

## Talen til Noel Fryer

### DISTRIKTSNYTT

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When President Tanaka invited Anne and me to represent him at your conference Mr Governor, I could not have been happier than to come to Norway. It seems to me and I think to many people of my generation that our countries, Great Britain and Norway have special links. To begin with it was probably Norwegian Vikings who invaded our country and terrorised us back in the dark ages! We enjoy a special relationship as a result of the Second World War and I for one am always moved when I see the Norwegian Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square in London.

First Mr Governor, I bring you greetings and best wishes from President Tanaka. He is a man of enormous integrity and a wholly committed Rotarian. He is a businessman who grew up in post war Japan and who has, like many of his generation, been deeply affected by Japan's wartime experience. Peace for him means much more than the absence of war and when he speaks in his theme of Peace through Service. It is a pleasure for Anne and me to represent a President who is so genuine and so wholly committed to the work and the aims of our organisation.

Whenever I go to a district conference, I often wonder why other Rotarians are there. Are they there because they are president of their club and feel they ought to attend? Are they there with friends for a weekend away from home? Are they there because they want to be district officers and need to collect votes? Are they there because they want to extend their Rotary knowledge or experience?

There are probably as many reasons for members coming to a conference as there are reasons for people wanting to join Rotary in the first place.

When Rotary was formed in 1905, it was not the service organisation that we now know. It had no high ideals of public service; that is something that came later. Those founding members came together seeking fellowship and friendship in an unfriendly environment. They came together in the hope that they and their businesses would benefit from what we would nowadays describe as networking.

In many respects, nothing much has changed. For the majority of our members the initial spur to seek to join Rotary comes from those same aims. Indeed, the opportunity to network is seen as a selling point when we try to recruit new members to our clubs. Only gradually does the new member begin to appreciate something of what we do and to appreciate just what Rotary is.

And for most Rotarians there is a time that they can identify when they stop being simply members of a Rotary Club and start becoming Rotarians. It doesn't have to be a "Eureka" moment like St. Paul on the road to Damascus; it can sometimes be a gradual, cumulative process.

That was certainly my experience. I was what we would consider very young when I first joined Rotary; I was only 25. At the time I knew very little about what I was getting involved with. Through family contacts I knew something of what Rotary did in terms of community service, but in the main I hoped that membership might be helpful to my young business. Only as I became more involved did the work we try to do come to mean more to me.

And if I'm honest it was probably only as I prepared to become President of my club that I really began to think about Rotary. I had to decide on projects for the club for my year of office and that made me start thinking about what was effective and what was worthwhile. I started trying to be sure that whatever we decided to do would really make a difference to those in our community we were trying to serve. And it was only as began to see and to understand the needs of those people that the value of Rotary became so much clearer to me.

I have been very fortunate in that my Rotary service has given me the opportunity to see Rotary at work around the world and those experiences have been a continual part of the process of changing me from being just a member of a Rotary club to being what I hope is a useful Rotarian.

Let me give you one or two examples. I recall being in South Africa at the time when they were preparing for the first elections following Nelson Mandela's release from prison at the end of the apartheid regime. It sounds so simple and so basic but the mass of the people didn't know how to vote – how to physically deal with a ballot paper – they'd never had to do so before in their lives. And then I saw that members of a Rotary club had gathered villagers together under a tree, miles out in the bush, and were showing them what to do. Something so simple but so essential and of real service to their community.

On another occasion I was attending a meeting in Venezuela. To travel from the airport which was down by the coast to Caracas the capital, the bus had to take us up a fairly steep, long climb from the coast to a plateau. On the way up I noticed a shanty town standing on the slopes of this fairly steep hill. While we were there, there was a torrential downpour which resulted in the whole of the shanty town being completely washed away down the mountain. Because it was the capital city the emergency services – police, ambulance, paramedics – were there fairly quickly but what impressed me most was the Rotary service. The people who had lost their homes had nothing. Everything they possessed was washed away but Rotary was there, giving them a little comfort, trying to make life a little more bearable.

I have watched wild game using a water hole deep in the African bush, turning it into a mud bath in which they urinate and defecate. I've watched village women filling up their old jerry cans and gourds from that same mud hole later in the day as their only available supply of water. You only have to see these things once to appreciate the value, the true value, of a fresh water supply.

And it is seeing these things, seeing the contribution that Rotary can and does make, the difference that we can make, that helps make me a Rotarian rather than just a member of a Rotary club. All of us at times get tired with Rotary. We get to the stage of almost resenting having to turn out every week to fulfill our obligations. Why should we bother when it's going to be just more of the same old stuff. The same food, the same people, the same complaints, the same tired old jokes. We ask ourselves what difference our efforts can make anyway. What impact can an individual have? What can our club of fifteen or so active members do? We're not well off, how can we afford all these things?

Of course you're right. Yes, sometimes it is a chore going to Rotary. Yes, sometimes people do get on our nerves. Yes, where's the sense in paying £10 or however many Kroner it is for a meal that probably isn't very good. And yes you're right that an individual can't do much; you're right that a little Rotary club can't do very much. But you're also very wrong. Because we're not individuals plodding a

lonely furrow; we're not just a little club of fifteen members. We are members of the world's greatest service organisation. We may be just one but we are one of 1. million; ours may be a tiny little Rotary club but it's just one of 30,000; when the efforts of an organisation of that size is mustered the effects can be momentous. And we know it works.

And that is part of what makes me a Rotarian. President Tanaka speaks of Peace through Service. He is a man who grew up in the aftermath of the devastation that the atomic bombs had wrought on his country. When he speaks of Peace, of course he means freedom from war, but he means more than that. He means the freedom that a peaceful existence can bring. The state of wellbeing when turmoil is not present. The chances to move forward and to grow without the constant fear and worry for the future and for life's very existence. And he recognises that Rotary can be a part of bringing that Peace into lives and making those lives so much better because of it.

In your country and mine we're very fortunate. We tend not to suffer from any of the worst natural disasters. We have an earthquake from time to time and the worst damage they do is loosen a few roof tiles and break a few windows. Very unpleasant for those who are affected but a bit different from Gujarat in India a couple of years ago when the entire area was flattened. We have floods from time to time and no doubt they cause untold misery to those who are affected; but compare them to Bangladesh on a fairly regular basis when an enormous part of the country is under water and thousands lose their lives. And yes, we do have homelessness, we do have children with heartrending needs, we do have elderly people with no one to care for them, we do have illiteracy, we do have a drugs problem, we do have an AIDS problem.

What it comes down to is that no matter where we look around the world there are those in dire need. All that differs is our perception of that need. The average African is a very stoical, pragmatic individual; he's accustomed to trouble, to problems, to difficulties that we just couldn't face. But he adopts a look, a look that is so disconcerting – the kind of look a child would have if he'd been promised an ice cream and then refused – he adopts such a look and then gets on with life. A Bangladeshi knows that there will be severe flooding from time to time and that people – probably members of his family – will die. It's a fact of life; it's how it is. And for anyone sleeping rough in our country, for a family with a child with what we call learning difficulties, for children with – I don't know, Down's syndrome, for old people on their own, they try to square their shoulders, to get on with life as best they can.

But they all have one thing in common. The Venezuelan squatters whose houses were washed away; those villagers making do with filthy water because that's all there is; the man sleeping rough in the doorway in one of our cities; the parents who can't cope with their crippled child; the old lady who doesn't have a visitor from one week's end to the next. They all have one thing in common – they need help. Some help from somebody.

Now it is a fact that in most of the western world, certainly in Europe and Scandinavia, most of the needs of citizens are taken care of. In the UK we have a health service, which, despite the best endeavours of politicians of all persuasions, still generally provides a pretty good service. We have a social security service which looks after most people. We have social services arrangements that cater for most needs. I say "most" and "generally" deliberately. Unfortunately, there are a good many who don't fall into the category of "most". For some reason they don't fit into the mould; they need more help than the state can give; they need different help and support.

In the third world it's a different story. In many countries any sort of social service is either at best rudimentary or all too often entirely nonexistent. They don't have the money; maybe they don't have the will; perhaps people belong to the wrong tribe. Whatever the cause the result's the same. People in desperate need.

And I believe that that's where Rotary comes in. We are in a position to help those in need. The little people, those who miss out on what is provided by others. I'm the first to agree that we are not a relief organisation. I know that we have other concerns and other interests, equally laudable, equally worthy of our support. Our educational programmes are second to none. Our aim to contribute to world understanding and peace is worthy in every respect. But whether you are amongst those who perhaps don't approve of some of our educational programmes few of us I think would argue that our humanitarian efforts are worth supporting.

When I was a district governor, the International President of the day chose as his theme "Rotary Brings Hope". That sentiment is what keeps me going when I get tired with Rotary. It is one of Rotary's greatest strengths that wherever our own interests may lie we can help; in community service at home; in the wider world community service; wherever, we can help. Yes, each one of us individually is important. Yes, each little club is important. Because collectively we can move mountains. We can bring a little hope where there may be none; we can bring a smile to a tearful face; we can bring a little pride to the downtrodden. We have ongoing projects in South America, India, the Far East bringing clean water, good affordable housing. And we're working just as hard at home. We can't work miracles but we can make life a little more liveable. Through our service we can bring a little peace; peace of mind, peace of heart. It is that thought, that we are making some difference, that helps make me a Rotarian rather than a member of a Rotary club.

Service above Self is our motto. To live by that motto is not easy; it can be very difficult. But we do know that by trying our best to live by it, by striving to be Rotarians and not just members of a Rotary club, we can make a huge difference to our world and to the people of that world we try to serve. Our service can help bring a little peace and as Rotarians that should be our aim.

Takk.