

FRANK TALK ON OUR ROTARY FOUNDATION

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CHAPTER 1

Hello Again!

“Frank!” I cannot believe it! You haven’t changed a bit.” The voice—and the exuberant greeting—were unmistakable.

“Sue!” I exclaimed. “You look wonderful. It was so nice of you to come all the way out to the airport to meet me. I’m very sorry the flight was late.”

“That’s not a problem,” she replied. “I got a chance to catch up on some paperwork and returned all my phone calls. Anyway, at least *this* time the flight did finally operate—unlike our first meeting, when the airport shut down.”

“That’s right,” I agreed, remembering that foggy morning six years earlier when I had been forced to take a train to my final destination after my flight—and all others—was canceled. “But you know, Sue, if those airplanes had operated, we all would never have met on that train.”

“Yes—and Bob, Duncan, and I would never have joined Rotary,” she said, with a huge grin. “Here, let me carry your computer while you bring your other bag. The car is this way.” We did not have far to go. As we walked, she explained that Phil Jefferson, the airport director, had recently joined her Rotary Club, and had given her access to the VIP parking spot just outside the baggage claim hall. Within five minutes, we were in her car and on the way to town.

As we settled into the center lane on the motorway, Sue's expression turned more serious. "Frank," she said, "I know that the moment we get to the conference, you will be mobbed by people...your adoring fans!" She flashed a mischievous smile at me. "So I want to take advantage of this time together to say 'Thank you.'"

"Thank you? Thank you for what?" I asked.

"For everything you've done for me. First, that morning on the train, you could have immersed yourself in work, read the newspaper, or listened to a CD. But instead, you took the time to tell us how we could enrich our lives—and improve the lives of others—by joining Rotary."

"But Sue, I was international president of Rotary at the time. If I would not do that, who in the world would have?"

"I know, I know," she continued. "In a way, getting *into* Rotary was easy. However, it was what came later that makes me so grateful to you. I was so demotivated by some of the people in my club who wanted to be members of a knife-and-fork fellowship, not a Rotary club, that I was on the point of leaving Rotary when I last met you."

I well remembered that meeting. I had represented the then-president of Rotary International at the district conference, and had eaten dinner with Sue, Bob, and Duncan the night I arrived. Rather than a celebratory reunion, the occasion had begun more like a wake. Sue—and incoming club president—was close to resigning. Bob had already all-but dropped out. Only Duncan, a member of a different Rotary club, had given a positive report of his experiences. The entire evening had involved my suggestions of how they could energize their members and refocus their clubs into truly service-minded, rather than self-minded groups.

“You threw down a challenge that night,” she recalled. “And Bob and I accepted it. Looking back, I believe that was the weekend when, through your encouragement and the inspiration from the speakers at the district conference, we changed from being members of a Rotary club to being Rotarians.”

“And Duncan?”

“He was already there!” We both laughed.

“Sounds like it’s been quite a couple of years,” I said.

“Three.” She corrected me. “That conference was almost three years ago.”

“Tell me about your Rotary journey in the past three years.”

“Gosh, I don’t think I have time before we get to the hotel,” she said, with a sigh. “Well, here’s the abbreviated version. The fact is, Frank, I came away from that district conference really motivated to energize my club when I became president. I had so many ideas that Bob and Duncan actually counseled me to tone down my plans a little. And they were right; no club president can do everything in one year.”

That’s true,” I said. “I even went through the same realization when I became Rotary International president. So what *did* you focus on?”

“The Rotary Foundation,” Sue answered. “I thought our members were already familiar with their opportunities to serve in the local community; we certainly are a very positive force for good in our town. Club fellowship was working well, but I surmised most members gave little or no support to The Rotary Foundation.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Was,” she corrected me.

“Sorry, why do you think that *was*?”

“They just had no idea what the Foundation was all about. For years, various club Foundation chairs or presidents had weakly promoted The Rotary Foundation with announcements like, ‘Well, folks, it’s that time of the year again. Please consider a donation to The Rotary Foundation because October is Rotary Foundation month.’ Give me a break! I was in the club almost three years and nobody had ever really told me what an incredible gift to the world The Rotary Foundation is. When I think back at all the missed opportunities our club—and thousands of other clubs—had, it makes me sick.” She pointed her finger into her mouth to emphasize her point.

“You really feel strongly about this, don’t you?” I asked.

“You bet I do!” she exclaimed. “Rotary is touching the lives of literally millions of people through our Foundation. However, imagine what we *could* have accomplished if just 25 percent of the Rotarians gave to their true potential. Imagine how many diseases could have been cured. Imagine how many mothers would not have watched their babies die due to malnutrition or unclean drinking water...” her voice trailed off as if she really was trying to imagine such a vision.

“Dream as if you’ll
live forever...
Live as if you’ll die
today.”
– James Dean

Several seconds of silence passed before I felt it appropriate to speak. “So what did you do differently in your year as club president?” I enquired.

“I decided to focus on The Rotary Foundation,” she began. “I certainly did not forget our local community service, but our club had done very little for The Rotary Foundation. I asked myself, *Are we part of an international service organization, or not?* So I appointed a committee of people I trusted to be good communicators and several weeks before I took office, we spent a Sunday afternoon at my home—sort of a retreat. I had called The Rotary Foundation office in Evanston, Illinois, and they sent me a huge assortment of materials describing the work the Foundation does and the many ways people can help. However, even more importantly, they put me in touch with the Regional Rotary Foundation Coordinator for our area, and he became an enormously valuable and inspiring resource. That afternoon, we watched some incredibly moving stories on video. I remember one tape The Rotary Foundation sent me called *One Blue Sky*. Another inspiring resource was a nine-minute DVD from The Rotary Foundation. It really opened my eyes. We resolved to give a Rotary Foundation Minute at each of the 52 club meetings in my year.

“I believe that our first priority was to educate our members—to make them proud to be Rotarians. I also believe that the most convincing messengers are those who are already committed to the message. Therefore, at the end of our afternoon retreat, I invited each member of the committee to make a personal commitment to The Rotary Foundation. Every one of them did, pledging a total of \$17,000 to The Rotary Foundation.

“We then divided the club into teams, and each member on my committee became a team captain. At first, we considered having a contest to see which team could raise the most money for The Rotary Foundation. But then we realized that was not such a good idea.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“For several reasons. Firstly, benevolence should be encouraged based on one’s personal ability to give. It would not be fair to reward one team that had an individual member able to write a large check, while passing over another team—whose members may have had more modest means—even though they may have given generously. Besides, I did not want it to be just about money. It is true that many Rotarians are very generous with their financial gifts, but I wanted to make them feel personally involved—even to have some hands-on experience with Rotary Foundation projects. I really believed—and still believe—that the more we can make Rotarians feel a *personal* connection with these programs, the more they will think of it not as *The* Rotary Foundation, but as *their* Rotary Foundation.”

“Wow! That’s pretty powerful thinking, Sue.” I said. “I could not agree with you more. Now you’ve got me sitting on the edge of my seat...that was almost three years ago, so tell me, how did you do?”

She momentarily took her eyes off the road to flash me a quick smile. “Frank, it was an incredible year! This club, the very club I was thinking of quitting because it felt downright moribund, responded in truly amazing ways.

“Firstly, just before the year began, Bob—you remember Bob—was sent by his company on a month-long trip to their new computer center in Hyderabad, India. While there, he contacted local Rotarians who took him out to various projects that The Rotary Foundation was funding. So he returned with hundreds of photographs and amazingly moving stories about how we can make a difference by helping support these programs. People in the club were really moved by his compelling testimony.

“Oh, and while we’re on the subject of people you know, Duncan was our district’s Rotary Foundation chairman the year I was club president. He is such a nice person, and I wanted to support him; he sure was a wonderful resource for me. Anyway, he was gone for quite a while because he took an around-the-world trip.”

I remembered Duncan had taken—not entirely voluntarily—early retirement from his job not long before we had met. “Well, he had worked hard all his life,” I volunteered. “He had certainly earned a nice vacation.”

“Yes, but this was no vacation, Frank,” said Sue. “He cashed in some of those frequent flyer miles he had accumulated and took a trip around the world visiting—and volunteering—at Rotary Foundation work projects. He called it his ‘vacation with a purpose.’ You will hear him discuss it in his workshop tomorrow. Anyhow, he sent each club president in our district weekly e-mails filled with inspirational anecdotes of The Rotary Foundation in action—and I forwarded them to every member of my club.

“We also had a make-up visitor from Brazil who attended our club for several meetings while visiting his daughter. Many of our members got to know him quite well, and when he told us of the problems of a well-baby clinic his club had started in a very poor neighborhood in his city, we wanted to help. In fact, our members proposed launching a joint project with Jose’s club. So we did.

“And do you know what made me the happiest, Frank? Three of those people were folks I had written off in my mind as ‘do-nothing, knife-and-fork members’. It was the first sign to me that if we connect real needs with real Rotarians, amazing things can happen.”

“You know, Sue, at the end of *A Century of Service*, the official history of Rotary’s first one hundred years, the author pointed out that every program, every successful project, every ideal which helped Rotary become the world’s leading service organization came not from the top down but from the grass roots up. That is what you witnessed. You tilled the soil, planted the seed, nurtured the first tentative sprouts—and it sounds like you reaped quite a harvest.”

“I haven’t even told you the half of it,” she said, nodding affirmatively. “We sent two teams of volunteers on field trips. We hosted a Group Study Exchange team. We became involved with the Peace Scholar program. And, at the end of the year, our club, which had never given more than \$12,000 to The Rotary Foundation in any previous year, turned in \$51,000 in cash, and another \$36,000 in pledges of future contributions.”

“Sue, I cannot believe what I am hearing,” I said. “I am so proud of you. Aren’t you the one who told me on the train that you did not belong in Rotary because it was a ‘boring old men’s club’?”

“Oh, there are still some of them out there, Frank,” she said. We both laughed.

“But seriously, Sue, you are exactly the person Rotary needs—and may I add, as chairman of The Rotary Foundation—you evidently are exactly the type of person The Rotary Foundation needs, too.”

“Well, thank you Frank,” she answered. “I really do appreciate those words. But truthfully, I feel a little guilty accepting them, because I am already so rewarded with the knowledge that in my own small way, I am making a difference in the world.”

I was contemplating a response, when Sue spoke again: “Okay. We are here. Why don’t you grab your

bags from the back seat and we'll let the valet park the car."

We entered the large hotel, quickly checked in, and then Sue gave me an overview of what was to happen next. I was relieved to be offered the opportunity to go to my room without any meetings and to sleep off the effects of my long flight from Argentina. She explained that although she was now district Rotary Foundation chair, this weekend was a multi-district Rotary Foundation conference—the first of its kind I had heard of. They expected me to give an opening keynote address on Friday morning, and then the closing speech on Saturday. There would be several workshops on both days, on various topics concerning The Rotary Foundation.

As I followed, the bellhop into my room, I suddenly felt very tired. My final thoughts as I lay my head on the pillow were of the three people whom I had met on that foggy train ride. Three people with absolutely no knowledge of Rotary, nor the slightest interest in joining Rotary. Their arguments to such a suggestion had been entirely self-gratifying: *we do not have time...we will not like the other members...we do not want to spend the money...it might be boring for us.*

Nevertheless, they *did* join. Then, the last time I ran into them, two of the three were about to drop out—again because they were focusing on themselves. What a tragedy that would have been! Now look at them. They were motivated—and motivating others. They had touched the lives of countless desperately needy people, and were thrilled to have done so. Now, their lives had an entirely different focus: it was *outward*, on helping others.

What is it that Sue said? "We have changed from being members of a Rotary club to becoming Rotarians." Indeed, they had!

In many Latin American countries, children suffer serious burns from cooking and heating fires, fireworks, sunburn, and other accidental causes. In 1979, Dr. Jorge Rojas, of the Rotary Club of Santiago, Chile, founded Coaniquem (Corporation for the Aid of Burned Children) to provide free treatment and rehabilitation to burned children, help prevent accidental burns, and train health care professionals.

"We wanted to ensure equal treatment for every child, with no concern about a family's ability to pay," said Rojas. "Burn-related accidents occur at every level of society, and Coaniquem helps everyone who needs it."

A Health, Hunger and Humanity (3-H) project trained Rotarians, Rotaractors, Interactors, Rotary Community Corps, and others to carry out burn prevention campaigns in eight South American cities. It also rehabilitated child burn victims at Coaniquem's Santiago and Antofagasta treatment centers, and trained medical professionals in the eight cities in all phases of this specialized care. The two Chilean centers now enable Coaniquem to treat some 9,000 patients from 11 countries annually. A charitable foundation was established in the USA to extend support for Coaniquem after the end of 3-H funding.

Rotary clubs in several South American countries and District 5170 (California, USA) helped implement the 3-H project and continue to provide support. As a slogan of the Rotary Club of Asunción, Paraguay, states in promoting aid for burn victims: "Pain has no borders, neither does Rotary service."