

Our Pursuit of Science and Health

*Dinner Remarks at the School of Public Health "Healthier World" Conference
October 14, 1994*

ANY SCHOOL that cares seriously about the public and its welfare, that sets out to improve the general health of all peoples, and that concentrates on prevention rather than on convalescence must be inherently optimistic, very smart, quick off the mark, and the very opposite of value-neutral. That's the kind of school – if I only were bright enough to be admitted – that I would like to join. But if I cannot be a true participant, I am delighted at least to be an interloper.

I read carefully through the program of presentations and discussions. It does sound, I admit, wonderfully upbeat. John Spengler's talk, as I remember, is entitled, "Every Breath You Take: Toxins in the Air." Then Tim Ford will entertain you with "Water, Water Everywhere: Is There a Drop to Drink?" Then Walter Willett: "Red Flags on the Menu: Finding Your Way through the Nutritional Maze." Later, Mary Wilson will say something about the health hazards of travel – namely, that we humans seem to be extremely attractive food for every conceivable kind of parasite in every part of the globe.

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All of this, I know, will be stimulating, illuminating, and intellectually exciting – as well as important. But, I am glad that my own remarks at this dinner, held in the darkened and no doubt polluted air of downtown Boston, a city surrounded by undrinkable harbor waters that must be inhabited by invisible parasitical marvels beyond our most fertile imagining – I am quite glad that this dinner is happening now, before you learn later that it may be a colossal mistake for you to breathe, travel, eat, or even sit next to one another.

This particular ordering of events – dinner tonight, warnings of nutritional disaster tomorrow – should be taken, therefore, as testimony to our humility, wisdom, and relish of festivity, as well as our pursuit of science and public health. Because while we care deeply about the environment and its effects on human beings, we also do recognize that we cannot control everything during every one of our waking moments. Let us, therefore, be mildly irresponsible gourmets and moderate imbibers this evening, oblivious to the invisible noxious environmental gremlins that are certainly everywhere in our midst at this very moment.

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Many of the problems – and potential solutions – that you will be hearing about are new. But they also represent something of the School's continuity and its historical mission. For instance, in 1936, at Harvard's 300th anniversary, this school had a major symposium called "The Environment and Its Effect upon Man." What were the topics? They included a panel on "Airborne Infection"; another on "Industrial Fatigue" – I'm not sure whether we've actually cured that problem, or whether we've simply resigned ourselves to living with it; then there was "Toxic Dust or Fumes"; and then something quite ominous and fancy called "Toxic Organic Vapors and Gases," which apparently infiltrated themselves everywhere at that time.

Yes, there is real continuity and some similarity in the topics

and concerns of the School, in spite of the obvious differences in nomenclature over the past sixty years. Is there also a significant change, beyond the nomenclature? I believe so. An important emphasis – not the only one, but a strong one – in some of the titles of tomorrow’s presentations, introduces the active agent “you” as well as the external objective, environmental objects around you. The focus, in other words, is not simply on the environment but also on what individuals can do through knowledge, awareness, habit, exercise, attention to nutrition, personal choice – through our *behavior*, in other words – to improve our own health and that of the larger population. We are clearly seeking ways to help purify the world outside ourselves. Yet, equally, we are trying to discover what we ourselves can do – through our behavior – to make life more healthy, productive, and satisfying.

This sense of vitality and activity – of emphasizing the active and purposeful individual and our ability to alter conditions in the world, not simply be victimized by them – pervades the spirit of the School of Public Health and its many activities. Let me offer just a few more – somewhat different – examples:

Within the last year, teams of researchers from the School of Public Health have conducted fact-finding missions to Bosnia, Iraq, Haiti, and other trouble-spots, to study and document the different ways in which political upheaval takes a toll on the health of innocent people.

Next, the School is sponsoring a pilot program in a Baltimore public school, for students in grades four through eight: it is called “Eat Well and Keep Moving.” The hope, of course, is to teach young children about nutrition, exercise, and healthy habits that can last them a lifetime.

Finally, there is a new initiative, using the media – especially television dramas – to try to have an impact on teenage gangs and violence. The initiative is aptly called “Squash It”: when individual teenagers or gangs dare one another to fight, the cool thing to do is for someone to say, “Squash it” – to interrupt the dynamics, call

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the situation to a halt, and allow the young people to disengage “honorably” by agreeing to follow a new set of rules. This program is in its early stages, but it is a promising new start.

And so I am pleased that we are gathered together this evening to celebrate this school and its programs, its commitments, and its care. As the very opposite of value-neutral it points us – and leads us – in the very directions that we ought, as a University, to follow in our various pursuits, including those of science and of health.