



RI PRESIDENT'S CLOSING REMARKS TO THE 2016 ROTARY CONVENTION

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My friends:

The shadows are lengthening and the twilight draws near.

Soon, this convention will pass from experience into memory.

A day from now, this place, this time, will exist only in each of us — in the stories we will tell of the days we spent together, here in this world of Rotary.

As my year at the helm of Rotary draws to its close, let me mention with gratitude just a few of the many people who have done so much to support Vanathy and me through the adventures of this Rotary office:

My aide, Barry Rassin, and his wife, Esther, for their complete devotion and endless assistance. Life would have been difficult without them around.

Our children, Krishna and Prashanthi and their wonderful spouses, Neesha and Nico, who willingly shared us with the rest of the world. We missed them.

And my colleagues at work back home, who held down the fort for nearly two years without allowing my absence to reflect on the company's performance.

And President-elect John Germ, GS John Hewko, and my board, for their unstinting support and cooperation. A great board like this makes even ordinary presidents look good!

When I look back, one day, upon this year, when I tell the story of my time as your president, I know that the stories I will tell will not only be my own.

They will always be a mosaic of the stories of others — of lives touched and shaped and changed by Rotary, as mine has been shaped and changed.

In these too few days, we have heard so many stories. They have moved us to joy, and to tears; they have filled us with new ambition; and made our hearts sing with renewed pride.

These stories have let us step into the experiences of our fellow Rotarians, and of those we help — to see the world as they see it, in its shadows and its light, its sorrows and its joys, in its valleys and its hills.

And when we tell our stories to each other, we are not just sharing the story. We are sharing ourselves.

So let me end this last general session — as we end our time together — by sharing another story, this time a story of my own.

It's a story that is very much a Rotary story, and yet it is also very much a Sri Lankan story. And it is a story that I think very few of you here have heard before, because it is a story about my mother.

My mother was born in Sri Lanka — a bright, beautiful girl who grew up to develop a remarkable strength of character. She married quite young and I was born about a year after that, so that by the time she reached the age of 30, I was already 11 years old and off at boarding school in Colombo.

So I wasn't home that day when she woke up feeling not quite well. I wasn't there when she went to wash her face and found that it had become difficult for her to lift her hands. I wasn't there when she sat down to rest and realized that it was becoming difficult for her to breathe.

And I wasn't there when she was rushed to the hospital — completely paralyzed, unable to move. She heard them say she was dying, and that she needed to be in an iron lung.

I was so young at the time that no one really told me how serious the situation was. I knew about polio, but no one said that word to me. Someone came and took me from school and brought me to my grandfather's house, where my brothers and sister and I stayed while my mother lay in the hospital, the iron lung pushing her every breath in and out for her.

It happened to be that my grandfather, like my father, was a Rotarian. And the next evening, he was hosting a committee meeting in his living room. I remember very clearly hearing the phone ring and looking down the stairs as my grandfather came out to answer it.

I couldn't hear what was being said, of course, but I could see his face, and I could tell that the news was not good. The doctor said, "You have to put her on a ventilator or she hasn't got much of a chance, but we don't have one to give her."

This was Sri Lanka in 1963. There were only a few ventilators in the country, and all of them were already in use.

And there he was, holding the phone like that at the bottom of the stairs, devastated, when his fellow Rotarians came out and crowded round him.

But they didn't just listen sympathetically. They stood there and worked out how they were going to get that ventilator. One of them was a bank manager; he called a minister of state to have a foreign exchange released. Another one was a manager at SwissAir,

who arranged to have the ventilator flown in by the following night. And in the meantime, the doctor himself made arrangements for the machine.

There was so much red tape at that time in Sri Lanka, but somehow, those Rotarians made it all fall away.

By the following morning, the machine was on a plane, with a band round it saying, “Rush me, I could save a life.” By that evening, it was at the hospital and it was helping my mother to breathe. She was on it for nearly a year, flat on her back, unable to do anything for herself, unable to even talk, but alert in her mind.

My father could not bear to leave her, even for a night. He slept on a table in the waiting room, for more than a year. During the day, he went to work. And then he came back to the hospital, every evening — where he sat, hour after hour, in a wooden chair outside the ICU.

Listening to every breath the machine took for her. Making sure it never stopped.

And willing her to recover.

After a few weeks, he had a sign hung on a small board over her bed. It said, “Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better.”

And she was. One day she could move her finger. And then she could move a toe.

For us, as children, it was an apocalypse, for both of our parents had suddenly vanished. But ultimately, my father, in his impossible optimism and his equally impossible hope, was right.

She was carried into the hospital on a stretcher, but when she left it, she walked. Slowly, with a walker, but upright, on her own feet. She was never physically the same again — but she came home to us to live another 48 years before she passed away five years ago.

Fifty-three years ago, my mother’s life was perhaps the very first to be saved from polio by Rotarians.

We have saved millions of lives since then.

And, my friends, the lives we will save in the years and centuries to come will be as the grains of sand in the desert and the drops of rain in the sea. They will be without number, they will be without end.

Fifty-three years ago, Rotary gave me the gift I prayed for. It gave me my mother back.

And tonight, I stand before you as her son, and your president, to say that soon — perhaps not in years, but in months — Rotary will give a gift that will endure forever: a world without polio.

When that happens, every one of you here, and everyone who has ever proudly worn a Rotary pin, will know that whatever else you do and achieve in your lives — whatever gifts you give or are given — you will know this much to be true: that your lives, your work, your gifts will live on, as long as the earth endures, and as long as humanity walks upon it.

Every story has an end. But in life, every end is a new beginning.

On the day you were born, an hourglass was turned. Even now, the sands run through it, day by day, hour by hour. We know only how many grains have fallen; we never know how many are yet to come. I ask you now to be always mindful of this — not to waste a single day, a single moment.

So that at the end of our lives, we may say to ourselves that we made a difference. That there are people on this planet whose lives are better now, because you traversed this earth.

And it doesn't matter if they know that or not. And it doesn't even matter if they know your name or not. What matters is that your work touched lives — that it left people healthier, happier, better than they were before.

That is what really matters. And that is the goal I set before you this year — to *Be a Gift to the World*. To make the world richer, for your presence in it. To leave it better than it was when you came. And, as was said, to sing the song you came to this earth to sing.

We and our memories will fade away. But our work need not.

For the midwives we train this year will deliver healthy babies to mothers who will live to raise, and love, and cherish them.

The sanitation we will bring to schools will bring better health to their pupils — who will finish their educations, go on to better futures, and bring greater prosperity to their communities and their nations.

And the drops of vaccine we put into the mouths of children — because of these drops, those children will grow up to walk, to run, to thrive, forever free of a disease that once prevailed.

My granddaughter Raika may not know the names of the Rotarians who saved my mother's life on that dark day in Sri Lanka, so many years ago. But their legacy will endure forever:

In every mother who wakes in the morning and lifts her hands with strength — who reaches out to her children in joy and love and health, and whose steps will echo, firm and strong, through the halls of her home — because she lives in a world that we created, free of polio.

This is the legacy that each one of us will leave behind — not in monuments of stone or marble but in the work we do, and the people we help, and the lives we change.

Through being a gift to the world.

As we prepare to leave this place, and our time together, I want to share with you the words of a poem from the great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa:

Look to this day:
For it is life, the very breath of life.
In its brief course

Lie all the realities of your existence.
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendor of beauty.
For yesterday is only a dream
And tomorrow is but a vision;
But today well lived makes
Every yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day.

My friends, I wish you all safe travels back to your homes and your families. I ask the blessings of the Almighty on our work in the months and years ahead.

And, as we say farewell to each other, knowing that our paths will cross again as He wills, I send with you my trust, my confidence, my faith in you — for you are, and will remain, a gift to me, as you are a gift to the world.

Thank you.