

Why Are We Here?

A poem to honor the visit of
Vladislav Antipov, Igor Kochankov, Vera Maslova,
Irina Ignatieva, and Irina Parfenova
From Sarov to Los Alamos
July 11-21, 1999

By Robert J. Thomsen

The poem continues, the pulse of our planet goes on,
Bringing new lives, new sunrises, new partners, new chances
To live together in peace and health and understanding.
We dare not miss the chance.

Why are we here? I keep asking the question.
Step back and consider where we have been.
Our cities dancing to the big boys' tune,
Moscowashington pulling the strings.
While we, not even on maps, playing the quiet games
Of nuclear weapons,
Each wrapped in our stone-encrusted slogans, self-serving visions
Of world "peace". "Peace" on our own terms.
Non-understanding "peace". Non-peace.
Cold war words willing to warp ourselves with our lies.
Each believing our own lies, not yours.
Enemies through misunderstanding, enemies through greed.
Locked in a dangerous game of who will first pull the trigger.
MAD, mutual assured destruction. A world gone mad.
This is not health. Yet risking all we have.

Why are we here? I ask again.
And where are we now going?
With this new opportunity to bring health to our peoples,
To heal a sickness wrought by cold war.
A chance to bring understanding between our communities
And health to our peoples.
Community based medicine.
With exciting, fresh, new possibilities. New vistas.

Here is my answer. Yours may be different.
We are here for Olga (yes, your Olga; yes, all Olgas), and
For Tatyana, Dennis, Oleg, Sasha.
For the young mother, working hard to provide.
For the faceless pensioner struggling on limited income.
For the teenager caught in the nightmare of heroin.
For the worker who drinks and smokes and will soon die
Unless something is done.
It is for these, and not for lofty slogans that we work.

And why do we care?
Because our health and our peace
Depends on them all. Community health is all of our health.

Our security comes from the health of the people,
and not from our nuclear weapons.

What will it cost? The money is the easy part.

It will cost change.

If we are to succeed, we will change how we think.

All of us.

We will chip out of our shells:

Shells of habit, shells of conceit, shells of mistrust.

It will cost communication.

We will listen.

We will seek first to understand.

It will cost effort

To beware of old deadly traps.

Through this partnership we will bring health.

Health to our people, health to our communities.

Health to pregnant women, infants, diabetics, asthmatics.

Health to the overworked, the elderly, the needy.

Fit bodies, solid teeth, healthy lungs, strong hearts.

Slowly, through fresh shared visions

Of how to best care for those in need.

Our work has begun.

The poem continues.