Your Royal Highness,

Members of the Academy of Sciences and Letters, distinguished guests.

It is an immense and most unexpected honor to receive the Abel prize today.

I had a rough start in life. I was born with congenital weakness of the retina. I had multiple retinal detachments at age 15, and for many years I lived in the terror of becoming blind. As a refuge against this terror I turned to studying math and physics, because my father was a math professor, and because I was so mediocre at anything else.

The tide turned when I met a stupendous graduate student in Kent, Ohio. She instantly captured my heart to this day. She is the proud daughter of an eminent scholar and aristocrat. I overestimated the power of my good looks because when I proposed her after three days she said "you are crazy". Fortunately, life had already taught me to fight, and, even though this was the hardest problem I ever solved, it took a mere three years before she consented.

She had been raised in the belief that scholarly knowledge is the supreme value of life, and it made her the perfect companion for a mathematician. I don't think that she ever interrupted my work. It was clear from the first day of our marriage that I had such an overwhelming advantage over my competitors that they were already doomed.

I suffer from a pathologically weak memory, almost to the point where when I get out of my apartment I have to carry a little card with my address on it to make sure I can come back. This prevented me from learning vast amounts of mathematics. The best I could do was to study

the problems which came my way, always trying to go to the very bottom of things. Fortunately I worked in Paris in a very rich mathematical environment. I was immensely helped by colleagues who had a far better overview of mathematics and who introduced me to the areas where I became successful. Gilles Pisier directed me to probability and Vitali Milman's deep visions on concentration of measure had a fundamental influence on my work.

Not only did I try to go to the bottom of things, I also tried to not give up easily. I came back to some of my favorite questions many times over a 40 years period and the last steps clinched when I was almost 70. This was years after I had ischemic accidents and my neurologist had told me that I had holes in my frontal lobes.

Now a touch of philosophy. While discussing the failed marriage of a friend, my wife made this comment: "The secret of marriage is simple. You give everything from the beginning, and then maybe you will receive". This philosophy also applies to my life with mathematics. Giving everything made me very happy. I eventually received more that I had ever dreamed of, and I could even write a small footnote in the great book of mathematics.

To end, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the academy of sciences and the government of Norway for their support of mathematics. To commemorate the sacrifices Niels Henrik Abel endured to advance mathematics and to reward other researchers at a time where so many other issues occupy the world's minds is exemplary.

Norway, thank you for your constant efforts in reminding the world of the fundamental importance of mathematics!