



2011-2012 Theme Speech
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International Assembly inspires Rotary leaders to embrace humanity

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Let me begin by extending Binota's and my sincere and personal welcome to each of you assembled here, leaders from 532 districts in over 200 countries and geographical areas from all over the world.

At the entrance to this Assembly Hall, you would have seen a sign that reads Enter to Learn. And that is what you and I shall do, as I join you today in all humility, but with a clarity about what it is that we want to achieve as we seek our answers over the next five days. It's going to be an experience that we shall long remember and always cherish.

Perhaps this is the time to take a look at your teammates. On each side of you this morning, as well as both in front and behind you, is a new friend. Just take a look. She or he may be from a different country, a different culture, perhaps a different creed. He speaks in a different tongue and has a different attire. But regardless of the differences, there is one single commonality among us: Each one around you is a Rotarian who has the same hopes, the same dreams, and similar aspirations to make the world around him or her safe and happy for his family, for his children and her grandchildren. Over the next few days, as we meet, greet, eat, live, and learn together, our friendship will grow stronger and firmer.

Each one of you is waiting, I know, to do just that. So why don't you stand up now — just stand up — shake hands with your neighbor on either side (and in front of you and at your back). Let's go and just do it.

Thank you. Yes, it's a truly special day for each one of us today, you as well as me, as we bask in the presence of our illustrious past presidents, the Board of Directors and Trustees, and officers past, present, and future, leaders all, of our great organization.

Well, where do we start? Let me respond to that question by turning back a few pages in our history.

It was Past [RI] President Glen Kinross of Australia who initiated a low-cost shelter project in Rotary in 1997-98. And this led to Rotary clubs from Raipur, in District 3260 in India, to get the local government to give them some 8 acres of land so that they could build 500 shelters, each about 350 square feet in area, at a cost of US\$800 each. For each shelter, Australian Rotary clubs contributed \$300 and Raipur's five clubs came up with \$100, and The Rotary Foundation provided the rest in a Matching Grant. When the shelters were ready, the clubs in Raipur advertised in the local papers and received some 5,000 applications. Whereupon, the Rotarians decided that the shelters would be allocated by a public drawing of lots. On the appointed day, they all gathered in the open space adjoining the buildings — the Rotarians and about 3,000 people. I flew in from Mumbai, 1,500 miles away, to join them.

Perhaps the 135th name drawn was that of Anisa Begum. As her name was called, a slim woman in a white sari got up from the audience and made her way to the stage where she solemnly received her papers. But instead of going back, she suddenly asked the Rotary organizers if she could speak a few words. And something about her sincerity made the Rotarian hand the microphone to her, telling her she had just one minute. The woman began by saying:

"My Rotary brothers, I don't know you and you don't know me either. I came here to Raipur with my husband and our three small children one 2 International Assembly Speeches 2011 year ago. We lived in one small room until my husband came in one day and said, 'Anisa, I'm going to leave you. There is someone else.' Then he quickly said three times, 'Talaaq, talaaq, talaaq' (I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you) and picked up his bag and just walked out.

"The sky fell on me. I had nowhere to go. The room's owner threw me and the children out the next day because my husband had not paid any rent.

Then, we just roamed around, staying at the rail station, sometimes at the bus terminal, being chased away by security guards everywhere, or just slept on the sidewalks along with the street dogs. The children were always crying and hungry and sick. I had no money for food or medicines and no job, except sometimes as a sweeper of public toilets. I was getting absolutely desperate.

"And then, someone told me about your housing scheme and was kind enough to write an application out for me because I can't write myself. And so here I am."

And after saying this she suddenly sat down, there on the stage, in front of the thousands there and said:

"Rotarian brothers, you don't know what you have done for me. You have given a new life for my children and me. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

And then she wept unabashed and so, I must admit, did we, because we just could not help it. But through our tears, each one of us realized that day the true meaning of our Rotary membership like never before.

Well, that was 12 years ago and ever since that day I have been convinced that if we want to bring hope and give dignity and confidence to our fellow human beings on this earth, we can do nothing better than to help them have a home to live in. A home is where the family begins. The mother and the child are the core of every family. And the communities we live in are not built of individual people but of families — families living in homes together, sharing their lives and their resources and their common destinies. Good families lead to good neighborhoods, and good neighborhoods build good communities. Good communities make great nations.

This is why, in the coming year, the first of our emphases will be the family, because the family is where all our goals are set. And then, we start looking at safe housing, at 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 and hope and harmony within its walls.

Years ago, I had the privilege to work with Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

It was Mother Teresa who said: The world is upside down and is suffering so much because there is so little love in the home and in the life of the family. We have no time for our children, we have no time for each other, to enjoy each other. Love begins at home — love lives in homes and that is why the world suffers so much and is so unhappy today. Everyone is in a rush, and children have little time for parents and parents have no time for children or one another — and in the home begins the disruption of the peace of the world. And so it is the home and the family we start with, to return to that peace.

Our second emphasis is to build on what we do well, on continuity, because there are so many things we are indeed good at: working for clean, safe water; spreading literacy; working in so many ways with the New Generations, our youth, in our newest Avenue of Service and assisting them to become the

leaders of tomorrow. And, of course, we stay focused on eradicating polio. We are almost there — just this close, as Desmond Tutu said. To do all this, we must continue to work with our strategic plan — expand on it, reinforce it, and take it to the next level. We must support The Rotary Foundation on its Future Vision Plan.

And since development leads to prosperity and prosperity leads to peace, let's continue to build communities. It may be by doing something huge, like building a dam or a bridge over rivers, as clubs in India have done. Or it may be something small, like putting desks or fans or blackboards in classrooms in a school. As you go ahead, you will find that what really matters is just your willingness to meet the need, and not the size of the project. This I have always seen: The difficult jobs can be done right now. The impossible may take just a bit longer.

But along with the big things, let's not ever forget the small gestures that change lives. A pat on the back, a word of cheer, sometimes just a smile is all it takes. And you will then see that almost everyone will smile back. Laugh and the world laughs with you. Let's make our year, in addition to all that we do, a year of laughter and joy and happiness, with at least three smiles each per Rotarian and spouse every day. That's eight million smiles daily!

Wow! In this life, you will find we may not always be able to do great things. But we can always do small things, with great love.

It is my belief that we Rotarians are pragmatic idealists and that we bring our ideals to life through our Rotary service. We aspire to live our lives ethically, honestly, having The FourWay Test to guide us, as we share goodwill and friendship, and try to see the worth of every human being. We are not interested in the lowest common denominator, for Rotary is anything but common. That is why we work to elevate ourselves and, thereby, elevate the world.

So, let's look at the things that we can do better, things that we should be changing, and things that we haven't started working on yet. I believe we must have the wisdom and courage to see these and identify them and engage ourselves in them. Indeed, I believe we are in Rotary to change the world, for why else would we be Rotarians? We believe our future will be better than the past. I'm so fond of quoting Mahatma Gandhi, who said:

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

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 ourselves. 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 recognize that it must start within us, with each of us.

And to bring about the changes, we will need to think out of the box. We need to explore the possibilities of working together with others similarly engaged as we are. I have often felt that Rotary and the United Nations form a symbiotic relationship. We can take this forward by our engagement with the Millennium Development Goals, striving to meet the needs of our communities. And the newly approved but well-tested Rotarian Action Groups — working in areas such as safe water, microcredit, AIDS prevention, or literacy — will significantly strengthen our arsenal of weapons to serve both effectively and efficiently.

Two areas where we shall need to constantly revisit our goals are first, finding more Rotarians to do the work of Rotary. I believe the time has long since arrived when we must focus on getting newer, younger, current-generation, YouTube- and Facebook-savvy Rotarians.

They are all there, willing to be invited, but we need to make space for them. In many parts of the Rotary world, this is beginning to happen. It needs to become universal as we put ourselves on fast forward and develop our own Rotary network. And it certainly will, if we focus on the changes that I am talking about.

And the other area we must look at is telling well the story of Rotary to the world. Too often do we believe that because we are doing so well, the world must be looking at us. Well, for International Assembly Speeches 2011 the world isn't, for most of the time. Even in Evanston, two blocks from our headquarters, intelligent people often ask: "Rotary? What does it do?" We need a planned, imaginative, modern-day presentation of the Rotary story to the world. Newspapers and magazines carry enough stories of the bad. It's time to tell the stories of the good. The way we tell it may differ from place to place, country to country. But it needs to be told, because we surely do things worth telling.

Yes, today, as we get ready to commit a precious year of our lives to Rotary, let us clearly understand that each one of us has a part to play, to perform, to deliver. We cannot simply go back home from here saying we shall try our best. We need to commit ourselves absolutely, fully, and say what I must do shall indeed be done.

And I tell you that each one of you will succeed because the resolve and

strength to do this — to do anything — comes from within yourselves. In order to achieve anything in this world, a person has to use all the resources he 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? It is because we all seek a sense of fulfillment in life, and the responsibilities we are about to take up are a part of that fulfillment.

To achieve the fulfillment, we have to find harmony between our inner self and the outer self; the inner dimensions are 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 our year:

Reach Within to Embrace Humanity.

How do we do it? Well, that's just what we have been talking about, all this time. All the lights of the world cannot be compared even to a ray of inner light of the self. And I wish that: May the lamps of love and devotion burn brightly in your heart, may the light of understanding shine in your minds, may the light of harmony glow in your homes, and may the bright rays of service shine forth ceaselessly from your hands.

I want to end this morning with a little story. One of my favorite books is Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the epic novel about the Napoleonic army's doomed efforts to conquer Russia.

There is one scene in the book where the French troops are very close to the Russians, who appear to have their backs to the wall. Two Russians, an officer and his friend, are talking.

The officer says to the other: Tomorrow's battle will depend on us, and not on any others. Success never depends, and never will depend, on position, or equipment, or even on numbers.

His friend asks: But on what does it depend?

The officer says: On feelings — the feeling that is in me, and in him, and in

each of us.

Why do I end with this story today? Well, for one thing, because we too have been talking about war and peace. But more, because for the past 20 minutes, I have been telling you that's what we are all about and that is what Rotary is all about: the feelings in you and in him and in me.

Reach Within to Embrace Humanity. And I wish that, for each one of you, this International Assembly will be everything that you hoped it would be.