Your Majesty, Mr. Turner, Ms. Calvin, Mr. Annan,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a privilege to accept this award on behalf of humanitarian workers everywhere.

My thanks to the UN Association of the United States and to the UN Foundation for this award and for your continued strong support to the United Nations in helping us to build a more equal, stable and secure world.

It feels as if we have reached a pivotal moment in our history. Every day the news agenda features terrorism, conflict and humanitarian crisis. The list of countries in crisis grows longer: Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Central African Republic, Yemen, Somalia. And the Ebola outbreak, which is having such a devastating impact on Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, has resulted in an unprecedented level of fear and suspicion across the world.

It would be very easy to get depressed. I don't. Why? Because although I see the very worst of what we as human beings can do to each other, I also see the very best: people managing in the most difficult circumstances. I see solidarity. I see communities and people being innovative and entrepreneurial in finding ways to survive. I see people with almost nothing, being prepared to share what little they have; holding their families and communities together; wanting the most basic things: safety, security, education for their children, decent health care and a right to be treated with respect and dignity.

Humanitarian response is at the heart of the UN’s mission around the world, and the unsung heroes and heroines of that work are the people on the front lines: the NGO and UN agency staff who put themselves in danger, under fire, risk their health and even their lives to get help to
people in need. I cannot describe how I felt the day I received a phone call from a senior colleague in Syria: “We are being shot at. We need help.”

Humanitarian workers are often supported by colleagues from private sector companies, who are maintaining vehicles and planes, delivering vital supplies and building telecommunications systems to track what’s needed where, and how we can get it to people as quickly as possible.

Some of the most important humanitarian work, for example, is being done by hospital cleaners in Liberia, Ericsson staff distributing mobile phones in Guinea, health workers taking soap and chlorine to remote areas in West Africa.

One gravedigger in Freetown told a member of my staff: “The first mistake I make will be the last mistake I make, but we’ll all be infected if there's no one to come out and say, I will volunteer.”

That’s the humanitarian spirit.

Thank you very much for honouring that spirit with this award tonight.

Thank you.