



K.R. "Ravi" Ravindran, RI President 2015/16

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One sunny morning at the end of June 1991, a van drove through the busy, rush-hour streets of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Winding through traffic to a northern suburb, the van arrived at the Forward Command Headquarters of the Defense Ministry. Security guards stopped it for inspection. When they did, the two suicide bombers driving the van detonated their cargo: thousands of kilograms of plastic explosives.

The roof of the building was blown off completely. Debris was strewn for blocks. In total, 21 people were killed and 175 people injured, among them many pupils of the girls' school next door. More than a kilometer away, the blast shattered every window in my home. My wife raced toward the sound of the explosion – toward our daughter's school.

Our daughter was then nine years old. That morning, she had forgotten her pencil case at home. At the moment of the blast, she was coming out of a stationer's shop, admiring her new pencils. Suddenly her ears were ringing, the air was filled with sand, and everywhere around her people were screaming, bleeding, and running. Someone pulled her into the garden of the badly damaged school, where she waited until my wife arrived to bring her back to our home – its floors still covered with broken glass.

Sri Lanka today is peaceful and thriving, visited by some two million tourists every year. Our war now is only a memory, and we as a nation look forward to a promising future. Yet so many other nations cannot say the same. Today, more of the world's countries are involved in conflict than not; a record 59.5 million people worldwide live displaced by wars and violence.

In Rotary we believe, in spite of all that, in the possibility of peace – not out of idealism, but out of experience. We have seen that even the most intractable conflicts can be resolved when people have more to lose by fighting than by working together. We have seen what can happen when we approach peace-building in ways that are truly radical, such as the work of our Rotary Peace Fellows. Through our Rotary Foundation, peace fellows become experts in preventing and resolving conflict. Our goal is that they will find new ways not only to end wars but to stop them before they begin.

Among the hundreds of peace fellows who have graduated from the program, two from Sri Lanka, one from each side of the conflict, studied together. In the first weeks of the course, both argued passionately for the rightness of their side. Yet week by week, they grew to understand each other's perspective; today, they are good friends. When I met them and heard their story, they gave me hope. If 25 years of pain and bitterness could be overcome by Rotary, then what, indeed, is beyond us?

We cannot fight violence with violence. But when we fight it with education, with understanding, and with peace, we can truly *Be a Gift to the World*.