

It's unnecessary to dwell on the fact that it is a real privilege to be awarded this honor from a great university.

I wish I could feel that my generation, and its predecessors, deserve to be honored for the legacy that we are leaving to those who will soon have the fate of the world in their hands. There have been impressive achievements in past years, but also striking failures, which leave young people today with problems and choices that are of a new order of difficulty and urgency. Some are specific to the region, but others are shared with the rest of the world. For the first time in history, humans have progressed to the stage where they can destroy the basis for decent survival. There are two grim shadows that hover over every topic we consider: nuclear war, and environmental catastrophe.

The first has been with us for 70 years. Reviewing the record, the fact that we have escaped disaster is close to miraculous, and unless policies are significantly changed the miracle is unlikely to persist for too long. Threats in fact are constant, some of them not very far from here.

The environmental threats were also with us 70 years ago, but then rarely perceived. By now only the willfully blind can ignore them, and fail to realize that we are marching towards a cliff like the proverbial lemmings.

A few years ago the grand old man of American biology, Ernst Mayr, pondered the question whether intelligence may be a lethal mutation. He observed that the evidence for that thesis is strong. Biological success is greatest for organisms that mutate rapidly, like bacteria, or that have fixed ecological niche, like beetles. And in fact they will happily survive the catastrophes we are preparing. But as we move up the ladder of intelligence, survival declines. There are, for example, very few primates, and the explosion of humans is too recent to mean anything and is unlikely to persist.

Mayr also observes that the average life span of a species is about 100,000 years, about how long homo sapiens has existed.

Whether Mayr's thesis is correct will very likely be determined by those who are entering the wider world today, facing a somber but unavoidable task.