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Nobel Lecture (phragment)

...So we come to the present. I woke up recently to the realisation I'd been living for some years in a bubble. That I'd failed to notice the frustration and anxieties of many people around me. I realised that my world – a civilised, stimulating place filled with ironic, liberal-minded people – was in fact much smaller than I'd ever imagined. 2016, a year of surprising – and for me depressing – political events in Europe and in America, and of sickening acts of terrorism all around the globe, forced me to acknowledge that the unstoppable advance of liberal-humanist values I'd taken for granted since childhood may have been an illusion.

I'm part of a generation inclined to optimism, and why not? We watched our elders successfully transform Europe from a place of totalitarian regimes, genocide and historically unprecedented carnage to a much-envied region of liberal democracies living in near-borderless friendship. We watched the old colonial empires crumble around the world together with the reprehensible assumptions that underpinned them. We saw significant progress in feminism, gay rights and the battles on several fronts against racism. We grew up against a backdrop of the great clash – ideological and military – between capitalism and communism, and witnessed what many of us believed to be a happy conclusion.

But now, looking back, the era since the fall of the Berlin Wall seems like one of complacency, of opportunities lost. Enormous inequalities – of wealth and opportunity – have been allowed to grow, between nations and within nations. In particular, the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the long years of austerity policies imposed on ordinary people following the scandalous economic crash of 2008, have brought us to a present in which Far Right ideologies and tribal nationalisms proliferate. Racism, in its traditional forms and in its modernised, better-marketed versions, is once again on the rise, stirring beneath our civilised streets like a buried monster awakening. For the moment we seem to lack any progressive cause to unite us. Instead, even in the wealthy democracies of the West, we're fracturing into rival camps from which to compete bitterly for resources or power.

And around the corner – or have we already turned this corner? – lie the challenges posed by stunning breakthroughs in science, technology and medicine. New genetic technologies – such as the gene-editing technique CRISPR – and advances in Artificial Intelligence and robotics will bring us amazing, life-saving benefits, but may also create savage

meritocracies that resemble apartheid, and massive unemployment, including to those in the current professional elites.

So here I am, a man in my sixties, rubbing my eyes and trying to discern the outlines, out there in the mist, to this world I didn't suspect even existed until yesterday. Can I, a tired author, from an intellectually tired generation, now find the energy to look at this unfamiliar place? Do I have something left that might help to provide perspective, to bring emotional layers to the arguments, fights and wars that will come as societies struggle to adjust to huge changes?

I'll have to carry on and do the best I can. Because I still believe that literature is important, and will be particularly so as we cross this difficult terrain. But I'll be looking to the writers from the younger generations to inspire and lead us. This is their era, and they will have the knowledge and instinct about it that I will lack. In the worlds of books, cinema, TV and theatre I see today adventurous, exciting talents: women and men in their forties, thirties and twenties. So I am optimistic. Why shouldn't I be?

But let me finish by making an appeal – if you like, my Nobel appeal! It's hard to put the whole world to rights, but let us at least think about how we can prepare our own small corner of it, this corner of 'literature', where we read, write, publish, recommend, denounce and give awards to books. If we are to play an important role in this uncertain future, if we are to get the best from the writers of today and tomorrow, I believe we must become more diverse. I mean this in two particular senses.

Firstly, we must widen our common literary world to include many more voices from beyond our comfort zones of the elite first world cultures. We must search more energetically to discover the gems from what remain today unknown literary cultures, whether the writers live in far away countries or within our own communities. Second: we must take great care not to set too narrowly or conservatively our definitions of what constitutes good literature. The next generation will come with all sorts of new, sometimes bewildering ways to tell important and wonderful stories. We must keep our minds open to them, especially regarding genre and form, so that we can nurture and celebrate the best of them. In a time of dangerously increasing division, we must listen. Good writing and good reading will break down barriers. We may even find a new idea, a great humane vision, around which to rally.

To the Swedish Academy, the Nobel Foundation, and to the people of Sweden who down the years have made the Nobel Prize a shining symbol for the good we human beings strive for – I give my thanks.