

The Thor Heyerdahl International Speech:

Author Amin Maalouf – Is mankind moving forwards?

Mr. President,

Distinguished guests and dear friends,

It is a pleasure to be with you, this afternoon, under the gentle fatherly shadow of Thor Heyerdahl, who has devoted his life to building virtual bridges between continents, between human cultures, and also between the past and the future. I am sure he would have been genuinely preoccupied by the anguished question which so many disturbing events have brought to our minds during the last few years : Is humankind still moving forwards ? I would not venture to guess what would have been Thor Heyerdahl's answer, although one could presume his thoughts would have carried a mixture of worries and hopes. Which is, in my view, the only reasonable attitude to adopt in our troubled times. Never to hide our heads in the sand, never to indulge in denial and self-deceit, never to push the problems under the carpet expecting them to vanish with time. But also, never to fall into despair, never to betray the tragic beauty of the great human odyssey. Never to lose hope. Even in the darkest of times, even when we are unable to see the light at the end of the tunnel, we ought to believe that there is light, and that one day, undoubtedly, we will see it.

Am I sounding already overpessimistic ? This is not my intention and, at any rate, I don't feel we should contemplate the future through the misty lenses of pessimism and optimism. Such notions are too vague, too unreliable, and misleading. The most common definition nowadays, is that a pessimist is somebody who believes the situation could not be worse ; an optimist believes it could.

I'll try to go beyond such definitions, and to focus on a more genuine, more heartfelt, and, at the same time, more rational approach. On whether we are still moving forwards, my spontaneous answer would be to say : on some levels, we are, but on some other levels, we're not, we could even be moving backwards, and in a manner that might jeopardize centuries of human advancement.

Or let me put this way : for centuries, there has been progress, ever faster, and on practically all levels, material and moral. Of course there were, as we

know, moments of regression into savagery, even at the heart of the twentieth century, and even among the most advanced nations; but in a wider historical perspective, the trend was upwards. During the last few decades, progress became even faster, in science, in technology, in communications, in health, and in wealth. Social and political change also came surprisingly fast. The collapse of the Soviet empire, which we barely expected to happen in our lifetime, took place in a few swift tremors, and almost without a shot being fired. With it vanished the Cold War, which had governed international relations since the end of the Second World War. A new reality was emerging, with which we were required to cope. And that's where we seem to have failed. So far, at least.

Failed in what ? Failed in convincing the peoples of the world that they're together on the same boat, embarked on the same human adventure, their destinies linked, inseparably. Failed in establishing an adequate degree of solidarity between North and South, between East and West, and even between various neighborhoods in our own cities. Failed in dealing properly with issues like immigration, integration, social and cultural harmonization. Failed in promoting a culture of peace, a culture of coexistence, and a culture of hope. Failed in building bridges between the peoples of the Earth.

The worst example of that failure, although by no means the only one, is the deteriorating relationship between the two large entities to which I, personally, happen to belong, to both of which I stubbornly claim to belong, but whose quarrels are currently poisoning our lives and jeopardizing the future of humankind — namely the West and the Arab World. Would it be fair to say that the Arab World is becoming oversensitive and intolerant ? Unfortunately, yes. And would it be fair to say that the West is proving insensitive and self-righteous ? Unfortunately, yes. Would it be fair to say that the Arab World has ceased to advance towards modernity and democracy and freedom of thought ? That it has fallen into the abyss of despair, and hatred, and self-hatred ? And that the West is constantly using its most sacred principles as alibis, and political tools ? That it has failed to address properly the unsolved problems that are driving so many people crazy ? That it has proven unable or unwilling to expand its prosperity towards the other shore of the Mediterranean, or, for that matter, across the Mexican border ? To all those questions, my answer will, unfortunately, have to be : yes, and yes, and yes.

As a result of such behaviors, on all sides, mistrust and hatred are mounting in an unprecedented manner, violence is spreading, and it is already

weighing heavily on our everyday life. It would have probably spread even faster had it not been checked by very harsh precautionary measures, which, in turn, threaten to pervert our system of values. That is just one example of the dilemmas in which we are trapped. On the one hand, it would be irresponsible for any country not to protect itself against enemies who are determined to hit it and harm it and who would be ready to smash their own lives for that purpose. On the other hand, when the most powerful and the most influential nations resort to certain methods of detention and discrimination and sometimes even to systematic torture, that is undoubtedly a symptom of the political and moral regression that is threatening us.

After so many fascinating achievements in all fields, we, humans, have reached a new junction in our march, a junction at which we'll need some more wisdom if we are to proceed smoothly, harmoniously, into a new era of material and moral advancement. Should we succeed, as I still hope we will, then all avenues are wide open before us, the sky is the limit. Should we fail, as we are failing so far, then our system of values might collapse, all civilized behavior might collapse, and we might fall into chaos, and regression, and bestiality.

One may ask : are we really facing a new threat for humankind ? Am I not just expressing old fears that have always been around, and will always be, because they are inherent to our human condition ? Haven't we always been, throughout History, at some kind of junction, or passage, or crossroads ? Well, I don't think so. I truly believe we are facing a brand new threat, unprecedented, not easily identifiable, and very specific to our times. Never before had we attained such a degree of globalization. Never before had the destinies of all humans, of all nations, of all cultures been so mingled, so entwined, so interwoven, in every country, in every city, in every small town, as well as in the world as a whole. Never, until the end of the Cold War, did we have to ask ourselves, with so much urgency, how should our planet be governed, by whom, and according to which rules.

I should perhaps add that, for many decades, the main divide in the world had been along ideological lines; there was, so to speak, an unceasing debate, worldwide, from Indonesia and Sudan to Argentina and Chile, from Cambodia and Vietnam to Greece and Spain — I intentionally mentioned countries in which there have been, during the twentieth century, vicious massacres directly linked to that ideological divide between Marxism and its adversaries, so as not to elevate that era to the rank of some golden age. That era was definitely not a golden age. It was vicious, and ruthless, and brutal, and unprincipled, and deceitful. But when we

consider it from our vantage point, I mean from these calamitous opening years of our new millennium, the era of the Cold War appears to have had at least two features that are lacking today. One : the world was more readable, so to speak ; we knew who was fighting against whom, what were the weapons on each side, and who should speak with whom in order to avoid a deadly confrontation. And two : the divide being mainly ideological, the debate was unceasing, worldwide.

Since the end of the Cold War, the world has been divided mainly along identity lines. When identity is the issue, there is no room for any rational debate. Each one of us is expected to flock with his own people, to shout whenever they shout, to curse the others, and that's about it. We are expected to believe that there are, on this Earth of ours, totally different humankinds, prudishly called "civilizations", supposedly irreconcilable, who have always followed separate paths and will always do. We are expected to believe that differences were not produced by the historical evolution of each society, but should be ascribed to the essence of each religion and of each nation. Those who, like myself, have always felt they belonged both to the West and to the Arab world now find themselves alienated from both. Those who were attempting to build bridges are now requested to step aside and let the war go on and on and on ; for such wars have obviously no end.

Who dragged us into this swamp ? As expected in such an atmosphere of bitterness and distrust, everyone has his favorite suspects. A great Satan for some ; an axis of Evil for others. For some, the arrogant invaders ; for others, the barbarian terrorists. Westerners blame Islam, Muslims blame the West... This blame game leads nowhere, of course. It is just another symptom of our common disarray. Because we are in disarray. We had been advancing, we seemed to know where we were going, and suddenly, we're lost. All of us. Suddenly, we're all stranded in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by strange people whose behavior seems weird, and wicked, people whom we are slowly learning to hate.

It is as if all the nations of the Earth were summoned to gather on the main square of this « global village » of ours, but nobody knows how to speak to them, what to promise them, nobody really knows how to unite all these people into something coherent, into something harmonious. So we're all standing there, tired, nervous, distrustful of others, feeling lost, sometimes to the point of despair ; most people close ranks with their own flock, or with what they see as their flock ; they begin to quarrel with everybody else. Who's to blame ? We're all to blame. There is a new reality, and we have a moral obligation to address it! We have a moral obligation

to make all our fellow humans, whatever their ethnic or religious or social background, feel that this world is theirs, that they are not pariahs, not second or third rate citizens. We ought to build a global society that truly promotes universal values, that truly respects all cultural expressions, and to which every human being could spontaneously identify. But we're definitely not moving towards such a goal. To be frank, I am not sure we're going towards any goal whatsoever. We're just drifting.

Which brings to my mind a brief personal anecdote — or, rather, a family anecdote. One of my uncles in Lebanon was a politician. He was a member of parliament for almost 30 years, and at one point in his long career, he became an influential government figure, as minister of finance, then minister of defense. He died two years ago, aged 94. We used to sit together, or walk side by side, and have very long conversations on every subject. And one day, I asked him what were his feelings when he found himself so close to the circles of power. He gave me an answer I was not expecting : « How did I feel ? » he said. « I was frightened! » And he fell silent, although he usually was quite talkative. I had to ask him : « Why, frightened ? » He paused a little, and then said : « Just imagine ! You're on an airplane, at thirty thousand feet above the ground. You're in your seat, comfortable, holding a glass of scotch, sipping happily. Comes a smiling hostess, who whispers to you that the pilot is inviting you to join him. Of course, you're flattered, you feel important ; you go and sit in the cockpit. And then, as minutes pass by, you discover, to your horror, that the pilot never got his flying license, and that the copilot is dead drunk. Wouldn't you be frightened ? »

My uncle was mainly speaking about Lebanon, whose plane eventually crash-landed, to put things mildly. But one sometimes wanders whether the same parable may not apply to the world as a whole. The aircraft is beautiful, the instruments are sophisticated, the food is excellent, the crew is smiling. But, for Heaven's sake, who are these men sitting in the driving seat ? What are their intellectual and moral abilities ? What is their vision ? What are their plans for our voyage ? Where are they taking us ?

Am I blaming our global pilot, our sole and lonely superpower ? Not quite. America might be a culprit, but it is also a victim, like all of us. And it seems to have lost its way, like all of us. What is beyond doubt, is that there is, in our troubled world, a huge problem of global governance, of moral credibility and of political legitimacy, to which we're all confronted, and for which nobody seems to have an adequate solution.

Let's go back to the main square of our global village. We are all gathered there, in a Babel-tower of creeds and shapes and shades and languages and nationalities. Then someone gets up and says : I am your leader. From now on, I'll tell you what to do. I'll tell you what type of government you should have, and how your economy should be run. I'll tell you who is allowed to use the outer space and who is not. I'll tell you who is allowed to possess powerful weapons, and who is not. If you follow me, you'll prosper, if you oppose me, you'll be crushed.

In this Orwellian setting, we're amid the crowd, we feel the mounting tension, we hear many people protesting loudly in Spanish, in Russian, in Chinese, in Persian, in Arabic, in French. Not far from where we stand, we notice some men muttering furiously ; then we see them leaving the scene with ominous threats. God knows what they might be planning ! We're afraid of these men, their values are not ours, their methods are not ours, we have no place in the world they dream of. We have much more in common with the gentleman who is standing on the stage. But we find him arrogant, pretentious, insensitive, we cannot possibly agree with what he has just proclaimed. We'd like to raise a hand and ask him : What are your credentials, pray ? Why are you talking as if we had chosen you as our leader ? You may have been elected by your own people, but your countrymen are not even five per cent of this crowd. What allows you to take decisions for all of us ?

And the gentleman answers : well, somebody has to lead. I am the guardian of democracy and freedom, and I am the most powerful. Who else should be in command ?

That improbable exchange could go on and on. We could pronounce names like Guantanamo and Abu-Ghraib, and ask the gentleman whether he could still be considered as a credible agent for spreading our noble values, if some of his actions were not, in fact, depreciating those values. However, although we're having this imaginary quarrel with our global leader, although we're criticizing him on Irak, on the way he is conducting his war on terror, and on many other issues, although we're irritated by his manifestations of arrogance and self-righteousness, still, we remain closer to his values than to those of his enemies, and on the question of leadership, although we're reluctant to accept him as our paramount leader, we recognize that he has a point, because we have reached a stage of globalization which does require some form of global governance, with a capacity for decisive action.

It goes without saying that my favorite candidate for the position of global government would be an international body exerting some kind of gentle

collective leadership, and promoting a worldwide culture of peace and coexistence. As a matter of principle, no other solution is morally acceptable. But would such an international body be efficient in the world as we know it ? Would it be capable of taking difficult decisions, without being paralyzed by vetoes ? Would it be able to use a certain degree of force if so needed ? In an ideal world, in a world without genocides, without bloodthirsty dictatorships, without aggressive neighbors resorting to threats and killings, in a world where names like Rwanda, Srebrenitsa, Darfur, Bali, Bamian or indeed Beirut, London, Madrid or Manhattan would not remind us immediately of tragic events, we wouldn't need a global authority with muscles and teeth. Obviously, we're not in such a world. Even if our irritating global leader were to stop fooling around, the problems would not vanish miraculously.

What, then ? Am I saying that this global leader, whom we didn't chose, whose policies are obviously making things worse, is still needed because we can't rely on anybody else. Well, that's one reason why I am so worried. We are in an era of many inextricable dilemmas, none of which are easy to solve. We curse America, yet we cherish it, and constantly strive to imitate it ; it is plundering our universal values, but it still embodies those same values ; its policies are tearing up the fabric of mankind, but nothing will ever be repaired without it. Needless to say, it will have to be a different America, with a different appreciation of its role among nations.

Such paradoxes bring us back to our core problem : we have reached a stage in History in which the most crucial issues — climate change, dwindling natural resources, nuclear proliferation, epidemics, organized crime, etc. — ought to be dealt with on a global level, but our loyalties are not yet global, our perception of our identity is mainly ethnic, or national, or religious, or racial, certainly not global. Our perception of our identity is not raising us to a level which would be consistent with the tasks of our times, to a level which would be consistent with our scientific and technological and economic advancement.

This, as such, is not a new feature in History. For centuries, there has been a gap between the material advancement of humankind and its moral advancement. We make discoveries, and we don't always know how to use them properly. Those numerous new tools we now have at our disposal, sometimes they liberate us, and sometimes they merely submit us to new addictions. Sometimes they help us open up to the wider world, and sometimes they make us more selfish and self-centered. Sometimes, it is even far more tragic. We invent a device that allows us to detect in advance the gender of the child to be born, and in some countries we

use it for a discriminatory birth control in which girls are systematically eliminated — an appalling and disgraceful practice that has already claimed the lives of ten of millions of girls, as the statistics amply demonstrate in East and South Asia, without provoking any significant upheaval anywhere. Our moral conscience is erratic, and subject to fashion. Some denunciations are fashionable, some are not, or not yet.

Material advancement does not automatically lead to moral advancement. It's a prerequisite, but in no way is it sufficient. We cannot just wait for science and technology and economic growth to solve all our problems and neatly transport us into a better world. They provide us with the vehicle ; if we've already chosen our destination, they might show us the road ; but they won't tell us where we should go, or why we should go there. If we lose our way, we are to blame, there is no point in cursing the vehicle. One of the symptoms of the regression we're threatened by is that temptation, so widespread nowadays, to curse modernity and worship a mythical past in which all virtue is supposed to lay. Many communities, belonging to all major religious traditions, feel overwhelmed by the pace of change, and by the scope of globalization ; they feel lost, abandoned, left behind, and they distrust any new idea, any new behavior ; some of our fellow humans, both in the North and in the South of our planet, are even calling for some apocalypse of sorts, that would miraculously snatch them out of a world they have ceased to comprehend. Goya, the great Spanish painter, used to say : "When reason is asleep, monsters wake up".

I, for one, do not think we ought to be apologetic about either the material or the moral advancement humankind has achieved. I am thrilled every day with what our modern civilization has given us. I would not trade this century for any previous one. I might plunge with delight in the study of the sixteenth century, I might discover some fascinating characters, invent a few others, try to share their joys and worries, try to be immersed in their extraordinary lives. But I would certainly not trade places with them, nor envy their lot. Because there is always a witty voice whispering in my ear : just imagine if you had to see a dentist in the sixteenth century ! This trivial thought cools at once any misplaced nostalgia for the past. And one doesn't have to go back many centuries to get the same feeling. Each one of us has read or heard accounts about life at the time of his grand-parents, or at the time of his parents. Just imagine what life was like before antibiotics, for instance. Today, in the wealthiest parts of the world, we are worried, and justly so, by the excessive use of antibiotics. But it is important to put facts into perspective. So many children used to

die in infancy of diseases that our science has now successfully eradicated. So many women never recovered from giving birth to a child.

I won't expand on a matter each one of us is aware of, but I had to mention it. Too often, we take those facts for granted. Too often we forget how lucky, how blessed we are to be living in this era of continual medical breakthroughs. Not a single generation before ours had enjoyed such a privilege. Of course, one must always bear in mind that, although the bulk of humankind has benefited from this advancement in medical knowledge, some have benefited much less than others ; and that, while life expectancy is growing fast in most countries, it has actually dropped in some others, mainly in Africa, and mainly because of aids ; but such discrepancies could not be blamed on science, on modernity, or on progress, the blame must be put squarely on policies, both local and global, and on humankind's grossly insufficient sense of solidarity.

In spite of this sad note, it remains important to stress that, for the very first time in History, we have in our hands the means to solve many problems which our ancestors were never able to tackle — provided we know what to do, and provided we have the will to do it. Our responsibility is to create the adequate conditions for advancement to go on, uninterrupted, so that, one day, every human being could be able to lead a long, and healthy, and meaningful life.

Another field in which progress has been achieved, at an astonishing pace, is that of electronics, which has obviously initiated a new way of working, and learning, and communicating, and which has led to an unprecedented expansion of all human knowledge. Of that too, I am thrilled every single day. For the very first time in History, we have the whole world at the tip of our fingers. Whatever has been written, or said, or composed, or painted, or devised is readily available to us, at any moment, wherever we are. Barely twenty years ago, all that seemed either unthinkable, or, at best, projected into a distant and hypothetical future designed by science fiction. And here it is, already ours. Sometimes I feel as if all the past generations, tens and hundreds of generations, had toiled, and struggled, and suffered, for the sake of our generation. As if all those who lived on this earth, from prehistoric times until the 1950's, were mere suffering creatures constantly persecuted by some heartless deity, and we alone the beloved children of God.

I have been fascinated by the internet from its early days, when there were few sites to go to, one very famous in Geneva, as I remember, and some others on American campuses. Today, I still spend a lot of time surfing on the net,

downloading documents, and reading newspapers from all over the world. But if you ever peep into the screen of my laptop, and find a folder entitled WWW, please don't be mistaken, for these three Ws don't stand for World Wide Web, they stand for What Went Wrong.

Let me remain, however, for a few seconds more, in the realm of advancement. Not any more in science or technology, where one could obviously signal many a breakthrough which transformed our lives, but in another field which has also seen a revolution of global significance, unprecedented in History, and, again, barely thinkable a few decades ago. I am referring to the economic takeoff that our generation is witnessing in China, in India, and some other countries. One could certainly deplore, here the persistent lack of democracy, and there the persistence of the detestable cast system. But the accelerated economic development of those two great nations, who represent well over a third of humankind, is a gigantic leap towards the improvement of their population's lot, on every level, including democracy, social justice, and also gender equality. Economic growth might not be sufficient to attain such goals, but it is, at the very least, an indispensable preamble. What has happened in those nations in the last decades is an event of huge importance which demonstrates further that we would be able, within one or two generations, to eradicate poverty, malnourishment, and many other stigmas of underdevelopment from every corner of every continent, if only we had the will to do so ; if only we could bring ourselves to consider as a priority the lifting of our fellow humans from the swamps of despair.

Maybe I should add, before I move on, that, considering the world as a whole, we have also been experiencing in the last few years, a period of relative prosperity, both in the North of the planet and in many countries of the South. But I cannot refrain from asking myself whether this fact is not deluding us slightly. I mean, one wanders sometimes whether these opening years of our century will not go down in History as an era of intellectual and moral collapse masked by encouraging economic data.

Am I not being too harsh, once again ? I don't think so, unfortunately. We are still advancing, materially, but intellectually and morally, we are on the verge of collapse. Notions that had long guided us — progress, equality, freedom, faith, justice, democracy — have been twisted, distorted, constantly used as political tools, and have ended up depreciated. The West, which had long been a sort of model and

a driving force for mankind, is fast losing its moral credibility ; and none of its rivals have much of it either.

Moral credibility and legitimacy are, in my view, important concepts. They are not just a matter for intellectuals to reflect on. Humankind could not hold together without moral credibility and legitimacy. When the most sacred universal values are viewed with cynicism, when no authority is considered legitimate, the world drifts towards chaos. And that, I'm afraid, is exactly what might be happening before our eyes.

Legitimacy is what allows us to acknowledge, without excessive constraint, the authority of an institution, personified by individuals, and deemed to carry values we share. Perhaps I should add that, in my view, legitimacy is not the sole and ultimate ethical value. When it goes uncontested for a long period of time, it often hinders any progress. Throughout History, the emancipation of men and women usually took place through the contestation of established legitimacies. Still, no human society could hold together, and achieve progress, without some kind of legitimate leadership at its helm. When a political system begins to lose its legitimacy, it is usually replaced by another, in the name of some other legitimacy. The history of all nations could be told through the history of changing legitimacies. When did the tsars of Russia cease to be legitimate in the eyes of their subjects ? And how many decades did it take for the October Revolution to lose its own legitimacy ? I cite Russia as an example, because we have all witnessed its dramatic switches of legitimacy, and because those changes have affected the whole world. But that was just an illustration of a fact observed throughout History : legitimacy might seem everlasting, it is not. With time, it wears off, and eventually vanishes altogether, often causing disorder and turmoil.

Why am I insisting on that point ? Because, in today's world, dozens of nations are governed by men who are not the fathers of independence, not the heroes of some patriotic struggle, not the leaders of a successful revolution, not the heirs of a respected dynasty, not the artisans of an economic miracle, not the winners of an honest vote. And who, therefore, have no legitimacy whatsoever. That is especially true when we turn our eyes towards the countries from where come those who commit the most spectacular acts of violence.

In a harmonious world — I'm not saying in an ideal world, just in a fairly harmonious world that could live and function and advance without major disasters —

most countries should be governed by people whose legitimacy is accepted, and under the umbrella of a world body whose legitimacy is also acknowledged.

Obviously, it isn't so in today's world. It's practically the opposite : many of our fellow humans live in countries whose rulers have lost all legitimacy, and under the suzerainty of a superpower whose legitimacy, outside its own territory, is questionable. A disturbing fact, from which many people nowadays jump to the conclusion that the whole world is out of the realm of law, or, to say it plainly, a jungle, ruled only by the force of cynicism and by the cynicism of force.

Once again, it is useless to put the blame on him or her or you or us or them. A situation has emerged which we ought to face, not by looking for culprits, but by looking for solutions. A world has emerged in which the issues of legitimacy, of moral credibility, and of cultural identity have become overwhelming, and unless we address them properly, we won't be able to resume our journey forwards and upwards.

I strongly believe that all of us, wherever we come from, must urgently place ourselves in a totally different state of mind. One of the lessons we should draw from the dreadful events that took place in the heart of Europe during the First World War, and throughout the Second World War, is that the borderline between civilization and savagery should not be confused with the borderline between one continent and the rest of the world.

The dividing line between civilization and barbarity, between humanity and bestiality, runs through every continent, through every nation, through every culture, through every religious community, through every social group. It even cuts through the mind and heart of each human being. For that reason, we should all leave aside our biases, our anathemas, our centuries-old habits of hostile characterization, of oversimplification, which often lead to violence on all sides. We ought to listen to the world with a high degree of fine tuning, we ought to observe it closely and thoroughly, keeping constantly in mind that there are no more strangers and no more foreigners in this world ; there are only neighbors. Everybody in this small world is our next door neighbor, and we can no more afford to ignore him, to ignore his thoughts, his needs, his hopes, his fears. We cannot afford to close ourselves to a world perceived as hostile, and bizarre, and impossible to understand. Even if it takes time, and effort, we ought to comprehend deeply and cleverly what is happening in our global neighborhood, because it is affecting our everyday life and it

will affect our future. For all the nations of the world will, from now on, remain our neighbors, for ever.

I come from a nation of nomads. My ancestors used to move from one oasis to another whenever the wells dried, or when the surroundings became hostile. When civil war began to shatter the enchanting country where I was born, a vicious war in which I was determined to take no part, we decided, my wife and I, to emigrate. We felt we had no right to let our children grow up in an atmosphere of violence and hatred and despair.

Many years later, during a trip to Lebanon, I found, with a bit of luck, the archives of my grand-father, who died in 1924, a quarter of a century before I was born. Going through these old papers, which no one in my family had ever read, I found a poem, written by his own hand, which said : « Whenever, in your city, the horizon gets narrow, just leave, just go away, for the land of God is broad... » I remained speechless, and dizzy, barely able to breathe. Because those words, which I had never set eyes on, were disturbingly similar to those which I had written, many decades after my grand-father, in my first novel, in which a character, Leo Africanus, a sixteenth century traveler, tells his son : « When men's minds seem narrow to you, remember that the land of God is broad... Never hesitate to go far away, beyond all seas, all frontiers, all countries, all creeds... »

What first struck me, while reading those lines, was that, by some amazing coincidence, or by some kind of ancestral atavism, I had unknowingly reproduced what was already inscribed, almost to the word, in my grandfather's papers under the date 1899. What struck me next was a disturbing question that came suddenly to my mind, and never ceased to haunt me ever since : what would happen if the whole world, all what my grand-father and I had both called the broad land of God, were to become equally narrow-minded ? Where could one go if the whole world were to become an inhospitable land, full of violence and hatred, full of frontiers nobody could cross without having his skin and his beliefs and his accent scrutinized ? I am still saying « if », out of politeness. But this is the world in which we are living today.

What to do, then ? Where to escape ? Thirty years ago, we were able, my family and I, to leave a country at war for another country. Sure enough, we won't be able to leave this planet for another planet. We only have this one, this blue planet of ours. We have no other choice but to cling to it, desperately, and strive to transform it into a better place.

This is the burden we'll all have to shoulder, wherever we were born, wherever we chose to live. This is the mission that History has ascribed to our generation. To politicians, to philosophers, to writers and teachers. To noble institutions like this one. But not only to them. Each one of us is required to think, and imagine, and speak, and learn, and find solutions, and try to implement them. This is not a matter of convenience, survival is at stake. This is our planet, this is our century, and we won't escape from either !

We're all embarked on that aircraft my uncle was alluding to. If it goes astray, we're all in danger. No one could afford to say : "That's not my problem ! I don't care whether the plane reaches its destination or not ! Leave me alone ! I'm just a passenger on this flight !"