



RI PRESIDENT'S WELCOME ADDRESS TO THE 2016 ROTARY CONVENTION

K.R. Ravindran
Korea
29 May 2016

There is a story of a king, who received a gift of two magnificent falcons from Arabia. He called his falconer to him and said, "Take these birds, and train them well."

Some months passed, and the king asked for a report on his new birds. The falconer said, "Your Highness, one of the birds is flying majestically, across all your lands. The other one — he found himself a nice branch the day he got here, and he hasn't moved since."

Of course the king was very disappointed in this. What is a falcon for but to fly? He called healers and experts from throughout the land — but the bird wouldn't budge.

Finally the king thought, "All this time I have been looking for experts on birds. Perhaps I need to find an expert on branches." So he called a farmer and said, "I will give you my best field if you can make that bird fly."

The farmer said, "Yes, Your Highness," and he went outside.

Ten minutes later, the king looked out the window. The bird was soaring off, over the treetops. The king ran outside and said, "The field is yours! How did you make this miracle?"

The farmer held up his hand and said, "It was very easy, Your Highness. I broke off the branch on which the bird was sitting."

We cannot fly without leaving our perch.

And sometimes, if you want to do your best, to fly your farthest, you have to say, I am going to leave the things I know. I am going to devote myself totally to the task that lies ahead; I will fly forward as I am called, and I will not glance back.

Being the president of Rotary is not just an honor, although it is.

It is, first and foremost, a job. And from the day I was nominated, I approached the job of running Rotary as I would the running of any big business: striving to keep our costs low, our productivity high, our operations efficient — and focusing on increasing value for our members. And what I asked of our members, I have also asked of our leaders and our staff.

These efforts have not only yielded substantial fiscal savings, but have also led us to develop new and creative ways to give Rotarians good value for the cost of their membership, such as Rotary Global Rewards.

Rotary Global Rewards is a new program that allows you to receive concessions on everyday transactions via your smartphones. It has had over 80,000 visits with over 13,000 redeemed offers already, in less than one year.

Whether you're shopping online at Marks and Spencer, visiting Walt Disney World in the U.S., or buying electronics at Harvey Norman in Australia, it's worth looking first on Rotary Global Rewards.

But in any business, it is not enough to merely know your markets or to know your customers. You have also to be responsive to them, aware of their evolving needs, and always alert to the competition.

And the real competition to Rotary these days is simply life. It is the other priorities we all have — all of which compete with Rotary for our energy, our time, and our resources.

It has become increasingly clear that the traditional Rotary model, of weekly meetings and meals, may not be a viable proposition to the professionals of all ages we most need to attract.

And so your Board proposed, and your Council approved, increased flexibility in how we meet, and in the types of membership — giving clubs more autonomy to make the choices that work for them.

I am glad to tell you as well that your Council made more progressive changes to our constitution than any Council in history — with an eye to a future in which the business of Rotary will be conducted on a level more ambitious than ever before.

Whether you are at a meeting of the RI Board or Council, or a Rotary club anywhere in the world, you are seeing the machinery of Rotary. You are seeing the process. But in order to see the product — the reason for this drive toward efficiency, toward building our resources, toward doing the most with what we have — in order to see that, you have to step outside those walls.

Like the falcon in the story, you have to fly.

And this is the privilege I have had in this Rotary year. Of flying above the landscape of Rotary, soaring over its fields and its mountains, its rivers and its valleys.

In dozens of countries, hundreds of projects, I have seen the countless ways that Rotary has been a gift to the world.

In Nepal, one year after their devastating earthquake, I saw the first fruits of a partnership between Rotarians and their government: an agreement that will result in 140 new schools, and hundreds of homes, to replace those destroyed.

In Chile I met a beautiful child, with no sight and with other disabilities. As I carried her around, I saw how many children were being set on a path to productive and fulfilling lives, because of that disabled children's center concept — by Rotary.

When the magnificent Himalayan region of India was hit by an apocalyptic flood, leaving terrible destruction, and thousands dead, Rotary stepped in to rebuild 32 schools — schools in areas so remote, so inaccessible, that the materials had to be carried in, brick by brick, on the workers' backs.

It was a triumph, not only of engineering, not only of logistics, but of determination, and of conviction — a conviction that even the most isolated, the most unreachable communities, must somehow be reached.

These projects, along with all of the best projects I saw this year, showed not only compassion, but also generosity, ingenuity, creativity, and skill. They showed what we can do in Rotary when we approach the business of service with our full attention, our full expertise — and with a full heart.

A few months ago in Rwanda, I had the privilege of spending a day with a medical team led by Past Rotary International President Raja Saboo. Twenty-six specialist doctors flew in from India, with all of their equipment, to perform some four hundred surgeries over the course of one week.

Having been invited by Past President Raja, I spoke to one of the organizers of the event beforehand, asking how I could help out. Being a professional, he asked what experience I had. I said, "I run a multinational business and I'm the president of Rotary International."

He thought for a moment, and he said, "All right, we will put you down for unskilled labor."

And spending the day like that, pushing wheelchairs and moving patients in and out of surgery, I thought, here was a project that targeted a need that no one else could meet. That mobilized resources no one else could mobilize. That brought together all of these people, from the most highly trained surgeons to those like me, with no specialized skills at all, and maximized the contribution of each one.

Who else, my friends, but Rotary could do that?

But more than that, what I want you to know is what happened afterward, when we came outside after the last surgery and saw, waiting for us, a group of mothers with their children — children previously sent to India for complicated heart surgery which they unfortunately could not perform in Rwanda.

They were there to meet me.

They had brought for us some home-cooked delicacies and were wearing their best clothes. One of them sang for us and another danced. And then one mother came up to me. She showed me her daughter — lovely child, big smile, maybe 11 or 12 years old. And she said, "The doctors told me that this child cannot live because of her heart. And then Rotary came, and they gathered these children together, took them in a plane to India, repaired their hearts, kept them there until they were well, and brought them home again.

“When my child left I cried uncontrollably, believing I may never see my daughter again. But look — here she is.”

And there she was. This smiling child, and all of these other children — every one of them children whose parents had been told they could not live!

My friends, I ask you, is there a price tag for this gift?

But *that* is what we do in Rotary. *That* is why we are here.

When I took this job, 11 months ago, I was convinced that Rotary must be run like a business.

And to those who said to me, “But Rotary is not a business,” I said, “Yes, it is.” But it is a business like no other.

Our business is literacy, is health. Our business is livelihood, and it is hope. Our business is life itself — and to so many of those we help, our business is miracles.

And that’s what I want to say to all of you. That’s what I ask you to understand. That when we push for ambition in our service, when we push for productivity, for efficiency, for new ways to leverage our resources, it is so that we can make *that* business grow.

As Rotarians, we see our business as entrepreneurs. We set our targets. We measure our progress. We chart our course and we move forward, week after week, month after month, one Rotary year after the next.

In this week here in Seoul, we will look at our business from the other side — through the eyes of those we help, through the eyes of the bird that soars above.

The child who was given no hope — until Rotary came to save her.

The family left homeless — until Rotary built their home anew.

The countless generations who feared polio — until Rotary came, and stopped it.

The work that we do in Rotary is practical, it is considered, it is the work of our hands and our minds here on earth.

And yet the gifts that we give, the fruits of that work — those gifts are indeed miracles.

For that is what you do, when you serve to the very best of your abilities, when you hold your Rotary work to your highest professional standards, when you never content yourself with saying, “I did the best I could,” but always ask yourself, “How could I have done more?”

I thank you all for the gifts you have given me: I thank you for your trust, for your confidence, for the responsibility that you have placed into my hands.

And I thank you for the gifts *you* have given, and the gifts *you* have become, through the work you have done, the promises you have kept, the opportunities you have seized — to *Be a Gift to the World*.