hands in despair – and I know he does not mind

that I put it that way. For he also held on to stoicism and humour. Last but not least, he benefited from the support of his mother and father, wife, daughters and friends. “I realised that it was a choice,” he said recently. “People often call it realism to be pessimistic, but the good things are always present, just like the bad things. We choose which to focus on. It’s just a question of the kind of life you want to have.”

Dear people of Iceland: My wife and I wish you all good fortune in the new year. “What bodes the blessed New Year’s sun?” asks Matthías Jochumsson in a well-known hymn, then answers: “It bodes nature’s Yuletide feast, it brings life and words of comfort, it shines hot with the Lord’s grace.” Let us try to take good care of each other and ourselves. “Say goodbye to stress, say goodbye to the screen,” as Mugison sings: “Let’s sing a song, play a game, then it’s good to be alive.”