

## DISTRICT 5000 LEADERSHIP ACADEMY 2009-10 FINAL ESSAY

### ROTARY MEMBERSHIP: HOW IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

It is interesting, instructive, and entertaining to look back to the beginning of Rotary to understand the ideas about membership that Paul Harris and his early Rotarian colleagues espoused as they were laying the foundation for our remarkable organization. The character of Rotary membership has evolved over time just as the culture of Rotary has changed. For most of the history of Rotary changes occurred in a somewhat sedate and gentlemanly pace, but there were periodic cataclysms such as the introduction of women members in 1986. In that case the event, while distressing to a minority of male members, was a timely change that in clear retrospect has greatly improved the ability of Rotary to contribute to the welfare of societies around the world. One can only surmise how Paul Harris and his fellows would have felt about the introduction of women and the great increase in emphasis on altruistic endeavors. But one can get some idea from reading his words and those of some of his fellow Rotarians.

The introduction of women notwithstanding it is quite worthwhile to reflect on the early writings to gain some perspective, and to consider re-energizing some of those ideas in contemporary "Rotarianism".

There can be no doubt that Rotary was founded as an organization of businessmen, and that a primary purpose was to promote business among members as suppliers and customers. Classifications were rooted in the early diversity of businesses and the intent that members of a club would do business with each other, and would recommend the businesses of club members to others outside of Rotary. The diversity of businesses represented in the club, and the practice of having only one representative of each business intentionally reduced an inclination to competition among club members and promoted ethical commerce among members. It is somewhat distressing to hear members of a club express reluctance to do business with other members for fear that it might not work out. That "fear" is precisely the thing that Harris sought to avoid through business ethics and the mutual respect among club members. He was clear that business arrangements should be equitable; he did not propose that one member should give another a particular "deal" at his expense. If a business arrangement was not satisfactory to both parties then so be it. That did not mean that they could not remain colleagues and not do business together in the future.

In contemporary Rotarianism I think that we have lost considerable value in the dilution of perspective on business and networking, and on the promotion of business ethics. While we at our club had been planning on having at each meeting a member spend a few minutes telling about their business, having read some of the earlier ideas we will try having our own members more often be the program for the meeting. It is interesting to observe that in the earlier days to have an outside speaker was a rarity<sup>1</sup>.

In the earlier days a Rotarian would buy a ticket to attend a meeting, and the ticket sales would, in turn, be made by each member at his place of business. This would require other members of the club to visit the respective business and to get some understanding of that concern. We don't do that anymore, but it does excite the idea of having members host meetings at their place of business. I have done this successfully, but it does take some coordination.

The now very significant emphasis on altruism in Rotary, earlier referred to as "Service, Not Self", had its roots in the business core of Rotary. Harris and his mates knew that their Rotary was a unique and increasingly successful endeavor, and they also knew that greater success

would come with greater recognition and acceptance within the community. He wrote that there is a place in Rotarianism for something more than a mere business exchange. He suggested that there is a “place in Rotary for him who recognizes the fact that he, as an American citizen of this day and age, has been the recipient of a vast heritage, the result of the efforts of generations who have passed on beyond, and who thinks it is his duty to do something toward balancing his account by doing something for the public present and for generations that are yet to come.” And, “Rotary’s growth will be stronger and more permanent if it is well thought of in the communities in which it is planted. The way for a person or club to be well thought of in a community is to do something for the community. The American people have been educated up to the point where they make insistent demand for a certain measure of civic activities on the part of clubs. If you have never done anything in that line before it is time that you began<sup>1</sup>.”

This, then, was an appeal for members to serve, and that service has over time become the primary ethos of Rotary. The quality of our membership is reflected in the quality of service provided by Rotarians around the world. The success of PolioPlus is most certainly remarkable, and it is right to see that disease eradicated so that we can focus on the “Plus” and many other contributions that only Rotary has the capacity to address. Rotary successes in projects against hunger, disease, illiteracy, poverty, and so forth are truly magnificent and increasingly effective. Rotarianism has indeed earned the great respect with which it is regarded around the world.

Perhaps, though, in our enthusiasm for service we have neglected our roots, and so done a disservice. We have Rotarians who vigorously protect the idea of business networking. As mentioned earlier we have Rotarians who are reluctant to do business with club members. We do, though, have Rotarians who really do hold to the 4 Way Test, and who really do conduct their businesses ethically. Perhaps it is time to reinvigorate the ideas of ethics and respect and fairness in our own business community. In considering the disaster of the Wall Street debacle and the actions of many banks one would desperately hope that those involved were not Rotarians.

In the Anniversary Number of *The National Rotarian*, March 1912, membership is clearly the focus of “The Elements of Rotarianism”:

Integrity- the qualification for membership

Opportunity- the privilege of membership

Service- the responsibility of membership

Success- the result of membership

Those words are from ninety-eight years ago, but they align pretty well with our current Object of Rotary.

The Object of Rotary is to encourage and foster the ideal of service as a basis of worthy enterprise and, in particular, to encourage and foster:

FIRST. The development of acquaintance as an opportunity for service;

SECOND. High ethical standards in business and professions, the recognition of the worthiness of all useful occupations, and the dignifying of each Rotarian's occupation as an opportunity to serve society;

THIRD. The application of the ideal of service in each Rotarian's personal, business, and community life;

FOURTH. The advancement of international understanding, goodwill, and peace through a world fellowship of business and professional persons united in the ideal of service<sup>3</sup>.

We have good reason to be proud to be Rotarians, but it is worthwhile to consider the intent of the founders. In general business has been difficult and Hawaii has not escaped the turmoil. It is interesting to read the words that go with success as an element of Rotarianism:

“With every member trying to be of some service to his fellow members it is inevitable that the accomplishment of a great deal of business must result. All may not profit alike nor immediately but aggregate volume of business accomplished during one year through a Rotary Club is simply astonishing as has been demonstrated in every Rotary Club”.

It is fascinating to contemplate the possibilities if so far as possible members of Rotary Clubs throughout the state were to do business with each other and in doing so to promote the values expressed in the 4 Way Test. If the words of The Elements of Rotarianism hold true then it would certainly be good for the economy of the state, and most certainly a more broad practice of the 4 Way Test would reduce conflict and, just perhaps, really enhance the spirit of “aloha”.

<sup>1</sup> “How It Is Done in Minneapolis”, B.F. Collins, *The National Rotarian*, Vol.II, No. 1, November 1922, Pp. 3-6.

<sup>2</sup> “Rational Rotarianism”, Paul P. Harris, *The National Rotarian*, Vol.1, No.1, January, 1911, Pp. 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> “The Elements of Rotarianism”, *The National Rotarian*, Vol. II, No. 3, March 1912.

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