“ If you want to create fellowship, then you have to give people something real to talk about. ”

Debra Fine

Words with friends

Among the many reasons to join Rotary, one of the most important is social: We like being part of something bigger than ourselves. We like to work with others toward common goals. We like to belong to a community. This need for fellowship has come into sharp relief with the COVID-19 pandemic, with many of us “socially distanced” not only from our Rotary clubs, but from everyone.

Debra Fine, a member of the Rotary Club of Denver Southeast, Colorado, and the author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, has made a career of studying how we connect with others and how we can strengthen those connections. We spoke with Fine about keeping in touch with our families and fellow Rotarians via video, as well as about how to reconnect once we start meeting in person again.

THE ROTARIAN: Why is “small talk” a big deal?

FINE: If you don’t start with small talk, then you don’t make a connection. I’ve been in Rotary 27 years, and wherever I travel as a public speaker, I go to a Rotary club. If you don’t invest in having a real conversation with that person sitting next to you, there is no connection.

TR: Where do you begin when you don’t know what to say?

FINE: If I met you at a Rotary meeting, I would say, “Frank, good to meet you. What keeps you busy outside of Rotary meetings?” That’s my favorite way to get to know somebody. These days, I might say, “What’s keeping you busy outside of being concerned about the coronavirus?” The key is to not ask questions like, “How are you?” or “How have you been?” If I’m speaking with a Rotarian I already know, I simply say, “What’s new since the last time I talked to you?”

TR: How are the conversations we’re holding via video different from those that take place in person?

FINE: A lot of the same rules apply, like using people’s names. We get lazy about using names in conversation. When you’re on a Zoom call with eight family members, you can say, “John, what’s going on in your world?” I’m constantly doing that on our family Zoom call. Or you can say, “What’s new that was different from last week?” or, “Bring me up to date on your week.” We have two Zoom calls a week with our four adult kids, and I always hear myself saying, “OK, outside of this horribleness, what’s keeping you guys busy?”

TR: Any tips for talking about yourself?

FINE: Rotary is about Service Above Self, about fellowship. If you want to create fellowship, then you have to give people something real to talk about. Just a sentence, not a speech or a narrative. But if somebody says to me, “How’s it going?” I’ll say, “Great. I’m planting some seeds for my vegetable garden,” or, “I just read a great book.” It’s an investment of 20 or 30 seconds, whether it’s in a Zoom call or at a Rotary meeting.

TR: Any advice for how to reconnect once meetings start again?

FINE: Most of us are in Rotary for connections, whether for business or social reasons. So put the energy into cultivating those connections. Walk into your Rotary club meeting with two or three things to talk about. Don’t sit at the table and say, “How are you?” “Good.” Then we all start playing with our food. We’re Rotarians, for goodness’ sake! Look across the table. Say, “Debra, what’s new with you?” Include everyone at the table. Be a leader. Assume the burden of cultivating connections. Say, “What are everybody’s plans?”

—FRANK BURES

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