President Jimmy Carter

The Hope of Our Future World

Address Delivered at the Skoll World Forum 2008

My favorite cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine is of a young boy looking up at his father and saying, "Daddy, when I grow up, I want to be a former president." Well, one reason the little boy said that—and I agree with him—is to be able to participate in a program like this, in this historic place, which I visited not too many months ago to be honored myself, and to be a partner not only in this transient moment but, I hope, on a permanent basis with the Skoll Foundation. I've looked forward to being with all of you tonight, ever since Jeff first invited me. Before I accepted, though, I asked him, what is a social entrepreneur? His answer surprised me, and honored me. He said, "You are one." Well, I did some research and I found some inspiring definitions. Let me read just a few: Someone who has new ideas about some of humanity's oldest problems and is willing to take risks to implement those ideas. Someone who is willing to learn and eager to teach. Someone who looks at problems and crises and sees only opportunities. And there's another one—I don't know if it applies to me or not—someone who is abnormally persistent, stubborn in fact.

Well, I thought about the social entrepreneurs who have meant something to me and helped to shape my life. As a matter of fact, some of them are completely unknown, and some of them later became famous. Among the five people who shaped my life was Willis Wright, a Black sharecropper who had never had anything under his control in all his life except 35 acres of land and two mules. But he was a leader. He was courageous, stalwart, intelligent, and admirable. During the time I grew up in southern Georgia, racial discrimination prevailed under the so-called separate but equal policy that was established by our own U.S. Constitution and prevailed in discriminating against our Black neighbors for about a hundred years. Willis Wright was asked by fellow members of his remote little church if he would represent them and become the first Black man who ever registered to vote in Webster County, Georgia. He was not a political activist, but he said, "Yes, I'll do it." And so he went to the courthouse. There was a trick in the South then. There were 30 questions that had to be answered before someone could register to vote if they were Black. Even an accomplished lawyer couldn't answer all the questions. Willis didn't answer the questions. Instead he came to see me and asked me what he should do about it, and I said, "Willis, I think you ought to continue trying and I'll be glad to go with you if you want me to." He said, "No, sir, it wouldn't mean anything if you went with me." So he went back. The registrar, when he saw Willis

Wright come in, laid a 45-caliber pistol on the table and said—I'll say the word—"Nigger, what do you want?" Willis said, "I still want to register to vote." And he did. In just a few years, every Black family in Webster County, Georgia, was able to register to vote. Not many people know about that. Nobody much ever heard of Willis Wright, but he was one of the five people who shaped my entire family, my entire life.

Another one of the five was even closer to me, and that was my mother. My mother was a registered nurse in those Depression years. The unemployment rate in America was almost 40 percent. We had hundreds of unemployed people walking by our house every day. We called them hobos. They were people who had been laid off from their jobs up north and they'd come down to the South in the winter to keep warm. My mother served among our neighbors as a doctor, although she was just a registered nurse. We didn't have any White neighbors. I grew up never having any White neighbors. All my neighbors were Black, and Mother nurtured them. Later, after my father died, Mother went through a series of experiences. She finally decided to be a Peace Corps volunteer, and at the age of 70 she went to India. She said, "Send me somewhere where people are in need and their skins are dark-colored." She went to a little village called Vikhroli that had 20,000 people working in it. She was a nurse there and also acted as a doctor. She became an untouchable because she had to deal with bodily fluids, and she washed her own clothes and she cleaned her own house. Mother nursed lepers and I wrote a poem about it. The poem was about her and a little girl who spoke Marathi. Mother had gone through a process of not really wanting to touch the child because she had so much fear of leprosy, and the final line in the poem was that she didn't feel ashamed when they kissed each other. Mother came home and made about six hundred speeches, and I've just finished writing a biography of her . . . my wife asked me to announce it. It'll be on sale soon.

Another person who I think is more famous than my mother or certainly Willis Wright is Don Hopkins. Don Hopkins was another African American who struggled and finally became a student and went to Morehouse College in Atlanta. On one of his vacations he went to Egypt, quite an achievement for a Black American in those days. He was just an undergraduate. He saw there a horrible disease called trachoma, which I had known a little as a child. It afflicted Egyptian people and was not being treated. That changed Don Hopkins's life, as he became interested in becoming a specialist in preventive health care. He volunteered to go to Africa and work on the final stages of smallpox eradication. He was in charge of a West African portion, including Sierra Leone, and in 1978, ten years after he went there, the last case of smallpox was eradicated, now 30 years ago. There hasn't been another disease eradicated since. Don Hopkins came back and became a professor at Harvard, then he went to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, the CDC, where he became the acting director. He became interested in tropical diseases, and now he works for The Carter Center. He's in charge of all our disease eradication programs, and I'll mention him again in just a few minutes.

Another person I'd like to mention, another social entrepreneur, is Norman Borlaug, who is famous. He was a dirt farmer from Iowa who eventually went into agricultural research in the International Center for Corn and Wheat. In Spanish it's Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maiz y Trigo: corn and wheat. They developed a short-stemmed species of wheat that was staunch in that it wouldn't bend over in bad weather. It was very high yield and resisted diseases, and Norman Borlaug decided that he would take that wheat to India and Pakistan, where millions of people literally were starving to death. He introduced the wheat among those farmers and saved hundreds of millions of people's lives. Some analysts have said a billion people's lives. He shared his knowledge with people in need and he, a dirt farmer, was given a Nobel Peace Prize in 1970.

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Well, when I studied entrepreneurs on the Skoll website, I found out a lot about the foundation. I realize that another quality of social entrepreneurs is that they are people of faith, and I don't necessarily mean religious faith. But they have a special kind of faith that's extremely important for any human being, particularly one who wants to lead in innovative endeavors, and that is faith in oneself—and, perhaps more importantly, faith in other people. Who could be a better social entrepreneur than Jeff Skoll? He was a young man who went on to make millions, and to share those millions with other people who have qualities that are being recognized tonight on this stage. Jeff and his foundation are finding such people all over the globe and furnishing them, I would say, with three vital things. One is encouragement, and the second one is a network of kindred spirits—kind of a collective partnership that's evolving, with now almost five dozen honorees. And, of course, they provide practical support after the social entrepreneurs prove themselves, having had enough insight and ability to be successful in getting an enterprise started. This is worthwhile work and it's bearing great fruit. I'll just mention two or three of the honorees here. As I said, I believe there will be, after tonight, 59.

Joe Madiath believes that people need to have running water and basic sanitation as they seek education and job training and better health, and he announced his goal as providing water and sanitation for 100,000 people, Indian families, by 2010. Karen Tse is promoting justice by establishing a network of public defenders in China, and she expects to extend that to Vietnam and Cambodia. Ms. Tse was at The Carter Center this past September as we honored human rights defenders from around the world. Victoria Hale was concerned about infectious diseases, which account for 60 percent of all the deaths among the world's poorest people, and she established a nonprofit pharmaceutical company that's already producing drugs. Ms. Hale thinks that by the end of this year she'll have five new drugs to pro-

vide to prevent these unnecessary deaths. Well, Joe and Karen and Victoria all are recipients of the Skoll Award, and there are many others, of course. I wish I had time to talk about all of them and nothing else, but Jeff has asked me to make a few comments about The Carter Center.

Jeff agrees with what I said in Oslo in 2002, that the greatest challenge of the 21st century is the growing gap between the rich people on earth and the poor people on earth—the greatest challenge, the growing gap. And as people become richer and richer and poorer and poorer, it's increasingly difficult to cross the chasm that grows between us. Another announcement that I made even earlier, back in 1977, was that human rights would be the foundation of my nation's foreign policy. And since then, working among people in 70 of the poorest countries on earth, 35 of them, not surprisingly, in Africa, I've come to realize that there's not much thought given to the American or the British emphasis on human rights. Freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, trial by jury, even the right to elect our own leaders fade into relative insignificance when a family lacks food or shelter or clothing or a modicum of health care or any education at all, or a chance for self-respect, human dignity, or hope that the future will be better. This realization has been the guiding principle of all our programs at The Carter Center—to cover the whole gamut of human rights.

We've tried to find some of those glaring gaps between the rich and the poor and then to fill those gaps. In fact, the first conference on health we had at The Carter Center was called Closing the Gap. We had 125 participants, and about a dozen of them were Nobel Laureates. They were the foremost experts on health care on earth. And we learned there, all of us did, that two-thirds of all deaths occurring before the age of 65 are totally preventable if people have knowledge, access to medical care, and the financial means to invest in their own health. Rich people have all these means, but they die unnecessarily because of smoking, improper diet, obesity, lack of exercise, or other personal choices that they make. Our work has been among those who suffer and die because they don't have any of those means. They don't have knowledge about their own diseases, they don't have the medicines to prevent or cure them, they don't have assistance from other people who sometimes care (and sometimes don't care) about them. And even if they know what they need, they don't have the money to buy it.

About three-fourths of The Carter Center's work, our money and personnel, is devoted to five so-called neglected diseases—that's a definition imposed by the World Health Organization—that afflict tens or even hundreds of millions of people every year. They are diseases that most people in this audience probably have never heard of—dracunculiasis, onchocerciasis, lymphatic filariasis, schistosomiasis, trachoma. You see, we don't know them. But hundreds of millions of people know them, which is proof that rich people have already eliminated them and that they can be eliminated. We go into the most remote villages and into the most remote homes on earth in the deserts and jungles of Africa and Latin America, and we give them a chance to learn how to improve their own lives. We give them the responsibility and the knowledge and a little bit of assistance to make changes in

their own communities. At The Carter Center we have the International Task Force on Disease Eradication, the only one on earth, charged with analyzing every human illness that exists and ascertaining which ones might theoretically be completely eliminated from a given country or region, or completely eradicated from the face of the earth. The man in charge—Don Hopkins, whom I mentioned earlier.

There's one horrible disease that The Carter Center has pledged to eradicate completely—dracunculiasis, or guinea worm, which I mentioned earlier. Guinea worm is widely known, even in the Bible, as the fiery serpent. You see it in the symbol for doctors, the Rod of Asclepius, a staff with two guinea worms wrapped around it. A lot of people think they're snakes, based on the Latin root from which the name derives, *Dracunculus*. It's an evil-sounding name and it's an evil disease. It's caused by drinking water from a stagnant pond that fills up during the rainy season, and the worms' eggs grow under the human skin to a length of 30 to 36 inches. A year after someone drinks the water, the worm begins to emerge through the skin, making a horrible sore that destroys tissue and destroys muscle and leaves an aftermath of damage similar to polio.

I first saw guinea worm in a remote village in Ghana, a little village that only had about five hundred people. It's about the same size as Plains, Georgia, where I live. Three hundred of the people had worms emerging from their bodies. Don Hopkins was there. Anyone who was still able to walk or drag themselves around assembled in the center of the village to welcome us. I explained to the chief, a little tiny man with a great deal of authority and a great deal of self-respect and pride, why we had come. I assured him that we knew how to end the plague of worms that were starting in his pond, and Don Hopkins described the measures by which we would eliminate the disease. The chief responded:

> Mr. President, we looked in the water, we don't see any worms, and our water hole is sacred. The gods send the rains every spring to fill our pond up, and we drink the water the rest of the year. If it wasn't for the pond, our sacred pond, our village wouldn't exist, our revered ancestors would never have lived, and you are casting aspersions on our pond.

He invited me to walk around and visit the people who were assembled there. Some were still in their huts, as they weren't able to come out. My eyes were attracted to a beautiful young woman, I would guess about 20 years old. I saw her holding what I thought was her baby in her right arm, and I went up to ask her what the name of the baby was. It wasn't her baby, it was her right breast, terribly elongated and swollen. A worm was coming out of the nipple of her breast. I'll never forget it. I learned that she had 11 other guinea worms emerge from her body the same year. I finally convinced the chief that our facts were accurate and that the only negative allegations we were making were not against their sacred pond but just about these worms that were in the pond. He finally let us help. He only did it because I said, "Look, we will not do anything except under your control, and in fact we'll let you do all the work." Rosalynn and I and Don Hopkins came back a

year later—zero guinea worms. And those people, since that time, have never seen and will never see another guinea worm.

Well, we've done the same thing in 23,600 villages—I'm an engineer, so we count everything—in countries across sub-Saharan Africa and three in Asia—India, Pakistan, and Yemen. We've found 3.6 million cases of this disease, and in every case the villagers worked heroically. Some had very difficult times. Southern Sudan, for instance, was in a war. Two million people had been killed in that revolutionary war. We couldn't get into the south, but we finally negotiated a peace agreement, a cease fire for six months, that let us go into the southern part of Sudan. And in all these nations there are now fewer than nine thousand cases left, a reduction of 99.8 percent. We know every case of guinea worm on earth and we're taking care of them to the best of our ability. I'll be going to Africa next week, as a matter of fact, to Ghana and to Nigeria, to honor four countries that became guinea worm–free last year. We'll soon have it eradicated, the second disease in history, both of them orchestrated directly or indirectly by a social entrepreneur named Don Hopkins.

> It's easy to become discouraged in the face of the world's tragedies, which are voluminous. I'm sure that everyone in this room has felt the pain of discouragement and knows its debilitating power, if not in yourself then certainly in those you know. But heroic social entrepreneurs are not daunted by intractable problems.

The most powerful tool we have is not food or money or medicine, or even the necessary filter cloths. It's the dedicated work of people who, for the first time in their lives, understand that they themselves can take charge of a difficult problem if given the means and information, and that they *can* correct the problem. The Carter Center, like the Skoll Foundation, is an action agency. We rely on people, on experts like Don Hopkins and Dr. Borlaug. They communicate with people in need and give them a chance for self-respect and hope for a better future.

When we go into villages, we often find other serious health problems. I've seen entire neighborhoods have onchocerciasis, or river blindness. A few years back, a Turkish research scientist at Merck & Co. found out that a veterinary medicine they use—if you have a puppy dog, you give it Heartgard every month—discovered that this same medicine would prevent people from going blind from river blindness. So Merck came to The Carter Center and said, "We'll give you the med-

icine free." Last November we administered our 100 millionth dose of what they call Mectizan—it's ivermectin—and last year alone we treated 11.7 million people. They'll never go blind, and we're learning now that in some areas we can completely eradicate this disease forever. For instance, there will never be another person to go blind from this disease in six countries in Latin America.

The number-one type of preventable blindness, by the way, is trachoma. Trachoma is caused by filthy eyes—flies gather around the eyes and cause them to become infected. The upper eyelid turns inward, so every time the person blinks it scratches the cornea and eventually causes blindness. We're dealing with this disease as well. One interesting thing is that we have a lot of social entrepreneurs in the central part of Ethiopia, all of them women. One of the key factors in eliminating trachoma is to get rid of the flies, and to get rid of the flies you have to get rid of the human excrement on the ground. In those areas of the world, it's completely taboo for a woman to relieve herself in the daytime, so they couldn't urinate or defecate during the day. So, we designed a simple latrine that doesn't cost anything if the family does its own work—just puts a hole in the ground and a screen around it and so forth. We thought, maybe we'll get 10,000 of these built in central Ethiopia. But the women adopted it as a women's liberation thing and we just passed the 400,000 mark. Now they can relieve themselves any time of day.

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We're also treating lymphatic filariasis, which you may know as elephantiasis. It's when your arms or legs or sexual organs swell up to a grotesque size. It's caused by mosquitoes, so with treated bed nets we can kill the mosquitoes and prevent both malaria and lymphatic filariasis at the same time. We're now in the process of putting two bed nets in every home in Ethiopia where they have that type of mosquito.

I mentioned Norman Borlaug earlier. He was 94 years old two days ago, on the 25th day of this month, and he's still active and an inspiration to all who know him. He's been working with The Carter Center on an agricultural program. We consider nutrition to be a health problem, malnutrition, and so we decided, with Dr. Borlaug and a generous Japanese entrepreneur, a philanthropist, that we would teach small farmers in Africa how to grow more food grain. We don't deal with cotton or other cash crops, just five grains— primarily maize, which is corn, wheat, oats, sorghum, and millet. I'm a farmer myself, so I really like this, but Dr. Borlaug has been the guiding light. We've finished teaching nine million African farmers, and they have been able to double or triple their production of food grains.

Well, it's easy to become discouraged in the face of the world's tragedies, which are voluminous. I'm sure that everyone in this room has felt the pain of discouragement and knows its debilitating power, if not in yourself then certainly in those you know. But heroic social entrepreneurs are not daunted by intractable problems. I'm now 83 years old and my wife, Rosalynn—well, I won't go into Rosalynn's age. She's a good bit younger than that. And our staff, for some reason, has never been comfortable talking about our deaths, so they refer to the prospect of reducing my level of participation. But I can tell you that we've made careful preparations, so when that time comes the work of The Carter Center will continue—and obviously so will yours. I know that Jeff Skoll feels a sense of urgency, and so do I, as we assemble in this beautiful and historic place. People are dying, children are starving, our planet is in trouble, with Mother Earth having been betrayed by her own children. Ignorance festers in the human race, just as guinea worms fester in some human bodies. Creating understanding among people, I would say, is the most pervasive need in our world and the most effective solution to its problems. Communicating with an African chief or convincing the leaders of major countries, especially my own, just to talk to each other is a notable challenge and achievement.

In conclusion, let me say that communication is a lifeline for a social entrepreneur, and it's no accident that Jeff, an activist, is really just a storyteller. His film company has won Oscars and other awards. But more importantly, as you know, they've shown the ongoing genocide in southern Sudan, the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, the imminent threat and long-term consequences of global warming, with help from Al Gore, and a pathway to peace in the Middle East. The Skoll Foundation has made a priority of highlighting hidden change-makers who quietly perform acts of redemption around the world. Hearing their stories—we'll hear a few more tonight—encourages us and lifts up new ideas. Ideas can change the world, as you know. I'm inspired by your stories, you who commit your intelligence and your energy and your life to this work. I thank you all for what you do. I wish you Godspeed in your enlightened vocations. You social entrepreneurs are indeed the hope of our future world.