

UNEP Goodwill Ambassador Designation Acceptance Speech

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I am very honored to be here today to receive this designation from the United Nations. It is an event made all the more special for me being here in Rwanda, a country that has factored greatly in not only my development as an artist, but also my development as an activist, providing for me a rallying point around which to generate attention and support. I would like to thank UNEP's Executive Director, Mr. Achim Steiner, for the opportunity to further these goals. I would also like to extend a special word of appreciation to President Kagame for making time to join us on this exciting day of gorilla naming, celebration and commemoration for World Environment Day.

It has been several years since I have been in Africa and the last time I visited the continent with my family I had the pleasure of not only being a guest of President Kagame at his residence but my wife, daughters and I also made a trip to Uganda to visit the World Vision, night commuter and IDP camps, visiting with many children who have suffered at the hands of the LRA. We heard many a harrowing tale but also heard stories of hope and redemption from those we met who were coming out the other side, so to speak, and were reclaiming their lives as they reconnected with their families and their communities, the arc of humanity finally for them bending toward justice. Also on this trip, we visited Kenya to go on Safari and were fortunate enough to witness the great migration of the wildebeest. I was still recovering from a recent knee surgery which made walking around, let alone hiking, somewhat difficult but we had planned this trip for months and there was no way I was going to miss it. Before hitting the Mara proper we visited David Sheldrick's preserve in Kenya and got a firsthand look at the baby elephants that had been rescued from the wild and were being rehabilitated to eventually return to their natural habitat. It was a special treat to have the opportunity to interact with these beautiful, magnificent creatures, more than worthy of being protected and cherished. It wasn't all smiles and sighs however, as one of the creatures

we had the occasion to meet, rather *aggressively* introduced itself to us in a way we will never forget.

For those who aren't familiar with the facility, the main grounds have as its central feature a large group of holding pens which sits in the middle of the property, surrounded by a fenced in area of brush separating the property from the wilderness beyond. Inside the fencing the elephants roam around with their handlers, rangers who are assigned to them for the duration of the elephants stay. While chatting with one of the rangers near the elephant paddock, out of the brush came very quickly - and a little too closely for comfort, I might add - an adolescent, yet almost fully grown, black rhino with what looked to be several fresh, puncture wounds on his side. As the father of two teenagers, let me tell you, the bad attitude of a young adult is unmistakable and from the looks of things, this rhino had just about had enough of whatever had happened to him beyond the fence, and was in no mood to play. As I stepped back slowly grabbing my wife and kids, the ranger saw my apprehension and said, "Oh, don't worry. That's one of our rhinos. He's fine." Fine? He was huge – bigger than my Mini Cooper and no CD player. The ranger went on, "Don't worry. There is a man here who can talk to him just like you talk to a dog." I said, "Uh-huh, and where is that man now?" "Oh, he's on holiday." Not quite the reassuring answer I was looking for, I continued to step back. But after giving us a good sniff the rhino trotted on about his business to his pen around the corner. The ranger explained that it was customary for them to let the rhino out in the morning to roam beyond the fence but he always returned at night to eat and sleep. Yep. Just like a teenager; let me go, leave me alone and oh, yeah...I'll take some food, water and a warm place to sleep.

The ranger walked off to open the gate for the rhino and with danger apparently averted I asked my kids if they wanted to watch the man put the rhino up for the evening. We should have let well enough alone because just as we peeked our heads around the corner I saw the ranger running back toward us at top speed yelling the one thing you don't want to hear while on foot in a wild life preserve in Africa; "He's

charging!” I immediately turned to my family and instructed them to do the one thing you aren’t supposed to do when being chased by a wild animal; “Run!” I pushed them in front of me and they took off, my daughters’ little toes somehow gripping their flip-flop sandals with superhuman strength, every muscle in their bodies fully aware of the severity of the situation. As I glanced back to see how close death was, I saw the Oh, so helpful ranger sprinting *past* me with fear in his eyes. Wait a minute, isn’t there some rule about protecting the client, getting between him and danger, the captain always goes down with the ship or something? Guess not. Then to my dismay, I saw the worst thing yet – 1 1/2 tons of angry adolescent rhino not two feet away, focused squarely on my back pockets. With my hobbled leg there was no chance to outrun him - I was clearly in trouble. So that’s how it was going to be, huh - death by rhino. I could see the headlines now. But I dug deep down, self-preservation taking over, and miraculously, impossibly managed to scale the eight-foot fenced in enclosure to my left that held the baby elephants. I don’t remember the split-second climb, I just recall staring down from the top, looking at this living, wrinkled, teenaged tank below as it wondered whether or not to ram the fence and finish me off.

Sitting up there on my perch, my emotions calming, heart rate slowing, my fear ebbed away and a thought crept into my head; maybe this charging rhino has it right. If I were a wild animal watching my habitat slowly disappear as man encroached upon it further and further, my water diminishing and my food sources becoming more scarce as a result of global warming and the proliferation of pollutants, I might try to take matters into my own hooves and take a couple human beings off the count for good measure as well. Who could blame me? For who else is it that can be counted on to redress the wrongs that humanity does? Who should be held accountable? The answer may be simple even though the solution is not. It is obviously us, men, women and yes, even children who must take up the fight to insure that these vitally important issues receive the attention they merit. Not for some lofty ideal of preserving a particular habitat or species because it’s the “right thing to do”, but for the very *selfish* reason of insuring that we as a species can thrive and quite literally, go on. Hundreds of millions

of people get their water from natural areas and 3 billion people are already affected by severe water stress, facts that you here in Africa know all too well. What conflict that exists today in already environmentally challenged areas will not be exacerbated by the continued loss of valuable resources, water chiefly among them? Half of all the fish stocks around the world are fully exploited, with major ramifications for food security looming as those who count on these fisheries for their livelihood scramble to support their families, struggling constantly to balance the rule of life against the rule of law. Scientists believe that half to two-thirds of all species will be put on the brink of extinction by the end of the century. That is a fact that should grab all of our attention and shake us out of our stupor. Deforestation is responsible for the destruction of untold new medicines for our most deadly diseases while at the same time being responsible for a third of the CO₂ that contributes to the greenhouse gas effect that is trapping poisons in our atmosphere, threatening to irrevocably choke us.

As this ever enclosing circle of loss and damage draws nearer to us, I find myself repeatedly reframing the questions; If not now, when? If not us, who? As climate change goes, a great many of us are like frogs in a pot of water. If you throw a frog in while the water is hot, the frog will make every effort to leap to safety, but if you put the frog in cool water while very slowly turning up the heat, it will remain there, unawares, until the water comes to a full boil, killing the frog. I am here today because I, unlike the frog, feel the temperature rising and realize that I am not in a pot out of which I can leap to safety. For better or worse, we are all captive on this big blue ball and if we continue to abuse it, it will abuse us right back. We need look no further than the Gulf of Mexico right now to confirm that fact, as another fragile eco-system sits on the verge of collapse, destroying species and adversely affecting the lives of those who depend on the region for many years to come. Our interconnectedness with our eco-systems and one another should be evident, but alas, it is not. Our leaders should be making these issues priority one, pouring a majority of their manpower and resources to stem the tide of these mounting calamities, but alas, they are not. It is these circumstances that bring me here today. It is my fervent hope that I can in my small way

be a voice that adds to those looking to be heard and perhaps help push their efforts over the top. I am here today as a parent who desires to see the world on the track to redemption and not destruction so that I leave more than an empty apology to my children for what we've left them to live through. I am here today in hopes that I can use my position in to do more than cut the line at the airport or get a great seat at a restaurant (though those are admittedly *really* nice perks). I am here today to throw my lot in with all of us frogs who can feel the temperature rising and wish to do more than simply wait for the inevitable. I am here today, the survivor of rhino rage, to say thank you for the opportunity to be about change, to be about a call to action, to be about a solution. Thank you.