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Some years ago, I was asked to speak at an Interact club in my home city of Colombo, Sri Lanka. I have always taken my interactions with Rotary youth very seriously, so I prepared my remarks carefully and put the same effort into my presentation that I would for any other event. After the meeting, I stayed to chat with a few of the Interactors, answering their questions and wishing them well.

I came out of the classroom where we had met into the autumn afternoon. The bright sun was shining directly into my eyes, so I found a bit of shade behind a pillar where I could wait for my ride.

As I stood there, hidden from view, I overheard a group of the very Interactors who had just listened to my speech. Naturally I was curious: What would they be saying? What had they taken away from my presentation? I quickly realized that what they had taken away was not at all what I had intended.

They were not talking about what I had said, the stories I had told, or the lessons I had come to their school to impart. To my astonishment, the major topic of conversation was my tie! I listened with amusement as they chattered about my Western clothes, my background, my business; every aspect of my appearance and behavior was dissected and discussed. Just as they began to speculate about what car I drove, my ride arrived and I stepped out into view. They were perhaps a bit embarrassed, but I just smiled, got into the car, and drove off with a wave.

Whatever they learned from me that day, I learned far more. I learned that the lessons we teach with our examples are far more powerful than those we teach with words. I realized that as a Rotary leader, and a prominent person in the community, I had, for better or worse, become a role model for these young people. Their eyes were on me in a way that I had never before appreciated. If they chose to emulate me, they would model themselves on what they saw, not what I told them.

All of us in Rotary are leaders, in one way or another, in our communities. All of us bear the responsibility that comes with that. Our Rotary values, our Rotary ideals, cannot be left within the confines of our Rotary clubs. They must be carried with us every day. Wherever we are, whoever we are with, whether we are involved in Rotary work – we are always representing Rotary. We must conduct ourselves accordingly: in what we think, what we say, what we do, and how we do it. Our communities, and our children, deserve no less.