

RI President-elect's Address

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Good morning and namaskar, as we say in India.

Standing up here before all of you is without a doubt one of the most incredible moments I have had in Rotary. To see all of you, so many people, my brothers and sisters of Rotary, from so many nations, gathered here in New Orleans under the flag of Rotary, is simply amazing. And to have the call to serve as the first among equals in this great organization in the coming Rotary year is also a truly humbling experience.

Some time back, we had a phone call from our granddaughter Tia, who lives in Australia and whom you met just a little while ago. Every week, she and her friends have to tell in school about what is going on at home with their families. Well, apparently when it came her turn to share the family update sometime back, she put up her hand and said, "My grandpa is going to be the president of the world".

Strangely enough, her teacher had a hard time believing that. She said, "He's going to be what"?

And little Tia absolutely insisted. She said, "He's going to be president of the world. I know, because my mummy told me so". Well, Tia's teacher phoned up the mother, and after what had happened was explained, peace and calm returned. But today, whenever Tia meets up with me, she can't resist saying, with her mischievously sweet smile: "Hello, President of the World".

You know, coming into this assignment in Rotary right now, I can tell you that our President Ray, our own Rotary cowboy, is going to be a tough, tough act to follow. But today at least I've got the advantage, I think, because if there is anything bigger, better, and bolder than a cowboy, it is a cowboy and an Indian together.

And here in New Orleans, we've got a lot of history, and even a lot of Rotary history as well. As I was preparing my remarks, I had a look at the proceedings of the last RI Convention held here, in 1976, when Ernesto Imbassahy de Mello of Brazil was the president of Rotary and Gerald Ford was president of America, which was celebrating its bicentennial. President Ford, who was himself a Rotarian, was to come to address the convention, but at the last moment he had to drop out and be replaced by another speaker, who quoted a valedictory speech given by a young lady at a Mississippi high school, who had said: "The trouble in America today is not so much the noise of the bad as the silence of the good".

Well, speaking from a perspective of more than 34 years down the line and also of a somewhat different culture to that of the young lady at the high school, I would agree that it is a problem, but I would not call it a problem that is peculiar to the United States. It's true, really, all around the world, that we hear much more about what is wrong with the world than about what is right. We notice much more the people who don't care than the people who do. The people who create trouble rather than the people who get things right.

But here in New Orleans today, we have abundant evidence that there are people who do care . people who are doing what is right . people who are doing good. And let me tell you, the good that you are doing in this world of ours is making a difference.

Let me ask you, if I may: Why are we here today? Indeed, why are we all in Rotary? I believe we are here because we care, and because we see both what's wrong in the world, and what's right. And we want to carry forward what is good, build on it, expand on it, help it grow . while taking a hard look at what needs to be changed in our lives and then doing what we can to change it.

Because at its core, I think, Rotary is about change. It's about not being content with things as they are. It's about not going gently into that good night.

A man named David Selbourne, a British social commentator and historian, wrote a little book called Moral Evasion. And in it, he listed 11 reasons why people avoid making moral judgments, why they avoid looking at something and saying, this is not right and we must do something about it. That sounds familiar, doesn't fit? Let me recount a few of those reasons:

There is no quick fix..

There is nothing you can do about it..

The problem is much more complex than you think..

You are focusing on the wrong issue..

It has never been any different..

And, of course, the perennial, "Who are you to talk?".

Well, who indeed are we to talk?

Who are we? We are Rotarians.

We are the doers of our communities, the leaders, the ones who are most involved, who see the problems and have the means to find the solutions. As our strategic plan so elegantly and aptly defines it: We are a worldwide network of inspired individuals who translate their passions into relevant social causes to change lives in communities.

I'm fond of quoting Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world". I believe we are in Rotary to change the world . for why else would we be Rotarians?

We are not here to listen to the naysayers, the doom-mongers, those who say the world can be no better than it is, so why even try to change? We are here because we believe in change. And let me tell you, my brothers and sisters . that change, any real change, has to come from us, starting from within us, from inside each one of us.

Because, if what we want is a world with more kindness, more caring, more joy, and more love . well, if we want all of those things in our world, we have to put them there! "Where do we find those things?" you ask. Well, I believe we will find them by looking within ourselves. That's where the search begins.

In order to achieve anything in this world, a person has to use all the resources he or she can draw on. And the only place to start is with ourselves and within ourselves. And the questions we need to ask ourselves are: Why am I here? Why are you here? I believe it is because we all seek a sense of fulfillment in our lives, and to achieve that fulfillment, we have to find harmony between our inner self and

the outer self. The inner dimension is our desires, our will, our spirit . and our outer dimension is the action we take and the image we create. That is why I am asking you to reach within and unleash your inner power and then use it to embrace everything and everyone around you.

Go ahead: First reach within yourself, and then move on . confidently, firmly . toward the targets you have set for yourselves. Discover yourself, develop the strengths within you, and then, unhesitatingly, unflinchingly, go forth and encircle the world, to embrace humanity. And that, my brothers and sisters in Rotary, is going to be our theme for the coming year: Reach Within to Embrace Humanity.

How we do this will vary, club to club, culture to culture, country to country. Each of you knows best what your own community needs. But together, around the world, we Rotarians will be guided by three emphases: the family, continuity, and change.

Our first emphasis will be the family. It is our first emphasis because the family is the beginning, the starting point for everything we are trying to accomplish.

The family is the building block of the community, and as the family goes, so goes the nation. If we wish to see a world that is more joyous, we first have to make sure that the families of the world are more joyous, that they have the things they need to be happy, to thrive, and move forward. So we have to look at housing, at clean water and sanitation, at health care, at all the issues affecting mothers and children.

For there to be a strong family, there must first be a strong and safe home . only then can there be health, hope, and harmony within its walls. Indeed, a home is where the family begins.

Back in the year 2001, the state of Gujarat in India, where I come from, had a terrible earthquake, measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale. It occurred on the morning of the 26th of January, the day India celebrates its Republic Day, and at a time when children are usually at their schools, participating in ceremonial flag hoisting and march pasts. Well, the severity of the quake destroyed many towns and killed thousands, many of them schoolchildren attending the morning's ceremonies.

One day later, I rushed there from Mumbai, 1,100 km away, and visited Anjar, one of the towns worst hit. And as I sat there with the shaken Rotarians, all of them fortunately alive and safe, working out how best we could help people rebuild their homes, in walked a lady . perhaps 65 years of age, carrying a small cloth bundle . who said: "I hear you Rotarians are planning to rebuild our homes. Well, I have here some money; please use it if you can.. We opened her bundle and counted out 120,000 rupees . that's about US\$2,500 . and thanked her for it. She just said: "Just use it up. And I'll try and give you more".

Four months later, we had the shelters ready . 200 of them built with all the money we had put together. Indeed, much help poured in, from Rotary clubs in Japan, today sadly damaged and recovering from its own quake and tsunami disaster; from the USA; and also from Italy and other parts of the world. The homes were modest but adequate, and as we organized a simple handing over, suddenly there came up from amongst the crowd the lady who had given us her savings. She came up and said: "My brothers and sisters, I want to tell you how happy I am today, and I want to thank you Rotarians. You see, I have lived in Anjar all my life with my family. Two years ago, my son and his wife were killed in a bus accident. But I survived the catastrophe, only because of Munni, my granddaughter, who was the light of my life. And then, on the 26th of January, Munni went to her school and never came back. I was devastated. But then, when I heard that you Rotarians were rebuilding our town, I gave you whatever I had saved for going on the Hajj for pilgrimage. After Munni went, I didn't want to go on the Hajj anymore. And today, you have given me back what I lost with Munni. I don't need to go to Mecca now. My Mecca is right here". And then she broke down and wept, and I must confess, so did we. And so, that's why I say a home is where the family begins.

Our second emphasis will be on continuity, on continuing and strengthening those things we do well. There are so many areas in which we have been successful . working for clean, safe water; spreading literacy; working in so many ways with Generation Next, our youth. And of course, our greatest project, polio eradication . where our success has come slowly, but is no less certain.

As the saying goes, the difficult is done immediately; the impossible takes a little longer. If we want to really achieve the impossible, we have to have not only persistence, but vision . we have to be looking past what we are doing now, at what we can and should be doing in the days and years to come.

And so, our third emphasis in 2011-12 will be change, and we start by being the change we wish to see in the world. If we wish for peace, we start by living in peace ourselves, in our homes and in our communities. If we wish environmental degradation to stop, if we wish to reduce child mortality or to prevent hunger, we must be the instrument of that change . and to recognize that it must start within each of us.

And to bring about these changes, we will need to think in new and different ways, explore new ways of seeing. If we do what we have always done, we will get what we have always got . nothing better, nothing more. This would not satisfy us professionally, and it certainly should not satisfy us in our Rotary service, where the stakes are so much higher.

Past RI President Bill Huntley used to tell the story of the old woodcutter who passed on his much-used ax to his son before retiring, saying: "Son, this is the ax that our family has used for generations. And except for eight new handles and 12 new blades, it is the same ax I and your forefathers have always used. It is now yours".

Rotary is a bit like that, isn't it? As we explore Generation Next in our new fifth Avenue of Service, as we focus on our strategic plan and Future Vision, I believe it is time for us to move into a future-forward mode . not just in the next year but in the next decade and beyond. These are exciting times, changing times, and times when we keep our feet firmly on the ground, anchored in our core values, but look beyond the far horizon. And as our Generation Next connects through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and iPhones, I believe the time has come to join hands, urge them forward, and go ahead developing our own Rotary social network, as we hope to do in the coming months.

Yes, my brothers and sisters in Rotary, the time has come for us to change . change from our pallor of gray and go green, to embrace our new generation of newer, younger members. They are all out there waiting to come in, and we need to open our doors and give them space. And I don't know how you feel, but I have always believed that the younger generation of today is perhaps more committed to the ideas of service and friendship than many of us were at that age. And we must understand the reality of the new generation of Rotary and help them balance expectations with realities. They are under pressure constantly, being involved in multiple endeavors, and yet have a strong work-life balance. And I understand too that even though they may be constantly on call with their careers and managing multiple responsibilities, they are as dedicated and passionate about being a Rotarian as you and I are.

On a recent visit to Myanmar to look at the possibility of Rotary's return to that lovely country, I was out dining with a local person from big business. And he told me about his son who had done his MBA at a top university here in the USA, got himself a job with a five-figure salary, but after two years gave it up to join an NGO [nongovernmental organization] engaged in spreading literacy in countries in South Asia, with a 75 percent salary cut . but a 100 percent enhancement of job satisfaction. Oh yes, they are all there, future and potential Rotarians, but we have to tell them our story, the story of Rotary. We need to work harder on our public image, we need to tell them who we are, what we do, and what we stand for. And the time to do it is now.

Let me ask you a question: What does each one of us seek in life? I bet the word is happiness. Now let me ask you: Could Rotary be the source for that happiness? The law of duality affects human lives, yours

and mine: Where there is joy, there is sorrow; with positive, we see negative; with heat, there is cold; with light, there is darkness. Yes, with love, there is hatred. Only if we could find a balance, we could probably seek the emotional situation that we call happiness. I submit that this equilibrium is present within each one of us. As a well-known Sufi poet and scholar in the 13th century said: Inside me there is good news. Others look for good news outside themselves.. There dwells within you the power and the spirit that can evoke the energy that you may not realize. You have to reach that inner voice, and you can do so provided you have the hunger for it. You have to be hungry enough to reach within and release the energy which will help you embrace humanity. I believe this is the state, the equilibrium, we call happiness. And I have just given you the prescription for it. Rotary can help you achieve the happiness in life that you seek.

I had started this morning by referring to a speaker at the last convention in New Orleans, and I would like to close today by remembering something he said that morning, because that's the way I feel too. My fondest wish for you, he said, is that at the end of the day, each day, you can look back and think: "I wrote a little line today in the history of good". Some days, you might write a paragraph in the history of good. There might be a day once when you could write a whole chapter in the history of good. I think that's what motivates Rotary. I think that is indeed what motivates men and women of goodwill every place on the face of the earth.

Indeed it does. And so, as you go back from this convention, perhaps today, maybe tomorrow, as you go back to your homes and to the countries you have come from, as you go back to Japan, as you go back to England, as you go back to India, as you go back to Brazil, and as you go back to South Africa and Australia and all the other great countries of the world of Rotary, go and tell your clubs and your communities that you are ready to take on the challenges that face us today, the challenges of distrust, of fear, of intolerance, of helplessness, of violence, and that the Rotarians are ready to go and work . with hope, with enthusiasm, with courage, and with vision . and to stand firm and strong and tall like Mount Everest, firm in our purpose to spread love and happiness and to work for peace.

My wife, Binota, and I look forward to the privilege of joining hands with each one of you as you Reach Within to Embrace Humanity, and continue to write the history of the good.

Thank you.