

Omar Yaghi's Speech for 2017 Albert Einstein Science Award

I want to thank the principals of the World Cultural Council, organizers of the Einstein World Award of Science Prize, and the generous hospitality of our hosts, Leiden University's executive body, faculty, staff, and students. Please allow me to express my deepest appreciation to Lily Hernandez for her thoughtfulness and dedication to help bring all this together. I am deeply honored to join the ranks of distinguished scholars who were awarded this prize in years past.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to make the following brief remarks: As a child born to a refugee family, I firmly believe that each one of us is blessed with having an opportunity, a chance, a probability, to succeed in our chosen endeavor. I believe we are born with this opportunity and that we as individuals can work towards capturing it and, if we make the right decisions, we can grow and thrive. In other words, our ability to transform ourselves lies within us. I sincerely believe that this opportunity and the chance to succeed live in all of us. It is part of our DNA no matter who we are and where we come from.

In my remarks here today, I wish to say something to those who may face at some point slim odds of success in their life, those who start at the lower rungs of the ladder, and those who experience difficulty and may feel sidelined by life's twists and turns. I stand before you as a product of those slim odds and of a life of hardship such odds entail.

I was born to a family who started with absolutely nothing except their will to build their lives anew. We were a family of 10 and my parents worked every day of their lives, never taking a holiday or taking a rest from raising the children and providing for them. My father only completed 6th grade and my mother couldn't read or write. I will not bore you with the details of how challenging ones' life can be under such circumstances especially when one is more worried about food and sustenance than about pleasure and convenience. My chances for success were slim indeed. Except for one thing that no one can predict in their life's journey. It is how nature reveals itself to us in order that we might rise out of our difficulty and change our destiny.

As a child of 10 years old, I slipped into the school's library, which was supposed to be closed at the time. There I saw drawings of what later I learned were chemical structures. The drawings were so beautiful to me that I fell in love with them. I kept them within me where they became a love for chemistry and for the discovery of the underlying atomic arrangement of our world. In college, when I became cognizant of the science of chemistry, my love deepened and my desire to know more extended beyond what everyone else knew or was comfortable to know. Passion for chemistry

and creating a new molecular world was seeded within me and it grew more and more. This was the key to breaking those slim odds. It came from nowhere. Totally unexpected. Totally unplanned. It was to be my ticket out of what really seemed like an eternally difficult life.

In subsequent years, my decisions were always based on my passion for chemistry, and nothing would divert me from pursuing my passion. This hunger for building the molecular world resulted in my research group discovering the largest classes of new materials ever made by humanity with tremendous impact on clean energy, environment, sustainability, and water. I called them MOFs, COFs and ZIFs and aside from being important physical materials, which are now being pursued by over a thousand laboratories in academia and industry worldwide, these creations represented true happiness to me for they allowed me to peer into nature's way of doing things.

My dear friends, let me say this, along the way of progress and success, there will be challenges and sometimes you will face difficulties. Remember that nothing can extinguish the chance and opportunity for you to overcome because this ability is within you. It is part of your fabric. It becomes alive and becomes your ally through self-reliance, deep passion, unrelenting commitment and hard work, and always through ethical conduct. Now, I stand before you in receipt of this prestigious international honor, the 2017 Albert Einstein Award of Science, as an exemplar of what slim chances can lead to, as an exemplar of what having refugee parents with little wealth but who had the right kind of wealth (love) can lead to, as an exemplar of how happiness leads to success rather than success leading to happiness, and finally, above all else, how nature reveals itself to those in attendance and of the prepared mind.

In closing, you and I know that our world needs more than ever selfless dedication to ensuring the youth of the world can still dream, discover and explore, and to have hope. It is for this reason that my research group is also building centers of research in many countries including Vietnam, Korea, Japan, China, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and soon in Peru, Mexico, Argentina, and Kazakhstan. In these centers, those with slim odds, can now find love for discovery, be transformed by science, and be agents for making good in society.

Thank you,