

WRITTEN FOR THE INSPIRATIONAL MOMENT  
SAN DIEGO ROTARY  
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Because today we honor the newest Mr. San Diego, I thought for these few minutes, we now call “The Inspirational Moment,” I should talk about the importance of community service for the health of the nation.

In 1832, Thomas Macaulay, the British essayist and politician, wrote to President James Madison and expressed the fear Macaulay shared with the rest of the world, that the American experiment couldn’t work. He said the American Constitution is like a ship that was all sail, and no rudder.” By which he meant the Constitution was only about rights, and nothing about responsibilities. He expressed to Madison that no nation could survive if its citizens just thought of their own selfish interests and cared nothing about the general welfare.

But just a year before Macaulay wrote that letter, Alexis De Tocqueville visited America from France with the question, “Why, forty years after the ratification of the Constitution, was America still here?” Like Macaulay, he believed that granting freedom to common people would result in anarchy and chaos.

But unlike Macaulay, De Tocqueville lived here for a few years and was astonished at what he observed. He wrote that contrary to the expectation of the rest of the world, the American experiment was working, and was working because the citizens manifested an extraordinary amount of social responsibility manifested in the concern they had for their communities.

This was unique in the world of that day. In Europe, schools, churches, hospitals, the arts, were created and supported by the royal and religious establishment. America intentionally did not have a royal or religious establishment. In America the institutions that shaped community were created and supported by the voluntary service of citizens in each community. This discovery astounded De Tocqueville. He said it was the reason America worked. In fact he coined a new word to describe it, “volunteerism.”

According to De Tocqueville the American ship of state indeed has a “rudder” that steers the ship. The rudder is the conscience of the people that motivates them to think not only of their private well being, but the well being of the community. So on this day when we once again honor a citizen who cares for the welfare of our community, we remember that “service above self” is what makes America work.