

Remain true to your best dreams

Speech by Gunnar Westberg at the Students Pre-congress at Basel, Switzerland, Aug. 26 2010.

Here is the complete manuscript. Because the previous speakers had expressed some of the ideas in this text, a much shortened and changed text was delivered.

Dear colleagues!

Roman asked me to tell My story, how I came to work against nuclear war.

Since I was very young I have taken it as a matter of course that I had some responsibility for the world and for mankind. I do not where I got that preposterous idea, that little Gunnar in any way was responsible for the world. This has in any case remained my “problem”. I am to some extent responsible. Maybe I am a dreamer, but I am not the only one. When we are young, many of us are that way. For many the dream withers, but some keep it green. I often say: There is so little I can do. Do that! That is not much of a dream, but it has stayed with me

As many of you recognize, this is a motto of Amnesty International. And there I ended up for a while. Being a medical student and later a doctor I came to work against torture. I found I could not for long work with that problem. The pictures, the stories of torture invaded my mind, disturbed my sleep at night. I had to leave that work.

Then came IPPNW. And a person, a pediatrician named Helen Caldicot. I saw her movie “If you love this planet”. I remember my awakening shortly after having seen that movie. I was pushing the buggy with my third child up a hill. I looked at him and thought: Maybe nuclear war will end his life and the life of everybody on this lovely planet. There must be ways to stop this!

HelenCaldicot also talked about he medical profession and nuclear war. Why doctors? Three reasons: 1.Nulcear war is he greatest threat to the survival of mankind, and of our patients. 2. We are trained to tell the bad news.3. We have a certain credibility as long as we stay with the medical message

To work against nuclear war was the responsibility of a doctor, was my responsibility.

So I took it upon me to learn about nuclear weapons and to look for ways to get rid of them. I felt that if everyone learnt what I had learnt, people would unite and demand that the nukes be abolished. I had to convince people: I must and it can be done.

You have chosen to become doctors.

Why did you make this choice. There are many reasons, but I believe that there is one reason which is common to all of you. You want to help.

Why do we want to help?

I know not why you want to help. But I know that when I look back at a day, or at a week I feel happy if I think I have helped someone. You probably feel the same, or you would not be here. So it is all for selfish reasons that we want to help, to I want to feel pleased with ourselves? Possibly that is so. We do good things because we feel good about doing these good things. That is not the whole story, certainly, but one side of it.

But we can train ourselves both ways. We can learn to forget our duty, and our right, to help, and say: I don't have the time. Let someone else taken care of that person's problems. The temptation will be there for you. I have seen that so often: Young medical students with a great desire to help the patients, seen them loose the fire in their eyes and become to some degree cynical and selfish already in medical school. Teachers and doctors are sometimes bad examples that make you forget why you choose to become a doctor. You can forget your dream.

But instead we can train ourselves to see, to understand the need of others. You can nurture your dream – not only to be a qualified doctor, well trained in diagnosis and therapy, but someone who tries to understand and to help.

There are obstacles. You will have much to do. The first years as a young doctor means long hours of hard work. And then there is the family. For most of you family and work will be the most important things in your life. To balance these two sides will be difficult.

Will there be time for anything else? There must be. There must be a time for yourself. If there is no time for yourself, you will at last be bitter and disappointed.

So there it is. Work. Family. Some time for myself. But to work for a better world? No time? Well, sometimes there is no time, but keep looking, after a few years as a young doctor maybe you will find time to return to your hopes for a better world again. And in the meantime, try to stay connected with IPPNW, try to come to a meeting now and then, and a few years later you may start again.

For obviously **you** are among those who want to do something to improve the world. That is why you have chosen to come to this meeting of an organization of doctors which works to prevent the greatest catastrophe, which could mean the end of mankind. You have understood that this threat is real. Most people today do not know this, that even today the threat against our survival is there, that still the president of Russia or of the USA can press

the button and exterminate mankind. Because they do not know, they cannot be expected to take responsibility. But you have understood. With knowledge comes responsibility.

Responsibility, duty, or dream? Maybe there is no contradiction? To be able to take responsibility for your patients, is both your duty and your dream. To be a good doctor is both a duty and in your dreams. To do what you can prevent the nuclear holocaust, now when you know, is both a duty and a dream.

And if you forget your dreams, you lose your soul.

Here is one possible end of the delivery. The experiences related below were to some extent presented.

Do doctors have a duty to intervene in society, in politics, as doctors, as experts? If you see patients coming to the emergency room addicted to a new hallucinogenic substance, do you have a responsibility to report this to the social and medical authorities? And if these do not act, and the problem increases, is it your duty to take action, for instance by contacting politicians or writing in news papers? Not every doctor does that.

About 1993 I visited with other members of IPPNW the Russian city of Archangelsk, in the far north. We noted at that time that goiter, enlargement of the thyroid gland, was very common in young women in the area. We asked the doctors about the cause. Iodine deficiency was the answer. In the Soviet Union there had been a few factories where iodine was added to salt, which then was sold all over the country. Now when the Soviet Union had fallen apart, salt was no longer enriched with iodine. "For heaven's sake, do something about this", I said. No, that is decided in Moscow the doctors responded. "But have you told the Ministry of Health of this problem", I asked? Well, no, it would be no use, they said. The ministry does not like to hear complaints of this kind. I got very upset, but what I observed was just a sign that at that time, twenty years ago, democracy was very new in Russia. **Democracy requires that citizens take responsibility.** The doctors must go to Moscow and raise hell until the problem is solved. Who else would do that?

In the year 1847 the government in Berlin sent a young doctor, only 25 years old, to investigate the cause of the recurring fever in Upper Silesia. His name was Rudolf Virchow. He found the farmers there living in the most abject squalor. Education was nonexistent Dr Virchow write in his report on the conditions and concluded that the epidemic was caused by the social conditions. The government has done nothing for uSilesia my only treatment plan is full and unlimited democracy. Schools, roads and a land reform is what is needed to stop the epidemic".

Thus wrote the very young doctor. Did he as a doctor have the right to not only describe the situation and make is diagnosis – that the epidemic was caused by the social conditions – but also to propose political solutions? Did he as a doctor have a special expertise in politics? Did Virchow go to far?

I leave this question open, for you to discuss.

You have come to understand that nuclear war is the greatest threat to the survival of mankind. As a doctor you have the right and duty to explain this threat to the public and to politicians. But do we have the right to say that the only solution is the abolition of all nuclear weapons? I believe we have. We

have studied the psychology of decision making in stressful situations, and we can with some medical authority say that humans make mistakes and there is no way to avoid this. And you can never *never* make a mistake when it comes to nuclear weapons. So we have a medical argument there.

But when we say that abolition is the only response, is that a medical argument, really? I believe it is, but it is not a matter of course. One way to solve the problem is to ask the person you are discussing with if he sees any other way. Such a Socratic, *maieutic*, approach usually works well.

Yes, I believe you have many dreams. They will be forgotten for long periods, when the medical career, the family responsibility or financial problems occupy your mind and time. But always try to return to your most important dreams, the dream of being a good doctor, of helping people and helping to create a healthy community. And the hope of removing the greatest threat, nuclear war. If you have to leave IPPW for a while, try to come back when you have more time.

If you forget your dreams, you will lose yourself.