

A Path with Heart

Humboldt State University

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Good morning everyone. I had the privilege to speak here three years ago, at the 30th anniversary of this outstanding service program. Thank you Annie Bolick and thank you Humboldt students for inviting me back.

I have a lot of respect for people who do service work, especially students like yourselves who also give up a weekend to come to conferences like this one. It takes a lot of courage, a lot of heart, to do service work, because service puts you in touch with things lots of things that are not right—with kids who need help, elderly folks who are lonely, streams that are polluted. But we do it anyway. Service is doing what it takes to make things right.

I've been thinking a lot about what it takes to make things right in the world, and about what it means to live a meaningful human life, to follow a path with heart, to be on the right side of history. I'm at a little different point in the life cycle than many of you, but I think the issues are pretty much the same.

If I could get inside your heads, I would probably find a lot of you wondering about your own path, about your career, your work in the world, about what you're going to do to make a living. Or about graduate school, about your future families and lovers. I came across a very interesting study where 1500 people were divided into two groups and followed for 20 years. Group A made up 83% of the sample. Group A embarked on a career for the purpose of making money now, in order to do what they wanted to do later. Group B, the other 17%, chose their career based on what they wanted to do now and would worry about money later. At the end of 20 years 101 of the 1500 had become millionaires.

Of the millionaires, all but 1-100 out of 101-had come from Group B, the 17%, who had chosen to pursue what they loved, chosen something that made them happy. Something tells me this is not a group of people who are driven to become millionaires, but you still need to take care of yourself and those you love, and the real point is that if you throw yourself into something you love, things will work out much better for you. Because the universe seems to reward those who follow a path with heart, of happiness. It's a shame so few people choose one.

It has become almost inevitable in American society, that people will spend much of their productive lives working at a job which is not really their calling, that involves a good deal of pain and struggle, and that rarely, if ever, inspires them. Because of this we are a nation full of doctors who are not healers, lawyers who do not uphold justice, politicians who are crooks, and educators who can't teach. Don't think it can't happen to you. Studs Terkel's book *Working* reports that of 100 people interviewed only one person truly loved their work—a stone mason. I think this is one reason why Zantac, for ulcers, is the most prescribed medicine in the world, and that depression is predicted to be the number one cause of disability in developing countries by the year 2020, a shocking statistic.

My favorite phrase for what work ought to be is something called "right livelihood", a Buddhist phrase. It is the idea that the way in which you earn your living ought to not only make a contribution to the world, but serve your own character development and higher or spiritual growth too. Which is the path with heart. The Christian theologian Frederick Beucher put it beautifully, *"the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet"*. Finding right livelihood is way more important than figuring out what your job is going to be, or how you're going to make money. No matter what your parents say.

Over the next 50 years, about the time of your working life, you are going to have at least 10-15 different jobs in 5-10 separate career fields. So simply finding the perfect job is not it. You're going to have lots of jobs. The main thing to find your own calling, your personal mission, your path with heart.

After graduation if any of you are contemplating taking some time off, bumming around the country, hiking in the woods, getting your head together, or doing Peace Corps or Americorps, I am one person—hopefully not the only one—who will support your decision. I did. After graduation I traveled all over the west, washed pots and pans in Yellowstone, climbed a mountain in the Rockies, picked apples in Colorado, fell in love, suffered, grew up, became more of a man. Vision quests are good for the soul.

We moved to Portland about two months ago, looking for a place where the tofu flowed freely, starting a new vision quest, trying to figure out what to do with next chunk of our lives. About a week after we arrived I picked up an alternative mag and read this quote by writer Noam Chomsky:

"Multinational corporations are illegitimate, totalitarian institutions. They have the same intellectual roots as Bolshevism and Fascism. They have no more legitimacy than Stalinism. They have a lot of power because we allow them to have a lot of power. Get rid of them."

Strong words, and they struck me rather strongly just then, because I had just spent the last 18 months up in Alaska working not only with a multinational corporation but with BP, the third largest oil company in the world. Some of my old national service colleagues back in Washington were not pleased, to say the least. Figured I had sold out, fled the path with heart. Maybe I had.

Confucius said that, *"life leads the thoughtful person on a path of many windings"*. Which was his way of saying that you never know for sure what the book of life holds, and that the path is far from straight. Which has certainly been true for me. For ten years I was the successful director of a successful community service program, had won the Points of Light award, been to the White House, helped launch Americorps, trained faculty around the country in service-learning. Now I was working with an oil company. How did I end up there?

I've always imagined myself as something of a movement person, so in the late 90's as the service movement became more and more mainstream I became restless, looking for a new edge, another movement. I loved education and service learning, but I had begun to feel that the stakes are so high, that the dangers we face as a nation and a world are so immense, that we simply don't have decades to get it together. I think most everyone agrees that the long term solution to local or global challenges is probably education. Problem is I'm not sure we have time to wait until my nieces and nephews or your little brothers and sisters are in the White House.

The famous futurist Barbara Marx Hubbard has concluded that corporations are our most evolutionary and future oriented institutions, that in the Darwinian sense, they are capable of the most effective social adaptations, and that if we want to change things quickly they hold the greatest promise of doing so. Which I found a rather disturbing thought. Governments are terribly slow and full of checks and balances, education takes a generation or two, and nonprofits don't have enough power or resources. So I left the service movement and my job at Berea College, and pretty much threw myself on the mercy of the universe. And ended up in Alaska working for an oil company, in the belly of the beast. Fate being the winding road that it is, it was a service-learning colleague who actually got me the job.

BP was getting ready to merge with ARCO, and needed someone who understood organizational cultures (which I thought I did), so I said, what the hell, its only six months. Believe me, the transition from the service field to a multinational corporation was not easy. The first six months were pretty hellish, and when I was asked to stay for another six, I came very close to saying no. Yes, I needed the cash. No, I did not fit in. I managed to maintain some sense of perspective by wearing a little button around on the inside of my jacket which said, "they think I'm one of them", which I would flash occasionally.

We had some interesting experiences in Alaska. Tierra used to come home from Sierra Club protests to pick me up at BP, and it didn't take her long to discover that that it was best not to mention to her friends in the environmental world that her partner worked over at BP. We definitely didn't see anyone else from the company spending the afternoon listening to tree sitter Julia Butterfly Hill when she was in Anchorage, who did her amazing sit right in the county I believe. But my favorite was one night at a BP cocktail party when Tierra, fresh and fiery from hosting her environmental radio talk show, jumped the president of the company about a proposed pipeline in Tibet and the treatment of indigenous peoples in Colombia. I nearly died. We ended up staying for 18 months, till this Christmas. By the time I left I had become the executive coach and confidante for the president, and chief consultant for the leadership team, which I and am to this day, something I would have considered unthinkable in the past, to say the least.

Last week I was sitting in a little Japanese restaurant in Anchorage after a return visit to BP. I really like Japanese restaurants, because 20 years after taking formal Buddhist vows they are one of the few places in America that feel kind of like home. I had my writing pad out and was starting to make some notes for this talk, and was wondering whether I should be honest with you about all this. Maybe it was the sake, but I decided to come clean. What the hell. Which is a little scary, since I'm pretty sure I'm talking to some of the most green and progressive college students on the planet. And we're at Humboldt State, which isn't exactly a conservative stronghold. Anyway, I'm hoping that you'll be open minded about this. If you had told me 2, 10, or 20 years ago that I would be working for a multinational oil company I would have told you that you were on drugs. In fact if you had told me 20 years ago I would have been on drugs! Back then I was a righteous hippie farmer in the hills of Kentucky who had built his own log home by hand, raised goats and chickens, played folk music, grew a little weed, and was an activist in the early sustainable agriculture movement. You get the picture?

Don Juan, the Yaqui Indian sorcerer, once told Carlos Castenada that:

Any path is only a path, and there is no affront to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you. Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question. Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't the path is of no use.

I had some very unhappy moments in Alaska wondering whether I was still on a path with heart, still following the principle of right livelihood. In the end, I could say, definitely yes. I wouldn't be surprised if you too will have to ask yourself the same question many times during your own career with all its jobs and transitions. You alone. I wish you well in that. It is not easy.

I learned some interesting things there, some things that surprised me. When I look back at the naïve presumptions I had about corporations and the individuals who work in them, I'm kinda ashamed of myself. The world is so much more complex, subtle, than I, at least, had realized. I had always thought of corporate folks as more or less evil, or at least clueless, which embarrasses the hell out of me when I think about it now. One of my first experiences at BP was with an oil exec who had a picture of a little boy being greeted by Bill Clinton in his office. Trying to be polite (but keeping my distance), I asked him about the photograph. There was a pause.... "That was my son being greeted by the president a few months back. He was meeting with kids who had cancer. My son died soon afterwards of leukemia." His eyes were moist. And I knew then, and have had it confirmed many times since, that the men and women who work in the oil companies are not the enemy. And that corporations themselves are only collections of people organized around a common purpose, high or low, so the corporations themselves weren't the enemy either. Which was my first lesson, which was disappointing, because the world was a lot simpler for me when there was an enemy. Multinational oil companies are handy enemies to have. Now who the hell was the enemy?

Robert Greenleaf, who wrote *The Servant-Leader*, once asked that same question. Who is the enemy? Is it the protesters, the politicians, the poor folks? Is it lawyers, corporations, goths? Is it black people, white people, brown, yellow, or gay people? Is it the democrats or the republicans? Fundamentalists? (my personal favorite) Is it evil, apathy, or the system? Greenleaf said that if you could somehow dispose of the worst of humankind, the tyrants or the terrorists, they would all be back in a generation or two. The enemy, said Greenleaf, is strong natural servants and leaders, people who are capable of making things right, but who do choose to do so. In short, we are the enemy if we do not choose the hard and high road that redeems humankind. When I read this some years back I knew I could no longer allow myself to be the enemy, blaming others for the ills of the world. Around that time I also read a quote by Robert Burkhardt that has never left me: "*Leadership*," he said, "*is the inability to sit back and watch the world go to hell.*"

My second lesson is that we have a lot of natural allies in multinational corporations, and in the oil industry, which might surprise you. I can still recall another embarrassment, standing in the check out line at the local grocery store behind one of the senior leaders in the company, who had brought his own cloth bags to bag up groceries. Which we had not yet begun to do. Which we do now. Last fall I got in a rather heated conversation with a guy from BP who was voting for Nader, voting his conscience thank you very much, while I was arguing pragmatically for a Gore vote. I've been in lots of back room meetings, a fly on the wall more than once, and I can tell you there are some serious environmentalists in the oil industry. At BP they report every single spill of oil, gas, or chemical over 1 liter. On the North Slope of Alaska, up where the oil fields are, when they have to park vehicles and leave them running when it is really cold, they actually pull pans under to catch the little drips. And BP at least has come out publicly saying that global warming is a reality, and set standards for itself more stringent than those of the Kyoto accords. Now, please don't get me wrong—I have no intention of becoming an apologist for the industry, but the whole situation is very complex. And not all oil companies are created equally. I found it fascinating that the folks at BP and Shell speak poorly of Exxon because of Exxon's lack of a serious environmental commitment. In any case, at BP, I saw thoughtful and informed citizens with strong social and environmental convictions up, down, and across the organization. Kind of blew my mind.

Which leads to my third lesson, which is that straight out adversarial politics—EarthFirst vs. Exxon—is not enough. It has a place, it is important, but it is not enough. I understand and value the role of social watchdogs like EarthFirst and Greenpeace. In any case, I'm hardly the first person to reach the same conclusion about adversarial politics. Christopher Childs, who served as an activist and National Speaker for Greenpeace between 1987 and 1996 wrote about this in his book *The Spirit's Terrain*. I believe it is better to work with existing leaders in every sector—public, private, non-profit—better to reach those currently in power who can effect the most positive change in the shortest time frame. And that includes corporate leaders, whose power is now enormous. Chomsky had that part right. Somehow we were all gonna have to figure out how to sit down and talk to each other, and work together towards a common solution. I believe that the stakes are too high for any other course of action.

I recently read a book by Ken Wilbur called a Theory of Everything, rather an immodest title, but it helped me understand why we all have such a hard time doing that. And to illustrate, I'd like to a little stand up/sit down. (Blue, Orange, Green). So, he talks about the work of a number of theorists, who say that the world is made up of people who occupy something like 7 or 8 different world views, from the most primitive, survival stages to the most spiritually sophisticated and sublime. Each one of us passes through all these stages as we evolve in our own lives. But about 90 % of us fall into three categories, blues, orange, and green, who basically are in a big struggle for power and for the future.

Blues (30/30). Blues represent family and religious values, patriotism, civic virtue, all that. Lots of service values. Orange (40/40-50). Oranges are the so-called moderns, more the scientific and artistic world view, full of individual expression and the drive for achievement. Rational thought is the god here. Greens (20/10-20) represent the multicultural world view, the view that promotes egalitarian principles like diversity and inclusion, and which the service movement and higher education in general has been very much in the forefront of. So these three are battling it out. The Bush administration, for example, seems to be kind of blue/orange, whereas the Clinton/Gore folks are more orange/green. And it has become abundantly clear to all of us just how split we are as a nation. One little problem here though—all three are absolutely convinced that their own perspective is the only valid one, and basically just wish the rest of the world would hurry up and get its act together. The greens, who in some ways have the broadest world view of all, have, according to Wilbur, a fatal flaw. Greens have a strong sense of superiority, elitism and self-righteousness about their own world view,. Greens definitely know who the enemy is. The corporations of course, but also the religious right. Wilbur goes on to say that the "prime directive", a nice science fiction term if ever there was one, is the health of the entire system. And that the only hope for us as a civilization is for significant numbers of us to move past blue, orange, and green thinking into a "second tier" world view. That means a world view that sees the whole picture and values the whole thing, and is willing to work to ensure the overall development of the whole system. T work with everybody. And the bad news is that only about 2% of us have arrived. Which at least partly explains why it is so difficult for us to work things out.

I had a moment last week that was a classic example of these world views rubbing up against each other! There I was, 250 miles above the Arctic Circle, surrounded by thousands of miles of northern wilderness, -45 with the wind chill. Spending two days in a camp full of roughnecks and oil workers, sitting on top of the largest oil field in North America, having come north with the senior executives of BP Alaska to hang with the troops for a couple of days. I was checking my email in one of the offices, and there on my inbox is a message (that many of you have probably seen) called Save the Arctic from Big Oil. And as fate would have it, at that exact moment I'm in room with the chief explorer and chief environmentalist for the company. The man who would actually drill in ANWR and the man who would be responsible for doing so with minimum impact. Kinda had to pinch myself. And I couldn't resist reading it to them, jerking their chains a little. I also couldn't resist writing my friend back and jerking her chain a little too, letting her know just where I was while I was reading her message.

I do not support drilling for oil in ANWR. But not because big oil is evil. Because it is high time the Western world got serious about transitioning out of a fossil economy, got serious about consumerism, and about changes in American energy and tax policy. But I can tell you this—having seen it with my own eyes and spoken to the folks, I will not be overly worried about caribou migration if it happens. True, it will no longer be a wilderness area. There will be some pipes. But the actual "footprint" will be quite small. Caribou were supposed to be severely impacted by the developments already there, and 30 years later, they don't much seem to notice the pipes. Go right under them. Reproducing nicely. Sadly, caribou, polar bear, fox and the rest of the arctic ecosystem, are much more at risk from the organic pollutants piling up in deadly doses in their bodies which they pass on to their young, pollutants that because of the way the earth's air currents and temperatures interact, are more likely to come from chemical refineries in Louisiana. Up in the Arctic mother's milk is so polluted that one Arctic native woman fed her baby coffee mate because she knew her breast milk was toxic, which led to her baby being hospitalized. Which is so incredibly sad.

There is so much sadness when you think about what it not right in the world, and so much for us to do. When I think about native women feeding their babies coffee mate, about the latest statistics on global warming, species extinction, and the widening gap between developed and developing countries, and all the other bad news that we could spend hours and hours talking about, I admit that sometimes I despair. Around that time I try to recall the words of Wendell Berry, who said, *"be joyous though you have considered all the facts"*.

If there is a cause for joy when I think about the complicated challenges we face, it is because of leaders like you and others too, servant leaders, who will not allow themselves to be the enemy, who are courageous, informed, and committed. Leaders who will help us realize our great and ancient human dream. You know the dream. Our dream of a world where the skies are clear, the rivers clean, the streets are safe, the children happy. Where the elders are honored, and where peace prevails. A dream that although always threatened, and struggling to survive against sometimes terrible

odds, lives and breathes and continues to inspire and move us both individually and collectively. I didn't meet one person in the oil industry who did not share that dream. Or in higher education, in nonprofits, in government. Not one.

Which brings us back to the path with heart. You, and you alone, have to decide what that path is for you. And there is no telling where it will lead you. No telling.

It takes a lot of courage to follow a path with heart. You know all the reasons why. But we have to do it anyway. We have to do it for our own happiness and for the happiness of everyone—for the frogs, for the kids, for the rivers, for the earth. For the ancient dream we all share. For the right to say, at the long end of our winding paths, that we ended up on the right side of history.

