WHY WE SHOW UP

Stories from the Field

Ray Sanford

PAST DISTRICT 5320 GOVERNOR

SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO ROTARY CLUB

San Juan Capistrano Rotary

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Past District 5320 Governor

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A Note Before We Begin

This book did not start as a book.

It started as a website. Posts written every week, sometimes more, for years. Stories about people, projects, history. Thoughts about why service matters. Profiles of Rotarians who changed things. Reflections on what it means to show up — not for recognition, not for a line on a resume, but because the world has problems and we have hands.

After 353 posts, someone suggested I look at what I had built. Turns out: a record. Not just of a club, but of something harder to name. A way of seeing. A set of values tested against real life. A collection of people who decided that doing something was better than doing nothing.

The test for every piece in this book was simple: would someone who has never heard of Rotary be moved by this? Not informed. Not persuaded. Moved.

That's the only bar worth clearing.

What follows is organized by theme, not chronology. Each chapter begins with a question and ends with evidence. The evidence is almost always a person — someone who saw a problem and didn't look away.

You don't have to be a Rotarian to understand this book. You just have to believe that one person, showing up at the right moment, can change what happens next.

We've seen it. Over and over again.

This is where we keep the proof.

Ray Sanford

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Chapter One

The Call

Why People Join

Nobody joins Rotary because they were looking for Rotary. They join because something shifted — a door opened, a conversation surprised them, a meeting they almost skipped turned out to be the one that mattered. "The Call" is rarely loud. It's usually quiet. A moment where you look around the room and think: these are my people.

This chapter is about that moment. The first meeting. The realization. The shift that doesn't announce itself but changes everything that comes after.

My First Rotary Meeting

Told to me by a fellow Rotarian

It was not long after September 11th. The country was stunned. You could feel it in the air of every room — that particular combination of grief, confusion, and the desperate need to do something. Anything.

I walked into my first Rotary meeting not knowing what to expect. I'd been invited by someone I barely knew. I almost didn't go. Across the room, a man caught my eye. Something in his posture. The way he stood. I recognized it before I could name it — that particular straightness that Marine Corps drill instructors spend years building into young men and never entirely leaves them.

We ended up talking for twenty minutes. He'd served in Vietnam. I'd come out of the same tradition. We hadn't met before that night, but we'd grown up in the same culture — the culture of showing up, of finishing what you start, of understanding that service is not optional. That was my introduction to Rotary. Not a brochure. A handshake. A recognition.

I've been coming back ever since.

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Finding Meaning

Another Rotarian's first meeting.

My son left for college on a Thursday. By Saturday, I was lost.

It wasn't grief exactly — he was fine, he was thriving, I was proud. But the structure of eighteen years evaporated in seventy-two hours, and I was standing in a house that suddenly felt too quiet, with no idea what the next chapter was supposed to look like.

A friend suggested I come to a Rotary meeting. I thought he was joking. I went anyway.

The speaker that night was talking about a project in Guatemala. Clean water. A village that had been drinking contaminated water for generations. The club had raised enough to build a filtration system. The speaker showed a photograph — a woman, maybe fifty years old, holding a glass of clear water, looking at it like it was something she'd never expected to see.

I didn't say anything at the meeting. But I signed up for the next volunteer day on the way out.

That was eight years ago. I haven't stopped.

The void doesn't need to stay empty. It just needs a purpose.

* * *

Cheers - Where Everybody Knows Your Name

There's a reason that show ran eleven seasons. It wasn't the writing, though the writing was good. It was the idea — the bar where you're known. Where you walk in and someone calls your name and means it.

We are living in the most connected era in human history and the loneliest. The statistics on isolation are staggering. Adults without close friendships. Neighbors who

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don't know each other's names. Families separated by geography and screens and the particular modern silence that falls when everyone in the room is looking at a device.

Rotary is not the answer to loneliness. But it is a place where you walk in and someone is genuinely glad you're there. Where your absence is noticed. Where the table has a seat with your name on it.

That's rarer than it should be. And it's worth more than people admit until they experience it.

* * *

Rotary is Happiness

Harvard has been running a study on happiness for over eighty years. It is the longest-running study of adult life in history. The researchers expected to find that wealth, fame, or achievement would be the dominant predictors of a happy life.

They were wrong.

The single strongest predictor of happiness and health in later life is the quality of your relationships. Not how many — how deep. People who were connected — who had people they could call in a crisis, who felt known and known well — aged better, got sick less often, lived longer, and reported more satisfaction with their lives at every stage.

Rotary is, at its core, a weekly act of investment in the quality of your relationships. The service is real. The projects are real. But underneath all of it is a table, and the people at the table, and the years of showing up.

The Harvard study would predict exactly what Rotarians already know.

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Dress Shoes vs. Boots

I used to wear dress shoes to everything. It was a habit from corporate life — the idea that appearance signals seriousness, that the right shoes say something important about who you are.

My first house build with Corazón changed that.

We were in Tijuana at 6am. The lot was dirt. There were forty Rotarians holding shovels and looking slightly confused about which end went down. By noon, I had destroyed a pair of shoes I'd owned for six years.

I bought boots the next week. I've worn them to every build since.

There's something important in that exchange. The dress shoes said: I am a person of standing. The boots say: I am ready to work. The second identity is better. It turns out I like who I am in the boots more than who I was in the dress shoes.

Service has a way of redistributing your sense of what matters.

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Chapter Two

The Table

Fellowship as Foundation

Paul Harris pulled pranks. This is documented. The founder of Rotary, a serious man with serious ideas, was also the person most likely to engineer a practical joke at the expense of a colleague. He understood something that gets lost in organizational gravity: joy is infrastructure. The laughter at the table is not a distraction from the work — it is what makes the work sustainable.

This chapter is about what happens in the room when the meeting ends. The friendships that outlast the projects. The rituals that seem small and turn out to be load-bearing.

Rotary as Family

The pin is a passport. Show up in a Rotary club in Tokyo, in London, in Cape Town or São Paulo or Kuala Lumpur, and the Rotary pin opens the door. You are not a stranger. You are a member of something that operates the same way everywhere — not because of rules, but because of values.

There are no fancy hats in Rotary. No secret handshakes, no elaborate ceremonies, no hierarchy of robes or regalia. Just the pin and the values and the expectation that you will show up.

What makes a family is not biology. It's shared history, shared values, and the expectation of each other's presence. Rotary is a family in the truest sense — because when you walk into a meeting, anywhere in the world, you already have something in common with every person in that room.

They showed up too.

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Birthdays of Meaning

My twin brother was dying of cancer when I turned seventy-six. We had shared a birthday for seventy-six years — the same day, same hospital, three minutes apart. We had shared everything: a childhood, a neighborhood, a set of parents who couldn't quite believe the two of us had arrived together.

That birthday, I sat with him and we talked about what we had built. Not careers. Not property. What we had actually built — the people who came to mind, the moments we'd be sorry to leave behind, the investments we had made in things that mattered.

After he died, I have thought about that conversation almost every day since.

The question isn't what you've accumulated. The question is what you've grown. Who's better because you showed up. What exists because you decided to build it.

That's the only ledger that matters when the birthday count gets high enough.

* * *

United by Laughter

New Orleans, 1974. A theater packed to standing room with a mixed-race audience that almost didn't exist yet — the formal machinery of segregation had barely been dismantled, the informal kind was still very much operating, and yet here was this room, full of people laughing at the same jokes at the same moment.

The movie was *Blazing Saddles*. Mel Brooks had made something that could have been controversial and instead became something communal. The laughter in that theater was the sound of a shared humanity that the official culture was still pretending didn't exist.

I have thought about that room many times in the years since. About what it means when people laugh together. About the particular democracy of shared joy — the way

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it makes hierarchies temporarily irrelevant, the way it insists on our common humanity when everything else is arguing for division.

Rotary runs on that. The table runs on that. The laughter is not incidental. It is the thing.

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Chapter Three

The Work

Rolling Up Sleeves

Four businessmen in Chicago in 1905 did not gather to solve world hunger or eliminate polio. They gathered to have lunch and do business, which in those days was done face to face, with handshakes, in rooms where you could see the person across the table. Out of that simple instinct — connection, trust, shared interest — came something that would eventually vaccinate billions of children.

The origin is important. Rotary was not founded as a charity or a way to volunteer. It was founded as a network. The service emerged from the network — not the other way around. Which is why the service works when top-down charity so often doesn't.

The Business of Giving

Paul Harris was a lawyer in Chicago. He was also lonely in the particular way young professionals are lonely in a new city — surrounded by people, known by none of them. His idea was simple: what if we rotated our lunch meetings? Your office. My office. His office. The rotation built the name and, more importantly, built the relationships.

The service came later. Once the men knew each other — really knew each other, trusted each other — they started asking: what else could we do with this? What could we build together that none of us could build alone?

That question is still the engine of every Rotary project ever undertaken. The network creates the capacity. The relationships make the commitment real. The work follows.

This is what separates Rotary from a fundraising organization. A fundraiser takes your money. Rotary asks for your life — your skills, your time, your network, your presence. The ask is higher. The return is proportionally greater.

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Handouts vs. Hand-Ups

The philosophy is simple. Relief is necessary but it is not development. Feeding someone today is urgent and right. Teaching someone to grow food — connecting them to markets, giving them tools, building infrastructure — changes the equation permanently.

Rotary's version of this philosophy shows up everywhere: in the KickStart MoneyMaker pumps that let African farmers irrigate crops without electricity; in the micro-enterprise grants that give women in developing countries the tools to start businesses; in the literacy programs that make the next generation's choices larger than this generation's.

The test of a good project is not how it looks on a donation receipt. The test is whether, ten years later, the people you helped still need you.

The best Rotary projects make themselves obsolete.

* * *

Thirty Years of Service Above Self

Late evening. A hillside clinic in the slums above Ensenada. A family carried a girl in — she had been in a car accident the day before, her jaw fractured and already infected. They had driven for hours on bad roads because they didn't have access to a hospital, because the clinic run by the visiting dentist from California was the only medical care within reach.

Dr. Chuck Tozzer looked at the jaw. Looked at his kit. Improvised a splint from dental impression material, the kind you use to take molds of teeth for crowns. Stabilized the fracture. Administered antibiotics from his travel supply. Told the family what to watch for.

She kept her teeth. She healed.

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Chuck has been running those clinics for over thirty years. Thirty-one thousand patients in ten countries. He has seen things that break you and things that restore you. He keeps going back.

When asked why, he says something simple: because when I'm there, I can help. When I'm not there, no one can.

That's the whole philosophy, compressed into fourteen words.

Years later, the same girl invited him to her wedding.

* * *

Building Hope: A Concrete Slab in Tecate

The lot was empty on Saturday morning. By Saturday evening, there was a house.

Not a finished house — a foundation, four walls, a roof. The family had been living in a structure made of reclaimed garage doors and scrap wood. By sunset they had concrete under their feet.

Forty-three Rotarians, one Corazón project manager, and eight hours. The family stood at the edge of the lot and watched. The children ran their hands along the walls. The mother touched the concrete like she wasn't sure it was real.

A house is not a solution to poverty. It is a platform for the next problem. But standing on solid ground — literally — changes what feels possible. It changes the question from survival to progress.

The family moved in that night.

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Big Goals Magic: The 900+

It started in 2006 with a question Mike Kerr asked over lunch: what if we helped ten families of Marines killed in Iraq and Afghanistan? Just gave the kids a day. Something to remember.

His wife said: why only ten?

That question — why only ten? — is the hinge on which a lot of Rotary history turns. It is the refusal to accept the smallness of the first instinct. It is the understanding that scale is a choice.

Three clubs soon became the Rotary district. The district became a coalition. Sponsors came in. Flights. Hotels. Three days in Southern California. Oakley donated gear. So did Quiksilver. The Crystal Cathedral provided space. Disneyland donated park access. UPS delivered the gifts at no charge.

More than nine hundred family members attended. Zero cost to the them. Every one of them had spent at least one holiday with an empty chair at the table.

Snowball Express was born that day. It started with one Rotarian who refused to think small.

That's the whole playbook.

It still continues to this day under the umbrella of the Gary Sinise Foundation.

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Chapter Four

Portraits

People Who Changed Everything

The movements that change things almost never start with a planned campaign. They start with one person who saw something they couldn't unsee. A woman in Oregon who visited Guatemala and couldn't stop thinking about the children's burns. A chance meeting on an airplane between two people who didn't know yet that they were going to redirect the course of a disease. A 60-year-old WNBA prospect who looked at statistics about female genital mutilation in Africa and decided that basketball could wait.

These are not exceptional people in the sense of being different from you. They are exceptional in the sense of being unable to look away.

A Housewife's Dream

Nancy Hughes was sixty years old. Her children were grown. Her husband had just died after a long fight with cancer. She had lived a good life by most measures — a stable marriage, a home in Oregon, a community she had served in the ordinary ways people serve their communities.

Then she went to Guatemala.

Open cooking fires. The smoke fills the room. The children are always in the room. The burns are everywhere — arms, faces, the particular patterns that come from falling into a fire that is also the only source of warmth and cooked food. She looked at the children and she could not stop looking.

She went home to Oregon and built StoveTeam International. Clean-burning stoves, simple and affordable, designed for the kitchens of people who cook over open fires because they have no other choice.

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More than half a million people now live in homes where the smoke doesn't fill the room. Where the children don't carry the marks of the fire.

A housewife from Oregon who decided, at sixty, that she wasn't done yet.

That is what an ordinary person with an extraordinary refusal to look away can build in a decade.

* * *

Answering the Call to Adventure

Adriana Lanting was not looking to change global health policy. She was on an airplane, and she got to talking with the person next to her, and the conversation went somewhere unexpected.

That conversation connected her to Rotary's malaria work at exactly the moment the Gates Foundation was looking for partners on the ground. What followed was not a straight line — it never is — but it was a line. A connection. An introduction that opened a door that led to funding that led to partnerships that led to hundreds of thousands of children receiving malaria prevention and treatment.

It started on an airplane, between two strangers, because one of them was paying attention.

This is the network in action. Not a strategy. Not a program. A conversation that went somewhere because the person having it was open to the possibility.

* * *

Usha Saboo Walks to the Podium

At the Rotary International Assembly, she started: 'Rotary found me unprepared.'

She did not mean organizationally unprepared. She meant that Rotary arrived in her life at a moment when she did not know what she was capable of — and Rotary's answer to that uncertainty was: let's find out.

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Usha Saboo rose through Rotary at a time when that path was not obvious or easy for women. She did not pretend otherwise. She talked about the moments of friction, the rooms where she was the only woman, the expectations she confounded and the doors she opened for the women who came after her.

Her speech was one of the most moving passages in the entire archive. Not because of its rhetoric — though the rhetoric was excellent — but because of its honesty. She did not perform triumph. She described process. The doubt, the decision, the showing up anyway.

> *Sharing in abundance is ordinary.*
> *Sharing when you have nothing is generosity.*
>
> *Immunizing our own kids is ordinary.*
> *Immunizing all the children of the world is Rotary.*
>
> *Traveling for pleasure is ordinary.*
> *Traveling on medical missions and giving vision, mobility, and life to others is Rotary.*
>
> *Making homes, toilets and providing fresh water for ourselves is ordinary.*
> *Making homes, toilets and digging water wells for deprived people is Rotary.*
>
> *Giving education to our own kids is ordinary.*
> *Building thousands of schools for poor children is Rotary.*
>
> *Donating blood for a loved one is very ordinary.*
> *Starting blood banks for the communities is Rotary.*
>
> *This transformation - our rising from Self to Service Above Self is the power and soul of Rotary.*

That is a more useful story than the triumph version. Because most of us live in the process.

* * *

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From Hoops to Hope

Lindsey Pluimer was drafted into the WNBA. She had worked for that moment for her entire athletic life — the training, the sacrifice, the particular narrow focus that elite competition requires.

She walked away from it.

The statistics about female genital mutilation and forced marriages in Africa — the scope of it, the age of the girls, the lifelong consequences — had been in her head for months. She could not reconcile the weight of those statistics with the weight of a basketball.

She went to Africa instead.

The work she has done since is quieter than a WNBA career. There are no highlight reels, no arena crowds, no statistics tracked on sports apps. There are girls in villages who grew up without experiencing what the statistics describe. That's a different kind of score.

The decision cost her something she had earned. She made it anyway.

Her organization, With My Own Two Hands, continues the mission.

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Chapter Five

The World Stage

Global Impact

On March 16, 1995, Rotary volunteers joined Indian health workers to attempt something that had never been tried: vaccinate every child under five in India in a single day. Eighty-seven million children. 1.2 million vaccination teams. A country the size of a continent.

They did it.

That sentence should require more processing time than it usually gets. Governments spend years failing to coordinate programs of this scale. International NGOs write white papers about the logistical impossibility. Rotary volunteers showed up, and in one day, they vaccinated eighty-seven million children.

India was declared polio-free in 2014.

What Commitment Looks Like

The polio story is the one that stops people. Not because it is the largest thing Rotary has done — though it may be — but because of what it reveals about the nature of commitment.

Rotary's involvement in polio eradication began in 1979 with one Philippine club. They vaccinated children in their community. Then they asked: what if we did this in other places? The question took thirty-five years to fully answer.

Governments change. Funding cycles end. International attention moves on to the next crisis. Rotary kept vaccinating children.

The Gates Foundation joined later, matching every Rotary dollar two-to-one at peak commitment. The foundation of one of the world's wealthiest men and the foundation of a global network of Rotary clubs, working toward the same end.

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What commitment looks like is thirty-five years of showing up. No headlines, no applause, just the steady accumulation of vaccinated children who will never know that the disease was once a certainty of childhood.

That's the work. That's what it looks like.

* * *

The Power of Local

The paradox of global impact is that it is almost always built from local action. The polio program began with one club. The malaria partnerships began with one conversation. The Kenya water wells began with one Rotary club that decided their community's problems didn't stop at the district line.

Governments work from the top down. Rotary works from the bottom up — 36,000 local clubs, each responding to local knowledge about local problems. The result is a kind of distributed intelligence that no central organization can replicate.

When a Rotary club in Southern California funds a water project in Kenya, the project works because it was designed by people who live there, who know which villages need water and which approaches work in that soil and that climate. The money travels from local to local, bypassing the bureaucratic middle.

This is why it works when so much else doesn't. Local knowledge is irreplaceable. Rotary has it everywhere.

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Chapter Six

The Warriors

Service That Begins in Combat

There is a particular kind of person who has seen the worst that human beings are capable of doing to each other and comes out the other side wanting peace more than almost anything. These are not idealists. They have no illusions about what war is or what it costs. They want peace precisely because they know what the alternative looks like.

Marines turn up in Rotary with a frequency that is not coincidental. The values are adjacent: Service Above Self, discipline, commitment to something larger than personal comfort. The transition from one uniform to another, so to speak, is shorter than it looks.

They Live On

Vietnam. The Marines and soldiers who came home carried the ones who didn't. Not metaphorically — the weight of specific men, specific names, specific faces. The particular grief of survival when others did not survive.

PTSD was not a diagnosis in 1968. It was not a diagnosis that mattered much in 1975. The men came home, and the country was, in various ways, embarrassed about where they had been, and the men dealt with what they carried largely alone.

They kept showing up. At Rotary tables. At fundraisers. At veteran support events. At the 11th Marines Ceremonial Garden, where the names are engraved because someone decided that not being forgotten is a promise worth keeping.

They live on — in the projects funded in their names, in the young people whose lives were changed by programs created to honor them, in the steady presence of their fellow Marines who refused to let the memory of what they sacrificed become quiet.

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Service Above Self is not a slogan for people who've carried brothers home. It is a description of what happened.

* * *

An Unlikely Hero

Joe George woke up in the brig on December 7, 1941. He had a court-martial scheduled for 9am. His Navy career was finished — not ended by the Japanese, but by his own record of insubordination, fights, the particular stubbornness of a man who didn't fit easily into institutional life.

At 7:55am, the bombs fell.

From his deck on the USS Vestal, moored alongside the Arizona, he could see six sailors stranded on the burning battleship. The Arizona was already dying — 1,177 men would die with her that morning. The six men were cut off. No one was moving toward them.

Joe George grabbed a rope and threw it.

Six men crossed hand-over-hand to safety. Six men who are alive in this story because a man in the brig decided that this moment was bigger than his record.

The court-martial was dropped. His career recovered. But the story is not about what happened to Joe George afterward. It's about what happens in a moment of crisis when a person decides to throw the rope instead of watching.

You don't have to be perfect to make a difference. You just have to throw the rope.

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The Warrior's Path to Peace

There is a beautiful paradox at the center of every Veterans Day ceremony: the people most committed to peace are almost always the people who have been to war. The rhetoric of peace is cheapest from people who have never seen its opposite.

Combat veterans carry the paradox openly. They train for violence and produce, with notable regularity, people who dedicate their post-service lives to building things: communities, organizations, programs for veterans, support systems for families.

The impulse is not complicated. They saw what the alternative looks like. They would prefer not to see it again. And in the meantime, while the world figures out how to avoid the next war, there are children who need food, and veterans who need support, and wells that need drilling in remote villages.

The warrior's path to peace runs through Rotary more often than the brochures mention. It's worth mentioning.

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Chapter Seven

The Idea

What Rotary Actually Believes

The 4-Way Test was written in 1932 by Herbert Taylor, a businessman trying to save a company during the Depression. Four questions about every decision: Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

The grammar is interesting. Not 'is it true?' but 'is it the truth?' The definite article raises the stakes. Not a version of the truth, not your truth — the truth.

The structure is also interesting. The first two questions deal with the present. The next two with the future.

It was adopted as Rotary's ethical cornerstone in 1943. It has not been updated since, which is either a testament to its precision or a statement about how slowly ethics evolve.

From Local Roots to Global Reach

Paul Harris died in 1947. By then, Rotary had clubs in seventy-five countries. He had started with lunch.

The origin story matters because it is so ordinary. Not a vision from a mountaintop. Not a manifesto. Four businessmen who liked each other and thought they could build something useful together. The idea spread because the idea worked — because the network delivered what it promised, because the service was real, because showing up at the table turned out to be something people needed.

Harris was not an idealist in the abstract sense. He was practical. He believed that if you could build genuine relationships — real trust, real knowledge of each other — you could build almost anything on top of that foundation.

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Seventy-five countries in forty years. Thirty-six thousand clubs today. Not bad for a lunch.

* * *

Service Connects Us

A professor in a comparative religions course once assigned students to find the single value that appeared in every major religious tradition. The students expected disagreement — the traditions are so different, the metaphysics so incompatible.

They found one thing. In every tradition, without exception: selflessness. The prioritization of others. The movement away from the closed fist of self-interest toward the open hand of service.

Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism. In every case, the ethical core is some version of: you are not the only person who matters.

Rotary did not discover this. Rotary institutionalized it — built a weekly reminder of it, a table where the ethic is practiced and tested against reality, a network of people who have signed up for the uncomfortable business of actually living by it.

'Service Above Self' is more than a marketing slogan. It is the oldest ethical discovery in human history, stated plainly.

* * *

No Monuments to Skeptics

The critics of Rotary are not wrong about everything. The organizational bureaucracy is real. The self-congratulation at conventions can be excessive. The gap between aspiration and execution is not always flattering.

But there are wells in Kenya and Mozambique that exist because a Rotary club in Southern California raised money for them. There are children in India who will never get polio because an organization started by four businessmen having lunch decided

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that a disease eradicable in principle could be eradicated in practice. There are veterans getting therapeutic equestrian treatment because a Rotary club funded the program.

The skeptics have not drilled the wells. The critics have not vaccinated the children. The cynics are not sitting with the veterans.

No monuments to skeptics. Build the thing, or step aside for the people who will.

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Chapter Eight

The Stories That Stay

History Through Rotary Eyes

History is not a list of dates and battles. It is a series of moments where someone had a choice, and the choice they made changed what came after. The problem with how history is usually taught is that it strips away the human moment — the fear, the calculation, the breath before the decision — and leaves only the outcome.

These posts use history differently. They stay close to the human moment. They ask not what happened but what it cost. Not who won but who showed up.

Jesse Owens and Luz Long

Berlin, 1936. Hitler had spent four years building these Olympics as a monument to Aryan supremacy — the architecture, the ceremony, the carefully managed imagery of German perfection. Jesse Owens walked into that stadium as a direct refutation of everything the games were supposed to prove.

What is less known is that he almost didn't make it to the finals.

Owens was fouling on his qualifying jumps in the long jump — overstepping the board, burning his attempts. One more foul and he was out. Luz Long was Germany's best hope for gold. He had everything to gain from Owens failing.

Long walked over to his competitor and told him where to place his takeoff mark. A simple adjustment — back a few inches, guarantee the jump, survive the qualifying round. Owens made the adjustment. He qualified.

In the finals, Owens won gold. Long finished second.

Long walked across the field and put his arm around Owens in full view of Adolf Hitler. The photograph exists. It is one of the most remarkable images in sports history.

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Long was killed on the Eastern Front in 1943. Before he died, he wrote Owens a letter asking him to find his son after the war and tell him about his father — that he was a man who believed there was something more important than winning.

Owens found the son. He told him.

The world changes when people reach across the line.

* * *

Gettysburg

Edward Everett spoke for two hours at the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery. He was the greatest orator of his age — a former Secretary of State, a Harvard president, a man who understood the weight of the occasion and rose to meet it with all the rhetorical apparatus of his era.

Abraham Lincoln spoke for two minutes.

Everett's speech is not remembered. Lincoln's is among the most quoted passages in the English language.

The lesson is not that brevity is always better. The lesson is that precision — the exact word, the essential idea, the refusal to pad what is already complete — outlasts everything else. The Gettysburg Address is 271 words. It contains the entire argument for what the war was about and what the country was supposed to be.

Everett wrote to Lincoln afterward and said: 'I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes.'

Lincoln's reply was gracious. He understood that the high compliment was accurate.

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Losing Camelot

I was seventeen years old in high school when the news came through.

The teacher stopped mid-sentence. She turned from the board. Her face had changed in a way that seventeen-year-olds understand means something real has happened — not a school thing, not a rules thing, but a world thing.

John F. Kennedy had been shot. By the time school let out, he was dead.

The grief was specific and strange. He had been in office for less than three years. We didn't know yet what his presidency would have become, what he would have built, what history would judge him. We knew what he had made us feel — that the country was capable of something elegant, that the White House could contain wit, humor and grace and a vision worth believing in.

The feeling when he died was not just grief. It was the first major political loss of my generation — the discovery that the people who carry your hopes are mortal, that the elegance can end without warning on a Thursday afternoon in Dallas.

I have never stopped missing what might have been.

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Chapter Nine

The Journey

Personal Memoir

The most honest parts of any archive are the first-person posts — the ones where the writer stops reporting on the world and starts reporting on himself. What I noticed. What I learned. What it cost. What it changed.

This chapter collects those. Not as confessions. As evidence. Evidence of a life lived at the intersection of service and attention — the attempt to see clearly, to engage honestly, to leave things better than you found them.

Happy Mother's Day

The lineage of women in my family goes back to the 1680s in Scotland. I have their names. I have, in some cases, their stories.

The one I keep coming back to is the woman who ate six oranges at the San Gabriel Mission in 1872. She had come west alone — three years after the Transcontinental Railroad opened, at a time when a woman traveling alone was a statement in itself. She was the granddaughter of the chaplain of the Continental Congress. She founded homes for unwed mothers and elderly widows in Detroit. She viewed service not as generosity but as obligation — the thing a decent person does because the need exists and she is present.

The oranges are a detail from her journal. She mentioned them because they were extraordinary — a luxury she had never tasted because they were fresh, offered to her by the mission fathers. She ate all six.

I think about her when I need to remember where I come from. The women in this family have always known what they were for. The oranges were just a detail.

* * *

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Lessons in Courage

Seventh grade. A bully in the parking lot of St. Joseph's Church after a school event. The particular arithmetic of adolescent social dynamics — how many people are watching, what it costs to step in, what it costs not to.

I did not step in. I was twelve, and the calculation that twelve-year-olds make in those moments is based on information they have never been given: what does it actually feel like to get hit? What happens to the person who stands up first?

What I had instead of that knowledge was the movies. Specifically, the movies of the 1950s and 1960s — the Western heroes, the war films, the stories where the protagonist steps in front of the threat because someone has to and the protagonist is the protagonist.

The movies taught my generation what courage was supposed to look like. The gap between that image and the parking lot reality was instructive. Courage, I eventually learned, is not the absence of fear. It is the decision to act in spite of it. And it almost never looks like Gary Cooper.

It usually looks like someone doing an awkward, imperfect thing in a moment that doesn't feel heroic at all.

* * *

Eye-Opening Travel

Nearly twenty countries. The rule I made early: take the child.

My son was seven the first time I brought him to a Mexican orphanage. He had no context for what he was seeing — children his age without parents, without the particular securities that a seven-year-old takes for granted. He was quiet for most of the visit. On the drive back, he asked me: 'Where do they go when they grow up?'

I did not have a complete answer. I told him what I knew: some are adopted, some age out, some build their own lives, some struggle. He was quiet for a while longer.

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Then he said: 'We should come back.'

We did. Many times. The travel teaches what no classroom can — that your circumstances are not the default, that the world is larger and more varied and more demanding than the suburb you grew up in, and that the appropriate response to that discovery is not guilt but action.

He understood that by eight. The orphanage taught him. The travel was just the vehicle.

Aviate, Navigate, Communicate

I learned to fly in the late 1960s, starting in a Cessna 150 at a small Southern California strip. That little two-seater taught me the fundamentals: straight-and-level, climbs, descents, turns — drilled until my hands and feet moved on instinct. From there I earned my private pilot certificate, built hours, upgraded to bigger airplanes, and eventually added a full instrument rating. The gauges, vacuum systems, and manual everything of that era are long gone for most pilots. But the core lessons — especially the brutal, humbling ones and the confidence-building triumphs — remain identical today.

My instructor, who later went on to fly with Air America in Southeast Asia, would pull the power at 3,000 feet and say, "Hold it." Within seconds I'd be chasing the horizon, feet forgetting the rudder, nose dropping into a sloppy descending turn. He'd let it develop just long enough for the stall horn to blare before taking the controls. "The airplane doesn't care if you're scared," he'd say. "It only knows physics."

That repeated embarrassment burned the four basics into muscle memory. You can't skip to cross-countries or instrument approaches until straight-and-level is automatic under the hood.

Solo followed — three touch-and-goes, heart hammering. The line guy yelled across the ramp afterward: "You looked like a drunk duck on final!" Brutal, immediate feedback. The next flight was smoother. It's always the way. Ego bruises heal. Bad habits don't.

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The Humbling One

Hundreds of hours later, well past my private and instrument ratings, I was flying a Beechcraft Debonair — a sleek, retractable-gear Bonanza variant. Routine IFR cross-country. I descended early, dropped the gear to slow down as procedure dictated, then raised it again because I still had miles to burn. Approach felt normal: carb heat, mixture, flaps, power as needed. On short final the stall horn began to bleat. I thought, good, right on speed, and concentrated on the flare.

Then the prop struck pavement with a horrifying metallic crunch. Sparks sprayed. The airplane slid down the runway on its prop, flaps and rear tiedown. I had forgotten to re-lower the gear.

The gear-up warning horn had been sounding steadily, but it had merged in my mind with the familiar stall horn I'd heard countless times just before touchdown. I shut everything down, climbed out shaking, and stared at the scraped underside and bent prop. The airplane was grounded for months.

The FAA examiner who reviewed the incident didn't yell. He simply said, "There are people who have landed with the wheels up. The rest probably will."

That line stung worse than the repair bill. I went back to basics — re-studied every annunciator, every checklist, every warning system — until I could recite them blindfolded. The mistake cost pride and money. What it bought was hard-earned vigilance and a lesson I've applied to every complex system I've encountered since: the warnings are there. You have to actually listen for them.

The Confidence Builder

Many years later, flying a Cessna Turbo 210 near Portland, I was in solid instrument conditions — actual IMC, single-engine, no second chance. Without warning the engine exploded internally: catastrophic failure, oil pressure to zero, RPM to nothing, prop windmilling. Silence except for wind noise and my own pulse.

Dead-stick glide in clouds. Options collapse quickly.

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I declared an emergency. ATC responded instantly — calm vectors, precise headings, step-by-step descent guidance to the nearest suitable strip within gliding range. I flew partial panel: airspeed, altimeter, turn coordinator, timed turns on the whiskey compass. The ingrained knowledge took over. Best glide speed. Glide ratio. Drag items to minimize. How to configure for a powerless approach.

I broke out at low altitude, aligned with the runway, flared, and touched down smoothly. No damage to the airframe beyond what the engine had already done. And I remembered to lower the gear.

The powerplant required a full rebuild. I walked away unscathed.

What made the difference that day wasn't nerve. It was preparation so deep it had become automatic. ATC gave me the vectors. My own systems knowledge let me execute. There's a difference between those two things, and it matters enormously when the engine quits and the clouds are around you and there is no one else in the airplane.

What the Cockpit Teaches

Pilots who came up in the 1960s tend to carry a particular orientation into everything that comes after. They anticipate breakdowns before they happen. They prioritize ruthlessly — aviate, navigate, communicate, in that order, because a distracted pilot with a great radio call is still a distracted pilot. They trust data over gut feeling when gut feeling is all they want to trust. And they stay calm when visibility drops to zero, because calm is not a personality trait in the cockpit — it is a practiced skill, built over hundreds of hours of discomfort, and it transfers.

The gear-up landing taught me that a warning system you ignore is the same as no warning system at all. The dead-stick landing taught me that the preparation you do on a clear day in calm air is the preparation you will use on the worst day of your life. The drunk-duck comment from the line guy taught me that honest feedback from someone who watched you land is worth more than ten hours of self-assessment.

These are not flying lessons. They never were.

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Each aircraft had its quirks. The lessons are timeless. You start uncomfortable. You embrace the debriefs. You master the interconnected whole until the parts are invisible and only the flying remains.

One day the clouds part.

You're not just flying anymore.

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Chapter Ten

The Legacy

What We Leave Behind

The question every Rotarian eventually asks — often in the middle of a long meeting, often on a quiet Tuesday when the inbox is full and the energy is low — is: what does this add up to? What is the point of the projects, the fundraisers, the Rotary meals, the newsletters, the careful work of building and maintaining an organization that is always harder to run than it looks?

The answer is not on the treasurer's report. It is in the people.

What's Our Legacy?

Bob died on a Tuesday. At his celebration of life, they showed a video that his former colleagues and associates had made. Person after person, talking about the same man from different angles.

None of them mentioned his title. None of them mentioned the company. They talked about a phone call he made when they needed it. A check that arrived without announcement. The way he showed up to things — not just the important things, but the things where the main value of his presence was simply that he was there.

Legacy is the accumulated memory of the people whose lives intersected with yours. Not the highlight reel. The ordinary moments where you chose to show up instead of staying home, to give instead of keeping, to invest in someone instead of spending the time on yourself.

Bob invested. The video was the compound interest.

* * *

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RYLA Magic

Paola Ruiz was just 14 when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Being the oldest child, she took over the cooking, cleaning, paying the bills and taking care of her younger sister and brother before tackling her homework each evening.

Her mom was insistent that Paola remain in school; telling her that education was the key to her future.

Early in her junior year at Paramount High School, Paola was selected by her Interact Club to attend RYLA. She and her mother were both excited about the opportunity.

Three days before the start of RYLA, Paola's mother died. Paola felt she should stay home. And some of her relatives thought it was wrong that she was leaving to "have fun." But her father explained to them that Paola going to RYLA was his wife's final wish.

The first day at RYLA was really tough and Paola didn't participate much. Her "RYLA Mom," Rotarian Melody Saint John, asked her what was wrong so she shared about her mother's death.

Melody encouraged her to share her story with her RYLA family. She did and the other RYLA students gave her overwhelming support and lots of hugs.

When RYLA was over, Melody handed her an envelope. The Rotarians at RYLA had passed the hat and collected money to help pay for her mother's funeral.

The following year, Paola fulfilled her mother's wish by becoming the first person in her family to graduate from high school. Out of a graduating class of 2,000, she was the Valedictorian. She had also won a Gates Millennium Scholarship to attend college.

Rotary continued to be at her side all through college, helping with things not covered by her scholarship. Like a laptop. And a warm coat.

During her breaks at college she honored her mother by volunteering as a counselor at Camp Kesem, a student-run camp for kids of parents with cancer. A camp much like RYLA.

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Paola graduated from college in 2016, again with honors and better than a 4.0 GPA.

From MIT.

She moved back to her family home in Paramount, Once again helping care for her family. You see, her father had developed stage 4 cancer.

Paola went back to college in 2019 after her father passed away. This time to USC, where she received her Masters degree.

Paola is just one story. There are hundreds more stories about the kids RYLA and Rotary has either helped or saved.

* * *

The Price of Standing Still

A father built something from nothing. He started without capital, without connections, without any of the permissions that current regulations would have required before the first brick was laid. He built anyway, because no one had yet told him he couldn't.

Later, when the regulations had caught up to the industry he'd helped create, he sat in a room with people who were asking about the regulatory burden, and he said: 'If these regulations had existed when we started, I never would have begun.'

The moment is worth sitting with. Not because regulations are wrong — some are necessary and right. But because the impulse to protect what exists can become an impulse to prevent what might exist. The price of standing still is not just stagnation. It is all the things that didn't get built.

Rotary's challenge — the one the founder worried about, the one every generation has to solve — is how to preserve the soul of the organization without calcifying into the procedures. How to keep the boots on and the dress shoes in the closet.

* * *

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Rotary's Challenge: Preserving Our Soul

The warning to future Rotarians is not complicated. Organizations die from the inside. They stop doing the thing that made them vital and start doing the thing that makes them comfortable. They mistake the meeting for the mission, the format for the function, the history for the purpose.

The soul of Rotary is not the 4-Way Test, though the test is good. It is not Paul Harris's story, though the story is worth knowing. It is the boots-on-the-ground, show-up-when-needed, refuse-to-look-away instinct that every person in this book acted on.

That instinct can be taught. It can be modeled. It can be celebrated and rewarded and told as stories until the stories become the culture of the organization.

But it can also be lost. Lost to comfort, to bureaucracy, to the slow replacement of action with administration.

The warning is simple: keep the boots on. The meetings are the means. The work is the point.

Why we show up is not because it looks good on a schedule. We show up because there are problems worth solving and we have hands.

That has always been enough.

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Acknowledgments

This book came from more than 300 posts written over years of service, observation, and the particular kind of attention that Rotary membership demands. Every story in it belongs to someone — to the people who lived it, to the clubs that made it possible, to the communities that were changed by it.

The writing is mine. The material belongs to everyone who showed up.

To the San Juan Capistrano Rotary Club: this is what you have built. Not just the projects and the fundraisers. This. The record of a group of people who decided that service is not optional and continue to show up, week after week, year after year.

To the Rotarians whose stories appear here — by name and unnamed — thank you for being the evidence.

To the reader who found this book without knowing what Rotary was: now you know. The door is open.

— San Juan Capistrano, California

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