Thank you, Rector Jan Danckaert and the VUB Board, for this kind honor and for your commitment, continuing that if your predecessor, Caroline Pauwels, to advancing VUB as a leader in the field: hosting scholars, advocating for imprisoned scholars—most especially Dr. Ahmad Reza Djalali, wrongfully imprisoned in Iran—and building solidarity within the higher education sector in the country, across Europe, and beyond. Thank you to Julie Beynens of the Department of Foreign Affairs and to the Flemish government for their support for this work, and to the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and all the member universities in the SAR Flanders section for working together to host as many scholars possible. Thank you to the nomination committee and the VUB international office, especially Jacqueline Couder, for their work on this event and their partnership these many years. Thank you to the entire VUB community for the honor of permanently attaching our names to each other, in recognition of the work we have done together, and in promise of the work we still hope to do. Thank you to my co-recipients for the honor of speaking our behalf.

Our theme is “science and freedom,” two profoundly expansive, inter-connected concepts; two concepts at the heart of our work at Scholars at Risk, as they should be at the heart of any university worthy of the name. Twenty-three years ago, almost to the day, at the founding conference of what would become the Scholars at Risk Network, we were issued a challenge of imagination by our then keynote speaker. “Imagine a world,” he said, “in which, in every country, there is at least one great, fully free university, where people from all parts of society can develop their capacities and harness their imaginations for the public good.” “Now,” he continued, “imagine a world where these spaces for free inquiry and expression do not exist, and where those institutions that do exist are heavily restricted and surveilled.” How would those two worlds differ? Which world do we choose for our children and grandchildren?
This simple choice, this vision of an archipelago of free institutions, strung around the world and linked together in common purpose, animated the creation of the Scholars at Risk Network, around which has since grown an ever-expanding constellation of partner programs, sections, coalitions, working groups and individuals. Together, we have assisted thousands of scholars and practitioners to escape risks and to continue their important work.

It would be wrong to say that I, or my SAR colleagues, or Scholars at Risk has “caused” this community, this movement, to come into being, at least not in scientific meaning of the verb “to cause.” Yes, we have done our part, as you at VUB have done your part, and as others at other universities have done their part to help create conditions, vocabularies and relationships. But people have always had the impulse to help, and universities have always taken people in.

Indeed, ours is not a conversion project. It is not our challenge to convince anyone to do this work; to convince anyone of this vision of the archipelago of free inquiry. Ours is not a conversion project, it is a project of linking up. Our project is built on the belief that there are already in academic and scientific communities around the world people who share this vision. Our challenge is to find them, to identify their needs and the constraints they operate under, and to support them. By linking up with them we signal our commitment to free inquiry. We model practices of mind as well as behavior—including sincerity, humility, and intellectual and moral honesty—that will draw others in and help to bring the vision about. This is our experience to date.

This community, this movement, sees the university as an engine of knowledge production, yes, but that is not all. History has shown us that the advancement of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, is incomplete, and may even be incompatible with freedom, if it is not harnessed to the public good by a set of core values. These include academic freedom and autonomy, of course, but also equitable access, accountability, and social responsibility. Absent core values, our universities risk becoming service-providers, feeding client-students courses that they select, in formats that entertain them, and client-donors research they commission that serves their market ambitions. Absent core values, scientific innovation risks becoming an engine of deepening inequity and a threat to the rights and hopes-for-freedom of the majority.

Our community sees the university as an engine of the public good. Universities most worthy of the name produce knowledge, but they do so with and on behalf of the broadest public. They are inclusive communities, not only open to, but welcoming of, peoples from all backgrounds and perspectives. This is because inclusion is essential to producing the widest range of insights, and because it is a safeguard against the myopic errors of exclusion.

Universities are engines of the public good because they are, in the words of a former Palestinian university president we once worked with, the place where we “leave our guns at the door.” This means that in the university space we do not seek to win through violence or coercive force. In this space the strongest, most connected, wealthiest, at least in the ideal, do not win because of their status. In this space, truth and outcomes are determined from evidence, reason, and persuasion. This is what makes the university different from the street. And by embracing this difference, and modeling and teaching the rules and practices of evidence-based inquiry and discourse to ourselves and our students, universities become engines of democratic practice.
Embracing this role in underpinning democratic practice is not to suggest that universities should posture themselves as human rights advocacy organizations, along the lines of Scholars at Risk or Amnesty International, deservedly recognized today in Secretary General Agnès Callamard. Each plays a different role. But universities as such do have a role, a responsibility, in defending the rights and principles from which the university itself grows. The university is rightly described as a neutral actor in disputes on the relative merits of contested ideas backed up by evidences. But it is not, and must not be, a neutral actor on the demand for evidence, process and quality, and for the practices by which these are debated. And at times when these democratic practices of evidence-based inquiry and discourse are under threat, the university has a first-order responsibility to defend them.

We are living in such times. This is what we see today in Afghanistan, of course, where the very idea of knowledge-based, forward-looking society is anathema to the Taliban authority. Where they have effectively imprisoned half the population, women and girls, and driven the most talented, highly educated, forward-looking and diverse generation of Afghan professionals ever into exile. We see in Ukraine another manifestation of this first-order responsibility to defend the public-serving university. The Russian government’s war of aggression on Ukraine is not only a blatant attempt to eradicate the self-determination of the Ukrainian people, it is an assault on evidence and truth. It depends on false vocabularies and histories, coercively imposed ideologies, and the direct targeting of those with the knowledge, skills and courage to ask questions. We see in the United States, where I am from, increasing attacks on inclusive academic spaces and evidence-based discourse. Legislators have banned the teaching of disfavored topics and vilified academics and students in these fields, including gender studies and critical race theory. Local officials have removed disfavored books from classrooms and libraries. University presidents and governing boards have in some cases attempted to strip the protections of tenure from long-serving faculty, or in other cases have been replaced with persons ideologically aligned with a sitting governor or legislative chamber.

From my chair at Scholars at Risk, looking through the lens of more than 10,000 requests for assistance from scholars all around the world, these growing threats to free inquiry are evidence that we are living in a symptomatic age. By this I mean that we are witnessing and experiencing signs of heightened tensions—environmental, economic, health, belief, political, familial, cultural. I believe these tensions are a manifestation of a moment in history, when we are bumping up against a conceptual barrier. We feel the need for a paradigm shift. How we have ordered the world and our individual lives is not working for most, perhaps nearly all; not in a way that can be sustained.

A collective awareness of the need for this shift is beginning to take shape, most clearly around carbon. Unconscious signs of it are visible as well, in mass migrations, disaffection from the structures of social participation, and mental health crises. We know that a shift is needed, and we even know what the core elements of the new paradigm must be: We must address extreme disparities and deep-rooted exclusions. We must have processes for more equitable and sustainable resource distribution. We must have genuine inclusion with due respect for difference. We must have genuine democratic legitimacy, in however many forms. This is not a “what to do” problem. This is a “how do we get there” challenge.

Let me conclude by saying that I do not presume to have the answer, but perhaps from my seat at Scholars at Risk I have two pieces of the answer. First, I believe that universities and science communities more broadly will play a central role in getting us there, but only if they are themselves rooted in core values
and in service of the public good. Science depends on freedom from external, ideological constraints, and Scholars at Risk will continue to defend the autonomy of academic and scientific communities to do their best work. But in exchange, science and the scientific community owe society an internalized system of professional and ethical restraint to ensure that the public’s support for the freedom of scientists is met by the scientific community’s support for the broadest possible freedom for the broadest public.

Second, I believe that the scholars and practitioners that those of us who are involved with Scholars at Risk serve can show us how to get to the new paradigm. Individually, they are talented, courageous experts deserving of our help as important voices and as fellow human beings. Collectively, through their experiences, they offer pinholes of light from the other side of the paradigm shift. Pinholes in the curtain of consciousness that we know is there but cannot fully see. Pinholes of light that show us that there is another side: a knowledge-based, forward-looking, pluralist, rights-respecting side. Through their courage, through their dedication to knowledge and the pursuit of truth, through their commitment to the public good, and their willingness to endure sacrifice, they show us the way.

It is the honor of my professional life to be in a position to serve so many of them in small ways. It is my honor to work with the extraordinary staff of Scholars at Risk, and our Board and donors, who make all that work possible. It is my honor to work with the many universities and people, like everyone at VUB and across the Flemish universities, who go out of their way every day to help colleagues in need; who work to bring about a world where universities and people from all parts of society can develop their capacities and harness their imaginations for the public good.

For myself, for the staff and everyone at Scholars at Risk, and for my fellow honorees today, thank you for this very special recognition.

Robert Quinn (@RobO_SAR) is the Executive Director of the Scholars at Risk Network and host of the Free to Think podcast. For information about joining the network, scholars seeking hosts, or supporting SAR’s work, follow @ScholarsatRisk or visit https://scholarsatrisk.org.