

REFLECTIONS OF A DISTRICT GOVERNOR
- A Rotary Odyssey

My Friends,

This is my last major statement as a District Governor. You all know that I never speak for more than 20 minutes: in this I have followed the guidance of the person who said, “If you have nothing more to say, do not give evidence of it by continuing to talk”. Rather like opening your mouth before you know what you are going to say...More importantly, I have been saving up time for this communication, so I will speak for as long as I need.

Thank you all for coming to the 82nd District Conference and Assembly. If you have not enjoyed this conference, please send your apologies for not attending.

I have been referred to by a lot of you using names like Tuju, Toshiba, Tissue, Tutu. I have been called DJ more often than DG, and I accept them all. What I will not accept is Susu.

My reflections would be incomplete if I did not start by thanking all of you because, in very many ways, many of you have supported me and have taught me a lot. I have got so many friends from around the District over the last year that the time I have is not enough to mention any of them without offending others by omission. The only person I will mention is Rtn Dorcas, who has given me fantastic support in all possible ways, and you can interpret that any way you want. Believe me, there are times when the will to go on flags, and you need someone to reinforce it; or when the will to go on over-drives the body, and you need someone to insist that you rest; or when you just need to share a passing moment and you need someone who knows all your shades of mood; or simply someone to talk to about nothing. Thank you for being that person Dorcas. Together with our children in Uganda, in the UK, in Canada, and the US A, you have been the life-force of this year of service. I must admit Dorcas was a bit of a shock to many clubs, by doing funny things like insisting on visiting projects, attending board meetings and club assemblies, instead of shopping and sight-seeing.

And beyond, around, and within everything that has been done and achieved, the omnipresence of God in whom I profess faith through Jesus Christ is a continuing blessing, even as I accept all my human weaknesses.

Our Rotary Odyssey started in my own club, Kampala North, a club that has been very supportive, which has learnt, through bitter experience over the years, that by speaking frankly and openly as family about all that goes wrong, the club has the capacity to heal all differences and increase its strength. My club received me on the 1st of July with some trepidation. It reminded me of the young man who, as he was given anaesthetic before surgery anxiously asked the surgeon, “Madam, have you ever lost a patient during surgery?” “Never”, she said. “That is good to hear! How many patients have you

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operated on”, he asked as he started fading out. “You are my first”, she answered. I gave President Bob the same assurance.

We visited clubs around Kampala and experienced the challenge of the Kampala phenomenon. Let me explain: Rotarians around Kampala tend to visit other clubs a lot (something I have been encouraging clubs elsewhere to emulate) but this more than triples during the Governor’s official visits to clubs, at which time the visiting Rotarians fall in three distinctive categories: those who regularly visit clubs; those who are sent to spy on the Governor’s approach and report back to their clubs; and those – especially in the evenings – who follow the bounty of hospitality often attendant on the Governor’s visit.

This imposed another challenge: you feel silly if you keep on saying the same things to an audience where some faces are always the same. I therefore learnt early not to anticipate or plan what I would say, but to tailor what I would say based on the discussions with the board and the President. I must admit that my life as an academic pedagogue has been advantageous in this. The spies also carried a message to their clubs about my insistence that I did not see my role as that of a pathologist determining what went wrong, but rather a nutritionist working with the club to craft a Rotary diet that would make it a more effective club. This helped a lot, and I thank the spies, because the clubs learnt to open up when we visited them to address their challenges frankly, and more importantly, construct their own solutions.

The start of the Rotary year was written in bold letters by the visit of RIP Bill Boyd and Lorna to our District. (They also sent Vice President Jerry Hall ahead to spy on us under the cover of visiting projects in Bwindi). There were teams in Kenya and Uganda that planned the visit, and I was a member of both. In Uganda, it soon emerged that the thinking framework of the older generation of Rotarians could not take this visit out of the routine. In Uganda, it was decided by this older generation to hand responsibility and authority to the younger generation – Rotarians in their mid-thirties (like Paul Harris was when he started Rotary) to early forties. While some of us remained to give policy guidance, this team dreamt big and made the visit a resounding success. This same team, you will note, has taken on all the key responsibilities (except Chair and Vice Chair) of the 82nd District Conference and Assembly. How else can we develop capacity?

The Visit of the RI President went off extremely well, and my sincere appreciation to the teams in Kenya and Uganda who pulled it together.

The performance of the team in Uganda taught me a big lesson: we have a lot of leadership potential in our district that we probably never give the opportunity to flower, and that we need to let go in order to promote new thinking and growth.

From Kampala, we ventured out for a week, with new found confidence after carrying out a few surgeries with a comparatively low mortality rate, to the holiday paradise that is Mombasa – from the city centre, to Diani in one direction and Malindi and Kilifi in the

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other direction. I learnt, from a Rotarian in RC Kilindini that failing to advertise the work of Rotary in order to attract members is like winking at a lady in the dark.

By this time I had perfected a technique that Country Chair Sam came to understand on the many he picked me up to visit different clubs: due to Rotary obligations, I have tended to do my email for several hours each night when away from office (which is why I had to turn down many kind offers for home hospitality). This leads to an increasing sleep deficit. My solution is to always fall asleep in the car which someone else is driving. Abdalla experienced this on the way to beautiful Kilifi Creek, where we assured the youthful Rotarians that we understood their challenges and would fully support them. I still owe them a visit to the school they are supporting. The three hours we waited as the President desperately tried to gather members were but an opportunity for us to relax by the creek and absorb the beauty of nature.

We have been to the metropolitan hub know as Nairobi, high in affluence, and high in poverty, and in this reflecting the reality of all our cities: extreme wealth juxtaposed with unbearable deprivation, and life going on normally as if there are two worlds in the same place but in different existence continua. Sometimes, it seems that it is only Rotarians and Rotaractors, and a few other people of good will in Nairobi, and indeed in our other big cities, who see both worlds.

Over time, and almost full time, we feasted on a cultural smorgasbord of hospitality and service by spending each succeeding week in another country in our District. We thus travelled the environs of Kampala from Kasangati to Mukono, Entebbe to Bukoto. Eastwards to Jinja, Iganga, Tororo, and Mbale; South-West to Masaka, Kalisizo, Kyotera, cool Karagwe, beautiful Bukoba, and picturesque Mwanza. The last three are actually in Tanzania, but it is testimony to the size of our District, and the geographical spread of clubs, that it is easier to access the clubs by road through Uganda. For the first time in my travels, I was given an armed escort, in order to assure safety through a long lonely stretch of the road to Karagwe. This time, my tactic of sleeping in a vehicle did not work: A man you have never met, in the backseat of your vehicle with an AK47 automatic rifle as you drive along a long lonely stretch of road is not conducive to sleep.

South Western Uganda also includes Mbarara, Bushenyi, Ibanda, Rwampara, and Kabale, where a chilly evening on the lakes of the hidden treasure known as Lake Bunyonyi is a must. Its scenic beauty creates a certain peace in the mind and soul, and the Rotarians in Kabale must be well aware of this because seeing the lake will calm even the fire-breathing ilk of District Governors that, nature demands, must occasionally be in charge of our District. The route to the West is equally varied with Mityana, Mubende, through dense forest to Kibale, rolling tea plantations to Kabarole, and on to Kasese in the foothills of the Mountains of the Moon, where the ice caps are fast disappearing due to global warming.

With the usual trepidation, because the memories of murder and atrocities of the Lords Resistance Army die hard, we cross the mighty river Nile into Northern Uganda where names of places like Barlonyo remain testimony to the inhumanity of man to man, not

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slaying for food, like most species do, but slaying and dismembering men, women, children and babies for the sheer enjoyment of the act of killing, disguised by political motives. The Rotary clubs of Lira and Gulu are a growing beacon of hope in this area. Working with PRIP Raja Saboo, twelve clubs in Uganda, Districts in India and the USA, and volunteer surgeons from India and Uganda, a major surgical camp funded through TRF, and to run during June this year is the latest addition to the list of Rotary projects for this area. Arua, in the Northwest was isolated from most of the violence. It has a peaceful aspect around it.

Gulu is a boiling hub of NGOs in expensive four-wheel drives and lifestyles that, while the motivation of a few is real, brings out the ugly truth behind a lot of the NGO industry. Would that there were more Rotary clubs through which assistance could be passed on without any of it being fat for the wolves in many of the NGOs.

To cover Tanzania, one must do a leg to Arusha, then down to Moshi and through Mombo to Tanga on the coast, having dinner with Rotarians by the shores of the ocean. We then stage through Dar es Salaam and connection to the spice island and the historical monuments, especially the palace, in Zanzibar Stonetown. From Dar, the continuation is by Road to Morogoro, a beautiful bowl surrounded by hills, and on to Iringa, with all types of game along the way, and through mountain roads and later plains to the Parliamentary seat, Dodoma. One sees signs of hardship and poverty along the way that give the lie to the beautiful holiday resorts along the coast, and cast the representatives of the people in cynical light.

One of the longest legs was from Nairobi by road through Nyahururu, where the Thompson falls are a must see to distant Maralal; and back again to the flower farms of Naivasha, onwards to Nakuru and the creative water projects, and up the mountains to the chill nights of Eldoret. We overworked AG Edward on this route, now made famous by Rtn Dorcas' story in the conference magazines. I have a sneaking suspicion that the popularity of this story is partly based on the section where the District Governor's seat in the vehicle topples over and Dorcas finds herself speaking to my shoes. Fortunate for her that she did not chose to give me a peck at that point in time. Yes, it was an exciting trip. Western Kenya is not complete until you almost enter Uganda again through Webuye, down to Kakamega and the only Rotary Secondary school, Vihiga, Kisumu, and Homa Bay.

Around Nairobi is a ring of clubs that have a very interesting aspect: Machakos, Muranga, Thika, and Meru. For Meru, be ready to brave the roads as daredevil drivers in two-ton vehicles carrying the illegal Miraa happily past police road blocks. The interesting aspect: the distance from these clubs to Nairobi is much shorter than the distance from Nairobi to these clubs, at least according to the Nairobi Rotarians. This, at least, is the perspective of Rotarians in Nairobi. My friends from Thika and Meru – I promised I would keep on mentioning this!

The land of the Queen of She eba, steeped in history and with a very proud people, has taught us that crime is not a product of poverty, but a product of the breakdown of the

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moral fabric of society. Ethiopia, the most populous country in our District, has been denuded by the long history of intensive human habitation, a mono-crop culture, and deforestation, all compounded by a rather healthy appetite for meat that beats even carnivorous Kenya. The majority of the people are extremely poor, and yet the crime rate is extremely low.

From the grand palaces of Addis Ababa; a day's drive across the Nile Gorge with Ato Tadesse to Debre Markos and Hotel Paradise which was everything but, and on to Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, with its ancient churches was a trip of discovery. We could not resist a flight hop to Lalibela and the rock-hewn churches that personify religious fervour. The faith that drove the architects and the builders are almost tangible in the atmosphere.

We have sought opportunity everywhere to meet Rotaractors, because this is ensuring, insuring, and assuring the future of Rotary. Mombasa, Addis Ababa, Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, Kisumu, Dodoma, Arusha, and of course Kampala – the meetings with the Rotaractors have always been a time of fun, exploration, and source of hope for Rotary and the future. I thank you Rotaractors for the great ideas you have, your enthusiasm, your vigour, and especially your new thinking. You bring life to Rotary. You are doing exceptional projects. And the bridging youthful Rotary clubs, none more than Langata that has nevertheless given more than \$10,000 to TRF this year – keep young so that we can attract more young business and professional persons in Rotary.

We have learnt, with humility, that many small clubs are not small, and with surprise that many large clubs are not large. I have seen Malindi, with only twelve or so members, but where every member is involved in service. And I have seen clubs more than five times this size where less than 20% of the members are involved in service. And this is why I have posed this question to many of the clubs: a mighty tree stands by the river side with a plentiful supply of water, and its branches spread wide. A small shrub hangs on the side of a dry rocky cliff and stubbornly digs its roots in the rock, creating a mini-eco system for insects, a resting perch for birds, and occasionally even a nesting place. Which is the stronger tree?

Yes, our travels gave us a chance to explore our countries and cultures. We enjoyed warm hospitality and care everywhere. Our hearts were touched by the generosity. The meticulous plans by the Country Chairs; the personal presence of especially the Assistant Governors who set aside several days each so that they were with us full time during our visits; Thank you all our dear friends. I must praise and thank you so that you do not have to use the self-praise of Ironsi the lizard.

And yet our travelling was not for ourselves, but for service. From one of Shakespeare's works:

“Life is but a mocking shadow, a poor player who frets and struts his time upon the stage, and is heard no more. It is like a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”

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My dear friends, these despairing words of Macbeth are echoed around the minds of the many in our communities who have lost hope. And as Rotarians, we have seen in our travels that you have dedicated yourselves to give a lie to this, to say that life indeed has a meaning, a meaning that is realised if one looks beyond self. It is the focus on self that makes life a mocking shadow, and indeed Macbeth's entire tale is about self-focus. On the other hand, it is despair and the loss of hope that makes life a mocking shadow for those who are much less privileged than us. Herein lays the opportunity: If those of us who have been endowed with resources beyond what we need for a modest life style can reach out to those who have lost hope, the benefit is as much ours as theirs.

The projects you are carrying out, from 3H grants like the School of Dentistry of Kampala North to creative projects like the string and washer pumps used in some of the water wells of Nakuru make a difference to many.

The beautiful singing voices of two girls, one from Jinja, and one from Kibera. I hope the Rotary clubs of Jinja and Muthaiga, as promised, are giving those girls opportunities to better their lives through their talent. After all, I have met a heavy weight boxing champion in Mathare, the place beloved of PDG Mohamed.

Muyenga – I hope you have followed up on Ben Adam. He is a little lost soul that can flower.

Kasese, Didas Byaruhanga who has to use his toes and mouth to draw geometrical figures, and hardly gets any additional time benefit for that in examinations, must not be forgotten.

Ethiopian Rotarians: there is a school with more than two thousand pupils in Bahir Dar, and one filled pit-latrines, and hardly any water. Reach out to them. Give a hand to support the work of Abebech Gobena, who was moved to charity when she found a baby suckling the breast of its dead mother during the last famine.

Tanzania – there are villages in the center of your land where communities survive in great hardship. Take a break from the beauty of the coast and explore your country, help your people.

Kenya – continue the work in Mathare, and Kibera, so that we can play our part in eliminating the dubious distinction of having the largest slum in Africa.

Uganda – do not forget the lessons of Barlonyo and its lessons of pre-teen children brutalised by being forced to murder parents and siblings.

Safe House in Naivasha, caring for abused children – and abused by that most trusted group of people, family, making home unsafe. When one looks at the pretty faces and smiles of the little girls, one is scared to look beyond at the damaged psyches behind the smiles, which the Rotarians, with expert assistance, are carefully healing.

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My Dear Friends, and in this I mean all of you here because, as one Rotary sage put it, “There are no strangers in the world. Strangers are only friends we have never met” – I would like to conclude with a quotation from Nelson Mandela:

“It should never be that the anger of the poor should be the finger of accusation pointed at all of us because we failed to respond to the cries of the people for food, for shelter, for the dignity of the individual”

While this was said in the political context, it applies equally to all of us. You and I can make a change by opening our eyes to the suffering, and doing something about it. If we want to see this change, then, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, we must be the change we want to see in the world.

Thank you for Leading the Way.