

New Year's Speech 2008
His Royal Highness King Harald
December 31, 2008

“No man is an island—entire of itself.” The English poet and preacher wrote this in the 1600s.

I want to use the last day of the year to reflect on what binds us humans together. We need to remind each other of this—as we meet the global challenges that greet us, but also as we meet our own everyday.

In November we marked the 60th anniversary of the UN’s adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Agreement on this declaration crosses cultures and borders. But if examine it more closely, perhaps it should not be taken for granted, even in our democratic and safe part of the world.

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” it states.

If we really had absorbed this, the world would look different than it does today. It concerns me that people in our own country still are discriminated against because of the color of their skin. We experience it in work life, the housing market and in encounters with the public sector.

Fortunately we also can see that important work is being done throughout the entire country to dismantle differences and use the valuable resource that our cultural diversity represents. In many youth milieus it has become completely normal to be part of a group of friends from many different countries. We who are older have much to learn from the young and their natural relationship to a multicultural every day.

We must all dare to discuss this subject without placing each other in the periphery. We must take the trouble to have a nuanced debate in order to make progress.

If we had recognized that all human beings are equally valuable, we would not have tolerated that some are met with condescending attitudes because they struggle with drug addiction. One woman I met said to me, “No one has any idea how much it costs to walk with your head high when I am turned away time after time. I have to remind myself who I really am –not how others see me.”

You need a strong back to walk with dignity through humiliation. I wish we would stop using the phrase “society’s weakest.” In reality some of these are the strongest among us.

We are all responsible for assuring that we and our fellow human beings can live dignified lives. This responsibility is not something we get, but something we take.

If we go back to the Declaration of Human Rights, it continues: “Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family.”

Many of us have experienced the privilege of marrying for love. It is a great gift—at the same time it is a human right to be able to make one of life’s most important choices on one’s own behalf. Unfortunately there are tremendous differences around the world in this area. It is important to learn about – and to try to understand—each other’s cultures. But we must guard against silently accepting harmful traditions that are in conflict with the human rights we have sworn to uphold.

Everyone also has the right for freedom of opinion and expression.

It isn’t always easy to grant this right to each other. The simplest thing is to ban what we do not like. But our democracy is based precisely on the freedom to disagree and courage to express it.

Prohibition is the weapon of fear. Tolerance is security’s.

Even so we constantly see examples of how challenging freedom of expression is. The Internet has become an arena for open debates and free expression. It a strength for democracy that many can and desire to participate actively in this way. But now and then we should reflect on how we use the freedom of expression. Some people experience being publicly belittled. Then it isn’t easy to go out and meet one’s colleagues or fellow students again. Fortunately there are active measures being taken to protect individuals against disrespectful attacks—and irresponsible writers from themselves.

A society is created in the tension between duties and rights, between responsibility and possibilities. None of us can expect others to make us happy without having to do something ourselves. Those who think that will soon be disappointed. This also applies in couples, friends, at work and in society. Some feel that they are prevented from participating fully in community. To be able to contribute and take responsibility gives us an essential feeling of dignity and self-respect. Others abuse arrangements specially designed for those who need them. As a society we must give opportunities to those who want them – and care and security to those who cannot.

Many go into the new year with uncertainty and concern. The financial crisis affects us all. We still don’t have an overview of the consequences it will have. But we already know that daily life—both for private individuals and businesses—is dramatic. Thousands of jobs are disappearing. Entire chains of value are breaking because one link breaks. For some it has affected their personal finances badly. Some are in danger of losing their homes---and with that the secure frame that helps daily life hang together. The situation we are in is more serious than we are accustomed to in today’s Norway. It will require much of us all in the time ahead—both in order to keep up our courage and to tackle the circumstances on many levels.

In some parts of the world the uncertain global economy contributes to a worsening of humanitarian crises. It is precisely in such a time when we ourselves are affected that we must try to reach beyond ourselves. In addition there are other big tasks that need our attention and action at the same time.

Climate changes become more and more significant. We have seen how they affect development work and the fight against poverty. We often say that posterity will judge our generation by how we handle the climate crisis. But there is also another aspect: We have a responsibility to take care of nature for its own sake. Everything of nature and animal life has its own value in the whole. We can choose whether we want to break down or preserve this whole.

Both the financial and climate crises remind us how closely we humans are tied to each other. Things that happen here in Norway affect those who live on the other side of the globe. And what happens far away affects us here at home. As John Donne goes on to say in his poem: “Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved with mankind.”

Also this year conflicts in various parts of the world have come brutally close to us. We can barely comprehend the tragedy in Congo. Tens of thousands of innocents are being killed. People are subjected to, or forced to do, actions that will damage them for life. Something that also has made a deep impression on me is how people who have nearly nothing help those who have even less. I read about a refugee Congolese mother who already had nine children she couldn’t manage to feed. Even so, she saw it as her duty to take in and protect three little strangers who had lost their parents.

This evening I want to send special greetings to Norwegian men and women who are working with humanitarian efforts in conflict zones—and all who contribute to the work for peace and stability in the Defense and Foreign Service.

Earlier this year the journalist Carsten Thomassen lost his life in Afghanistan. At the memorial service his partner said something that can be a reminder to us all: “Stay high up!”

She quoted her deceased husband who thought that this was the first commandment in order to avoid getting lost on mountain tours. Those who are used to walking in the mountains know that this is a good rule. But it is also an guiding principal to enable us to look beyond our own situation in difficult times.

The poet Gabriel Scott has written a book about the fisherman Markus and his relationship to everything around him. Among other things he writes: “Markus didn’t have a great place to live. There are lots of people who have it a lot better on the outside. (...) But Markus has his on the inside, where he has more than most people. (...) That’s where he has happiness, trust and hope, where he has strength and power and light. He gets it from the mountain he walks on, pulls it into himself from the meadow and the earth, squeezes it out of nature itself.”

I think there is a danger today that we build up much too much of our identity around achievements and visibility—and that we judge both ourselves and each other this way.

Many experience that unhealthy demands are made in our work lives. For some this leads to illness. Young people tell about the pressure of expectations at school, home, from friends and through role models created through the media. We adults have a responsibility to support the young to become whole people who make conscious choices; who don't think that value lies in being smartest, prettiest, or most popular. In the new year we can simply encourage each other to relax a bit with regard to external demands.

In 2008 we marked the 100th anniversary of Olav H. Hauge's birth. He says: "Many a man's unhappiness comes from wanting to be what he is not." Every one of us is sufficient as we are.

Through this year's TV-action, which went to the Blue Cross, I met many courageous children who were not able to be who they were—children. We were reminded of those who must take on much too great and too early responsibility—by being caregivers to their own parents. It is my hope that we must manage to see young people who are in pain and help them. On the last day of the year I want to say to those of you who experience this: it is not your fault that your parents are struggling.

New Year's Eve is a time to remind each other what we are working for and where we are headed. King Haakon's speeches to his people during the War carried a clear message: Stand united as a nation and work untiringly for the country's freedom and independence.

To day Norwegian society consists of people from many countries and cultures. Together we are building Norway.

Together we will be a people who have the security to see the best in each other. Together we will be able to live as whole, fallible people in a generous Norway.

Happy New Year.