

Vocational Service: The Abandoned Avenue

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When President-elect John Kenny asked me to speak to you about vocational service, normally considered a lackluster subject, I was thrilled. Not only because speaking at a plenary session of the International Assembly is an honor but also because vocational service has been the guiding spirit in my journey in Rotary, in my life.

As I was putting my thoughts together, I was overwhelmed by the question: Have we abandoned this avenue?

Often, I have come across Rotarians who call Vocational Service “Vacational” or “Occasional” service. I have seen, at the club and even at the district level, that this avenue receives least importance, and Rotarians assigned to the task are, more often than not, least active.

But today is a new beginning. Standing here before you, I am filled with hope. I can feel a new surge of energy in this hall. As I look around, I see you all, who by the nature of your position, philosophy, and commitment have dedicated your lives to service. You are the leaders all set to act your truth, live your belief, and work your values — elegantly, consistently, and passionately.

In each one of you I can see the legendary Olympic hero Michael Phelps. When asked before the games if he would become the second Mark Spitz, who was then the gold medal record holder, Michael replied: “Mark has been an all-time great, but I will not like to be a second Mark. I will like to be the first Michael Phelps.”

Not sitting on the shoulders of others, but standing tall on your own feet, you will symbolize Rotary’s new heights ahead.

Friends, vocational service has been my guiding light in my career.

In the long association with my German partners in the needle manufacturing business, I had their total confidence and even represented their interests. I had all the opportunities to get the exclusive technical know-how, have the specialized machines copied, a duplicate factory of my own started, and lots of money made. But it was Rotary’s influence that made me shun such thoughts. And after 32 years, when we parted and I sold out my interest, people wondered what would Saboo’s identity in society be. No matter what people said, my values and faith in ethics stood by me. And I grew in my self-esteem. And perhaps in society’s too.

Without talking about programs and projects under this avenue, for which you will have ample opportunity in your discussion group, I wish to present a scenario.

In dealing with Vocational Service, we seem to skirt the very first line of the second object of Rotary: “High ethical standards in business and professions.”

In those early years of the last century, just about the time when Rotary was born, barons of business proudly trumpeted: “Business is business. The public be damned.” The society was inundated with self-seekers who were unrestrained in their practices to amass wealth or power.

In such selfish and narrow business conditions, Rotary dealt with this sensitive subject of ethics with courage and conviction. In 1910, at the first Rotary convention in Chicago, Arthur Sheldon,

known as the father of vocational service, said that “business is the science of human service” and that “he profits most who serves his fellows best.” How true this maxim was. And it still endures.

Is it different now? We see great corporations reduced to nonentities. We see shareholder values tumble. We also see regulators and facilitators of services in the society succumbing to temptations. More recently, we have seen the debacle of the giants in the financial sector bringing wave after wave of suffering to those who have lost their money, their jobs, their security, their future. And all this for the sake of the bottom line, increasing assets for individuals. Few, playing the game of numbers, juggling the fate of others.

Rotary’s doctrine of ethics becomes all the more relevant today than at any time before.

You will often hear, “Evil present in the society gets reflected in any organization, and Rotary is no exception.” “Rotary is not for preaching.” “Ethics is good to talk about but not practical.”

Please tell them, if you will: “Ethics is not outdated. Integrity and honesty have not been redefined.” Ethics is not confined to business or profession alone — it reflects in totality and moves in tandem with family values. The fruit never falls far from the tree, and your children will be what you are or what you do.

A story is told of one proud father, Bobby Lewis, who was taking his two little boys to play miniature golf. At the ticket counter, he was told of the entrance charges, “\$3 for you and \$3 for any kid older than six.”

Bobby said, “The younger one is three, and the other is seven; so I guess I owe you \$6, including me.”

The man at the counter exclaimed, “Hey, mister, did you just win a lottery or something? You could have saved yourself three bucks telling me that the older one was six; I would not have known the difference.”

Bobby replied, “Yes, that may be true, but the kids would have known the difference. And would have always carried it in their minds.”

At times, I have been confronted by the question “What is ethics?” and so I submit an exercise for our actions, the age-old question: “How would we feel if we were in the other person’s shoes?”

- Would we act the same way if we were to be reported on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*? Or the paper our home friends read?
- Would we do it if our children picked up the same behavior?
- Would we change our mind if the person on the receiving end of the ethical transgression was a loved one?
- And the simplest of all: What would our mother think?

My dear Rotary leaders, The Four-Way Test is very much relevant even today. Please make clubs and members realize that mere essay competitions and plaque distribution in schools are not enough, nor is framing the words of the test and hanging the plaque in workplaces. The real test will be: “How much am I able to apply it to myself?”

Rotary has a profound statement: the Declaration for Rotarians in Businesses and Professions. It is an undertaking every Rotarian ought to make.

The fact is, most people favor righteousness — or so many of them would not pretend to have it. The difference is between knowing the path and walking it. The path is not easy. But Rotarians are no ordinary people. They just need to have the courage, the determination to walk their talk. And remember, knowledge without action is like snow on a hot stove.

It is very significant that one of the priorities of the RI Strategic Plan is to emphasize Rotary's unique vocational service commitment. This is mentioned in your workbook. It is crucial that to be able to influence others through business and vocational associations — which must be done — one has to be ethical first, and then to lead by personal example. In Gandhi's words, "A man is the sum of his actions."

In a geography class, an inquisitive child asked the teacher, "Sir, what is the weight of the earth?" The lecturer, taken somewhat aback, promised to answer the next day, went home, consulted his books, and the following day came to the class with the answer. "Son, the weight of the earth is one billion tons." Innocently, the boy questioned again, "Sir, with people or without people?"

The little story makes me think that, without people, the loss of weight of the earth might be minuscule. But in the case of Rotary, its value will reduce drastically, without our classifications.

Must we not restore the importance of classification? My classification is my identity in Rotary. Let us remember the words of Paul Harris: "Each Rotarian is a connecting link between the idealism of Rotary and his trade or profession."

Vocational excellence awards, career guidance, and vocational talks and visits are very prevalent and useful activities. Basically, they are recognition of the worthiness of all useful occupations. Please continue them with vigor.

Most important is sharing one's expertise and knowledge. This truly enhances one's own vocational fulfillment. This I learned from my wife, Usha.

When we shifted to Chandigarh, Usha's interest in gardening was further enhanced and she grew exquisite flowers, which would always get maximum prizes in competition. After a few years, she found that as soon as there were her entries, other competitors would withdraw. Soon, she realized that this was not what she wanted. She made her seeds and seedlings available to all garden lovers, shared her experience and expertise, and invited them to our garden.

From Usha, I learned the value of sharing vocational skills and spreading out the resultant joy. I recommend that you listen to your spouse or partner — they are full of wisdom. It is not flattery, it is reality.

Rotarians are talented, creative, experienced people. When they share knowledge, they can truly brighten up the lives they touch — brighten up society.

The four Avenues of Service are so placed in order that one leads into the other. Club Service is the organizational structure that comes first. Then comes the Vocational Service avenue, which is the basis — the requirement — for membership.

Thus, Rotary becomes a group of like-minded people from different vocations, and when such people, with clean hands, big hearts, and open minds, extend themselves to serve the community, acceptability of Rotary in society becomes all the more profound.

If you take out vocational service, Rotary becomes purely a community service organization. And if you take out ethics from vocational service, then vocational service falls flat.

The world is full of nongovernmental organizations working for humanitarian causes. Then there are many organizations espousing ethics and values. But there are very few that are equally focused on ethics-based profession/vocation on one hand and humanitarian service on the other. Rotary is one such organization.

In the wake of the deteriorating business and professional environment, the world is looking for people who are ethically sound and committed to social responsibility.

Rotary is already strong in community service and international service. Can Rotary become equally strong in vocational service? Can you and I give Rotary a new identity through this powerful combination? Can we start the process of infusing renewed enthusiasm for ethical standards in Rotary?

If we can, Rotary will be recharged, ready and relevant to the needs of the 21st century. And people will be lining up to join us.

Look beyond yourself, beyond your year. You can be the trendsetters. I urge you to

- Find active and doer Rotarians for your district Vocational Service committees. Encourage clubs to do the same.
- Make ethics an essential subject in all the training programs.
- Prepare vocational project guidance sheets and distribute them.
- Give assignments to those who have their values in the right place.
- Have a clear understanding of the second Avenue of Service.
- Make sure that through club programs, there is an opportunity for every Rotarian to participate.
- Encourage Rotarians to volunteer their knowledge, experience, and time.
- Ask clubs to develop close connections with business and vocational associations.

In the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy, Canadian Sara Renner was leading her team in the grueling cross-country ski race when her left ski pole snapped. She pushed on, but it was hopeless. On an uphill slope, several skiers passed her. Then, something extraordinary happened. A man stepped forward from the side of the course and handed Renner another pole. She got back in the race and made up some of the lost time. In the end, her team captured the silver medal.

Later, Renner learned that her benefactor was Bjornar Haakensmoen, the coach of the Norwegian team. Haakensmoen became an instant hero in Canada, with newspapers full of praise for him. Haakensmoen did not understand all the attention. “The Olympic spirit is the way we try to follow,” he said. “If you win and don’t help somebody when you should have, what win is that?”

Vocational ethics at its best. Ethics becoming proactive in this world of free market competition. Something for Rotarians to learn.

Vocation originates from the Latin word *vocare*, meaning “to call.” Your and my vocation calls us to contribute our talents, share our knowledge, and spread the richness of our success.

Once I asked my spiritual guru, “Swamiji, the time I spend, the positions I get, the business I have to sacrifice at times for Rotary, is that all worthwhile?” His reply was simple, “It is, if it makes you a better person.”

I can never repay Rotary. And on my last journey, my hands will not be empty — they will be filled by what Rotary has given me, thanks largely to vocational service.

Ask yourself, “Does Rotary make you a better person?”

Traveling through the Vocational Service avenue is like a life journey. There are no shortcuts, nor is it a highway. It is a street that passes through towns, villages, communities where people meet people; where you will meet people, you will lift them up and, in turn, they will help you climb uphill to the top. This journey will shape your character, invoke the genius that inhabits you, and offer you opportunities to realize your full potential.

In this journey, the one year of your leadership will be very significant. Dare to walk on the abandoned avenue, Vocational Service; overcome the hurdles and make the avenue alive with the resounding words *responsibility, credibility, accountability*.

Your identity will not merely be the photographs in the participants book or the glowing compliments in the publications during the year. Your identity will be the footprints you will leave on the sands of time — sands of the year 2009-10 — footprints of perseverance, courage, resilience, action, planted firmly, that winds of change will not be able to erase.

Your journey will then be memorable to you, and to others who follow you. My friends, awake, arise, and be ready to march forward. You have a destiny to achieve.