



FROM WHERE I AM

A View of Rotary



Rtn. Ashok Mahajan

Director, Rotary International, 2007–09

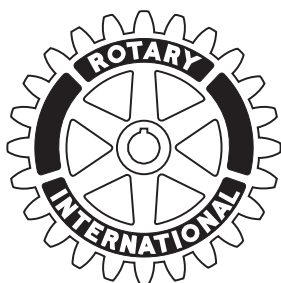
Trustee, The Rotary Foundation, 2009–13

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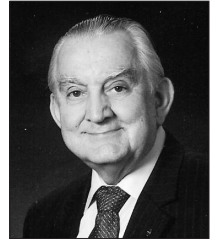
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Foreword



Having met my friend Ashok Mahajan when we were both selected to become classmates on the RI Board, it has been my privilege to come to know him better in the intervening years. As guests in his home, Linda and I observed his rigorous daily routine as he arose early for daily exercise and meditation and retired every night without an ounce of animosity towards anybody. We have enjoyed reading his impressive output of philosophical essays which, taken in the aggregate, can be seen as a roadmap for a life of relevant service to humanity.

An old saying goes, “Some people talk a lot, but do not walk the talk.” Ashok is well spoken, but also ‘walks the talk’ with more energy than most of us exhibit. He does not merely exhort others to action, although he does that effectively, but he takes action himself to bring about desirable outcomes. He has been an indefatigable champion in the successful battle to wipe out polio in India. His fundraising results are legion.

In this year’s booklet, he has continued to answer many requests to assemble his yearly output of essays. I shall reference them often for inspiration.

Thomas A. Branum, Sr. (Tom)

RI Audit Committee 2006-2009, Chair 2008-2009

Rotary International Director 2007-2009

RI Finance Committee 2009-2012, Vice Chair 2010-2012

Reach Out To Africa Chairman 2010-2014

In my Defence



It's been almost over four decades since I joined Rotary. I entered the club and proceeded to do what every new entrant does. I talked to anyone who would listen. I went to the meetings, enjoyed the friendship and took part in events. I learnt to look at the world differently. By getting to know wonderful people, I understood that I can tie myself to my limitless potential instead of my limiting past.

I have been influenced by the uniqueness and advice of several Rotary leaders. I value their vision, proactive initiatives, guidance, wisdom and the security they have provided me with their principle-centred personal views. They have helped to see what you see in the field of happiness in life. My association with every Rotarian has been a profoundly rewarding experience for me.

In the recent years, I have been participating in numerous programmes, which have helped me to find answers for questions about how every programme can make a lasting impression in our minds.

That a man can aspire to achieve a direction in the path of happiness through a cultural exchange dialogue with people became clearer as I learnt something more everyday from such stalwarts. I started putting down my thoughts and sending them to many friends in Rotary. Their feedback has been encouraging. I am thankful to the exceptional opportunity I have to be their friend. In this volume I have shared my thoughts on what it takes to bring peace through service.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ashok', followed by a long, sweeping horizontal flourish.

Ashok Mahajan

Trustee, The Rotary Foundation, 2009–2013

Director, Rotary International, 2007–2009

Member, International PolioPlus Committee

Smile - Serve - Sacrifice - Satisfy

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Successful New Year

We are entering another New Year. During the past year when Rtn. Sakuji Tanaka was the President-elect he has shown that he can connect to each one of us by putting extra efforts in his communication programme. His hard work has always resulted in success. Similarly we should all work together for a successful year under his leadership. Kindly accept my greetings for an exciting Rotary year 2012–13.

Our success has always been measured on how we deliver socially relevant projects through The Rotary Foundation. The Rotary Foundation is our backbone which supports many vital structures of service. We need to further strengthen our Foundation during this year. If we become satisfied with the statistics of the millions we collected for The Rotary Foundation or with the near annihilation of polio or with the success stories of various service projects, we tend to become lazy. This laziness is the first step towards mediocrity. A batsman does not become satisfied with a century; he wants to reach a double hundred or beyond. A bowler who has taken nine wickets in an innings does not become satisfied by the feat he has achieved. He tries hard — very hard — to take the tenth.

Raising the bar may be the key to better achievements. We should not let the success go to our head — we must strive for higher achievements. Our potential to excel in the field of service is not fully tapped. We tend to underestimate our potentials and overestimate the obstacles. If we keep on striving for more, we can ensure better results.

Success comes only to those who dare to reach for the moon. The Rotary Foundation is our weapon of universal service and if we strengthen this weapon and remain unaffected with our achievements, we will rise higher in the orbit of service and never be labelled 'mediocre.' The strength of an arrow is not in its pointed tip — it is in the strength of the archer who tightens the bow and releases the arrow. Let our strength be strengthened by our resolve to conquer mediocrity by not being complacent with the achievements of today.

Rotary can make a difference in the World

A British newspaper once asked its readers, “What is wrong with the world?” One of the letters it received was from the famous writer, G. K. Chesterton. His answer was very short. It just said, “I am.” The world is dangerous not because of those who do harm but because of those who look at it without doing anything. Are you ready to make a real difference in the world around you?

The power to make a difference lies within each one of us. If our faith is strong and constant, our effort to make a difference will be more than what we ever thought possible. All we need to do is to act as if our desires were already realities. To make a difference does not mean making a big splash or doing something that makes people yell, “Wow!” Some people proudly call it ‘leaving a legacy.’

Making a difference is doing ordinary things differently. Are you willing to help a needy child overcome the obstacles of poverty through a sponsorship? Can you put aside your indifference as regards those underprivileged and approach the HIV/AIDS affected with a little more compassion? Have you ever thought of providing education to those children who are still out of school? Have you ever considered about those children who die each year from curable diseases such as diarrhoea, malaria and tuberculosis?

Mother Teresa was once asked, “What is the secret of your success? Is it hard work, dedication, ability or discipline?” She smiled and said, “It is hard to say, but one thing I know. I love to serve. I love to give and if you give yourself, life will give you back something to cherish. You can make a difference in this world.”

If we can share the tears of the lowly, we will soften our hearts, wash our eyes and clear our vision. They in turn, will witness our selfless desire to be of help. Most of the have-nots are generally afraid to put their faith in the offers of help because many of them have an ulterior motive. They have selfish reasons to offer assistance. When they realise that Rotary is different; Rotary is serious; Rotary has no axe to grind — that Rotarians can share their tears and fears — then they would give total co-operation, unstinted faith and enthusiastic response. Therefore, never be afraid of tears that you share with others. That is the best cleaning fluid ever.

Rise in the eyes of your community by sharing your time, energy and resources and make them know, “Yes. Rotary is there. Rotary can make a difference in the world.” Remember, to the world, you may be just one person. Yet, to one person, you may be the world! Therefore, let your presence in the world be one that radiates love, peace and happiness and in turn let the world speak for you!

Say ‘Thank you’ to the Community

Have you noticed that when you are overworked, tired and exhausted, sleep eludes us? We often believe that exhaustion and fatigue would induce sound sleep — but often this is not so. When I asked a friend, “What do you do under such circumstances?” “I count sheep” he replied.

However, counting sheep is not as effective as counting our blessings. There is an old American song that says “Count your blessings instead of sheep and you will fall asleep counting your blessings.”

We are blessed not only with a healthy purse but with a healthier heart that knows how to beat for others. We have seen gratitude, love, admiration and even happiness in the faces of those whom we touched with our compassionate service. We know how to walk an extra step or two to reach the needy. This walk towards those who are craving for some relief is the most important walk of our lives.

A Chinese master once said that the real miracle is not to walk on water or fire or air but just to walk on earth and reach a crying soul. How wonderful for us to breathe in the awareness that we have made a difference in the life of someone. This feeling is almost a miracle of sorts.

When we travel by a taxi, we may say ‘Thank you’ to the cab driver. When we are served at the table by the waiter, we may say ‘Thank you,’ a person says ‘Thank you’ to someone who opens an elevator door or gets us a telephone connection or offers us a seat on a train. Is it not appropriate, then, to extend our gratitude to the communities that have offered us an opportunity to serve? We exist because the communities need us. We exist because we are capable of doing some good to someone. We exist because we are needed.

Let us celebrate our existence by saying ‘Thank you’ to the community.

Real Service

Service is an effective prayer to God, because, we take those steps of helpfulness to people's needs that bring us nearer to God. Service done with real fellow feeling is far more acceptable and useful than those begun with colourful inaugural functions and newspaper advertisements. "There is no grace" said one of the ancients "In a benefit that sticks to the fingers." Giving a portion of oneself is to sip happiness — at the same time contributing one's own small share towards a better, kinder world.

The path of service should be travelled selflessly and constantly. We are amongst a minority few, who are blessed by the Almighty and it becomes imperative to pass on some benefits to the needy. When you serve the needy, you see God in those who are the beneficiaries. There are so many miseries and sufferings that the role you play as a Rotarian, is sure to enrich your lives. If you are generous, kind, tolerant and compassionate, you are utilising your energy, assets, intellect, wealth, strength or anything you possess for the betterment of others, who are not as fortunate as you are. Chanting prayers, sitting before the idols with folded hands and closed eyes is not true prayer to Him, when the surrounding community is in agony or in dire needs. Of course, meditation, peace and devotion are necessary for our own upliftment, but we can not elevate ourselves, if we fail to elevate the needy.

We live for ourselves for most of our lives. Learn to live for others too. One day, when we depart, there will be no morning alarms, no afternoon siesta, no evening leisure or no night T.V. shows. Your beliefs, preferences, bank balance, assets, losses or gains, your frustrations, jealousies and hopes will not matter. What will matter is, however, what you gave, what you built for others. What will matter is 'How' you lived your life — not 'How Long.'

Rotary has given us an opportunity to live lives for others too. The blessings of the needy we have helped is as strong as the blessings we crave from God.

Let us 'Share' our philosophy, action and commitment, with everyone around us. Let us build Heaven. It is possible.

Let us retain what we have

There is a valid concern in Rotary about membership development. Despite all our efforts, we are not only stagnating but even falling in Membership strength. There may be many reasons for this — and each one of us has more than one reason to project but there is one reason that must be highlighted and addressed.

When we add new members in an existing club, we bring the new member with fanfare and enthusiasm. However, we fail to retain those members and soon many of them leave Rotary. The plan for retaining members is almost non-existent in most clubs. When a new member joins Rotary, he (or she) feels proud, privileged, happy and important. Soon the scenario changes. Neither the club leadership nor the proposer pays any special attention to the new member. There is disappointment, disillusion and even distress. The outcome is obvious — membership loss.

It is eye opening to note that a large number of Rotarians leaving Rotary do so within two to three years of their induction. The message is clear — they did not find what they expected in Rotary. True, some Rotarians join Rotary for personal gains, but the fact remains that many of those who joined Rotary for service, friendship, affection and challenges feel disappointed.

They leave Rotary and become one of the strongest critics of Rotary, generating negative public relations. When they joined Rotary, they perhaps had no positive or negative feelings but when they leave, they carry negative feelings — a flaw that needs adequate attention.

The answer lies in Membership Retention Plan. Each club must formulate a plan to ensure that the new members are exposed adequately to fellowship, togetherness and above all, to responsibilities — responsibilities through involvement in club administration and working responsibilities by rendering services. Once these new Rotarians are immersed in service, they will never leave. And if they do so, it will not be because of neglect or disillusionment, but for other unavoidable reasons which will not result in negative PR. The process of retention must be put into motion immediately on their induction and responsibilities placed as per the wishes of new Rotarians. An 'Entry Interview' will tell us the spheres of interest and an 'Exit Interview' will tell us about the true reason for leaving. Remember that Rotary devotes a lot of time, energy and efforts to ensure the growth. Yet, the results have been disappointing.

Membership is a crucial facet of Rotary and there are many areas within its ambit that needs to be addressed. The role of the proposer, the role of the club leadership, the responsibilities of all members, the role of their families, the need for continuous Rotary information and education, the need for exposure to service activities and many such areas of membership must be simultaneously addressed to ensure a healthy membership. Let us retain what we have. Other things can wait. Let us pledge to keep Rotary growing.

Peace Through Service - 1

Rotary promotes Service. Service promotes compassion. Compassion promotes tenderness. Tenderness promotes happiness and Happiness promotes Peace.

If more and more people become compassionate, the world would be Heaven. It is unfortunate that many men and women are coloured by selfish motives and therefore, compassion for others takes a back seat.

Swami Vivekananda convincingly said that service to others is an opportunity to go nearer to God and therefore, the best prayers offered to the Almighty are related to service to the needy.

We often rejoice at the thought of being helpful to others; we must thank these “others” for the opportunity they have given us to be of help to them because we now have an opportunity to be nearer God. When we come nearer God, we come nearer to Peace. Peace originates from happiness and happiness originates from service. That is the reason why Rotary wants to create a peaceful world through service.

Rotarians should be like trees. The tree continues to give — flowers, fruits, cleaner atmosphere and much more. Even if the tree is neglected or hurt, it continues to give. Rotarians must continue to serve — no matter what.

Let us all be thankful and happy that we have been given an opportunity to promote Peace through Service. Because if service is the vehicle, we can ride it through thick and thin to approach Peace.

Towards World Peace

Peace is not a negative phenomenon. It is not absence of conflicts. It is the presence of tranquility in the midst of commotion. Conflicts are bound to be ever present and history has not recorded any era where there were no wars, battles, conflicts or disagreements. Peace is the pervading influence of serenity and contentment amidst the turbulence.

A contest was held in a leading metropolis to select the best picture of Peace. A tranquil pond with tall green grass along the borders was one entry. Another entry showed a pleasant early morning sunrise behind snow clad mountains with placid blue skies. There were many other entries denoting Peace as perceived by the artists. There was one picture which showed a turbulent sky, torrential rains and an angry river. Behind the cleft, overlooking the river was a small nest, where a bird was feeding the offsprings with food collected for the purpose. This picture was chosen as the best entry for the contest.

Living and promoting calmness amidst the turmoil of daily life is 'Peace.'

Rotary is alive in so many countries, in the midst of tensions, stresses, conflicts and even small wars. Terrorism, fanaticism and lack of egotism are there to stay. It is amidst these challenges that Rotary has to live, perform, elevate and adjust. Unless there is a one-to-one dialogue, one-to-one understanding, one-to-one love and friendship, Rotary will find it almost impossible to promote a more peaceful world.

Rotary's various programmes of exchanges, peace centre initiative, peace forums and peace promoting efforts will bring men closer and give peace a chance. This universe has become so small that any event in a relatively far corner ultimately affects many. Rotary's role in promoting Peace can only be appreciated when people start living in a tranquil way in the midst of storms. Conflicts are inevitable. Angry actions and counter reactions should be contained. I am sure Rotary will stand the test of time and emerge as a powerful force of better understanding, better relations, better reactions and better compromises.

There are many Roads to Service

Service is the work involving the use of head, heart and the hands for the welfare of others, irrespective of their status, caste or creed. It relieves the economically underprivileged through personal commitment to selfless service. It contributes to the works of development through physical labour. Service explores the potential lying dormant in persons through education.

Service is concerned about the needs of others. It offers ample opportunities for the development of one's character and personality. Service prompts us to give selflessly without expecting anything in return.

There are immense opportunities for service. A friendly smile, a sincere greeting, a passionate foray into the lives of the needy with helpfulness in the heart, will all generate positive energy, which will turn service into commitment. There are many roads to service. No road is more important or less important. What is important is our behaviour, our readiness, our application. When we help others, a way opens up for us to receive something — a smile or an expression of gratefulness or a 'tonic' to rejuvenate yourself, or a tranquil, peaceful, deep happiness. Happiness is like a shadow — the more you run after it, the more it seems to move away. Only service to others will cast a shadow that will follow us — we would not run after the shadow.

Rotary's only goal is service. It is dangerous to take the eyes off the goal because it will surely result in your eyes wandering away from the goal and see only obstacles. If you do see obstacles, convert them into opportunities of service because, the path of course is never smooth. As you walk on the path of service and have many co-travellers, you will not only have like-minded people as your friends but you will also learn to walk together, serve together and share compassionate behaviour.

If Rotary shares, let us share this philosophy with others.

Pursue your Dreams with Passion

Each of us is gifted with talents and possibilities that would enable us to attain the success we dream of and desire. The many rags to riches stories we invariably come across everyday affirm this fact. We can reach where we dream, master what we desire, attain what we aspire and be what we want to be if we pursue them with intense passion.

One thing that is common to the inspiring stories of real-life heroes is their unwillingness to conform to mediocrity. Passionate people strive for the best; and it is this passionate pursuit for excellence that distinguishes them from the others who yield themselves to what life normally brings for them. They slog when others sleep, pushing to their limits and beyond because they realise that success comes with the readiness to take the extra step.

It is believed that the universe with everything therein assists the one who dreams positively, acts prudently and pursues passionately. Dream big, aim high and act as if you have already reached the final step — this will make you more passionate and you will realise that the capacity to be great comes with the willingness to do the extra mile.

A strong passion for any object will ensure success, for the intense desire of the end will point out the necessary means.

Believe it or not, Rotarians are powerful beyond measure and already have what it takes to experience the life of their dreams. All that is required is to aim high and get moving. If you see obstacles, use all the resources in command and convert them into opportunities of service, because the path of course is never smooth.

Pursue your dreams with passion to serve and achieve peace.

Let's All Promote World Understanding and Peace

Rotary Clubs around the world spend approximately. US \$250 million per year in service activities, but the world spends US \$100 million per minute in war.

Since 1945, over 150 battles have been fought and over 15 million people have died. It is clear that divisive forces, terrorist forces, and religious forces far outpace solidarity. Politically, therefore, one cannot make the world one. Culturally, however, one can. This is the strength of Rotary and Rotary's foray into building bridges of friendship and understanding may result — nay — will result in a more peaceful world. Therefore, we must act. We are conquering space but we cannot conquer emotions, greed and intolerance. We have entered outer space but have failed to enter the hearts of our neighbours. Let Rotary, therefore, beat the drums — not of war but of Peace. Let us promote concord and not discord. In the 21st century, if the world has to survive, it must follow a 'Rotary' philosophy.

Is the goal illusory? Is it unattainable? Is it just a dream? If we have to achieve world peace, we must implicitly behave in Rotary philosophy. Man, who discovered electricity and fire, and invented the wheel, telephone, television, computer and nano technology can promote peace.

Alfred Hitchcock, the famous film producer was once advised by a technician, "Why don't you use artificial lights when shooting a film? You depend on bright atmosphere, but very often there are clouds. You waste money and time by just resting and waiting for the sunlight to return." This was the beginning of a new era of film making using artificial lights. Simple ideas may turn into excellent achievements. Let Rotarians think and offer some simple ideas and may be, one day, we will have a strong weapon in the armory of Rotary and the world to fight for peace.

National understanding must precede world understanding. Person to person contact, dialogue and exchange can promote peace locally. The world of tomorrow is going to be different from the world of today and is going to be vastly different from the world of yesterday. What type of 'difference' this is going to be depends upon the generation of today and tomorrow. Whether this difference is going to make the world a better place to live in depends on you. Let us promote World Understanding and Peace.

Not by reason of force, but by force of reason.

Peace Through Service - 2

Peace appears to be an elusive goal and often one feels that total universal peace is a dream that cannot be realised. Perhaps this is true — but it does not mean that we should not take steps to increase the chances of peace.

When the basic needs of human beings are not fulfilled and when just staying alive is a Herculean task, there can be no better way to promote a peaceful existence than to ameliorate some of the problems.

Rotary comes into the picture through its varied programmes to promote peace. One of the most important, and effective way Rotary can promote peace is to promote, practice and participate in service to the communities that are denied many of the basic needs of life. Yes, Peace Scholars, GSE, Youth Exchange and other programmes aim directly at promotion of Peace. However, at the grass root level, Rotary has to concentrate on improving the quality of life of millions of citizens.

If there is one important thing that Rotary teaches you, it is action. And when action (service) is enjoyed, it is fun. When there is fun, there is an increased desire to excel. Service multiplies when there is fun doing that service.

For everything that Rotary is — creator, pioneer, humanitarian genius and even a messiah, it remains an adaptable inventor, ready to mould into whatever is necessary to render effective service.

When communities feel safer, happier, wealthier and healthier, they will give time to think about peace. Nobody wants conflicts. Everybody wants to live a life that is productive, happy and useful. Rotary gives that opportunity to millions of communities worldwide to enjoy the basic needs so that they can then, think about others. Rotary through Service promotes Peace — and Service is our strongest weapon to fight for Peace.

Your Legacy

Life is short and death is an inevitable reality of life. The question is not about when, but about what one leaves behind after one's death.

Imagine you have been dead a few years and now you come back to visit the people you left behind — your family and friends. Are you remembered the way you thought you would be? Are you important in their lives? Does your absence affect their lives at all? The answers to these questions will help you realise the impact your life had for the people you lived with — your own legacy.

Your legacy is the celebration of your life — the person you are, the things that you do and what impact you have on those around you. Leaving a huge fortune will not make you be remembered for, even if you were a billionaire. Rather it is what you do with your money that matters. You don't have to be a celebrity to leave a lasting legacy. It is all about how you make yourself useful and helpful to those around you.

You may regret about how you have spent your life so far. But it is never too late to leave a mark behind. Since you alone are the author of your story, you still have the time to rewrite it with a fitting climax. Everything — small or great — that you write in the 'Book of Life' will determine the kind of legacy you will leave behind.

Thomas Chalmers says, "Live for something. Do good and leave behind you a monument of virtue that the storm of time can never destroy. Write your name in kindness, love and mercy on the hearts of thousands you came in contact with year by year and you will never be forgotten."

Rotary has given us the privilege to serve. Service above Self is the motto for every Rotarian. In Rotary, all the avenues of service are meant to bring light to the ignorant and enlighten the educated. Bring light to all and leave the rest to God.

About the Author



Rtn. Ashok Mahajan

Rtn. Ashok Mulkraj Mahajan, member of Rotary Club of Mulund, RI District 3140, Mumbai, India has been involved in Rotary since 1973 and rose from an ordinary member to the coveted position of RI Director 2007–09 by his commitment to the Rotary movement. He was the President of RC Mulund in 1982–83 and District Governor, RI District 3140 in 1993–94.

Born on July 23, 1947, he graduated with a Bachelor of Engineering degree from the Bombay University with distinction and then took a Diploma in Operations Management and Business Management from the Bombay University. He now runs an industry for manufacturing electrical and electronic components.

He has been RI President's representative to District Conferences many times and was also appointed as the Zonal Coordinator for Membership Task Force in 1995–96 and again in 1998–99. He was a Member of the World Affairs Committee during 2003–05.

He was associated with the National PolioPlus Committee for over 10 years and now he is a member of the International PolioPlus Committee of TRF. He was instrumental in the formation of the Muslim Ulema Committee in India, which supported the polio eradication programme. He also served as the Zonal Coordinator for Avoidable Blindness Task Force during 2000–02 and was a member in the India Presidential PolioPlus Summit 2001–02. He represented RI District 3140 at the 2001 Council on Legislation, Chicago.

Rtn. Ashok Mahajan was conferred with the Distinguished Service Award, Service above Self Award, Regional Service Award for a Polio-free world and the Golden Century Award. He is a major donor to TRF, benefactor and a member of the Paul Harris Society.

Rtn. Ashok Mahajan has been inducted as a Trustee of The Rotary Foundation of RI for the period 2009–13. This assignment has been given to him immediately after he completed his tenure as RI Director in June 2009.

He is the Vice Chairman, fund development of The Rotary Foundation for the year 2011–2012.

His wife Nayantara and all the members of his family ably support him in his work in Rotary. He is blessed by his parents in his quest for service. A deeply religious person, Rtn. Ashok Mahajan enjoys reading, cricket, walking and social service.