

Inaugural Speech of Albert S. Frank
July 5, 2007
As President of the Rotary Club of Toronto – Forest Hill



When I was a boy my mother did something unusual: she went back to school.

At first she enhanced her high school because she had taken her high school over in Quebec and she was then in a different province. So she enhanced her high school and then she went on ultimately to get two university degrees.

She used to tell me some of the things she was studying. I believe it was while she was studying anthropology that she told me about a superstition that some peoples had called the "lump of wealth".

The idea of the lump of wealth is that there's just so much good stuff available and if one person gets more, somebody else gets less. So if one person gets more money somebody else gets less money. One person gets health care, somebody else gets sicker. Whatever – just so much good stuff in the world, that's available.

Well contrasting with that, what my mother called a "primitive idea", we then have the Rotarian. If you look at our Rotarian magazine you will see example after example of how we are making the world better, how we are improving people's lives. In so many different ways: when it comes to water supplies, education, immunization, health, one project after another improving people's lives.

The question though is, well, "is Rotary International lying to us in that magazine?" Can it be that that even if the individual projects are as good as they say that somehow somewhere else there's a compensating disadvantage?

For example, in our own club we have helped fund school breakfasts for children so that children from poorer or less-organized households can have a good breakfast at school and are then well-prepared, physically well-prepared, to concentrate on their studies, to focus, to learn. As a result of that it's quite possible that some of these people's lives will be

significantly improved – that they will do better in their studies and therefore do better in life. Well does this just mean that the people we've helped will then be taking the jobs from the people who would have had them otherwise?

That's what the lump of wealth would say. It would say that all you can really do is redistribute the misery of the world and that all of our efforts then are just helping some people at the expense of others.

It's not just primitive peoples who have had that idea. A relatively sophisticated gentleman named Reverend Malthus in Britain a couple of centuries ago came up with a pretty similar idea. He gave it a scientific analysis as to how this could be. His thought was that the amount of food available, that could be produced and obtained for people could increase arithmetically. So by a process of arithmetic you can add another field and then add another field, increase your planting, that kind of thing. So there is a very limited degree to which you can improve the food production.

Then on the other hand he said, "well, people can reproduce, and do reproduce, geometrically." You have two people who have five children and then each of those children has many children and very quickly what would happen is that you outstrip the food supply. The number of people increasing faster than the increase of food that can be come up with. And the same could apply to other resources like water supplies, medical supplies, any kind of resources you can imagine.

He said that result of this is that whenever you improve something – particularly he was thinking of food production – whenever you improve the food production all that happens is people who were maybe on the border of starvation get a bit more food, produce more children, more of their children have more food and are able to survive to adulthood to then produce more children, and quickly all the additional production is eaten up and you get a whole mass of miserable people on the verge of starvation again. Their numbers are being limited then by forces like starvation, disease, war, and all these things have to happen until the population is controlled and knocked down.

A pretty gloomy outlook on life, but one that seemed logical. And in fact if you look historically you see per capita prosperity, however you measure it, whether in terms of food or whatever, has been pretty much constant for most of human history. Per capita, averaged out per person, people don't get that much richer. That's how things were up to about the time of Malthus. Then what happened?

Right around the time Malthus made his predictions everything changed. We had the industrial revolution; we had tremendous changes rippling around the world which have continued to the present day. What's happening is per capita prosperity has soared. So unfortunate for Malthus, right around the time he figured it all out he was proven wrong, but pretty fortunate for humanity.

On the other hand this lump of wealth idea keeps coming back. In the early 1970s a crowd called the "Club of Rome" came up with something they called the "Limits to Growth" report, in which they figured out that unless we changed our ways by pretty much calling a halt to all human progress, turned back the clock, de-industrialized, that sort of thing, unless we did some of these radical sorts of things they said civilization is going to collapse, we'll have terrible terrible misery.

They did **computer models**. So it must be true, right, because they did computer models. They demonstrated with these computer models that all these things would indeed happen. That you can't keep increasing the population because you can't feed them and if you take frantic efforts to continue to feed them then you'll erode the land or you'll have greater pollution and so on.

I didn't read their report so I don't have the full details but they said no matter which way you approach it, something's gonna getcha. Their main prediction I gather was mass famine. If pollution doesn't get us first, mass famine within 100 years. One man of similar worldview called for the mass famine to happen sometime in the 1980s.

It didn't happen. If there was any mass famine in the 1980s it certainly escaped my attention. In fact in a recent Rotarian magazine I saw they said that desperate poverty around the world, the absolute most basic most grinding "how are we gonna eat?" level of poverty has actually continued to decrease since then. It's the best ever, recently. Even places that have chronic problems, like India and China in particular, have improved significantly in the last 10, 20 years.

So the Club of Rome was wrong also.

We could have a big analysis of why they're wrong or how they're wrong, how they and everyone else who keeps coming up with the idea of the lump of wealth, is wrong, but the important thing for us as Rotarians is to realize that it is wrong. For the moment forget about why, the important thing is that it

is wrong.

As human beings we are not limited to redistributing misery. We are not limited to taking from one person to give to someone else and the net prosperity of life stays as bad. On the contrary, the things we do and the things that other people are doing improving life around the world and there's no reason to think that's going to stop.

We can, and therefore we must, improve human life.

In the 18th century there was a famous rabbi and mystic known as the Maggid of Koznitz. A rich man once came to him asking for a blessing. "What are you in the habit of eating?" asked the Maggid. The man replied, "I am modest in my demands. Bread and salt, a drink of water, I need no more."

"What are you thinking of?" said the Maggid. "You must eat roast meat and drink mead, like all the rich people." And the rabbi did not let the rich man leave until he had promised to change his ways. Later the Maggid explained to his puzzled followers, "Not until he eats meat will he realize that the poor need their bread. As long as he himself only eats bread he will think the poor can live on stones."

Fellow Rotarians and guests, who is the rich man? We are. We, here today, are the rich man. Although all of us no doubt know some people who are doing better or at least have heard of people who are doing better, by international standards and by Canadian standards we're all doing pretty well. We may not think of ourselves as rich but compared to so many others, we are.

So here we sit eating a very pleasant lunch in very pleasant company. All the clean water we want to drink, good food, good fellowship, and we enjoy this and so we should. We should enjoy this. But as Rotarians and friends of Rotarians, we remember the poor of our country and of the world and the fact that they need to eat too. Our role is to help them. To help them through our many projects.

Where they are threatened by polio, to immunize them. Where they are threatened by blindness and other diseases through lack of vitamin A, to get them that vitamin A.

If they are short of clean water to the point where they can get diseased or not be able to grow crops because they don't have it, or as we have heard before where the girls can't go to school because they're spending all of their days looking for and

hauling water... In those situations, internationally Rotary's many water projects are helping to improve their lives.

People who are orphaned by AIDS, Rotary is also reaching out to help them. Rotary is even sponsoring scholarships to help people study the issues of war and peace in hopes of bringing more peace to the world.

And locally the children of Regent Park now have a playground. Where did it come from? It didn't sprout like a mushroom – it's there because we paid for it. We Rotarians of this club.

When people go to one of the local churches, the homeless, for a lunch, who is helping to pay for it? – we are.

In these and so many other things we are doing we're not just redistributing the misery. We're making lives better and making a difference.

In this Rotary year that's now beginning what specifically should we be doing to keep up this good work? One thought I've had is I distributed a list called "Rotary Tasks" with some preliminary ideas of things we might do to keep our club effective, thriving, growing and contributing. I welcome your thoughts about how this list can be improved.

Another thought I've had is in our computer system that distributes the Bulletin to us there is a system that allows us to assign tasks to people. So when they get their Bulletin they also get a reminder of things that they should be doing. My thought is that every Rotarian should have a task.

We currently have about 30 active club members and I think that everybody should have something to do. Now some people are able to do more, some are able to do less. Different people have different interests and different kinds of expertise. But everyone should be doing something.

If you're not seeing a task coming up when you get the Bulletin emailed from Rotary, talk to someone on the executive and we'll figure out what you can be doing to help the work of Rotary.

In this year, as I have mentioned before, my focus is on membership. Membership is a serious issue. We struggle with it in this club. Various of our presidents for the last number of years have worked hard to keep our membership up. The fact that we're struggling with membership is not because we've done anything wrong. We haven't done anything wrong – we've done a lot of things very right. The problem is international

trends that have hurt service clubs generally and made it harder for people to put in the effort, the time, the commitment to these organizations.

It's something that faces Rotary internationally and other service clubs as well.

So what can we do about membership? My thought is we should keep up the things that our prior presidents have thought of, and add to it. What I can bring to the table to add to it is the question of publicity. We have not particularly had a publicity program in the past. I think it's a promising area for us to promote Rotary generally and our club in particular. To let people know what we're doing, and then the people who really want a higher level of commitment to helping their fellow human beings might well then be inspired to come join our club, or if they're in no position to do that maybe they'll be inspired to help our efforts in other ways.

I spoke not long ago with one of our former speakers here at the club, Mr. Brambilla, who is the head of the Hummingbird Centre. I spoke with him about the question of publicity and promotion. What he said is that we're going to have to have a campaign, a serious campaign going for about a year before we'll get real traction.

So let's give it a serious effort. Let's start putting out press releases. Let's start trying to get interviews. Let's start spreading the word about what we do. And see, after a year, are we getting some results? And if so, what have we done that's better and what should we keep doing?

As a trial lawyer and a former high school debater and public speaker and a former vice-president of a Toastmaster's Club, all these things, I'm very comfortable making speeches. My thought is that is something I can be doing.

I am particularly inspired by the question of polio. Polio strikes me as such a horror. A healthy, happy child can be playing one day and then can be paralyzed or dead very soon thereafter. The work that Rotary has been doing internationally has been so tremendous, so inspiring, so successful, that I think that this is something I could speak to other groups about to inspire them to contribute to that particular cause and to get them enthusiastic about us, our club, what we do.

I am calling on my fellow members and any of their friends for ideas and leads as to where I can speak. Because I can't combine everything else I have to do in life with also being a

one-man speakers' bureau lining up my own speaking engagements. I will go out there and speak to any reasonable-size group about Rotary as long as I can cram it into my calendar somewhere somehow, but I can't also be the guy lining up the speaking engagements. For that as many of our club members as possible have got to get into the act, spreading the word of my availability and helping to line up speaking engagements.

Often when we become aware of some way that people are suffering we'll say "well somebody ought to do something about that." Somebody, somebody ought to do something about that. Well how about us? We're somebodies. We're not just anybody – we're Rotarians. We're Rotarians.

We are the people who are particularly dedicated to helping our fellow human beings in so many ways. We have skills, talents, energy. We have an organization over 100 years old and the prestige and expertise that comes with that. We have 1.2 million members internationally.

So as Rotarians what are we going to be doing during this next year? Many people lead lives that are miserable, that are nightmares, they live in nightmares. They're thirsty, they're hungry, they're diseased, they're afraid. Even in our own country, in our own city, there are people who are hungry and people who are ignorant, who aren't properly educated... There are so many needs and problems.

We're going to wake some of those people out of the nightmare and bring them to lives that are good lives. Contribute to that anyway.

The money and effort that we put in during this year, I don't know how big it's going to be this year: whether it's going to be an average year, a below average year, a better-than-average year. I don't know. But one thing I know is this: the things that we do will improve people's lives, the things that we do are going to be saving some people's lives.

We may not know the names of the particular people who don't die of polio or malaria or whatever during this next year because we contributed to immunization efforts. We don't know whose life is going to be saved. We don't even know exactly how many lives are going to be saved.

But we do know that this year, because of what we do, we will be saving lives. People will live who would otherwise die. People will have water who would otherwise be thirsty. People will have

health and education who would otherwise not.

Fellow Rotarians and guests, please help me and help each other this year to improve and save lives, through Rotary, and once again raise your glasses, and again we will toast, "To Rotary."

#

Albert S. Frank is a business trial lawyer (commercial litigator). After over a decade on Bay Street he has relocated and is now at 45 St. Clair Ave. West, Suite 101, Toronto, M4V 1K9.

Phone: (416) 929-7202 E-mail: afrank@FrankLaw.ca

Web: <http://www.FrankLaw.ca>

Copyright © Albert S. Frank