

THE UN-DAVOS SPEECH

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by Steve Bender

This speech was written over the Christmas holiday, surrounded by a loving family and two beautiful children. I was advised that Davos might not be ready for my honest opinions, so I wrote another speech — “Is It the Truth” — which I presented at Davos on January 19, 2026.

As I travel, speak, and most importantly, listen to voices from around the world, I find myself reflecting on how deeply concerned I am about the future of our species and the health of our planet. This concern does not come from pessimism. It comes from love. Love for the natural world that sustains us. Love for the communities we serve. And love for the children being born today, who will inherit the consequences of what we choose, or fail to choose, right now.

I have always loved history. I read it not to admire the past, but to learn from it. History is humanity’s long memory. It tells us what happens when we are courageous, and what happens when we look away. What troubles me is how often we repeat our mistakes. Empires rise and fall. Civilizations ignore warning signs. Leaders cling to power while the foundations beneath them quietly crack.

History shows us that decline rarely comes from a single catastrophe. It comes from denial. From complacency. From the belief that “this time is different.” The philosopher George Santayana warned, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” And yet, we so often do exactly that.

Today, I see truth itself beginning to erode. News sources we once trusted bow to corporate pressure. Facts are treated like opinions. Science is questioned not with curiosity, but with ideology. In that confusion, we lose our shared sense of reality, the very thing that allows a society to solve problems together. When we cannot

agree on what is true, it becomes nearly impossible to agree on what must be done.

I am not as worried for myself as I am for the children I have recently held and love.

What kind of world will they grow up in? What air will they breathe? What water will they drink? What opportunities will remain for them?

What will they say about us when they look back and ask whether we acted when we still had time?

Will they say we were too busy, too divided, or too comfortable to care? Or will they say that we rose to the moment, that we recognized the stakes and chose responsibility over convenience?

As Rotarians, we believe in service above self. We believe that leadership is not about status, but about responsibility. We believe that lasting change begins with people who care enough to act.

These values are not just for local projects or international missions. They are exactly what our broader society needs now.

Rotary has always understood something essential: that progress is built not by grand speeches alone, but by steady hands and willing hearts. We build wells that will serve for decades. We eradicate diseases not for applause, but because no child should suffer needlessly. We plant trees whose shade we may never sit under and create reefs for oceans in which we will never swim. That is wisdom. That is long-term thinking. And that is the mindset our world needs.

I believe one of the most important ways to renew our country is to renew its leadership. That does not mean tearing down institutions or demonizing those who serve. It means restoring the idea that public office is a duty, not a lifetime entitlement.

Over the years, I have organized and moderated a Congressional debate and have been encouraged by both parties to run for office. Those experiences gave me a front-row seat to both the promise and the strain within our system. I have always declined political aspirations, and I will continue to do so, because this moment is not about any one person. It is about changing a system that too often rewards self-preservation over service.

I also believe both parties have forced us to choose leaders who are simply too old to lead responsibly.

Imagine if the person who sends us to war, or makes decisions about our planet, were young enough to have a child who might fight in that war—or live with the environmental consequences of those choices.

When the same people hold power for decades, government can become stagnant and disconnected from everyday life. It begins to serve itself instead of the people. We need to ensure that ideas and integrity matter more than donors and special interests. We need clear, firm term limits so that public office remains a period of service, not a permanent career.

Imagine a system in which representatives serve for a defined time and then return to building real lives and real careers. Imagine leaders who know they will live under the very laws, health systems, and economic conditions they help shape. Imagine a culture where public servants are held to a higher standard. Where conflicts of interest are not tolerated. Where trust is earned, not assumed.

Fresh voices bring new energy, practical solutions, and a closer connection to the people they represent. That kind of renewal is not radical. It is healthy. It is how living systems stay strong.

And this renewal is inseparable from the health of our planet. Environmental stewardship is not a partisan issue, it is a human one. Clean air and water do not belong to one party. A stable climate is not a luxury. It is the foundation of food security, public health, and global stability.

When we fail to care for the Earth, we fail the most vulnerable first, and future generations entirely. The Earth is not something we inherit from our parents; it is something we borrow from our children. That old proverb carries a truth we can no longer afford to ignore.

Every challenge we face, economic, social and political, rests on the same physical foundation: A living planet.

Without healthy soil, there is no food. Without clean water, there is no life. Without a stable climate, there is no security. Stewardship is not optional. It is the price of continuity.

Rotary teaches us to think beyond the next quarter, the next election, or the next headline. We think in decades. We think in generations. We understand that real change is often quiet and patient. It is built one project, one relationship, one act of service at a time.

The challenges before us are enormous, but so is our capacity for good. Every era is defined by the choices of ordinary people who decide that indifference is no longer acceptable. We do not need to be perfect. We need to be brave.

We need the courage to tell the truth.

The courage to protect what is precious.

And the courage to leave the world better than we found it.

History is watching, children are waiting. And the planet we share is depending on us to remember who we are and what we stand for.

Let us be the generation that chose renewal over retreat, service over self, and hope over fear.

Thank you.