

Acknowledging the Past, Committing to the Future^{*}

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The most gratifying of duties is to be grateful. I would like my first words as dean designate to be a fulfillment of this duty.

First of all, I would like to thank Drew Faust. Like is so common in the academic world, my first contact with her came through the written word, when I read her splendid inaugural address as Harvard President. I was immediately inspired by her vision, and this inspiration grew through our successive face-to-face meetings. Thank you, Drew, for the great honor you have bestowed on me by appointing me as dean of the Harvard School of Public Health.

Second, I thank Steve Hyman for his encouragement and orientation throughout the selection process, which I

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know will continue through the transition period and during my service as dean.

Third, I would like to express my gratitude to Barry Bloom. Barry has been a friend of many years and a colleague in many causes. I cannot thank you enough, Barry, for your constant advice and also for agreeing to stay on until the end of the year, thus facilitating my transition. Most of all, thank you for your distinguished service as dean. You have built a rich legacy that will make my job so much easier, as it became clear to me when I read your marvelous letter to your successor. I feel immensely fortunate to arrive at such a strong school both in academic and financial terms.

I would also like to thank the members of the search advisory group for their valuable contribution to the selection process. More broadly, I acknowledge all the members of School of Public Health faculty and their collaborators throughout the University, because it has

been their talent and commitment that has brought the School to the distinguished place it now occupies. The list of seminal contributions that this School has made to public health has few parallels in the world.

My thanks also go to the dedicated staff members of the School, who make our mission possible; to the students, who represent such a critical part of that mission; and to the wide network of distinguished alumni and donors, who do so much to support the School.

As you can see, I have many persons to thank for this, my most recent interaction with Harvard. But I must say that my debt of gratitude towards this University goes back many, many years.

Something very few of you know is that I was almost born in Boston. My father was a fellow at Children's Hospital while my twin sister and I were enjoying the comfort of embryonic life. The amazing coincidence is that he did his experimental work in a laboratory located none

less than in the basement of the Harvard School of Public Health. My mother decided to deliver my twin sister and me in Mexico, not for patriotic reasons but simply to have access to her support network. We came back to Boston when my sister and I were three months old, and we spent the rest of our first year of life in this marvelous city. It may well be that that this early “imprinting” explains why I keep returning to Boston.

Without going quite so back into prehistory, the fact is that many crucial dimensions of my adult life have had a connection to Harvard. My mentor, Avedis Donabedian, who taught me the love of scholarship, was a Harvard graduate. One of the most inspiring persons I have ever worked with, Gro Brundtland, is a distinguished alumna. I even married a Harvard graduate. My wife Felicia Knaul developed academically here under the mentorship of Amartya Sen.

More specifically, my relationship to the Harvard School of Public Health has been extremely enriching for me. In

addition to Barry, I have had the privilege of interacting closely with the two other living deans of the School: Howard Hiatt and Harvey Fineberg.

Indeed, this School has been a constant presence in every major cycle of my professional life. As early as 1984, when I had just finished my graduate studies and had returned to Mexico to start what in time would become the National Institute of Public Health, Jaime Sepúlveda, another distinguished alumnus, introduced me to Harvey Fineberg, who had just be appointed dean. It was the right encounter at the right time. I must have caught Harvey off guard, but the fact is that he accepted my invitation to join an international advisory committee for a still nonexistent Institute. With an amazing degree of generosity, Harvey devoted seven years of creative advice that laid the foundation for one of the most enriching academic relationships I have ever witnessed. The Institute is now the leading center of research and higher learning in public health in the developing world. This is an example of

capacity building without creating dependence. Many of you in this room have been key figures in this exchange.

Then, when I finished my term as director of the Institute in 1992, it was only natural for me to open a new cycle by taking a sabbatical year at the Center for Population and Development Studies. This was one of the most productive periods in my life, yielding many books and papers and also the design of a comprehensive policy review that would be the basis of evidence-based reform in Mexico.

When I became minister of Health of Mexico in 2000, I had the opportunity to apply those methods to the design and implementation of a major health system reform that was subject to a rigorous evaluation by a team of top researchers, naturally from Harvard.

When that professional cycle ended as I finished my term as minister in December of 2006, my very first opportunity to speak in public was the invitation by Barry Bloom to deliver a lecture in this same place. On that

occasion I said that, after six years in the battlefields of policy design and implementation, I was returning to this temple of higher learning in a pilgrimage of gratitude.

And now here I am, at the beginning of a new cycle, one that will take my relationship with the School to new levels. It is my good fortune that my service as dean will now give me the opportunity to pay back at least part of all that I have received from this great School and this great University. How do I intend to do so?

My first duty will be to listen, starting right now with the transition period. Throughout the fall, I plan to spend at the School several days every month in order to better prepare myself before I take office as dean on January, 2009. I can hardly wait to start the job full time, but these intervening months will help me to understand your concerns and aspirations and also to begin to develop close collaborative relationships with other parts of the University. In this

respect, I thank the deans of other faculties who accompany us at this reception.

The transition period will also serve to articulate the vision that will guide my deanship. Let me, however, already share with you a very broad outline of some of my initial ideas, many of which have evolved over my career in public health and most of which will be shaped and sharpened by my interaction with you.

If there is one keyword that I can use to characterize that vision, it is “integration.” I have always seen public health as a crossroads where multiple dimensions intersect: biology and society, individual and population, science and scholarship, evidence and ethics, analysis and action, the local and the global, excellence and relevance.

The main challenge to public health is to avoid false dichotomies or divisive reductionisms and instead fully embrace its wealth of disciplines and perspectives in an integrative framework. This in no way denies the

importance of specialization and analytical depth, but it does challenge us with the need to build integrative bridges that better allow us to understand and act upon the complexity of health conditions and systems.

The Harvard School of Public Health is already distinguished by its comprehensive reach. Few other schools have similar laboratory capacity to conduct cutting-edge biomedical research, while at the same time excelling, as our School does, in the quantitative and population disciplines, as well as the social, behavioral, and policy sciences. I fully intend to strengthen this extraordinary research capacity.

Few other schools have been as successful as ours in translating rigorous analysis into major policy initiatives, as demonstrated, among many other examples, by the admirable work on tobacco control. I am fully committed to this topic in particular and, more generally, to the irreplaceable role of the university in the development of a

scientific foundation for public policy. Such a role becomes even more prominent in moments of political transition like the one the United States is undergoing now.

This School is also recognized worldwide because of the quality of its educational mission. Its alumni are prominent leaders in research, education, policy, and practice, thus multiplying the School's influence. Continuing to attract the most talented students from all over the world will be a top priority for me.

And this leads me to underscore another strong point of the School, namely, the creative way in which it has been able to combine a truly global outlook with its excellent work around the most important health issues on the domestic agenda. Of course, there ought to be no dichotomy between the global and the domestic levels. Global health should not be taken to mean "foreign health." Instead, its key notion is interdependence among all populations in the world, which is generating new challenges and

opportunities. Salient among the latter is the potential for shared learning among countries, of the type that a world-class university like Harvard can help to systematize and disseminate.

All of these sources of strength in the current work of the School offer a firm foundation for progress, which could not come at a better time. Public health is at the threshold of a new era fueled by four simultaneous revolutions: in the life sciences, in the information and communication technologies, in systems thinking, allowing us to comprehend and transform complexity, and, last but certainly not least, what Michel Ignatieff, formerly at the Kennedy School, has called the rights revolution, which provides the ethical foundation for so much of our work in public health.

There is no other school in the world that is as well positioned as ours to lead this new era of public health. In addition to all the strong points I have already mentioned,

the prospect of a new campus in Allston offers the once-in-a-generation opportunity to design and literally build an innovative space, both physical and academic, for what public health should be in the 21st century. I fully share the position of the President and the Provost in the sense of assuring that the development of this strategic project will be responsive to all concerns, perspectives, and expectations, so that we may carry forth a proposal that will be at once sustainable and transformational.

Even as the planning for a new material construction continues, let us keep building the multiple intellectual bridges that integration requires: bridges to the Medical School and the affiliated hospitals, so we may fully take advantage of synergies and complementarities; bridges to the other faculties, so we may enrich public health with the wealth of academic resources that sets this University apart from others; bridges to the whole world, so we may continue generating knowledge as the ultimate global public good; bridges to the past and the future, so that we may be

accountable to both, as Drew Faust beautifully put it in her inaugural speech; bridges to the realm of policy and practice, so that we continue to make science and scholarship the enlightened forces for purposeful social transformation. It is this belief in the power of disciplined creativity and rigorous evidence to improve our complex world that unifies the various positions I have held until now and that brings me here with you today. Let me reiterate my eagerness to listen closely to the entire community—faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors—in order to learn more about your aspirations and vision for the School.

As I join this community, I am fully aware of the heritage of excellence that I am privileged to receive. I can set no higher goal for myself than to be a worthy successor to the previous deans of the School of Public Health. I can find no challenge more inspiring than to become a commendable companion to the men and women who have made Harvard the great institution it is today. Standing firmly on this outstanding platform of past and present achievements, I

shall always strive to be a reliable steward of the future legacy that we will build together.