

Interreligious Morning Meditation, Sunday, Sept. 5th, EEMA-Conference 2010
Switzerland. Speaker: EEMA PP Werner H. Keller, Heidelberg, Germany.

“YOUTH EXCHANGE – WITH HEART AND RESPONSIBILITY. “

Good morning, dear friends, ladies, gentlemen and distinguished guests,

Thank you very much for taking the sacrifice upon you to get up so early this morning to join us in our pleasure celebrating this interfaith morning meditation with prayer and music so excellently performed by our young people Antje and Moritz.

Almost 100 years ago the Austrian poet Peter Rosegger (1843-1918) wrote a poem with some fine ideas and wishes for the New Year. I would like to quote two verses from it as wishes for a good morning and for a blessed and successful new year both in the service of Rotary Youth Exchange (RYE) and your personal life. So it sounds:

*“A bit more of peace and a bit less debate,
a bit more of kindness and a bit less of hate,
a bit more of love and forget jealousy,
and more of the truth – now that sets us free!*

*Not so much of strike but of peace to pursue,
not so much of I but a bit more of You,
not fear nor despondence but more enterprise
and strength to take action – now that would be wise!”*

These wishes, my dear friends, are coming from the source of a wise and confident heart and are deeply corresponding to the motto of our EEMA Conference this year “YOUTH EXCHANGE – WITH HEART AND RESPONSIBILITY.“

Certainly this theme is a wise message to all people, friends and families who are involved in RYE-Programs.

Looking back to my own more than 30 years of engagement in RYE-service and programs on club , district and international levels – I attended my first EEMA Conference in 1974 in Amsterdam - I am convinced that this service is one of the finest and most brilliant stones in the crown of RYE. In fact , I even dare say that RYE programs are certainly contributing on a high level to the good image of Rotary International and to a successful process in different worldwide activities that -within the aims of RI President Ray - are building bridges and promoting a responsible and a heartily engaged vision of a global peace, of goodwill, understanding and spiritual and educational efforts in a process of reconciliation and tolerance. It is true, what the admirable and honored Nelson Mandela, prophet like, proclaimed: “After climbing a great hill, one only find that there are many more hills to climb.”

There is, today , an extraordinary disconnect between the education we offer our young people and what they really need in order to cope with an increasingly violent, materialistic and selfish world despite the recent “rediscovery” of our societies crisis in ethical and spiritual values. Few voices can be heard questioning whether the education we provide our children and young generation offers them the knowledge, attitudes, and understanding that might really enable them to deal with the toxic values that increasingly distort their lives. It is no wonder that in this increasingly privatized world young people -and not only those - feel alienated and disconnected from social and political events and issues. If that is real, to me it circumscribes an irresponsible reduction to the fleeting images of the electronic screen and world.

In my opinion RYE does share – with heart and responsibility – an impact of a necessary spiritual and educational basis within all the different cultures and religions. We have to learn how to share this spirituality of our hearts in expressing love, understanding and tolerance through the work and engagement of our actions and minds.

RI. PP Wilkinson from Canada has expressed this idea a few years ago – I quoted his word already last year in Reykjavík, Iceland.

“As Rotarians, we demonstrate that love, and we share that love by helping each other on our way to become one big family without bloodshed, aware of living in a globalised yet also highly fragmented world.”

Dear friends, besides the fact that we have to be both, very appropriate and skillful organizers and friendly open hearted hosts in YE. We also have to be aware of our responsibility of reflecting the educational and spiritual basis, aims and message of all our service and work to do.

Let me tell you a very personal impression: In fact, one of the most beautiful experiences in the business of a RYE-Officer is to receive and to read – not only put them into the files – the final reports of our exchange students.

I think we should ask for these reports – according to certain specific questions. - It is marvelous to learn about their wonderful experiences: how they enjoyed the challenge of getting to know new friends - some of them will be lifelong ones. How they gratefully experienced the hearty and generous hospitality, how they were getting to know different languages and school systems, behavior and cultures, sometimes with a feeling of having gone through a cultural shock, especially at the beginning; in fact, a lot of very mature and intelligent insights. I am convinced that a great majority of the nearly 8000 exchange partners every year would have had and will have such experiences.

On the other hand I often missed remarks to the following questions:

1. What did you learn about social engagement, about tolerance, about humanity, about the dialogue with different cultures, religions and peoples?
2. How did Rotary help you in the process of learning in these issues, help you to find a way to your own personal identity and responsibility?

I am afraid to confess that I did not find very many of these issues in the reports at all. We have, dear friends, to be aware of the fact that these issues also belong to our responsible educational task and impact in doing youth service and exchange. Maybe RYLA seminars connected with our exchange programs might be a useful instrument to do so as our friends in Israel and Taiwan are using it sometimes as far as I know, or in cultural meetings and workshops we heard of yesterday so impressively yesterday within the Swiss Rotex services.

In conclusion: we have to learn and to practise that the human family of this planet cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals will be changed. We have to pledge to work for the transformation of our individual and collective consciousness and political awareness and responsibility but also and mainly of our spiritual powers through reflections, meditation, and positive attitude towards a conversion of the hearts.

In the Bible the Prophet Ezekiel has sent a message to his people: “God wants to change our hearts of stone into hearts of love.” Let him by his grace do so!

Hearts of love require sacrifice, patience, persistence and a faithful devotion. Hearts of love are responding to the love of God. Not to forget “with heart and responsibility” also means pleasure, celebrations and joy. A culture of loving responsibility is a culture in which we find ways of tolerance to give each other permission and assistance to temporarily leave an atmosphere of goal directed behavior so that we can instead immerse ourselves – as we do in this EEMA meeting – in the pleasure of enjoying friendship and the celebration of gratitude for God’s eternal love, merciful grace and peace.

Thank you very much, dear friends, for the privilege to share with you some of the ideas which I was reflecting upon the motto of this conference.

It is true that what we know best we “know by heart”.

It is true when we remember something seriously we “take it to heart”.

It is true that when we speak with passion and honesty we speak “from the bottom of our hearts”.

When we are discouraged we “lose heart”.

Conversely, when we have gained courage we also have “found our hearts”.

When we are filled with joy, we “feel it in our hearts”.

Dear friends, this very kind of truth we may “take it to heart” when we reflect upon question NUMBER ONE in the Rotary Four Ways Test: Is it true.

Today I remember a few lines from a song of Joan Baez - worldwide moving the hearts of so many people. I want to end my meditation with these lines of her song to encourage you in your work, to comfort you in your life, to strengthen you in your heart and mind and to bless you today on your way back home.

“There’s a fire that’s a burning heart. Deep in my heart there’s desire for a start.”

So let us start stand up for a prayer with words from the Franciscan tradition which I discovered again in the PRAYER BOOK FOR AFRICA, collected by the wonderful Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whom I gratefully met a few years ago in the garden of the South African Embassy in Berlin.

***Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.***

***O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.***

Thank you. Have a blessed day and a healthy and blessed returning home.