

2010 10 05 Conference of Nobel Laureates Welcome Address by Elie

Wiesel

Tom Kaplan:

It is now my great pleasure to be able to introduce a man who needs no introduction. And in fact, normally gets no introduction at the Y. For the very simple reason, that his preference, whenever he's introduced to this stage is to go right to his chair. To sit down, and to start lecturing without any introduction or fanfare.

This evening, he's going to have to pardon us for a little introduction. As you came in this evening the pianist was playing amongst the various themes, "A Song For Hope." This was written 20 years ago in order to be able to commemorate two very special events. First, the fiftieth anniversary of The Performing Arts at The Y. And secondly, the twentieth anniversary of Elie Wiesel first appearing on the 92nd Street Y stage. Elie himself wrote the libretto.

It's [00:01:00] appropriate that tonight we hear this music again. Because it reminds us of the extraordinary relationship which the 92nd Street Y has had with such an extraordinary man.

For 43 years he has delighted, challenged, and engaged our community. He represents, in fact we can even say that he defines those things which we consider to be our major mission. Which is to be able to harness the unparalleled capacity of civil dialogue to change minds. And the equally great capacity of education and the arts. To be changed by human intellect.

Today, Elie Wiesel returns to our stage, to open his Conference of Nobel Laureates, that he has held all over the world. Today, he honors the 92nd Street Y by [00:02:00] bringing the conference here to address some of the major issues of our age. We could not be more honored to be Elie's students. We could not be more blessed to be his partner. Honored laureates, ladies and gentlemen, Elie Wiesel. (applause)

**Elie Wiesel:**

Thank you, all of you, for being here tonight, at the very opening of what is going to be a very important conference. Marion and I are grateful to every one of you. Simply because we believe in that, we believe in bringing people together. We believe that culture means to become a matchmaker. And this is what we are doing. Simply [00:03:00] young and old, Jew and non-Jew, from whatever horizon one comes. They should meet

their counterparts, or strangers. And see to it that the strangers are no longer strangers.

I have been here, as you heard from Tom, I've been here for 40-- more than 40 years. So somehow, it's inconceivable that I should be here to open this session for tomorrow. This opening session, as a *forshpeis*, a kind of first course, and not tell you a Hasidic story. (laughter) Can't do it.

A Hasidic story is following. That somewhere in Eastern Europe, Rabbi Moshe Leib Sassover, a great Hasidic master, said, "The meaning of love," which to him meant actually friendship, of love. "I learned from two drunkards in an inn. I came there [00:04:00] one evening, hoping to rest. And there at the table they were, Ivan and Boris, and Ivan says to Boris, 'Boris, are you my friend?' 'I am.' 'If you're my friend, do you love me?' 'Of course.' Drink, the other one also drank. A minute later, 'Boris, do you really love me?' 'I do, of course.' It went on, and on, and on. They were both drunk already. And then he says, 'tell me, if you love me. How come that you don't know what pains me?'"

Do we know what pains the world today? The world is going through so many crises. Such turbulence, convulsions. To really know what is happening in this world today. We have just entered a new century, and already the century is going through [00:05:00] new metamorphoses on every level, in every field. This is why we have this conference, as we shall have others, and we have had in the past. Simply trying to explore things that are absolutely necessary if you want to understand history.

So we decided to ask four Nobel laureates here to give us the substance of the following question: "What pains you most these days? What frightens you most these days? What preoccupies you most these days?" And every one of you have three minutes. In three minutes you can say so much. So, I will start [00:06:00] with Professor Roy Glauber. Just because, (applause) alphabetically he is the first, and in many ways he is the first.

**Roy Glauber:**

Well, I take it you didn't come here to hear about multi-atom quantum radiation problems. I have to tell you, there are not, there's not a great many people left on this earth who worked on the original Manhattan Project. To build the bomb in New

Mexico. I was there for two years. And I have to tell you, it has been something of a continuing burden on my conscience.

[00:07:00] And I am teaching a seminar to Harvard students at the moment on the history of the project. And trying to convey all of the difficulties, and all of the pangs we went through in doing that work. All of the people who made major contributions to the project have gone now. I was certainly not one of them. But the worry, remains.

We are at something of a turning point, the technology changes. Ways in which we could never have really imagined, the production of the active materials are now being used. Technologically, they are [00:08:00] far more accessible. There's every likelihood that they are going to become more so. And that the availability of these weapons will spread, it's already spread a great deal too far, I'm afraid.

It does seem to me a good idea to try to teach these things to the young people. And to bring about whatever we can to realize the proposal suggested by these four names: Schultz, Nunn, Perry, and heaven knows, Kissinger. I've seen those names in all of the 24 permutations in the last three years, but very little activity going in the direction of their proposal that we

go [00:09:00] just as quickly as we can to zero nuclear weapons availability. Thank you. (applause)

**Elie Wiesel:**

Professor Eric Maskin, Nobel in economy. (applause)

**Eric Maskin:**

Thank you. I'd like to say a few words about something that I'm currently doing research on. Which is inequality, and inequality in developing countries. As you all know, the world in the last 20 years or so has been [00:10:00} globalized to a degree that we've never seen before in human history. And it was suggested that globalization was the key to bringing the poorer countries of the world into prosperity.

In fact, many of the poorer countries of the world have come a long way in the last 30 years, precisely because of globalization. And China, India, Brazil are just the most obvious examples. But when I say that these countries have come a long way, what I mean is that their average income, their GDP per capita [00:11:00] has risen significantly. What has happened as well unfortunately, is a marked increase in dispersion of income. So the gap between rich and poor in these

countries. The haves and the have-nots, has also grown enormously.

And the question is, why this has happened? It was not supposed to be this way. In fact, the best-established theory of international trade, the theory of comparative advantage-- which goes back literally hundreds of years -argued, people thought quite persuasively, that globalization was supposed to decrease inequality in poorer countries. Because it would give people [00:12:00] at the bottom, the people without skills the opportunity to produce for a global market. And would thereby raise their incomes.

As I said, this, this theory was believed. Proponents of globalization suggested that, that the theory would work its magic. And yet it failed. And, so I've been preoccupied in constructing an alternative theory. A generalization, if you like, of the theory of comparative advantage. Which can help us understand why inequality has increased in poorer countries. And also try to do something about it. Thank you very much.

**Elie Wiesel:**

Thank you. (audience applause) [00:13:00] Professor Mario Molina, chemistry.

**Mario Molina:**

Good evening. (inaudible) did tell you about one of my big worries. And to put it in perspective, it has to do with the fact that we have a very large population in our planet. More than six and a half billion people, and our planet is small. It has limited natural resources. And society is not using them very wisely.

Specifically, the problem that I work on, or the example I can use is climate change. The resource here is the atmosphere, its capacity to absorb the consequences of human activities.

[00:14:00] In a nutshell, as you probably all know, what happens is that the economic growth is very much tied to the use of energy. Mostly fossil fuels historically, that has been the fact. Both the use of fossil fuels as a consequence of change in the composition of the atmosphere, which in turn is changing the climate.

And there is a small temperature increase which by itself is not the worrying part. It's extreme weather events; droughts,



floods. For example, the frequency of floods has increased more than tenfold, in all continents since the 1950s. So it's clear that climate is changing. There is also a clear consensus among experts in the scientific community that this is indeed the consequence of human activities.

So what to do about it? My worry is that society is not really responding [00:15:00] to it. There are of course, not just scientific issues or economic issues. How much does it cost to fix a problem? But the consensus is that it costs a lot less to solve it, than to deal with the consequences. Never there is a problem that has become very politicized. In terms of international agreements, what is needed, of course is to put a price on emissions. And it's not happening. There are-- it's moving very slowly. One important factor is the position of the United States, as you know, the Senate did not pass any climate or energy bill.

And so, a worry within this worry is that science itself has become very politicized. And what should be just a scientific issue is sort of in the public opinions perspective. Being questioned, of course. It's not just us, and you can see it's not just a matter of science. But values, what to do about it,

and economic responses. But [00:16:00] to summarize again; my worry is that if society doesn't do anything about it there is some risk of having very large consequences. And society is not dealing responsibly with this risk at the moment.

**Elie Wiesel:**

Thank you. Professor Edmund Phelps, economics. (applause)

**Edmund Phelps:**

It seems that each of us has his own demons. I think of myself as being quite optimistic. But these days, it's easy to get into another frame of mind. I'm getting to be a little bit worried about the East, China. In other words, [00:17:00] I used to say on occasions that China had displayed amazing ability to solve one problem after another. And there was-- I could see no reason to think that they would not go on solving problems. And go on to achieve very high level of development.

But, I've grown more worried in the past year or two. Maybe it's from becoming more immersed in China than I was before. I was shocked by a number that I hadn't known, that I just saw a couple of days ago. Maybe it's inaccurate, but I'll assume it's accurate; that half of the output of China is for export. Can

you imagine? This is something that's outlandish. So, I'm afraid that we, the world could be headed for [00:18:00] some kind of a trade war in the future. And it will take a lot of diplomacy to avoid that.

But my normal thoughts have as long as I can remember centered around the West, rather than the East. I don't worry about Europe anymore. I'm sorry to say that I think that Europe is finished. It's lost-- long ago lost its economic dynamism. And the reasons for that have to do with an erosion, so to speak. For the lack of a better word. An erosion of the economic culture that would be necessary to keep that dynamism alive.

I love that subject, but I have only two or three minutes!  
[00:19:00] So, I can't stop to talk about it. I had always looked at the US as a continuing bastion of economic dynamism. And with a pretty respectable record of inclusion, also. But I believe, now looking back over the past decade that the prosperity that this country had, in some sense was masking some signs of trouble. Such as a rather lackluster level of business investment, a sharp decline in Silicon Valley, signs of increased short-termism in business, etc., etc. [00:20:00]

And so, now I would say that this may not seem to be an important problem to you. But if America has lost much of its economic dynamism. If in the average company there isn't that drive to do things a little better tomorrow, or to come up with a little better product. If that isn't pervasive over the economy, and if that isn't the drive of the participants in the economy? Then I think not only is the US economy in trouble; it will have lower employment, higher unemployment, slower productivity growth. And more social problems that result.

But I'm afraid that the entire world [00:21:00] will suffer, because the United States has been the engine of innovation. It's been that and it's also been the testing ground for the new products that it has produced. And so if the United States does slip, does prove to have lost a significant part of its economic dynamism, the whole world will face slower growth. And increased social tensions as a result.

And the worst part of it is, it's not too clear what we can do to arrest that. If it is true, that we've lost some of our dynamism because dynamism. Because dynamism is a very complex thing. It's not just the entrepreneurial spirit. It's five or ten things like that. And each of those things turns out to be

very complicated. So yes, I have developed a newfound pessimism, more than I knew I possessed. And I do think it's very serious, and not being properly addressed in this country.

**Elie Wiesel:**

Thank you. (applause) Now, if I may answer my own question. What preoccupies me most? It's fanaticism. We speak about globalization? Fanaticism has become globalized. Fanaticism, what makes a fanatic a fanatic? [00:23:00] To a man born blind, God is blind. To a fanatic who believes that death is the answer, God is the God of death. And fanaticism is gaining ground.

Therefore, we witness a new globalized terror. Or at least a new threat of globalized terror. Terror itself has reached unimaginable heights. Call it "suicide terror." For the first time in history that we witnessed that kind of murder. The suicide terrorist is not someone who wants to die. He could throw himself under a train or take poison. No, [00:24:00] he wants to kill.

In other times, the nineteenth century, twentieth century; in the beginning suicide was a romantic notion. Nihilists,

anarchists. But they had a target. Power, authority. Today the suicide terror is against children or with innocent people. Just killing and killing. And that is a product of fanaticism. And that is what worries me.

Together with our friend, Jeff Greenfield, tomorrow we are going to I think explore all of these subjects and more in depth. I hope most of you, if not all of you will come, to attend meetings. And even take part in them. For tonight, [00:25:00] thank you. (applause)

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