



## RI PRESIDENT-ELECT'S THEME ADDRESS TO THE 2018 INTERNATIONAL ASSEMBLY

Barry Rassin  
14 January 2018

Good evening, everybody!

How are you doing this evening?

I can't hear you. You're doing OK? Glad to be here?

It's great to see you all, together at last, and to welcome you to this 2018 Rotary International Assembly. It was really an incredible moment, when I saw the first DGE couples start to arrive yesterday morning. I was standing down in the lobby, with John Hewko, and I said, "Well, here we go."

And he said, "It's kind of like that YouTube video."

I said, "Like *what?*"

He said, "You know that YouTube video, where a bassist walks out into the middle of a plaza, and starts playing Beethoven's 9th. First it's just the bass player by himself, and then a cellist comes out and joins him, and then the bassoonists trickle in, and the strings, and then the rest of the woodwinds. Everybody's dressed in regular clothes — you wouldn't pick them out of a crowd — but before you know it all of these ordinary-looking people have come together into a full orchestra, and a chorus, and the music is everywhere, and everything is just transformed."

I said, "Yeah, I know what you're talking about. I think someone sent me that video." And just as I said it, another couple walked in. And then another.

I could almost hear the music.

All day yesterday and today, you've come, from every corner of the Rotary world. And now, here you are, ready to play your parts.

We're here tonight to begin a journey together that I could not have imagined just six months ago.

On 1 July of this Rotary year, you and I and all of Rotary thought that someone else would be standing up here this evening. President-elect Sam was a friend of mine, a hero to the Rotarians of Africa, someone whose brilliant smile and gentle spirit were known and loved by so many. He called himself an incorrigible optimist — who, despite having seen so much of the darker side of humanity, never ceased to believe in the goodness of the world, and Rotary's power to help it shine.

As we carry forward Sam's work, we carry forward that lesson that all of us have learned in these last few months: that the work of Rotary doesn't begin or end with any one of us.

The responsibility we've been given is to build on the work of those who have gone before us — and build a solid foundation for the work yet to come — by serving as effectively and as efficiently as we can; keeping our work transparent and accountable; changing the lives of as many people as possible for the better, in the most significant and lasting ways; and ensuring that Rotary continues to provide the best possible experience to its members. That it continues to grow and be useful to the world, not just this year and the next, but beyond our own time in Rotary, and even beyond our own time on earth.

These are the tasks that we have been entrusted with, as Rotary leaders.

And they're the ideas that inspired our new vision statement, which describes the Rotary we want to help build:

Together, we see a world where people unite and take action to create lasting change — across the globe, in our communities, and in ourselves.

In Rotary, we unite: because we know that we are far stronger together than we could ever be alone.

We take action. Because we are not dreamers in Rotary — but doers.

We work to create lasting change — change for the good, change that will endure long after our involvement has ended. Change across the globe, and in our communities — reaching out to those we will never meet, and those closest to our hearts.

And change in ourselves — perhaps most important of all.

Mother Teresa once said if you want to change the world, go home and love your family. Because changing the world starts with changing yourself — and working outward from there. That's something we all need to take to heart, in taking care of our organization.

Our membership has hovered around the same 1.2 million mark for the last 20 years. We aren't growing, and our membership is getting older. We've got too many clubs that don't have the knowledge or the motivation to have an impact: clubs that don't even

know what we're doing on a global level, clubs that don't know about our programs or our Foundation, that don't even know how to get involved.

We are a membership organization. And if we want to be able to serve, if we want to succeed in our goals, we have to take care of our members.

It's not your job to fix every problem, in all of your clubs, on your own. That's not what you're here to do. What you're here to do is inspire the club presidents, and the Rotarians in your districts, to *want* to change. To *want* to do more. To *want* to reach their own potential. It's your job to motivate them — and help them find their own way forward.

To me, as a Bahamian, the sea has always been something special. It represents both distance and connection. I stand at the edge of my island, and thousands of miles away, someone else stands at their edge. Our lands, our nations, our languages may be different — but our sea is the same.

And that sense of connection, that sense of inspiration, that sense of longing for something that seems just out of reach but is much closer than we think — I want you to inspire in your clubs, your Rotarians, that desire for something greater. The drive to do more, to be more, to create something that will live beyond each of us.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry put it, “If you want to build a boat, don't begin by collecting wood, cutting boards, or assigning tasks. Begin by awakening in the souls of your workers a longing for the vast and boundless sea.”

Your job isn't building a boat. It's building a better world. And if you want to build a better world, you have to awaken the souls of your Rotarians — to their own ability, and their own potential, and to the longing inside each and every one of us.

If you want to build a better world, don't begin by planning projects or assigning tasks.

Begin with inspiration.

Begin by awakening the souls in your Rotarians the longing for a better world — and the knowledge, deep and true, that *they* can create it.

Begin this evening — together, in this place — with our theme for 2018-19: *Be the Inspiration*.

I will ask you to be inspired by our motto of Service Above Self, and to inspire others to action through Rotary.

I will ask you to inspire with your words and with your deeds, doing what we need to do today to build a Rotary that will be stronger tomorrow — stronger when we leave it than it was when we came.

Some will ask how do I inspire others, so I want you to remember four elements of that ability: You need to show your love and your empathy to Rotarians and to clubs and the communities we serve. You need to show your enthusiasm for Rotary and changing the world to the point that it is infectious. You need to be the agent of change, with an audacious challenge for doing more than ever. And you need to lead by example, showing Rotarians what to do rather than telling them what to do.

I want to see Rotary *Be the Inspiration* for our communities through work with a transformational impact — taking the time to research the real needs, to involve all the participants, to plan and to partner.

To build a stronger organization, we need to do a much better job at letting people know who we are and what we do, leveraging social media to get our message out there where it will be heard.

We need to work harder to inspire a younger generation, building Rotaract as a vital force within our organization and giving our clubs better ways to help members develop their skills and their leadership.

A club that's inspired is a club that will push forward. And we need to remove the barriers that are holding them back, making it easier for people to start new clubs that suit their needs, for Rotaractors to start their own Rotary clubs, and for all Rotarians to have the flexibility to serve in the way that works for them.

Each one of us has our own inspiration in Rotary — the thing that excites us, that pushes us forward.

For many of us, that inspiration has been the work that has united all of Rotary, for over 30 years: our work to eradicate polio.

We are at an incredibly exciting time for polio eradication: a point at which each new case of polio could very well be the last.

Thirty years ago, the wild poliovirus paralyzed an estimated 350,000 people, almost all of them children, every year.

Four years ago, polio paralyzed 359 children.

Three years ago, it was 74 children.

Two years ago, 37 children.

Last year, 21.

In 2018, so far, not one child has been paralyzed by polio.

That one number that has measured our progress, year after year, for so long, stands at zero.

We all hope that is exactly where it stays. But whether we reach our last case this year, or next year, or have reached it already, that last case won't mean our work is over. And that is something it is incredibly important for every Rotarian to understand. Polio won't be over until the certifying commission says it's over — when not one poliovirus has been found, in a river, in a sewer, or in a paralyzed child, for at least three years.

Until then, we have to keep doing everything we're doing now.

We have to keep immunizing the kids — 450 million of them every year.

We have to keep up all the surveillance — checking communities for paralyzed children, checking water supplies for virus, and maintaining all of the labs, staff, and infrastructure we support now.

If we stop any of that work — if we let immunization levels fall, if we take our eyes off the places where the virus can hide — we risk losing everything. And that's why we need to raise all the money that we've committed, to get us all the way to the end.

When polio is gone, it will be the end of one disease. And it will be the beginning of a new chapter for Rotary.

A chapter where sustainability in our service moves front and center in everything we do.

Sustainability has become our watchword in Rotary. We want the good we do to last. We want to make the world a better place. Not just here, not just for us, but everywhere, for everyone, for generations.

And if we really mean that — if we really care about what the world is going to look like, 10, 20, 50, 100 years from now — we need to acknowledge some hard realities about the state of our world today.

Pollution, environmental degradation, and climate change are having more and more of an impact in every one of our six areas of focus.

Environmental pollution is now responsible for 1.7 million child deaths every year.

Four billion people now live with major water scarcity for at least one month a year — and that number is only going to go up as the planet gets warmer.

I live in a country where 80 percent of the land is within one meter of sea level. According to the projections we have now, we'll see a two-meter rise in sea levels by the year 2100. That means my country is going to be gone in fifty years, along with most of

the islands in the Caribbean and coastal cities and low-lying areas all over the world.

I ask all of you to *Be the Inspiration* to help Rotary move from reaction, to action — to take a hard look at the environmental issues that affect health and welfare around the world, and do what we can to help.

Truly sustainable service has to mean looking at everything we do as part of a larger system, a larger global ecology.

It means helping to build communities that are stronger and more resilient to the changes ahead.

It means doing everything we can to make sure the good we do now is still leading to better lives tomorrow, and beyond.

I am asking you to *Be the Inspiration* for that to happen.

*Be the Inspiration*, to your clubs and your districts. Show them what we can do in Rotary, and what we can be.

*Be the Inspiration*, to your countries and your communities — by coming together and taking action to create lasting change.

*Be the Inspiration* — and together, we can, and we will, inspire the world.

Thank you.

*Note: This text reflects Barry Rassin's remarks as they were prepared. The actual spoken remarks differed somewhat.*