

President-elect's Closing Remarks

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RI President-elect

Garrison Keillor has a popular radio show in the United States, and I am one of his fans. He usually starts his weekly stories about his mythical hometown with the statement "Well, it has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon." I would like to paraphrase his line by saying, "Well, it has been quite a week here in San Diego!" Yes, quite a week! Do you agree?

It has been a wonderful week with a model world in which Rotarians from around the globe have worked in peace and harmony to make the world a better place. Indeed, it has been a magical place here at the Grand Hyatt this week, due to the spirit of Rotary — the spirit of fellowship and service that has spread around the world from the simple act of one man inviting three of his friends to meet with him to talk about a new idea, the idea of a service club that would be based on fellowship and friendship. What a simple idea, but what a powerful concept! We are the direct beneficiaries of that new idea proposed by Paul Harris in 1905, and there are millions of other people who have benefited as well through our service programs.

The Rotary spirit, and the magic we have experienced this week, has occurred due to one person's new idea. And there have been several other new ideas adopted along the way, such as the four Avenues of Service, The Rotary Foundation, the Standard Rotary Club Constitution, The Four-Way Test — and the office of district governor! Each of these hallmarks was conceived by an individual Rotarian and then supported by other Rotary leaders because it made good sense. They were simple concepts, but they have created the magic of Rotary!

Now it is your turn. What are your new ideas to improve your districts? We want you to plan your work and work your plan, but first you need to dream! Think big! What can you do to help the clubs in your district to become bigger, better, and bolder? You have this amazing window of opportunity to create new directions and new magic in your districts. If you can dream it, you can do it! Buzz Tennent, the RI president in 1957-58, said it right: "The magic, the genius, the power of Rotary is friendly service finding expression in the lives of men [and women]." We can enhance the magic of Rotary, and our most important tasks to do that are to think big and to do the right things!

As we prepare to close this assembly, it is natural to be saddened by the completion of this incredible experience. Tomorrow morning, we will say farewell to our new friends and then return to the real world outside this hotel. But keep in mind that this is not the end but just the beginning of our new adventures in Rotary. We will leave here more competent than we came, and we are ready to meet the traditional challenge of Go Forth to Serve! We are ready to dream and to plan for improved assistance and support to our clubs. And at the same time, we recognize that some Rotarians in our districts, perhaps even some crusty old PDGs, will not be ready for our new ideas.

So let's talk for a minute about the resistance to change that you will encounter, the buckets of ice water that others are waiting to throw on your new ideas. After all, the old-timers may remember that some ideas similar to yours were tried about 25 years ago, and they didn't work! Now comes the real test of your leadership: the need to convince other Rotarians that your plans will work — not because they are your ideas but because they make good sense. And because they are the right things to do!

There is always resistance to change due to uncertainty of the future. As a wise person once said, "The problem with the future is that nothing is the same anymore." Rotary has evolved to

its current position on the world stage through many steps of incremental change. But occasionally, Rotary has taken big steps through the courage and foresight of some visionary leaders. One such change was approval of the 3-H program in the late 1970s, which subsequently gave rise to PolioPlus. That change was engineered by three successive RI presidents — Jack Davis from Bermuda, Clem Renouf from Australia, and Jim Bomar from the United States. The lesson to be learned from that experience is simple and strong: If you want to make lasting improvements in your districts, you need to gain the support of your two successors before you start implementing your plans. Let them become co-owners of your plans. Sharing the credit is part of good leadership!

One of the best ways to introduce your plans is to talk about improvements, rather than change. Change for change's sake is counterproductive. But continual improvements to keep Rotary radiant and relevant are vital. Our clubs must be dynamic and action oriented to maintain our current level of fellowship and service, and the revised RI Strategic Plan is built on that premise. Remember the words of [historian] Henry Steele Commager, who wisely said, "Change does not assure progress, but progress implacably requires change." It is far better for us talk about progress in our districts than merely to talk about change!

I genuinely hope that next year will provide a culture of innovation and experimentation in Rotary. The RI Board is ready to move forward, and you can join the effort, if you are ready to dream and to work. I don't know that all of my new ideas will work, but I think they are worth trying. If the new ideas work, then we will make progress, and they probably will be continued. If they don't work, they can be relegated to the scrapheap, but we should learn something from the experiment. Much of our evolution in Rotary has occurred through trial and error, and I ask you to join me in looking for new ways to make your districts more responsive in supporting and strengthening the clubs. Together, we can make a difference in Rotary, and through the magic of Rotary, we can make the world a better place!

When we were developing the Future Vision Plan for the Foundation, all of our committee members read a book named *Good to Great*, which was written by Jim Collins. In his supplement for nonprofit organizations, the author posed three questions to be used in developing long-range plans, and we used those questions in designing the Future Vision Plan. The questions in the book are: What drives your resources? What are your members passionate about? What are you the best in the world at doing?

As we know, the resources of our Foundation are driven by voluntary contributions to fund our charitable programs, and successful programs produce more donations. However, our resources in RI are driven by membership dues, and it takes an increase in Rotary membership to provide additional support for RI programs, particularly the youth and young adult programs, and more funds for districts to help our clubs to be bigger, better, and bolder. Growth provides a positive and beneficial cycle for dynamic organizations! A decline produces the opposite effect and creates a downward cycle.

What are Rotarians passionate about? I think it is fellowship and service! Fun, friendship, and fellowship are our foundation stones, and we are passionate about them. Without them, Rotary would be a much less effective organization. In regard to service, different Rotarians prefer different types of service, such as Youth Exchange, polio eradication, and literacy. Regardless of their preferred programs, Rotarians are passionate about using the spirit of Rotary — and our Rotary programs — to make the world a better place. Rotary clubs operate differently around the world, but they have a common purpose of fellowship and service. We have truly achieved "unity without uniformity" through our network of clubs, and if we help the clubs to be bigger, better, and bolder, then clearly the best days of Rotary are still ahead!

Now the important question: What are we the best in the world at doing? Clearly, it is utilizing the Rotary network of more than 33,000 clubs in over 200 countries and geographical areas to advance international understanding, goodwill, and peace through a wide variety of programs. PolioPlus has placed us on the world stage, and we are the premier service club organization in the world. But to heed my own advice to keep Rotary simple, and to adhere to “cowboy logic,” the shortest and simplest way to state what we are the best in the world at doing is through four simple words: *Building Communities — Bridging Continents*.