[1] Children: asset or liability

Ladies and gentlemen, what I'd like to talk about today is children.

One of life's mysteries is why people in the developed world still have children.

Children have long ceased to offer any benefits to their parents.

In the past, things were very different. Then having children did make sense.

For a start, children worked for a living.

For example, children would be sent to fetch water.

They contributed to the family's economic welfare.

They would mind sheep and other animals at age 6 or 7.

And they could find a job in the factories.

Later on, children were often the only means parents had for support.

But that was the past.

Now, quite frankly, children are worse than useless, far from making any economic contribution to family life or even supporting themselves.

What do they do?

They loaf around at school all day.

They while away hours in expensive recreation.

They devour cash and reduce the family's standard of living.

Later on when they're adults, they themselves are burdened by debt, burdened by mortgages.

The elderly parents are still supporting their adult children.

So this seems to me to be something of a paradox.

Children are more expensive and more useless than ever before, but nonetheless our society adores them more than ever.

Seems to me, in fact, that parents in our society are obsessed with anxiety about the safety and well-being of our children.

We're seeing unprecedented levels of spending on our children.

We buy them expensive clothes.

We buy them computer games and electronic gadgets.

And even small children seem to be put at the very center of all big family decisions.

Small children get to have an opinion about where we go on trips, where we should live, and what car we should drive.

What experts tell us is that the real explanation for our child-centric society is first of all the abolition of child labor, and secondly the introduction of education.

And it's this migration from the workplace to the schoolroom that's been the most important transition in the history of childhood.

And it would seem that the elimination of the productive role of children has turned them from being an asset to a liability in economic terms.

The answer would seem to be that people have children for all sorts of reasons, but no longer because they need them economically.

We have children for our own emotion.

We have children to meet our own emotional needs.

And yes, children may not make good economic sense anymore.

But they do nonetheless have their advantages.

First of all, as lifelong friends, they are quite frankly much more reliable than partners.

Secondly, not like wives and husbands, they are less likely to divorce you, to abuse you, and to battle you.

Children are also still really a better solution as a support system in old age.

They will still come and visit you when you're old even if it is just to ask for money.

And also children are a source of pride.

They are an extension of their parents selves and a vital part of parents' acclaimed status.

And if you listen to any group of parents bragging about their offsprings' achievements, you'll know exactly what I mean.

So perhaps as well, this explains our fears about our children too.

It explains our anxiety about their welfare when making a much greater investment in financial and emotional terms in fewer children.

Thank you very much.

[2] Electronic devices and waste

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to assume that you all know what an iPod is, and in fact you probably own one.

I'll assume that even if you don't have an iPod, you have an MP3 or MP4.

Or maybe several.

Maybe one for every day of the week to match the different colors of your handbags.

Or maybe you use them to match whatever type of belt you happen to be wearing.

I have to confess I don't have an MP anything and I don't have an iPod, of course, either.

That's because I very rarely listen to songs except in the car.

And I have a feeling that it's actually not a very good idea to have earphones on when you're in a car.

I didn't have a Walkman, either.

Back in the old days, Walkman was the cutting edge of technology.

Some of you probably can no longer remember those days when a Walkman was around.

But if you go to museums, you would actually find them in places like technology exhibitions and so forth.

Anyway, I've never been particularly attracted to the idea of walking around with headphones stuck in my ear.

But most people do. And I guess it's quite pleasant.

In many places people use their personal portable music systems to isolate themselves from the rest of society.

It’s actually quite a reasonable desire if you're in a crowded train and you have a long journey to work.

While you're commuting, why not try to shut yourself out in your own world listening to the kind of music you like. Rather than listening to all the other sounds and impositions of a crowded city.

So I can understand people who want to try and shut themselves off.

I mean I personally tend to do it by reading a newspaper or a book. But then I'm rather old-fashioned.

iPods and other MP3 players have become absolutely common nowadays.

A friend of mine told me an anecdote about what happened at Heathrow when the authorities had a big security alert.

It was the first big security alert about liquids on planes.

It was the day that the British counterintelligence services discovered that there was a plot to blow up a number of airliners by using explosive liquids.

So the first thing the airline staff did was to announce that everybody had to put everything in transparent plastic bags.

All their personal items, toiletries or liquids.

And they also mentioned phones.

They specifically mentioned the iPod.

And this was what struck me.

Because they obviously assume that the vast majority of people who were flying would have iPods and MP3 players, and would therefore not be surprised if it was mentioned in a public announcement.

Basically, what they were saying is that having an iPod is as much part of your daily routine as having toothbrush when you travel.

I also know that some believe listening to music while you're in nature actually increases the experiences of connecting between the music and the beauties of nature.

That may well be true to some extent.

But in fact, the electronic devices in general are bad for nature.

A recent study shows that Apple is one of the worst performers amongst major electronics companies when it comes to electronic waste.

All the other electronics companies do better than Apple in generating less waste when they produce or dispose their computers, their MP3, their whatever.

And you must remember that a lot of electronic devices use some very strange metals, in particular, heavy metals that can have a very severe impact on water and soil.

I'm not going to make a judgment on Apple.

But we probably ought to start thinking about the environmental footprint of all those gadgets we use.

Thank you.

[3] Benefits of exercising

I'm going to talk about exercise, and in particular the beneficial effects thereof.

I go to the gym regularly.

I sincerely hope I'm doing myself some good with this, because exercise is supposed to give us better health, more resistance, and give us a long and active life.

That's what the experts say.

And I was interested to read a story in the press about the effects of exercise, actually proven effects.

I'm going to go back a bit in time to shortly after the Second World War, where exercise was not so common.

It was noticed at that time that people from different backgrounds were dying of heart attacks more and more frequently.

This is a strange phenomenon.

And there were a number of doctors who started to look at this phenomenon, and, of course, to ask why and to try to find out.

A person called Jerry Morris in the United Kingdom decided to do some research.

He, by the way, is still alive, nearly 100 years old, doing very well indeed, and is clearly a very good advertisement for his own advice.

He decided to focus his research on particular jobs.

He started off by looking at post office workers and then transport workers.

The first results he achieved were particularly interesting.

They were all taken from the London area where he had been looking at cases of drivers and conductors, both of whom work on the buses.

He noticed a big difference between the two categories.

The drivers did a lot worse.

Many more of them had diseases or died of heart attacks.

And he looked at the backgrounds of both drivers and conductors and saw that they were very similar - the same sort of social background, the same kind of lifestyle and a similar diet.

But here's the big difference.

The drivers, of course, have a sedentary job.

They were seated at the wheel of the buses most of the day, whereas the conductors were running up and down the stairs of double decker buses.

They are half as likely as the drivers to die of heart attacks.

We all know nowadays that exercise does indeed prevent cancer, heart disease, and many other conditions.

Jerry Morris was one of the very first to see the link between the two and to set about proving it.

He decided to continue with his research and to come up with some firm, hard facts and prove them.

He therefore looked at post office workers next.

Interestingly, the post office workers who work seated in the post office all day again were more prone to heart attacks and heart disease than the postmen.

The postmen. What are they doing?

Walking or cycling round the streets delivering the mail.

So he really had his hard and fast facts.

After all, we know that moving is good. We know that exercise is good. We know that smoking is bad.

But in those days, things were not so clear and not so easily defined.

I think that the results and the conclusions are very clear to all of us.

And now governments are realizing that too.

10% of the budget of the National Health Service is on tackling obesity.

So it is time for us to think seriously about exercise and at least in the hope of a long and active life.

Thank you.

[4] Light pollution

Ladies and gentlemen, it’s often said that the most important development in the history of mankind was when man discovered fire.

Discovery of fire enabled man to do many things that he had not been able to do before.

First of all, fire gives you warmth.

And the provision of that warmth meant that mankind could move to inhabit other parts of the planet, colder parts of the planet, places that he not previously being able to live in.

Fire also means that you can make food.

That in turn meant that, little by little, over the years, we were able to develop agriculture.

With agriculture, we were able to have a steady supply of food throughout the year.

And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, fire provided us with light.

Now we are able to continue our activities even in the night.

If you take a walk around some of the cities of northern Europe particularly, you’ll see just how far we’ve come in terms of light.

All the windows remain illuminated, cars and buses pass with extremely strong lighting.

And the shops leave their lights on, even though it’s past closing time.

In many ways, this is seen as a mark of progress, but in other ways, this light all the time is not such a good thing.

And I want to tell you today a bit about why.

I’m going to take the example of a bird, a bird I’ m sure you have all heard about, which is the owl.

The owl is a night animal.

It hunts when the sun has gone down, feeding mainly on things like mice.

But the problem is that recently the population of owls has been decreasing.

The main reason has to do with excessive light.

With artificial light, the animals that the owl catches can see the owl approaching more easily, because of the increased light.

So the owl finds it harder to catch its prey.

Let me give you another example of the turtles, which live in the sea.

You probably know that turtles always go back to the same beach to lay their eggs.

When the little baby turtles then hatch out of the eggs, they must get into the sea.

In fact, the sea is the bright part of the horizon at night.

So the little baby turtle looks around and he’s aware that the horizon is where the sea is.

But these beaches have also become popular tourist destinations.

And with the tourists, there has come all sorts of buildings.

So now when the turtles come out of their eggs, the brightest point on the horizon is no longer the sea, but rather the bright lights of the roads.

And that’s where they head.

Inevitably, that means that many of the turtles end up being run over by cars or picked up by people.

You could say the same thing about insects.

If you ever walked along a street at night, and looked up on one of the street lamps, you see in the halo of light, that there are lots of little insects buzzing around, trying to get close to the light.

But it takes up energy that it should be conserving. So it’s a bad thing for the insects.

They should be resting in the dark, and it means that they are literally too tired to reproduce.

And again we’re seeing a major fall in insect populations across the world.

In fact, it’s not just animals and insects that suffer.

Researchers have found that women nurses working in hospitals are much more likely to develop breast cancer than women working on ordinary jobs, nine till five in ordinary, natural daylight.

Perhaps we should sometimes remind ourselves just how beautiful our night skies can be without light.

Thank you.

[5] Planning a holiday

Ladies and gentlemen.

At the time that this speech is being recorded, it is summer.

It's nice and sunny outdoors.

And this has got me thinking about where I want to go in August.

I've been thinking about the holidays, the upcoming holidays that I have.

Now, if you have been planning a trip far away, then you may find that there are lots of things you have to think about.

You have to remember not only to pack your passport.

You also have to think about whether the country you're going to visit is safe or not.

You may have to check up on the political situation in the country you're going to visit.

What I'd like to share with you today is a piece of news that is actually rather worrying.

And what I'd like to tell you is that it's true that the dangers whilst abroad can indeed affect you, can indeed ruin your holiday.

The factor which is most likely to cause you problems is the roads.

As a matter of fact, road safety is what is most likely to disrupt your holiday if you are traveling abroad, above all if you're going to a developing country.

I love traveling myself and I love reading travel literature.

I love reading a good book about travelers who go abroad.

Maybe they cycle round the whole world in one year or they go off to some faraway country on an expedition.

And when reading these books, I try to empathize with the writer.

I always think what I would do in that situation.

And I also try to learn lessons for the future, if I would ever be brave enough to take on a trip of this type myself.

And having read quite a lot of literature on travel now, I have to say that what seems most dangerous of all when traveling around developing countries is the possibility of getting run over or having some kind of accident on the road.

But it's not just anecdotal evidence from these books that I should use to prove my point.

In 2015, The WHO published a report in which it was pointed out that 1. 25 million people a year die on our roads.

We may think that terrorism is a great threat because when you turn on the TV you hear about bombs in the Middle East, you hear about some rebellion in some parts of Africa maybe.

But actually there are many more people dying from road accidents than from terrorist attacks or from war.

It's not just about the number of people who die.

Also the report points out that the costs of all of these road accidents, if you were to consider the damage caused.

This goes far above $500 billion a year.

Also in many developing countries, drivers of taxis or buses have to drive for many hours.

This is because labor regulations in these places are not very well developed.

This increases the likelihood of accidents.

In fact, in many developing countries, road accidents actually affect the most productive people in our societies, those who are educated or who are in the best age to learn new things and who are best able to contribute to the economy.

When we think about road accidents, often we don't think that they will affect us.

We often think more about serious things such as terrorist attacks or ending up in hospital after meeting some drug trafficker on the street.

It's true that there are many disasters and wars that are hugely tragic.

But maybe we should remember millions of people died as a result of accidents on our road.

After all this should be a problem that is relatively easy to solve, and huge numbers of lives could be saved as a result.

[6] Transport happiness

In this speech, I'd like to talk to you about a new concept, a new approach to transport in the urban environment.

Ladies and gentlemen, we all know that cities are growing.

Various predictions say that by the middle of this century over half the world's population will be living in an urban environment if they're not already.

That brings huge problems.

Obviously, there's the question of transport.

There's also the problem of pollution.

We've heard a lot about vehicles and emissions, but I don't really want to talk about that now.

I'd like to talk more about transport from the point of view of congestion.

If you live in a major city, you will experience congestion, and I'm sure at least twice a day in the rush hour, in the morning and in the evening.

But congestion is already a huge factor in people‘s lives even in Los Angeles, a city that was designed and built around the car.

Congestion brings a huge waste.

A huge waste of time.

A study in 2017 concluded that the average Angeleno spent over 100 hours every year sitting in stationary traffic.

It's also a huge waste of money.

The costs to the economy are incalculable.

There’s also a terrible waste of resources.

If we look at the average car for example, it stands still for something like 80% of its lifetime.

Various calculations have been done about the actual cost of infrastructure and what it costs to really move people around with a car.

Rather than taking the bus, many drivers think that it's cheaper to use a car.

But if you look at it from society’s point of view, it's much more expensive.

In fact, for every $1 spent on the bus, the cost to the passenger, there is a cost to society of $1.5 in terms of the maintenance for the bus, the payment for the driver, and so on.

And if you shift of the calculation to the use of a bicycle.

Every $1 that the bicycle rider thinks it costs them is actually a cost to society of one cent, because of the health benefits.

So it's actually a positive contribution to society to use a bicycle.

However, there are arguments that aren't really very powerful for the average citizen.

If we use only economic arguments, nobody would ever use a car.

The factor that weighs in favor of people using private cars is, of course, the freedom that they have.

They can get into a car and drive where they want to, when they want to.

So the car is really a symbol of freedom.

There's been a proposal to change this approach.

Not an economic approach, but one that is based on the concept of happiness.

And it’s called a mobility Bill of Rights.

I’ll explain that now.

Firstly, transport should be a trustworthy service to people.

They must have the feeling that transport takes them where they want to go when they want to go and reliably.

Then it is the freedom from harm.

That is the fact that people must have the feeling that they can go on public transport without running the risk of being harassed sexually, racially or in any other way.

Finally, there is the freedom from exclusion.

This means that people are aware that public transport gives them the chance to move around their environment, their city, regardless of their income, regardless of any disabilities that they may have, and regardless of their social status.

With public transport, we're all the same.

We can all move at the same speed in the same comfort.

I found this concept of the Mobility Bill of Rights very interesting and I think it's something that we should consider in all cities in the future.

Thank you.