

KAIROS-Preis 2010

Acceptance Speech by Andri Snær Magnason

(es gilt das gesprochene Wort/check against delivery)

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, my Dear Friends, Colleagues and my Dear Family og hæ - krakkar!

I would like to thank Mr. Christoph Stölzl and Mr. Halldór Guðmundsson for their kind words and all of you for this great honor.

If you ask an Icelandic child about Hamburg the first thing that will come to their mind is the word game that is often played when travelling in a car: "What are you doing with the money the lady from Hamburg gave to you?". You must answer but you may not say "yes", "no", "black" or "white". So you say: I bought a car. Was it red? Indeed. It was red? Not blue? No... Then you are out. So it was funny when I told my children we would actually meet the lady from Hamburg. But we had to use the money on something very special – something between yes and no, black and white. Maybe that is the real area where art lives.

But why did I take this path in life? If you ask my psychologist he would say that it is because I have two mothers – they are identical twins – that create a very good ground for a strange mind and some complexes – a double Oedipus to deal with for example. Despite sharing the same genes and upbringing – they have opposite views on everything. That I might have from my mothers, the ability to see things from two correct perspectives and never quite agree with myself.

If you would ask my brother he would blame it on Lego – I hoped I would never grow up from Lego. But later I found out that Lego is quite like language – you have prefabricated parts but can build a whole world from them. But the cool thing is that language is bigger, more bricks – and endless colours. Even an old language spoken by very few people - like Icelandic - can be used to create almost anything. And then it can be translated to German or Chinese.

If you ask my sister she would say that I would have become a doctor like my father, and my grandfather – and my great grandfather – if she hadn't become a brain surgeon first. She is a much better student than me and more disciplined. By becoming a brain surgeon she reduced the pressure on us brothers and gave us freedom. At least our parents could be proud of one child. Still I managed to take the first year in medicine – only leading to strange stories later published in my short story collection. One had something to do with anatomy – of a mermaid – if the sailor that caught the mermaid of his dreams would become disappointed when he understood that making love was

just a question of fertilizing the caviar in the kitchen sink.

If you ask my grandmother she would say something similar to what she said after my big launch lecture from the book Dreamland:

“I always thought you were retarded. But now I am not sure anymore.”

That was a compliment and she laughed. It might be people like her that give you most of the tools needed to write a book – that is if you want to use irony, sarcasm and black humour. And it helps to have been taught not to take things too seriously and especially not yourself.

My father would say it all comes from our family in north Iceland. My grandfather probably read too much of Tao when he was in his 50s – he lost all political, activist and career ambition. His only ambition was to live a simple, good and quiet life – he started renovating his deserted childhood farm, taking four months every summer to go up north to catch trout, birds and seal, collect eiderdown and just live. He left us nothing but a huge extended family that has not just met in funerals, but actually spent time together in the old house, flying in from all the corners of the world. From him we know most species of birds in Iceland – you can sit on one rock and hear 17 types of birds trying to distract you at the same time. That teaches you some respect and understanding of how nature works. And if an arctic tern attacks you – after flying from South-Africa to Iceland to lay its eggs - you deserve being attacked.

My grandfather was raised in a real crisis – The Great Depression. He was rich as a child because he was not hungry. The depression taught them to value earth’s resources, they ate everything – and tried to find use for everything. When he died 2006 he was buried in red socks he had knitted himself, we thought it was symbolic. But I was thinking: If my children become as old as my grandfather they would still be alive in the year 2093 – imagine that: 2093. And my grandchildren might still be alive in 2130.

Some people think science fiction is just a subculture for nerds, but just having children and imagining their fate is really science fiction. Just thinking about the world after 30 years is science fiction. 2093 is the expiring date of what we produce today. And sometimes, or most of the time, we treat the planet and it’s resources we live on like the year 2093 had nothing to do with us – and we do not connect the word sustainability to thoughts like “It might be a good idea to have some oil to harvest corn in the future.” And while we have no alternative solution it is morally wrong to waste the oil. So maybe a lack of fantasy creates a lack of realism in our lives, we underestimate our creative strength and do not have the ability to imagine the consequences of what we are doing today, despite all the knowledge and data. 1919 to 2130 – that is my time – the span of people I have actually met, loved, know or will know, love and meet. But we do not think in that length – we think in quarterly profit.

My daughters span might be 1926 - 2170.

My grandmother on my mother's side went on a three week honeymoon on Vatnajökull Glacier with my step grandfather. Parts of the Icelandic highlands were still an unknown and unnamed territory as late as 1956. One of the landmarks on the glacier is today called the Brides Belly. On that area, a high glacier plateau, they had to wait for three days for a snow storm to calm down. When I asked if they were not cold they were almost offended and said: Cold? We were just married! They were pioneers in the rugged and roadless highlands of Iceland – finding and naming places – that my generation is now fighting to preserve or develop. But it is not only in the hands of Icelanders. It has been calculated that The Brides Belly will have melted in the lifetime of my own grandchildren.

My other grandfather left my mothers in Iceland and became a chief Surgeon in the New York Hospital. He became quite successful – operated the Shaw of Iran and Oppenheimer. His sister was a babysitter for Tolkien in 1930 and I once asked her if she had any influence on his work – because Tolkien was writing the Hobbit at the time. She said: Well I taught his son an Old Icelandic children's rhyme:

"Í grænni lautu þar geymi ég hringinn sem mér var gefinn en hvar er hann nú?"

In translation:

"In the green meadows
I am keeping the ring –
that was given to me –
but where is it now? "

Looking at that you can wonder about the multiplier effect of words.

If you ask me why some of my books have actually been well received by readers it is because I have a very evil wife. She does not look evil but when she gets a manuscript she takes her evil pen and tears it to pieces. Scripts that come clean from the publisher with comments like "very good", "interesting", "excellent" get comments from her like "oh my god!", "Did you show this to anybody?", "Who can read this page?", "Do you understand this paragraph?", "Where is the logic?". So I spend half a year to meet her demands. There is nothing worse than a proof-reader that does not want to hurt your feelings. Such a person is not your friend. My friend once got horrible reviews, he called his reader that said he actually agreed – he just didn't want to hurt his feelings. He rather wanted him to be humiliated in the national press.

Kairos: I must admit I did not know this god very well – my mothers never taught me to

pray to him – but looking at some events in my life it seems like he has been pulling some strings – and yes I do admit I sometimes looked at the skies and wondered who was playing with the events. Sometimes I even thought it was coincidence.

For example when I wrote my book Dreamland I was writing about ideas, ideas as one of the main forces of an economy – and how a lack of ideas lead to a lack of creativity and overdependence on simple solutions of uncreative politicians. The American military base issue was very large in our politics. The cold war was over and they wanted to close the base down. That would mean a loss of 1000 jobs. And people said – this is devastating – they must not close down the base. And I wondered: Isn't that absurd. The cold war is over and people say that it's devastating. So I wondered if world peace would spread around the planet like a virus – we would see headlines all over: World peace threatens local economy. World peace: the tragedy of my life.

I wondered how language tells people that they are a product of a military base but not the force that keeps the base working - and could therefore keep anything working. How the language and the media's approach to problems disempowers people instead of showing a way out of a problem or giving an alternative solution. I decided to take a different approach to the issue – and wrote a whole scenario about the creative possibilities that would open up if the soldiers would leave the base. What other things could be done with all the facilities. It was fantasy, I was playing with ideas – but at the same time with very volatile issues.

Two days before the book came out the Americans announced they were closing the base. Some people actually thought I had inside information from the Pentagon. I had written 60 pages about what to do when the base would close – all the positive and creative opportunities – that was Kairos. Proactivism it can be called.

So I was quite aware that there was some god of timing up there that was pulling some strings on my life.

A Chinese curse says: May you live in interesting times. In Iceland there are for sure very interesting times at the moment – maybe a bit too interesting – because who needs fiction when constant shocking news cover the media. Total collapse if we do this – total collapse if we don't do it. Who needs drama when you have headlines like these?

Times like these are good and bad for art. Art often needs a firm ground to stand on – a reality that will not change for the two years it takes to make a project, like a film, or a novel. In Iceland everything changes by the week. We are floating in thin air. Art can be well received because it has the right opinion, expresses the right anger – but in the long run – maybe it was not good art.

An artist always has to balance between the urgent issues and the long term labour of

art – and be careful that each element nourishes the other.

In Iceland our authorities decided to create an economic bubble with an industrial bubble. They decided to double the energy production in Iceland from 2002 to 2008 – and after that – by redoubling the production. They offered many of the most fragile, beautiful and biologically diverse areas in Iceland as a source of cheap energy to many of the most destructive companies in the world. We knew that the economic benefit would only last during the construction gold rush - then we would have a crash. To double the energy production of a developed nation is unheard of, the scale is enormous. But it was not considered madness – it was considered inevitable progress. People were silenced for being critical. To be critical, to go against the propaganda was considered as extremism – even as economic terrorism.

This had a tremendous effect on artists in Iceland. Many believed that these areas were more important than anything they could create from their own mind. Friends of mine stopped in fact making art and started walking. They took hundreds of people for long walks into the rugged highlands with tents to show them the endangered places. It was after one of those walks that I decided that a proper novel could wait – so I made Dreamland the book and the film.

In Iceland the crisis is not new – it has been underlying for years – even though international rating companies looked at our economic growth and called Iceland an economic miracle. When you are in a bubble – an economic or ideological bubble – it covers all the spectrums of your daily life and thinking – it becomes almost impossible to think beyond the bubble. A bubble has its own force of gravity – it marks the orbit that your thoughts and language can rotate. You can only go a certain distance from the bubble – as go your thoughts, language and choice of words.

When the bubble bursts, the language changes – positive words become their own opposites and vice versa – words like bank, wealth, profit have a completely different meaning. And that is one of the interesting things in Iceland today – when there is no gravity anymore for our thought to circulate – then everything becomes possible – and then again the question arises: What do you do as an artist? Should you keep writing the story you started long before – in another era – or should you join the debate, or find other forms for your expression.

In Iceland today the most urgent issue is to keep people active after jobs or industries go bust. We need to recreate the economy. Politicians will not save us. The solutions must come from the grassroots, the energy of the people.

A few days after the economy collapsed I met a friend of mine – an architect. She was laying-off ten of her employees – very talented young architects. She had been talking to a carpenter friend that was talking about all the equipment and skills that were going to waste. We have well educated people that have lost their jobs, we have skilled

workers that are not building a house in the next years. We have unused machines and a government up to their ears in problems. So one of the interesting things in the crisis is how people that have never met, start working together. I got involved in a group that has taken over a huge power station in Reykjavík that has been empty for 20 years. In that building we are gathering people together. Architects, designers, skilled workers, old men with their mechanical knowhow and young people looking for a direction and ideas of what to do in the future. In this house we want to make a prototype centre for new ideas and sustainable products.

Kairos is the god of the right moment.

I had just been wondering last September after spending too much time on this power station concept – what a crazy career I was creating – I had become the publishers nightmare. Making a book of poetry, when asked for another I made short stories, asked for a novel I made a CD with old Icelandic Folk music, then a children's book, that did quite well and has been published in 20 countries, but instead of a follow up I made LoveStar – a book not suitable for children but cyber punk science fiction for adults – about an enormous Icelandic company that causes the end of the world. Yes you can call that prophetic. When asked for a proper novel – I made political non fiction and then a documentary film.

In the publishing world the fiction publisher does not know any children's book publishers and they know nothing about non fiction or poetry and they have no interest in film festival success. If not writing I was busy doing public lectures, mobilising people, nature concert organisation and activism, had become some kind of an energy and aluminium expert. My friend kindly said: You will never get anywhere if you scatter your carrier on plays, poetry, films, babies and power stations. But I asked him: Why does nobody understand diversity – why do you have to make a lifelong commitment to one art form. Why should I always have to be a poet? Why do I need to acquire the identity of a film maker, or novelist, or playwright. Why dedicate to one form? Should an artist not seize what form he thinks that fits the moment? And if no form fits the moment – sometimes it's better just to walk or participate in making a power station.

Then Kairos called.

I want to thank Elín Hansdóttir and Darri Lorenzen. I have been told that they pitched my name to the Toepfer institute. Emiliana, Pétur, Hilmar, Páll and Steindór for the music and joining us. Mamma pabbi, Hulda, Jón Pétur – Magga – og krakkar! And my posses! I would like to thank my publisher for his patience, my collaborators during the years, codirectors, cowriters, codesigners and coworkers. Birte, Uta and Ansgar! Thank you!

Andri Snær Magnason, 28th of February 2010

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