

## **“It’s All about Leadership”**

**Speech by John Graham  
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to  
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Today is the two-week anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the four-year anniversary of 9/11. I can’t think of a better day to talk about leadership.

I understand that President Bush will talk to the nation today. I expect him to tell us that the response to Katrina, like the response to 9/11, was a great example of the spirit and caring and can-do-ness of the American people.

I don’t buy that, and I doubt that you do either.

Four years ago, I remember feeling very good about the rescue and recovery efforts in New York and very proud to be an American. After Katrina, I feel angry and ashamed.

Why? Why was the response to 9/11 relatively rapid and effective? Why, after Katrina, did we get The Gang That Couldn’t Shoot Straight?

It wasn’t because of how individual Americans behaved on the ground. Now, as four years ago, there have been many inspiring examples of people responding to disaster with great caring and courage.

The difference is in leadership.

My purpose this hour is not to bash George Bush and his government. Others have already done a fine job of that and I agree with their criticisms.

I want instead to focus on a very basic lesson. *That lesson is that leadership matters.* And the more serious the challenge, the more leadership matters.

You can’t take leadership for granted. You can’t assume that bad stuff will never happen so there is no need for leadership. You can’t assume that God will solve your problem for you, or that the leaders you suddenly find you need will appear out of nowhere.

You can’t assume that you can appoint an unqualified campaign crony as FEMA director, give him a couple of PR hacks from the White House as deputies and expect the agency to function in a situation demanding experience and competence. You can’t

expect a good result if you shred the national social safety net, strip funding from FEMA, take away the \$76 million needed to strengthen the levees and then let your top response team wander in circles for four days.

Good leadership has good outcomes. Bad leadership has bad outcomes, and sometimes they are fatal.

It's a simple lesson.

It's true for a national emergency. And it's also true for meeting any challenge, large or small.

Yesterday Robert Kennedy outlined for us the great environmental and energy crises facing this nation, all of them created or made worse by the Bush Administration.

We need to fight hard on these issues – such as global warming and a sham of a national energy policy – and to push relentlessly for a positive and sustainable future.

For most of us, however, our chance to make a difference is not on national media or in Congressional hearing rooms, but closer to home – either dealing with the local effects of these larger problems, or with local issues important in their own right. The organizations and projects featured in the Exhibition Hall of this conference are good examples. So is the Island County Citizens' Growth Management Coalition, the group I led in Washington State for five years.

As background, Washington State passed a Growth Management Act in the early 1990's mandating fast-growing rural counties like mine to plan for growth in ways that met the needs of people while protecting the environment and preserving farms and forests. But Island County was then run by very conservative commissioners who resisted growth planning of any kind. So I and a dozen other people pooled our contacts and resources to form the Citizens' Growth Management Coalition. The first thing we did was get the governor to threaten economic sanctions on the county unless the commissioners began serious planning for growth management.

That got their attention. Then for the next four years we worked hard to make sure that the planning and policies that resulted from this process were legal, fair and far-sighted.

At the peak of our efforts, our Coalition was negotiating with county officials, testifying at hearings, organizing public forums, fundraising, getting our own people elected to county office, managing several lawsuits, making public presentations and guiding a PR strategy – all at the same time. We felt like that guy at the circus spinning plates on the ends of sticks.

And we won. Today I can drive down the roads of Island County and see the farms and forests and eagles and coyotes and know that it will stay that way because of what the Coalition did. All through this process, we were at most 15 committed activists. Often it was just one or two of us negotiating with the county commissioners, sometimes in late-night sessions, over crucial issues like wetlands protections and zoning.

There are thousands of examples like this. The point is: we need leadership at all levels, including local and regional, where we live and work and raise our families.

You may say, “Well, not me! I’m not a leader. Maybe I can help somewhere, maybe I can write a check, but I don’t have the skills and experience to lead.”

My experience is that every one of us can lead at the levels we need to lead. I’m not saying that everyone can direct the response to a national crisis, and being a leader is not about being a superhero. But every one of us can start from where we are. Where is leadership needed in your family, neighborhood or community? Perhaps there’s an ethical challenge at work that cries out for you to lead.

Even if you’re a resolutely a follower, you never know when circumstances will push you into a leadership role. Just ask the President’s pal “Brownie,” the former head of FEMA.

It’s all about leadership. And it’s all about all of us, in every aspect of our lives – at home, at work or in the community. The skills, experience and self-confidence you gain from leading on environmental issues will help you anywhere you might find conflict, or have to wrestle with change. I wrote my first book on leadership for people who lead outdoors trips and expeditions. Many of the letters and reviews I’ve gotten in response to that book are from people who say they’ve used it to help them deal with challenges in their businesses, or with their kids or other personal relationships.

This morning, I want to share with you some guidance for good leadership. Since I can’t cover every topic, I’m going to skip over familiar ones, such as planning, decision-making, teambuilding and communication. There’s plenty on these subjects in my books, or others’ books. Instead, I want to focus on four aspects that are crucial, but often ignored. They are vision, trust, motivation and credibility.

First – vision. Good leaders must be able to create and communicate a vision of success. Being able to do this is the single biggest difference between leaders and managers.

A vision is a mental picture of the result you want to achieve – a picture so clear and strong it will help make that result real. A vision is not a vague wish or dream or hope. It’s a picture of the real results of real efforts.

Visions are important for three reasons:

*A vision inspires action.* A powerful vision pulls in ideas, people and other resources. It creates the energy and will to make change happen. When Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “I have a dream...” there was very little national support for his cause and Congress showed no signs of passing civil rights legislation. But Dr. King’s vision catalyzed progress where there had been none.

*A vision is a practical guide* for creating plans, setting goals, making decisions, and coordinating and evaluating the work on any project, large or small. My organization, the Giraffe Heroes Project, uses a vision as the basis for our planning. First we set the vision for what we intend to achieve, then, guided by the vision, we form the plan to make it real. Our vision is like “true north” on the compass.

*A vision helps keep organizations and groups focused and together,* especially with complex projects and in stressful times. When people share a vision, it’s easier for them to see connections between what they want as individuals and the goals of the entire group.

Have you ever been in a group that spends an hour arguing over what color paper to use for a brochure? That’s a group that needs a vision. When there’s a clear, shared vision, the small stuff just gets handled because everybody can see and appreciate the bigger picture of where the group is going.

Not every picture works as a vision.

*A vision needs to be clear* – so sharp that you can see, hear, smell and taste the smallest details. If your vision is cleaning up a polluted river, put yourself on the riverbank on that future day when the river is clean. See families picnicking on the banks and fishermen pulling in edible fish. Hear kids splashing and swimming. Sit on a bench by the river and read an article in the local paper describing what you did.

*A vision needs to be positive.* Don’t try to motivate yourself or others with a vision of bad things that might happen if you don’t succeed. A vision that builds people’s fears may help fuel immediate action, but it can also cripple creative and courageous thinking. If your vision is no drilling in the Arctic, for example, don’t motivate yourself with pictures of drills and roads and waste dumps. Instead, create a vision of the arctic plain in all its permanent and lonely splendor, with caribou and bears and foxes. This is not too fine a point; keeping your vision positive is key to unlocking its emotional power.

*A vision needs to include changes in attitudes.* A serious challenge almost always involves personal attitudes that may be deeply buried and strongly held. Some of these may be prejudices, such as racism; others may be negative emotions such as fear. That’s why effective, long-lasting solutions demand changes in peoples’ attitudes. Any strategy that

ignores attitudes will likely be a short-term fix – the “solved” problem will reappear, often in a different form.

*A vision needs to include a clear picture of your personal role.* This isn't about ego. It's about you taking full responsibility for helping achieve the results you want. It's you out of the stands and onto the playing field.

*Finally, a vision needs to come from the heart, not the head.* Don't try to think your way to a vision. To create a vision that's exciting and compelling, you've got to give yourself the freedom to dream – to use your imagination to see and feel what does not yet exist.

A vision is not the same as goals or objectives; they come from the head and are important at a later stage in the planning process. They flow *from* a vision and guide the specific steps that will make it real.

The second element I want to talk about this morning is trust.

First, there's the trust you need from the people you want to follow you. Think of a time when you've been on a team or in an organization where you trusted the leader. Now think of a time when you didn't. What difference did trusting make in terms of the energy and commitment you put into that work?

It's a lesson George Bush I hope is learning. After 9/11, Americans mostly gave him the benefit of the doubt and trusted him to lead. Five years later, much of that trust has evaporated; after Katrina, it has plummeted further. One obvious effect is the increasingly courageous questioning of his leadership by the media and even from people in his own party.

But gaining trust from your own team is the “easy” part of it. What's tougher, but just as important, is building *mutual* trust with your opponents.

What, you say? Do I mean that if I walk into the headquarters of Monsanto or into the Pentagon, I should trust the people there, and try to build their trust in me?

Yes, that's exactly what I mean.

I can see the eyeballs rolling up. "Sure, I'd like to trust," those eyes say, "but sometimes you just *can't* act that way in the Real World or you'll get run over. Where does this guy live anyway? How smart is it to trust when the world is full of people who'll see it as a weakness to be exploited, and who can't wait to manipulate you and put you down?"

I'm not talking about the degree of trust where you might name your firstborn child after someone. I'm talking about trust where you are in effect saying, "I trust that you've

thought about this issue; I trust that you're pushing for what you think is best; I trust that you'll be honest with me. And I invite you to trust me in the same way."

Isn't even this level of trust naïve?

No, it's not naïve. What's really naïve is believing, despite so much evidence to the contrary, that the tired game of attacking and defending will somehow work next time around.

It took me a long time to learn this lesson. In my career in the US Foreign Service, I dealt with wars and revolutions and arms sales. I tangled with some of the worst people on the planet so I'm not naïve about nasty people and the harm they can do. I don't underestimate the difficulty of dealing with them (at the time, some of those people would have told you that I was no angel either).

I started to change only when I realized, as a young diplomat at the United Nations, that a strategy of attacking and defending usually just led to escalating confrontations. At best, there were temporary "victories" that lasted as long as it took the other guys to lick their wounds and come back at me and my country.

So I started experimenting with building trust with people who were supposed to be America's enemies. My first attempt was with the Cubans. As an American diplomat, I wasn't even supposed to talk to them, but they were fun, interesting, and, like me, baseball nuts. So I began building modest friendships. As some trust began to build, I became one of the few reliable channels the Cubans had to the State Department at a time of a near-complete breakdown in relations between Washington and Havana.

In January, 1980, the Cuban delegation and I were all in Belgrade for a conference. Ricardo, their deputy ambassador, invited me to go out with his team for a "real workers' meal" – meaning beans and pork and cheap red wine. To this day, I'm convinced that what happened that night with the Cubans could have freed the American hostages in Iran a year before they were finally released.

The previous November, the entire staff of the American Embassy in Teheran had been taken prisoner by mobs controlled by the Ayatollah Khomeini, and for over two months, no amount of direct threats or diplomatic pressures had worked to free them. America needed somebody else's good offices and, to me, the Cubans, with their good links to Khomeini, seemed perfect.

The plan was hatched at a run-down restaurant in the industrial section of Belgrade. To the great discomfort of the Cubans, the Yugoslav government had insisted on supplying them with a huge black chauffeured limousine for their stay. Ricardo had directed the

car to park a block away from the restaurant, and we'd walked the rest of the way. "We are socialists," he'd said. "No way we drive up to a workers' restaurant in a limo."

It took a half bottle of hot sauce before the Cubans pronounced the meal acceptable. That was also when we ordered the fourth bottle of wine. About two in the morning, after a rambling discussion that covered everything from the collapse of Red Sox pitching to changing U.S. policies toward Cuba, we sketched out a deal on a napkin that would have traded Cuba's help in freeing the hostages for a loosening of the American economic embargo on their island. We all thought it was a great idea.

I was afraid the notes might have disappeared with the hangovers, but two weeks later in New York, Ricardo took me aside in the General Assembly hall and whispered, "The Man says we'll do it." When I looked puzzled, Ricardo sighed in frustration, wary of people watching us. "I mean, he said very deliberately, "that Fidel Castro wants to pursue our plan. He will help free your people in Teheran."

I all but ran across the street to my office with the news, but when the US Mission sent Castro's offer down to the State Department, it was rejected outright. Under pressure from right-wing Cubans in Florida, the US Government was not willing to give Castro the kind of PR coup he'd score if he got our people out. I got my knuckles rapped for encouraging the enemy. I'm sure the plan hatched with the Cubans would have worked; we got the Algerians to do much the same thing with the Ayatollah, but only after our people had suffered in prison for another year.

Yes, the bottom line was that I'd failed. But from that experience I saw what building mutual trust with "enemies" could do.

Here's an example closer to home. In the Citizens' Coalition's push for stronger protections for wetlands and streams in Island County, at first, farmers were among our fiercest opponents. Their perception was that new environmental rules would threaten their livelihoods. It was a classic "us-against-them" situation.

When we started, in 1997, it was very hard for the farmers and the Coalition to even talk to each other, let alone negotiate solutions to sensitive issues. Both sides had their stereotypes: to many on our side, farmers had no concern for the environment; to many farmers, environmentalists were all selfish and elitist. It was clear to far-sighted people on both sides that we had to build some mutual trust before we could even hope to deal with the policy concerns – otherwise we'd end up in court, which nobody wanted. So we started meeting – led by people on each side who were willing to take the risk.

Our initial meetings were awkward, but slowly we began to get the feel of what made each other tick. The enviros began to appreciate the farmers' shaky financial situation and to respect the responsibility most of them felt to be good stewards of the land. The

farmers began to learn that the enviros weren't arrogant elitists, but neighbors concerned about protecting habitat and water for the whole community.

The more we began to appreciate the others' situation, the more we began to trust the others as intelligent and fair-minded people with different views on many issues. The sliver of common ground between us began to grow. We eventually all got so committed to "solving the problem" that in the end it was an enviro who suggested a part of the solution that the farmers might have come up with – and a farmer who suggested what the enviros might have proposed. We worked out a deal that both sides could live with – and *are* living with – for the long-term.

So how do you earn trust from others, especially opponents? What example do you need to set so they might trust you in return?

*Competence* builds trust. *Accountability* and *honesty* build trust; people know not only that you *can* do your job, but that you *will*.

*Respect* builds trust. Valuing other people's priorities, backgrounds, outlooks and styles helps them trust you, especially if they hold views very different from your own.

From my experience, however – the most powerful tool for building trust is *caring* for other people and for their situations. By "caring" I mean what you think I mean. Caring is putting yourself in another's shoes. Caring is listening.

Caring is getting rid of stereotypes: Cubans and Americans; environmentalists and farmers; I'm sure you can think of your own examples. Stereotypes create self-fulfilling prophecies. If you really believe that some institution is so stupid or selfish that it will respond only to a sharp stick in the eye – then that's probably what it will take from you.

As a State Department officer, I met with hundreds of people who wanted to convince me of their points of view. My attitude toward them got a lot more helpful when they treated me as a person – not just as some lever they were trying to pull in the State Department. And I closed down very quickly to anyone who assumed that I was the enemy or some dull bureaucrat without a brain or conscience.

Most people in bureaucracies are decent people trying to do the right thing in often difficult environments and, almost always, with impossible workloads. When I walk up to the counter in some massive gray public building these days, I think of those highway signs: "Road Crew Ahead – Give 'Em a Brake."

And you can never know what might be in someone's heart. A few years ago I gave a speech to a large group of powerful lawyers in Seattle. Mike, the guy in charge of

checking me out for the firm, was very suspicious of anyone who intended to talk about service and trust to the sharks he knew would be in the room.

But the speech was well received. A year later, when I tried to call Mike for something else, I was told that he'd quit the firm, and was now working for a small nonprofit in northern California, at maybe one-tenth his former salary. When I finally tracked him down, he said, "Oh, yes. What you said that morning brought up stuff I know now I'd been thinking about for years, but ignored. I finally decided to act on it."

Behind their power suits and big desks, many people in high places are trapped in emotionally and spiritually impoverished lives. Your positive spirit may be what gets through to them.

Doing small favors expresses caring and can help build trust. I live down a long, winding, dirt road with fifteen other families on it; some of them have always pitched in to help fill potholes, and some not. But we share a common problem: visitors to our houses are constantly getting lost. So I took an hour one afternoon and made a detailed map showing how to reach all sixteen houses. I gave copies to everyone on the road and to the fire station. The next time I was out patching potholes, people who'd never helped before came out with their shovels. There was a new friendly spirit and there's no doubt that little map helped cause it.

Even getting a glass of water or a cup of coffee for a person on the other side of the table might at least tempt them to reevaluate their stereotypes of you.

"So," you say, "all I have to do is get a cup of coffee for the SOB I'm negotiating with and he'll melt?" No, of course not. Caring can never be a manipulation; *you have to really care*. Faking caring will backfire – and you'll end up much worse off than before. In Island County, for example, environmentalist had to really care about how hard it was for farmers to make a living of the land, and the risks and effort it took.

Efforts at building trust are risky and don't always work. Most times you'll have to make the first trusting moves, and to deal with suspicious reactions. There are times when the people you're dealing with really are too nasty or the situation is just too far gone to even try. But it's not all or nothing. You will rarely have enough information at the outset of a negotiation or confrontation to make a good appraisal of whether trust is possible or not. So it makes little sense to *start* with an attack-and-defend strategy. Navigate by positives unless and until it becomes clear that the other persons will not do likewise.

Yes, if you guess wrong, you'll lose a step – but the risk will have been worth it.

Bottom line: when you're faced with the choice of trying to build mutual trust – or not – assess both the people and the situation you're dealing with. Initially, you may come up with all the reasons *not* to try: the situation is too tough or the opponent too nasty; there isn't enough time or you could be played for a chump. Now ask yourself whether you're making a true appraisal of the odds – *or conning yourself so that you won't have to risk making the first trusting move.*

Yes, I've been burnt making that first trusting move. But far more often I've seen mine and others' efforts to build trust result in breakthroughs, some of them dramatic. From decades of experience and observation, I'm convinced that the risk and effort to build mutual trust with opponents consistently raises the odds for success. That goes for a negotiation on global warming – or a fight with your teen.

The third element I want to talk about today is motivations for leadership.

Why lead? In fact, why get involved in the political process at all? Why not just numb yourself at the mall and hope somebody else solves the problem?

One reason you might get involved is sheer frustration and anger over the injustice or incompetence you see.

We all understand that motivation. I've been working with other activists for over 20 years, however, and I know that frustration and anger can be great catalysts, but you can't succeed for long if they are your only fuel. *Sooner or later they'll cause you to start making mistakes and missing opportunities.* Eventually they'll undermine your effectiveness and you'll burn out. There's a stronger, more sustainable motivation for being an active citizen.

It's the lesson from Giraffes, the people honored by the Giraffe Heroes Project for sticking their necks out for the common good. We've gotten their stories told in the media and in schools, inspiring others to stick their necks out too. You can see more at [www.giraffe.org](http://www.giraffe.org).

Giraffes are people like:

- Craig Kielburger, a Toronto student who heard reports of child slave labor in Pakistan, went there to do his own investigation, then started an international campaign to free the children;
- Casey Ruud, a safety inspector who put his job on the line when he refused to ignore glaring safety problems at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation; and
- Wangari Maathai, who speaks truth to power in East Africa, as leader of the Greenbelt Movement – and in 2004 won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Initially, Giraffes are often motivated by frustration and anger, just like anybody else. But when we ask them why they stick their necks out the way they do, many just look at us and tell us in so many words that's a damnfool question. "The problem was right in front of me," they'll say. "What was I *supposed* to do?" It's almost as if they couldn't *not* do it.

What keeps most Giraffes going over the long haul – and what helps make them as effective as they are – goes beyond whatever initial frustration and anger they felt. What sustains them is a strong sense that what they're doing to solve that crisis or problem is *meaningful* to them at a profound and personal level – that is, that it satisfies a personal sense of purpose at the core of their being. It's this motivation that makes Giraffes so powerful in solving problems and so inspiring to people who hear their stories.

Of course it isn't just Giraffes who are motivated by a sense of meaning. Philosophers and spiritual leaders have been telling us for millennia that there's no deeper human need and no more powerful yearning than to live a life we know is meaningful. We all want to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror and know that who we are and what we're doing reflects our deepest priorities and values, that we're not just marking time.

That's certainly true for me. When I know what I'm doing is personally meaningful – even if it's very hard – I feel an energy, a sense of excitement, a deep satisfaction of being in the right place at the right time. I'm more inspiring to others, who are more likely to follow my lead. And I'm much more likely to get the results I want.

What's your experience? At home, at work or in the community, do you feel the difference when you know that what you're doing is meaningful?

We all know people – maybe sometimes it's us – who involve themselves in activities and relationships that *don't* have meaning for them. It's hard for such people to be creative, and to put much focus or energy into what they're doing. They rarely excel; often it's hard for them even to get the job done. People like these are anything but inspiring. It's like they're slogging through wet concrete.

Finding what's meaningful to you adds focus, energy, passion and commitment to your life, and it provides a strong, stable motivation for sticking your neck out as an active citizen and as a leader.

My last point is credibility – how you come across to others as a leader, and how you come across to yourself, especially in a crisis.

What you're looking for is a quiet, confident acceptance of you as leader, functioning effectively as head of your group or team. It's that vision of yourself, that acceptance of your role, that squares your shoulders, settles your emotions, prepares your mind and heart to lead – and inspires confidence in others.

It's exactly the opposite of what the nation saw in George Bush in that Florida classroom on 9/11, being told by aides of the attack on the Trade Towers. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

A strong vision of yourself-as-leader doesn't come overnight. It grows and deepens as a product of training and experience, and by constantly reaffirming to yourself *why* you lead – the motivation we talked about earlier. If your motivation isn't clear, then you shouldn't be leading; you'll focus on the risks and on the drain on your time and energy and you will wonder why you're there. Others will pick that up. And if there's a crisis, you'll feel blindsided. Your reaction will not be "Let's go!" but "This shouldn't be happening to me!" and your credibility with others will really plummet.

Your leadership *style* must be credible too. Every leader has a style, formed by his or her own personality. Some leaders are funny, some are stern, and all of it can work – so long as the style is authentic. Too often I see people trying to copy other leaders instead of just creating a personal style that reflects who they really are. Others pick up the faking and are uncomfortable with it. Too many women leaders, for example, in my opinion, think they have to lead like a man. In fact, women bring unique gifts to leadership, and it's important that their leadership style reflect those gifts, not some off-the-shelf male style they've observed.

A question that relates to style is: "How top-down, how controlling should I be? If I'm a leader, shouldn't I be telling people what to do?"

It's more complicated than that. At one extreme are people like former GE chief Jack Welch, famous for his forceful style of leading by intimidating and demeaning people. Welch is a very poor model of a leader. But so are people at the other end of the spectrum, who exert no control at all. Have you ever gone into a meeting and had the person supposedly chairing say something like: "Welcome – now who has ideas for our agenda today?" That's ineffective too.

To deal with this question, I've invented a system called the Pucker Factor. It's an old Army term referring to the tightening of a certain part of the anatomy under stress.

The Pucker Factor says: your leadership should be more top-down the *more serious* the challenge you are facing, and the *less competent* the team you are leading. In the Gulf, for example, the new FEMA chief is facing a huge challenge with a team that has been disorganized and ineffective. His Pucker Factor is very high, and I hope he's capable of

some very top down and decisive leadership. On the other hand, if you're organizing a trash pickup on the beach, the challenge is not serious and your team is reasonably competent, so the Pucker Factor is very low and your leadership can be very informal and consensual.

The Pucker Factor can change quickly. You may be leading a hike in the mountains, for example, with a reasonably competent group. Initially the Pucker Factor will be low. But if someone breaks an ankle, it begins to rise. And it goes up much further if it starts to get dark and someone else panics.

Vision, trust, motivation and credibility are important elements of leadership. So are all the other elements we haven't talked about today – such as planning, decision-making, communication and teambuilding.

Now what?

You don't *have* to do anything. Then problems will get worse and I'm guessing that your own life will be a little less fulfilled.

You look at the risks and the time and the effort of getting involved. And you get swept up in the busyness of your life or you lose hope or you simply wait for someone else to solve the problem.

No. You look at the problems and see where you can make a difference. Then you pick up the corner of the rug you can reach.

When I feel like putting my head in the sand instead of sticking my neck out, I remember the question posed by the poet Mary Oliver: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Find out what's meaningful to you. Find the issue or problem that concerns you most. Ask what you can do with your talents, your experience, your resources. Be selfish. See not just the impact you can make in solving that problem. See how working on it will build passion, energy, focus and satisfaction that will spread into every part of your life.

Not long ago I went back for a high school reunion in Tacoma WA. Nearly all my classmates were leading comfortable lives in business or the professions. They worried about the stock market and college tuitions for their kids. To be honest, I was bored to death.

Except for one man. His name was Tom Noble. He'd been the slowest kid in class, the butt of our jokes, the Least Likely to Succeed. He had also for 30 years been directing a

social service agency in the worst area of Tacoma and had just started a controversial needle exchange program.

He was fascinating. He spoke with the charisma, energy and peace of mind of a person who'd truly found his calling and was answering it with everything he had.

Back to Mary Oliver's question. This time make it personal: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Thank you.