



Remarks of Teresa Heinz, April 23, 2003, Missouri Botanical Garden  
Recipient of the 2003 World Ecology Award from the International Center for  
Tropical Ecology, University of Missouri-St. Louis

Thank you. It is a great pleasure to be here with you tonight, and to be in the hometown of Jack and Sally Danforth. Jack was a good and old friend of my late husband—they used to enjoy trout fishing together in Pennsylvania's limestone streams.

I am truly honored to be the recipient of this distinguished award. Yet, in accepting it, I am mindful that this is not a time for any of us in the environmental community to be celebrating or patting ourselves on the back. Today, we are losing ground worldwide, not gaining it, in spite of the amazing efforts of so many people. This award may be a tribute but it is also a challenge—to me, to all of you, and to everyone who cares about the future of our environment, of our planet.

As I thought about our gathering here, I kept remembering something I saw on the news recently. Like most Americans, I have watched my share of war coverage in the past few weeks. One of the many images that will stick with me was of an American soldier playing with a group of Iraqi children. He was dancing hip-hop style on the top of his armored vehicle, and it was a sight to behold. These children had grown up in a society determined to preserve its insularity and stamp out its differences, and here they were, face-to-face with an African-American soldier from a military whose ranks are black and white, Hispanic and Asian, male and female, Christian, Muslim and Jewish. And the children felt comfortable enough with this soldier that they too were dancing, toothless grins and all, and the remarkable thing was they knew the moves. They knew that part of our culture.

If you ask most people around the world, including here at home, why this country is so powerful today, they will point to many different factors: our wealth of resources, the money we spend on defense, the entrepreneurial spirit of our people, the democracy that protects our liberties. What they will often overlook is our rich diversity.

We all know our country has an imperfect history in this regard. But despite its long and painful struggles with racism and discrimination, America is a remarkable experiment in the coming together of people who are, each in our own way, different.

I have a very personal perspective on this. As a little girl growing up in Mozambique, my view of society was directly informed by what I saw in the natural world. There was a beautiful order that arose from the many different elements that lived and belonged there—the fabulous mix of animals and bugs, languages, races, droughts and downpours, flowers and trees, birds and vultures.

As I became a young woman and left behind the innocence of youth, I realized how rare it was for adults to perceive differences as having any sort of similar intrinsic value in human

society, particularly in its governance. In the land where I was raised, no one had a vote, the country was a dictatorship. My dad was 71 years old when he voted for the first time. In our country, if you were a second-generation-born white African, which I was, your Portuguese passport was stamped “second-class citizen,” which mine was. I was 12 years old when I learned that. If you were openly critical of Portugal’s government, you would be called a leftist or communist or subversive, and depending on your luck, you might be jailed. In any case, you’d pay for it somehow...and that’s how I grew up, that was the order and the nature.

Thankfully, we did not have the hateful and humiliating strictures of apartheid, with which I became familiar at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. But in the mother country, Portugal, wealth belonged to the very few. And in Mozambique, although buses, hospitals, schools and the gathering places of community, like cinemas, were theoretically open to blacks and whites alike, very few of the African population could access or afford them, distance or cost separated them.

As a product of that place and time, I see America less as a melting pot than as a great web—a web of diverse people with diverse needs...a web of races, religions, and ethnic heritages, woven together by shared dreams, aspirations, tragedies and hardships. To me, these are the silvery threads that draw us together into a great nation. This is a country built on its differences and on its capacity to bridge them.

Much of the world doesn’t see that about us—in part because we don’t always embrace it as strongly or project it as proudly as we should, and in part because many other societies have no frame of reference for this thinking. Most societies around the globe are still built on a homogenous foundation that values sameness above diversity in everything from race to religion.

But in the age of globalization, the walls of separation that have made this possible throughout much of human history are crumbling. What was so perfectly symbolized by the encounter of a black American soldier and a group of children in the arid sands of the Iraqi desert—an image televised instantly around the world—is how fragile and permeable those barriers have become.

This is immensely threatening to societies with no tradition of pluralism, and understandably so. In sociopolitical terms, we are living through the birth of a global “ecosystem” of countries and societies, and some of them simply don’t want to be a part of it. It is too confusing, too unfamiliar, and too threatening.

The hard reality, though, is that they have no choice. In a global economy and an era of instant communications, they can no longer keep the world at bay. Like it or not, we are all enmeshed in this new and fascinating global web. Inevitably, that favors pluralistic societies and weakens insular ones. And that in turn can lead to resentment, fear, anger, hatred and, as we have seen, to terrorism and war.

History has brought us to the point where all hope for lasting peace in the world hinges on our ability to recognize how intertwined and interconnected our fates have become; to recognize that our very survival depends on our capacity to make room for our differences. That imposes a burden not only on closed societies to begin to open up, but also on open societies to be respectful of those peoples and cultures that do not always see the world as we do—and indeed, even to understand and appreciate those differences.

Fourteen years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Brazilian Amazon jungle with my late husband and Tom Lovejoy who is known and loved by many people here. Initially, I was stunned and even disappointed. The African savannah of my youth was a much sparser place but it was wide open and you could see almost everything. I went into the rainforest expecting to find a riot of colors and noises and activity. Instead it was dead still, and for a moment, I felt like I'd been had. But the next day I went out at dawn, after the howling monkeys had cried and we were all awake and before the heat of the day drove the forest into stillness, and I began to hear something. There were birds flying overhead and butterflies flitting among the leaves. The forest was alive, but you had to know when to look, and where.

But what was the most amazing experience for me was to be in this canopy that was 120 feet high, like the storied pillars of a gothic cathedral. There were huge trees that were rooted in a mere six inches of soil – that's all! You wonder what they eat, and then you look at the ground and see the interplay of mosses, ferns, mushrooms, insects and animals, and what you begin to understand is the meaning of biodiversity, the beauty and complexity of life, and that no one in that forest is more important than anyone else, and that none of them could live without those tiny little things. The interplay of those species was probably the best lesson I've had in my life.

Today, America is like those trees. We are the colossus of the forest, but we are still fed by the interplay of a community of nations and peoples. Just because some of those nations may be smaller, just because some may be strange and different from us, does not mean we can afford to view them as inconsequential. In this newly globalized world, we must ask ourselves how we can enable those countries and peoples to remain as whole as the species in a bio-diverse forest. We must ask ourselves how we can protect and strengthen what we have become while still remaining purposeful and yet respectful, powerful and yet magnanimous, strong and yet unassuming. And we must do this because, unlike the trees of the rainforest, whose symbiotic relationship is protective, we have, at will, the capacity to destroy the rich but fragile soil in which our society, like all human societies, is rooted.

How unfortunate it is, then, that just as history arrives at this moment, many leaders in our nation—the beacon of pluralism in the world—should appear so disinterested in the priorities and concerns of the rest of the planet.

As a nation, we have extraordinary responsibilities, but we also have tremendous opportunities. A great nation such as ours can improve an imperfect Kyoto protocol treaty, not just declare it dead. A great nation such as ours can treat international diplomacy as a chance to convey and personify what is best for and about us without boasting.

And a great nation such as ours can deal with its dependency on fossil fuels, especially on foreign and Middle Eastern oil, not just assume that dependency as a given.

As an OPEC chief once remarked, “The Stone Age didn't end because we ran out of stones, and the oil age won't end because we run out of oil.” We have to put that great American ingenuity into use by finding alternative sources that lessen our dependency on Middle Eastern oil. When John F. Kennedy set America's sights on the moon in 10 years, it wasn't because we were ready to go to the moon right then—it was because when we set our sights, he believed there was nothing we could not do.

That might makes right is the wrong conclusion. None of us doubts that America can win any military battle that we should need to fight. But the power required to wage a war is vastly different from the power required to sustain peace and to avert the need for future wars. And it is vastly different, too, from the power required to combat transnational crises like global environmental degradation and epidemics like AIDS and SARS. No one gets to opt out of global warming just because they question the science.

In this country there are many national leaders who actively disdain environmentalists—“green weenies,” they call us in their more charitable moments. It is time that environmentalists in this country are treated with respect.

If one appreciates the porous nature of borders and what they do and do not keep out, in terms of both people and disease, if one takes the time to understand the science of environmental health—I spend quite a bit of time with that—then this game of second-guessing becomes not only absurd and untenable but also downright sinful. We see that our future and the environment’s future are inseparable, just as we are inseparable from one another and from the ecology that surrounds us.

When we connect the dots of this puzzle where the human world meets the natural world, then respect for God’s creation and its precious gifts becomes the most ardent form of love of country. There we discover the sacrosanct responsibility of a free and democratic people to prove themselves worthy of those rights by treating the world as a legacy handed down to us by our Creator, and by making sure we will be able to hand that legacy, whole and complete, to our children in a spirit of understanding, gratitude, and that most forgotten word of all, love.

The environment must again be front and center in our national dialogue. It must again be a rallying cry, which is how we got the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency itself during the Nixon Administration.

The health of our planet depends on it. But so does the health of our democracy. To show how we genuinely care about this great tree called America, this tall and fragile American elm, this proud colossus of the forest, we must do more than sing its praises. We must nurture the soil in which it is planted. That is our mission, and I urge you to join together in pursuing it with the passion and fervor it deserves.

Thank you again for this honor. In receiving it, I would like to acknowledge everyone who has helped me along this path, especially my late husband John Heinz, who taught me so much about determination and optimism; the leaders of an earlier time who shared his belief in harnessing the power of the marketplace on behalf of the environment, men like President George Herbert Walker Bush, Secretary of State Jim Baker, Bill Reilly, and the late John Chaffee; and my husband John Kerry, who was introduced to me by my late husband on Earth Day 1990.

If I may reminisce, I would like to receive this too for my late husband, John Heinz, who taught me much and with me embarked on this journey, determined and optimistic; about enjoying and protecting nature and man. Thank you.