Opening Remarks

Good morning, and welcome to the eighth annual Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Conference.

Each year, this Conference has grown and evolved, hopefully for the better, and it is important to remember why and where it all started. The Conference began right around the same time as the Greek crisis, as a platform to discuss ideas for addressing its widespread and debilitating effects. The need, and appreciation, for such a platform was immediately apparent, as was the fact that the discussions taking place would not be relevant only to Greece, but to society more broadly as well.

Though the Conference came out of the darkness of the crisis, it continues in part because we truly enjoy it. This is a chance for us to all come together, to collaborate, to build out a network of strong, productive connections. Just a few examples of the new collaborations that have arisen: our partners at the Barça Foundation and at Henry Street Settlement in New York City struck up a serendipitous conversation that ultimately led to Barça conducting a teachers and coaches training for its FutbolNet methodology at Henry Street; a collaboration between the Institute of International Education (IIE) in NY and Fulbright Greece to implement the Greek Diaspora Fellowship Program; Philadelphia Mural Arts and ArtWorks are collaborating during this year’s conference on introducing and training Greek artists in Philadelphia Mural Arts’ program to utilize art for social causes, focusing on supporting the most vulnerable of populations, such as victims of the opioid crisis; Theater of War working with the SNF Agora Institute and the Berman Institute of Bioethics at Hopkins to present a number of Greek tragedies in Baltimore; our own collaboration with the Special Olympics to expand globally its social inclusion program through sports by “Play Unified. Learn Unified.” and many such others, which perhaps you all know even better than we do.

Not only is it about facilitating new partnerships, but expanding existing ones. In addition, I should point out how much the Foundation’s work is strengthened by our evolving and deep relationships with each one of our partner grantees. Tomorrow afternoon’s panel between Drs. Tom and Peter Sculco, Dr. Oheneba Boachie, and Dr. Takis Koulouvkaris will show how the SNF’s longstanding partnership with one grantee, the Hospital for Special Surgery in NYC, has multiplied into relationships with organizations on three continents—from HSS in New York, to FOCOS Orthopedic Hospital in Accra, Ghana, and back here to Athens with our own incubated organization, Regeneration & Progress, offering much-needed health and sports services to our society at large.

The positive energy of this sense of collaboration is matched by the Conference’s happy time and place. We could certainly do worse than the start of summertime in Athens, in the midst of the Summer Nostos Festival. The setting of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC) further boosts the positive atmosphere. The SNFCC, created through SNF’s largest single grant to date, completed on time and on budget, and given to the people of Greece more than 2 years ago, has been a true success in terms of how people have embraced it, have made it their own. The real value it has added to the world is created through its use and enjoyment by the people of Athens, people of Greece, and by visitors from all around the world who keep engaging with it every single day. We welcome you to make it your own too while you are here. For those of you who have visited before, you will find some new additions at the SNFCC, such as the new dome venue at the Labyrinth, a shaded place in the summer and a warm space in the winter; the new water fountains installation at the Canal, choreographed to music, with the official inaugural event this coming July the 14th in collaboration with
the Greek National Opera, but as you have seen already, having a special soft launch this week for our conference and for the Nostos Festival. We are just trying to add to the magic of this special venue that belongs to the people. At the same time, the retrospective photojournalism exhibition in honor and memory of Yannis Behrakis is open right next door on the 4th floor of the National Library building, awaiting your visit.

The SNFCC is also tangible proof of the true potential of public-private partnership in action. That same model of partnership forged through the construction of the SNFCC continues today and is reflected in the implementation of SNF’s Health Initiative across Greece. This major initiative, well under way, involves a mix of physical projects (two new major hospitals in Northern Greece, and another one potentially being added soon in Southern Greece) and programmatic projects to improve health services at large for people throughout Greece.

All these good things are coming together here at the Conference, playing off and multiplying one another. It is like a negative image of Murphy’s Law: things just seem to want to go right.

This is not a conference that is looking for specific solutions or ready-packaged takeaways. The value of this gathering is the value of the journey we take together. Some of you know about my true love affair with Cavafy’s poem *Ithaka*. This conference is part of the journey, without which we would not have set out. We should feel safe here to engage in a genuine exchange of ideas, all traveling together. It is not about the destination (if there really is one after all...), it is all about the journey that each one of us takes on.

The title of this year’s conference is “Untitled,” but it could just as easily have been “Unentitled.” A title, in the sense of position, rank, or credential, is not a prerequisite, and sometimes is quite the opposite, for doing good work, and sometimes we need to be reminded that whatever title we may have does not entitle us to stop thinking critically about our own positions or to stop putting in a real effort to improve. Sometimes we get too comfortable in our own assumed expert positions and our own perspectives. There is nothing more important than life itself, but in so many ways life itself is untitled.

Henry Timms—who we are very happy he is with us here—and Jeremy Heimans talk in their book *New Power* about how power works in our hyper-connected world. In an article they co-authored for the *Harvard Business Review*, they describe old power as currency, jealously guarded, held by a few, downloadable. New power, by contrast, is like a current, most forceful when it surges, open, participatory, peer-driven, uploaded to the cloud, and shared. Titles work when power is currency, but not so much when it is a real current. In this new world, genuine human collaboration, conversation across divides, public-private partnerships, and open exchange of knowledge are all important parts of this new power “cloud.”

The journey of this conference is about listening to others in an untitled and unentitled way, digesting what we hear, and seeing how we can all get better and, through our own work, make life better for all. To borrow a line often attributed to Aristotle, the more we know, the more we know we do not know; but that is ok, we have to start somewhere...and it is okay if there are no pat answers at the end of this process. We may learn more than we ourselves realize, and good outcomes are set in motion that we may not be aware of at the time.
Leonard Cohen, the late Canadian singer and songwriter who felt a strong affinity for Greece (he actually bought a house in Hydra when he was 26 years old and spent a lot of time embracing the local culture and way of life), wrote that there is a crack in everything and that is how the light gets in. We all have a duty to keep this crack open, to keep letting the light in.

This is how we strive to approach our work at SNF. It feels sometimes like we agonize over the grant requests that are declined, and in making decisions, we tend to lean to the side of trusting in that inverse version of Murphy’s Law, that things want to go right. Better to seem foolish for trying to help too much than be wrong, and perhaps be perceived as arrogant, for declining to support a project that could have changed lives for the better.

Cohen’s choice of the word “crack” is a significant one. A “crack” implies something unintentional or accidental; something not designed or predicted, itself by nature untitled. In that sense, it is a perfect metaphor for the way this Conference aims to break free from traditional, preordained pathways of thinking.

In closing, I would like to thank all of you attending the Conference and coming from nearby and far away alike, without you there would be no Conference to talk about. I would also like to pay tribute to Dr. André Gerolymatos, who passed away last month. Dr. Gerolymatos was Director of the SNF Centre for Hellenic Studies at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, and joined us here on multiple occasions to lend his voice to this Conference. Most important, Andre was a great scholar, a great and loyal friend, he will be truly missed.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank all those who help organize and coordinate, and put up with me while doing so, the Conference and the Nostos Festival; it takes a lot of hard work, so thank you to all and especially to my colleagues at the SNF Stelios, Elenia, Nancy, Anna-Kynthia, Alexia, Lenia, Thanassis, Lina, Chris, Dimitra, Ioanna, Sofia, Christos, Alexia, Titica, Panagiotis, Viktor, and last but certainly not least, thank you to the Nostos’ angels, our own Elly, Mily, Asimina, to R&P’s Takis, Stavros, and their colleagues, and to Kostas and Yannis and their colleagues from View Master, to everyone who works at the SNFCC to keep the dream alive.

Thank you all for joining us. It is a true pleasure to be here with you and to see new connections being made and old ones renewed. The core of any productive collaboration lies in the human element, how people connect and work together. Discuss, engage, argue if you have to—the more you put in, the more you get out. Enjoy the conference, and keep Ithaka always in your mind.