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PEOPLE WHO WANT TO HELP

A leader is anyone who wants to help.
Margaret Wheatley

A recent talk to graduates of a community leadership program:

First of all, congratulations to the graduates of the community leadership program.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Margaret Wheatley defined a leader as "anyone who wants to help."

Gandhi said: "if you want to change the world, be the change that you want to see in the world."

You are doing these things: you are a group of committed people who want to help and want to make your community even better than it is. Your leadership program prepares you to be effective, progressive civic leaders by developing your leadership skills and broadening your community awareness.

Never doubt that it matters to you, your families, your community, and even your nation and the world as all things are truly interconnected.

After almost 40 years as a leader, consultant, and student of leadership, I'd like to talk with you about the things I believe are most important to leaders: values, authenticity, and personal responsibility—the inner game of leadership.

I know there are great leaders in this room. And I know that many are on a leadership journey that will make them great

leaders in the future.

The journey to being a great leader never ends so here are a few suggestions for your journey to leadership:

Know who you are. Why are you here? What is your **purpose in life**? Where are you going? What is your vision for your life? What **values** will guide you along the way as you move toward your vision as you fulfill your purpose? And remember that happiness comes not from leisure but from the pursuit of noble goals—some of them unachievable.

True excellence is always value, vision, and purpose driven. I worked with true excellence as a young man in the United States Secret Service in Minneapolis, Chicago, and Washington D. C. many years ago. The men I worked with would give their lives for their fellow agents, for their President, and for justice. They were value driven everyday and they taught me how to be a professional and ethical man in the workplace and they inspire me today, many years later.

My greatest leadership experience in nine management positions over 18 years at the Star Tribune newspaper was leading a 4,500 employee business unit that committed itself to value driven leadership.

Our efforts to lead from our values changed our lives and we accomplished astounding business results.

Before I left the Star Tribune in 1994, I spent two years working on my vision for my life, the values that would guide me, and the purpose I wanted to live out. I read a lot, talked to two great advisors, and did a lot of thinking. The document I produced gave me the courage I needed to leave the corporate world, to venture out on my own, and the commitment required to return to academia and complete a Ph.D. at age 52, begin a new career, and go through the humiliations of the novice as I learned how to write. An easier part of my vision was a trip to Africa for wildlife photography.

My statement of vision, values, and purpose sits on my desk and I review it regularly. I adapt the vision and check out how well I am living my purpose and values. My vision, values, and purpose guide me today to live a more value-driven life in more authentic ways with more personal responsibility than I would have without them.

I encourage you to do this same work as part of your

leadership development.

Develop your talents—not your weaknesses. What are your God-given gifts? What do you love to do? What are you doing when time flies for you? What do you learn easily? The answers to these questions are clues to your talents.

Develop them by gaining new knowledge and new skills. Do what makes you feel alive as much of the time as you can. Highly actualized people develop their talents. They do not waste a lot of time trying to get good at what they are bad at.

Take time to think; no one will give you that time. In fact, many prefer that you not think for yourself. Demand that time for yourself. Do not mindlessly allow the organization or institution to replace the parents of your childhood—become independent and become your own person in your adulthood.

When you take that time to think, reflect on your thoughts, feelings, and experiences in life and **become your own best teachers**. Research shows that outstanding people take time to think.

Stay connected to your humanity—nothing is more important to our collective community. We live in a time of great and constantly accelerating change that **threatens** what makes us human. Don't allow yourself to lose your humanity: stay in touch with your spirit and emotions, know your impact on others, develop your empathy and your compassion for others, for the endangered natural world, and for yourself.

Great leaders take bold actions. Aristotle said that we become brave by doing brave things. You will make mistakes, I promise you. Face them head-on. You'll have failures and disappointments as all of us do. I've yet to meet any perfect people with perfect lives. Besides, we learn the most and find the most meaning in our pain and suffering. You can recover from most of your mistakes. Some are fatal, however, or cannot be repaired easily, so be thoughtful before you act.

When you make a leadership mistake: admit it, apologize, fix what needs to be fixed, and move on. People will respect you for it.

Get comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty, and change for they will be with you throughout your life. Resist simplistic black and white answers to life's complexity and mystery—the more you do the more successful you will be. I once told

a consultant when I was in the middle of a leadership challenge, “I’ve grown comfortable feeling scared and inadequate much of the time.” You need to gain that same comfort with being uncomfortable.

Finally, live creatively and create with love. Only work for organizations that expand human potential, and be who you are—life demands nothing more and nothing less of you.

Robert Greenleaf, the author of the seminal book *Servant Leadership* wrote that **caring** is the essential motive to lead. And we must care about people and about our organizations and institutions if we are to live in a good society.

Servant leadership is about putting the greater good ahead of our personal gain, the company ahead of our department, the marriage ahead of personal wants, and the community before my neighborhood and so on.

The one thing all leaders share is a focus on creating a better future for the larger community.

Greenleaf also wrote that the problems in the world are not the immature, the irresponsible, the neurotic, and the evil. They have always been with us and always will be. The problem, Greenleaf wrote, is not them but the good people—people like you and me—who have fallen asleep.

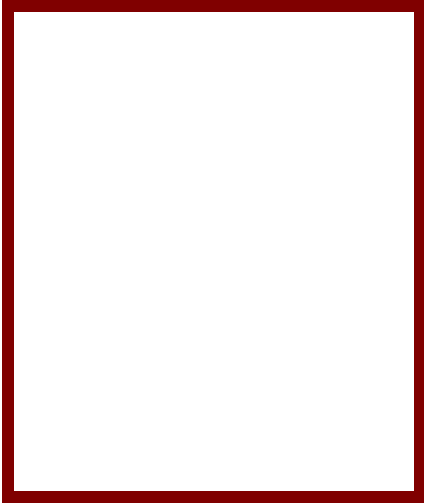
We are responsible. Each of us needs to stand up, speak up, and bear witness when our values are violated or when people are abused, humiliated, and mistreated. We must take sides.

Caring, Greenleaf wrote, is an exacting and demanding business. It requires not only interest and compassion and concern; it demands self-sacrifice and wisdom and tough-mindedness and discipline—just as you have shown in your leadership program.

If you always care, including taking care of yourselves, I predict that your community will be just fine in 20 years and will be a better community because of you—and that will be a grand legacy for each of you.

I wish each of you a grand journey in life. Life is about climbing hills: enjoy the climbs, glory in reaching the summit, and understand that time in the alleys is just as much a part of life as the climb of a hill is.

Your time as community leaders will go fast so follow your



heart and spend time doing what you love to do with people who bring out the best in you.

My wish for you is that you choose values, authenticity, and personal responsibility. I wish for you grand visions of the future you want to create and noble goals and the courage to be great.

Thank you.