



MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH OUR AREAS OF FOCUS

John Hewko, General Secretary
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Good morning. *Bonjour.*

You know, it's a real honor to be here in Toronto, at Rotary's 109th international convention.

Now I would like to start this morning with a thought experiment. Remember a time when you could see a crystal-clear night sky, when the stars were visible.

Picture that sky in your mind.

Now try and count the number of stars that you can see. It's clearly an impossible task. There are simply too many to count.

Now, I can tell you that the 34,000 people fleeing violent conflicts every day is 10 times the number of stars you can see — the number of stars visible to the naked eye.

And I would suspect that for many of you this is an uncomfortable thought.

I remember when I last looked out at the night sky from my office at Rotary headquarters in Evanston. It made me think with deep empathy about those thousands of people, desperate for a chance to live in peace and in freedom.

It made me think about the incredible challenge for countries and systems to integrate a huge influx of new migrants.

I thought of my own parents, who, at the end of World War II, came to the United States from Ukraine by way of refugee camps in Bavaria.

As a child, they would tell me stories of leaving everything, literally everything, behind and making the long and dangerous trek from western Ukraine, across war-torn Europe, to the refugee camps in southern Germany — and then to a new life in the United States.

In fact, it was my desire to give back to the country that welcomed my parents with open arms that motivated my interest in public service.

And when I weighed up what my parents had lived through, and what the people

displaced by conflict today are facing, I asked myself two questions: “Will the future bring more conflict or more peace?” and “What can we do about it?”

Now, it might be easy to answer that first question with low expectations. You might say: John, it appears that in the last decade, violence has actually increased.

Every day, we see images of conflict and terrorism, which feeds the perception that our world is becoming a more dangerous and more divided place.

It seems like we are experiencing the profound impacts of social instability and political turmoil. It also seems as if the fruits of globalization and rapid technological change have not improved lives equally.

So, can I see a show of hands now from those of you who agree that our world is heading for more conflict?

OK. There are clearly many of you.

Now let me offer an alternative perspective. The reality is that our world is healthier, more prosperous, and more peaceful than at any time in history.

In fact, over the last 70 years, deadly political conflict has been gradually declining. Since the 1980s, civil war in developing countries has been cut in half, and deaths in war have fallen by more than 75 percent.

Never before has so much progress been made in reducing poverty, improving health and education, increasing incomes and personal freedoms.

Let me illustrate that point with some examples. Extreme poverty once accounted for 4 out of every 5 people on the planet. Today, it accounts for just 1 in 5.

In 1960, more than 22 percent of all children born in developing countries died before their 5th birthday. Five decades later, that figure is just 5 percent.

And, as you all know, we are coming closer to the day when polio — a disease which once brought terror to millions — will be eradicated from the face of the earth.

So, in many ways, one could argue that the world is becoming more peaceful and more prosperous.

But, as we all know, progress is not guaranteed, and what we have achieved so far is meaningless, absolutely meaningless, to those who have not yet benefited from the great surge in human development.

There are still close to 1 billion people living in extreme poverty, and more than 3 million still die from vaccine-preventable diseases each year.

844 million people — that’s 1 in 9 — still live without access to clean water. And 2.3 billion inhabitants of our planet still live without adequate sanitation.

So what does this mean for Rotary?

It means quite simply that our work is not finished.

Although Rotary has done so much in our first century, there's still much more to be done. And when I think about the challenges that mankind still faces — especially in the area of peace and conflict resolution — I'm an optimist. Precisely because of organizations such as Rotary.

And for two simple reasons: First, well, just look around this convention center, and see the power of our global network, people like you, people of action, who are ready to make a difference. And second, the work we at Rotary do in each of our six areas of focus.

Over the next few days, you will hear some remarkable speakers, from Caryl Stern of UNICEF and Dr. Tedros Adhanom of the World Health Organization on health, to former United States first lady Laura Bush on literacy, and former administrator of the United Nations Development Programme Helen Clark on sustainable development.

And their messages will reinforce the concept that our work in water and sanitation, in disease prevention and treatment, in maternal and child health, in community development, in literacy — this all directly builds the optimal conditions for peaceful societies.

And how do we know this? Because we now have new tools at our disposal to measure and implement long-term, sustainable actions to build more peaceful societies.

One of those tools is called the Global Peace Index, created by one of Rotary's newest partners, the Institute for Economics and Peace.

And it tells us that there are concrete interventions that we can make — that everyone here can make — to build the optimal conditions for peace.

The institute is the world's leading think tank dedicated to analyzing peace. It carries out its mission by quantifying peace through a number of indicators and by developing a concept called Positive Peace.

And Positive Peace identifies the key characteristics — which we can measure — of peaceful societies.

Now these characteristics include the fair distribution of resources, a sound business environment, low corruption, good relations with neighbors, and an acceptance of the rights of others.

And the work we do at Rotary in our six areas of focus — from providing clean water to developing local economies — this is all related to building these optimal conditions for peaceful societies.

Let me give you just one example. Here's Muyatwa Sitali from Lusaka, Zambia, who completed our Rotary Peace Centers program in 2012-14.

Muyatwa saw how many girls refused to attend schools with no running water or toilet. He witnessed disease ravaging communities that lacked proper sanitation. Muyatwa wanted to be involved in the clean water movement, since he knew that in many developing regions water held the key to economic empowerment and, ultimately, to peace.

He knew that without basic needs — a reliable source of clean water, and proper sanitation — women and young people would be held back from attaining the education they needed to get ahead. Every hour they spent carrying buckets of water home over many miles was time that was stolen from them.

In regions undergoing reconstruction in the wake of mass violence, he saw how unequal access to water triggered tribal or religious conflicts.

So after his fellowship ended, Sitali became a consultant for the World Bank and, now, for UNICEF.

He has teamed up with Rotarians to provide basic resources to communities recovering from violence.

In his words, "Too often, the cause of the conflict was the result of inequality. Providing water and sanitation may not guarantee peace, but it reduces the chance of grievance that leads to armed conflicts."

So, when you, as a Rotarian, implement a water and sanitation project, you are a peacebuilder. When you initiate a microcredit project to empower a first-time entrepreneur, you are a peacebuilder. When you mentor a young student, you are a peacebuilder.

So how can *we* make the greatest possible impact for peace in Rotary's future?

How can *we* live up to our new vision statement: "Together, we see a world where people unite and take action to create lasting change — across the globe, in our communities, and in ourselves"?

Well, there are three ways we can do this: our global grant model, measuring the work that we do, and our strategic plan.

First, in my view, The Rotary Foundation's global grant model represents the most important initiative that our organization has undertaken over the past 30 years — after polio eradication.

And I say this for the following reasons: The global grant model offers enhanced impact and sustainability in our projects. It improves our public relations when these projects are implemented. And, it expands opportunities to partner with other organizations.

In short, global grants are a way for your club, your district, to do bigger, better, more sustainable projects.

So, during this convention, take the opportunity to learn more about our areas of focus and the ways in which you can participate in the grants process. Because through our global grants you can truly make a difference in the lives of others.

Second, just as we now have a measure for peace, we can also measure the impact of our work. This is important because it tells us if our projects are getting the results we need. It allows us to be more agile and change those projects if necessary. It ensures that our projects are sustainable.

By quantifying what you do, and collectively what we do, we can get the deserved credit in the public eye. We can communicate our local and collective impact. This will allow us to attract others — volunteers, donors, partners — who want to be part of the impact we are having on the world.

So please continue to measure the impact of your work so that we can prove our value, tell our story, and attract new generations who grew up in the era of big data.

And third, we are thinking long-term and developing a new strategic plan for Rotary, which will redefine our work in the 21st century.

And for this process to be a success — for us to define what Rotary will look like in the future — we will need your participation.

We will all need to be bold and think differently about the future — allow new club models to flourish, bring new ideas to the table, open our arms to younger generations who also believe in Service Above Self.

So, I hope that by these three actions — bigger and better grants, measuring what we do, and defining our strategic vision — we can make the greatest possible impact in the future and create lasting change.

As I said earlier, there's still much we can do. We can prevent conflicts before they happen. We can stop epidemics before they spread. We can rebuild trust in communities torn apart by conflict. We can help refugees resettle and start a new life. We can give young girls an education and economic independence.

Ultimately, we can be optimists about our ability to create lasting change.

Why? Well, do you remember the thought I shared at the beginning? That the 34,000 people fleeing violent conflicts every day is 10 times the number of stars you can see?

Well, remember that there are 35,000 Rotary clubs and 1.2 million Rotarians ready to give them the chance of a healthier, more peaceful, and empowered future.

And, you know, two of those people who fled conflict — my parents, Lu and Natalie

Hewko — gave me the inspiration that I, too, could make a difference. And in many ways their story is our story of service. After escaping Europe, they arrived in the United States with nothing, absolutely nothing.

And like millions of refugees before them, they made a new life for themselves and provided the very best that they could for me and my brother and my sister.

And they were helped along the way by caring, compassionate volunteer and community organizations.

And in return, when they were able to get back on their feet, they volunteered with multiple organizations. And one of those organizations which my father served is Rotary.

As a Rotarian, he was able to make a difference not only in his local community in Clarkston, Michigan, but in Ukraine — in bringing much-needed medical equipment to local hospitals and in helping set up the first post-Soviet club in that country.

But even more important is what Rotary gave to him — the friendships, the skills, and the satisfaction of changing people's lives for the better.

So the next time you look up at the night sky, just think: You can truly make a difference.

You can *Be the Inspiration* for anyone who needs your help, because the power of your compassion and the force of your commitment is greater than the cruel conflicts that undermine the cause of peace.

You are all tomorrow's peacebuilders, and you can all create lasting change.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of the convention.