



**Address by  
The President of Iceland,  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
At the Nordic Gerontologists' Conference  
“Two Worlds – Two Ages”  
in Reykjavík  
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a special pleasure for me to welcome you all to Iceland, and I hope your conference will be both enjoyable and productive.

In many ways it would be interesting for me to be able to take part in your discussions and search with you for answers to the questions: “What is age?” – “What is ageing?” – Who are the elderly? – questions which come up in my mind more and more often.

Is old age a particular crossroads, a milestone in life when we are informed in accordance with the law that we have achieved enough through our work, and it is time for everyone to stop at the same point and set about persuading themselves and others that they can no longer create anything new or be of any further use?

Does the onset of old age sentence us to a particular type of behaviour or life-style? Does it mean that we can withdraw from the daily round and devote ourselves to idleness and the quiet life? Or is it a convenient formula that has come into being gradually through social development in order to make room on the labour market and open the way for new rules and customs that suit younger people?

What is the origin of the idea that our creativity evaporates as soon as we accept our first pension payment? Why does society not make the use of the creative ability and progressiveness of those who have reached their senior years?

There are countless examples that show how people retain their creative force almost until the end of their lives, whether they use it to make new discoveries, create works of art, come forward with new ideas or influence the

course of human events by guiding historical actions and forging a new view of the world.

In my first year at university in England I heard the philosopher Bertrand Russell, then over 90 years old, hold a lecture to a packed hall of 2,000 people. He stood on the stage and spoke, without notes, for nearly two hours, so brilliantly and elegantly that it would have been possible to record the lecture word for word, write it out and publish it without needing to make so much as a single change. And are there not plenty of famous art galleries all over the world that attract hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of visitors who go to admire works which Picasso, and other giants of the ages, have produced in the period of their lives that, according to the regulations of so-called modern societies, is supposed to be a time of barrenness and passivity?

Wasn't Winston Churchill an old man, according to the official definition, when he led the democratic nations of the world to victory in a bitter war against the criminal regime of Hitler and the Nazis? And wasn't Ronald Reagan an ordinary pensioner when he won the presidential election in the USA, to be re-elected with a resounding majority when he was almost 80? And do we believe that Albert Einstein stopped thinking when his hair turned grey?

Perhaps we should look for ways of letting society, the business sector, culture and the sciences enjoy the contribution and pleasure that the older generation can provide them, instead of writing practically everybody off as soon as they reach a certain age?

I know the programme of your conference has already been decided, but nevertheless I hope you may have an opportunity to consider these questions.

I also hope you will have a chance of seeing the creative forces of nature at work here in Iceland, the eternal display which is put on for our entertainment.

In the Old Testament we are told how God – who was probably quite advanced in age at the time – created the world in six days and then decided to rest after that. But this story is not quite true. When the Almighty came to create Iceland, it found the task so enjoyable that the process of creation has been going on here unbroken ever since right down to the present day, as you can see in the volcanoes, the lava fields, the geysers or if your are lucky feel it in the earthquakes.

I hope you will be able to enjoy our show of creation, and that your stay in Iceland will make you think of the creative powers which surely lie in people of all ages and how we can let them flourish to the benefit of all.