

HUMMING THE ROTARY TUNE
A speech to the Rotary Club of Stockton
June 17, 2009
President Gary Putnam

A speaker at a University Chapel service organized his sermon around the letters of his own university, Yale. For 30 minutes he talked about the letter Y, standing for “Youth” and all of the possibilities of vigor and growth. The next 15 minutes he spoke of A for Ambition. During that section a few students slipped out of the Chapel. Another 15 minutes was spent on L for Leadership --- and a large group of students left. Finally he spoke of E for Enthusiasm. At last Y-A-L-E was completed. At the end of his speech, there was only one student remaining in the Chapel. This student was in fervent prayer. When the student said “Amen”, the lecturer asked as to what the student prayed. He replied, “I was just giving thanks to God that you never studied at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.”

Today I want to be a bit more “down to earth”, to talk dirt. In fact I want to talk about 3 words that share common roots with humus, the Latin word for earth, ground or soil. What would you expect from someone who grew up on an Iowa farm?

There are 3 qualities of good Rotarians that find their origins in the word for earth, humus. Humor. Humility. Humanness. The 3 hum words. These attributes are in short supply among persons who are so earthly bound as to be of no heavenly good and persons who are so heavenly bound as to be of no earthly good. They are wonderfully abundant in Rotarians.

I

Humor is a down to earth gift of Rotary. We laugh a lot. A theologian once observed that laughter is the surest sign of the presence of God. Laughter is a great pleasure but also has powerful healing effects.

Norman Cousins wrote of how he developed his own therapy for what was diagnosed to be a terminal illness. He checked into a luxury hotel, instead of a hospital. (It was considerably cheaper on a daily basis.) There he laughed himself back to health by massive doses of comedy films. This is not a new form of positive thinking and could not be widely recommended, but it certainly worked for Norman Cousins. Even if laughter may not prolong your life, it surely makes it a lot more enjoyable and happier.

Talk with those of us who are grandparents --- rather, LISTEN to a grandparent tell stories of a grandchild. There are all sorts of cute sayings that evoke a blend of love and laughter in the grandparent. It is often tough to be patient with these stories, but there is a great celebration of life in these stories.

Laughter is also important in the world of business. I am told that if you can get people to open their mouths in laughter, it is amazing what you can get them to swallow.

Life is lived most fully when we laugh. Rotarians laugh a lot. Humor is one of those down-to-earth words.

II

Humility is another down-to-earth word. Humility is such a liberating gift. Through humility we do not have to prove anything to try to deceive people into thinking we are other than what we are. Humility allows us to be imperfect, free from knowing it all.

As Rotarians we are not General Managers of the Galaxy or God's principal Advisors. In "My Fair Lady" Liza Doolittle reminds us that "without our twirling it, the earth does spin, without our pulling it, the tide does come in."

A little praise doesn't hurt us as long as we don't inhale it, but the person who falls in love with him or herself will have no rivals.

One of the great teachings I received from my mother was after her life was completed. When I went to write her obituary, there seemed to be relatively little to say. She had not built many things, received awards, and had not served on prestigious committees. Judged by the world's standards of success, her life was not of historical significance. Judged by the measure of relationships, she was world class.

We do well to measure more of our life by relationships and less by achievements. Accomplishments have little to do with humility. Relationships are built on humility. Salt of the earth people do not try to be the whole entrée of life or some exotic dessert. They simply add a bit of spice that enriches the whole flavor of life.

Rotary has more to do with relationships than accomplishments. We belong to Rotary because of bonds of friendship formed in service above self. If we are strangers to one another, there is little we can accomplish. Our relationships are what activate us. Our success is not as individuals, but as a unit. Humility does not mean we are without legitimate pride in our fellow Rotarians and having an outreach beyond our own hands.

When we join this club, we move from self to service. John Wooden, the great UCLA basketball coach, advised his players, "Be more concerned with character than reputation. Character is who you really are. Reputation is what people think you are."

Having a sense of humility does not mean that we have no gifts or talents. Humility does not diminish our capabilities; it just keeps them in perspective. Being humble doesn't mean being ham strung. Humility acknowledges that what we cannot do as individuals we can do as 200 in a local Rotary club. And what one Rotary club cannot do, 32,000 clubs with 1.2 million members can do.

III

Our humanness is another down-to-earth gift of Rotarians in 168 countries, more countries than are in the United Nations. We are Rotarians not out of national political interests --- not because of financial gain --- but we are one human reaching out to another human.

Our basic humanity is part of the nobility conferred in creation. We look across the luncheon table and see other members of this community who are seeking to live by the simple, but very rigorous 4 Way Test of Rotary and we see in the mirror of the faces of Rotarians, the giftedness of our basic humanity.

And when we look across the seas to see a farmer in Vietnam, a teacher in Zimbabwe, a legislator in Norway, a child in India, we see the same nobility in the humanity of others.

Now to be sure, there are some persons who deny their humanity and do inhumane things. Mark Twain said, "Humanity is the only animal in God's Creation that blushes -- - or needs to." But as Rotarians we focus on the goodness of our humanity that is given to us.

As humans, as Rotarians, we have skills conferred upon us not for special privilege but for special responsibility. We seek to make a difference. And , oh, what a difference we are making.

We are great dreamers as Rotarians. Who has dreams as large as Rotary?

Some see us as Clark Kent – okay people who gather for lunch, sing a song, have some laughs and go back to the office. Those who know Rotary see us as Super Women and Men.

Who else would dare to tackle the eradication of polio, the most crippling disease of previous decades? In 1985 there were 350,000 cases of paralytic polio. By 2008 in cooperation with the World Health Organization, Rotary had cut that number to 1800. In 2009 that number if further reduced to 370. Someday soon it will be ZERO.

Bill and Melinda Gates valued Rotary's commitment to the tune of \$355 million. The governments of the United Kingdom and Germany based on the Gates' example matched that amount. What other organization that you belong to has that kind of impact on one of the world's wealthiest foundations and also on national governments?

Rotary has immunized 2 billion --- that's with a B – 2 billion children. Some of these 2 billion were immunized in Ethiopia by Nick, Joe and Jim of our club.

We have challenged illiteracy around the world and here in Stockton. We fund young people as Peace scholars and our club has just nominated two exceptional students as ambassadorial scholars. We sent wheelchairs abroad and Physical Therapy students to properly fit them. We have brought playground equipment to Mexicali for over a decade. We provide scholarships for 12 Filipino high school students and more here in Stockton.

There are 67 large Rotary clubs in the United States, having 140 or more members. We are number 52 in terms of size, but we rank number 10 in terms of giving to the Rotary International Foundation and our club foundation. During Mas Kamagaki's Presidential year our club contributed nearly \$300,000 to local and international charities.

And these are just a few of the projects in which you are involved.

Rotary has the ability, the money, the expertise and the confidence. And we do that because we have the down to earth humanity to care and then to act.

We do this not to seek praise, but in response to the needs of others. Humility in service, satisfaction in helping others.

And we have fun doing it. Humor --- laughter --- magically creates bonds of kinship and commonality that is very empowering.

So we seek to be down-to-earth, close to humus, as we live and love with humor, humility and humanness.