

# **Leading A Meaningful Life**

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4<sup>th</sup> Annual Women's Symposium at the SIAS University in China*

In the opening ceremony I did a quick scan of the global picture of women's leadership in the highest positions. I outlined a simple process to follow to make you most effective in your pursuits. I then pointed out a series of qualities for you to bring to your work to be successful. Lastly, I addressed the requirements for men to be most supportive of a woman's passion and purpose. I declared that in the end both women and men must listen to their hearts and trust themselves. Identify your vision or Yonder Star and the path to it and get to work. Be courageous, authentic, collaborative, compassionate, patient, and persistent. The joy is in the journey and the learning along the way."

In this session, let's dig deeper. Let's get down to what it's really going to take to live a life you love and produce outcomes that have you shouting "YES!"

First, let me say that fulfilling your vision or Yonder Star can look a lot easier when you are in college than it actually was when I look back from 66 years old. When I was in college, the Viet Nam War was raging in Southeast Asia and many young people back in America were either protesting or taking drugs. Our saying was, "Don't trust anyone over 30." My generation was convinced that older people were hopeless, that we knew the true path, and that we really were going to change the world. Somewhere along the way, my generation lost sight of our vision or "Yonder Star," became the world's biggest consumers, and became obsessed with being safe. Giving up our vision for consuming and safety was a bad idea!

As you all will experience, life gets harder in the middle as things like jobs, family, housing, school, and medical expenses take all of your energy. It will be hard to remember what you said you were committed to when you were in college. Nobody can really tell you that. You have to step out into the world and be defeated a few times to test your resolve. Can you get back up, shake yourself off, and continue to pursue your vision or will you step to the side and only make gestures? Will you let your circumstances or situation determine your life and just complain about it? Perhaps you will just



suffer in silence, hoping you can do better in your next lifetime? Do you know anyone like that? They didn't plan their lives to turn out that way! So what happened?

Life happened. Circumstances happened. As you go along, the evidence and the agreement of others stacks up about how hard it really is to make a difference. In your lifetime it will be even more challenging. In an age of uncertainty, rapid change, volatility, the rapid spread of instant information, and the breakdown of traditional practices and culture, it will be more confusing than ever.

I see all of this as great news for you. The more the past ways are losing their grip, the more freedom you will have to innovate and the greater that demand will be for your courageous leadership. Please note an emphasis on courageous and recall how I used David Whyte's definition of courage in the opening ceremony, "developing a friendship with the unknown." Why is that so important?

When the pressure is on and circumstances are pressing in on you, it is very normal to fall back to what you know from your past. The problem for leaders is that your past won't help when what you need to accomplish your Yonder Star are bold new strategies and partnerships that are different from past practices. To get your passion and purpose back on the path to leadership, you will have to get comfortable with not knowing what to do. You will have to stay uncertain long enough to discover new strategies and new team members that can lead you beyond the world you and others knew and find comfortable. You will have to learn to become very comfortable with being uncomfortable!

So let's get specific. Here is an example of a really big vision or Yonder Star. Applicants for next year's World Academy For The Future of Women were asked to write a brief essay on women's lives in a perfect world. Part of what one second year woman said was, "In a perfect world, women are really equal with men. They do not have to lose weight in order to get the praise of their boyfriends. A woman is a god of herself, not her boyfriend, family or someone else. She is totally free. And her spirits are strong. She makes her own life colorful and has a say in society. She belongs to herself. She belongs to the world too. She thinks for the animals, the children, even our beautiful world. Her eyesight is so big. Life is full of ups and downs, but she always keeps her heart basking in the sun. She knows that every dawn will present a fine prospect for her to unfold. And the world will always be about new hopes in her eyes."

Does that Yonder Star call to you? What do you think it will take to make that vision real in the world? If it fits you, what will you have to change about yourself and the way you have dealt with



life in the past? If you answered “I don’t know,” you are wise. No one knows today what it will take to fulfill such a bold vision. To be successful with such a vision, you will learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable or not knowing.

The other critical aspect of being able to fulfill your Yonder Star is to make it very, very public and develop lots of partners in your vision. The more people you include, the more creative input you will get. More importantly, there will be more people to remind you about your commitment when you forget.

Does that sound scary? It should. The last thing you will want to hear when you are overwhelmed is someone reminding you and telling you to “get back to work!” on your vision. You will want them to go away and leave you alone. When you do get back to work on your vision, you will love them for reminding you.

Now I want to remind you that the only powerful vision or Yonder Star for you is the one you choose. No project is too big or small if it is truly yours. This is one of the hard parts of leadership. There are so many social agreements on what’s right or wrong or what gets recognition at the moment and what does not. Unfortunately, many really important ideas are not appreciated by others when they are created. Many famous artists, for example, died before their work was recognized and many social reformers never lived to see the improvements that came from their lifetime of commitment and hard work.

You cannot live a life of true significance and also worry about whether you are getting lots of credit at the moment. You will have to find other sources of strength. You will have to become completely comfortable with your own vision and ideas and completely willing to own the consequences of your actions and inactions. You will have to be completely willing to deal with your circumstances.

For the women in the audience, to be a visionary, you will have to be very patient. It may be a struggle to bring men along with you on your path. Some of you may find it easier to stay single and simply focus on your work. In some ways that will make your life much simpler, On the other hand, you will miss out on many of life’s joys including children and real partnership.

For the men, if you intend to be a partner with a highly committed and passionate woman leader, be prepared for surprises. At times, your emotions may swing from very excited to wanting to give up. To be an equal partner will mean that much of what you have learned by listening and watching



other boys and men while you were growing up will not be valid or useful in partnering. These old ways of relating to women may even cause you great pain.

For both of you, your guide will be the Yonder Star vision you share and your respect and love for each other. Beyond that, you and your partner will both be on a path of exploration. If you are frequently uncertain or confronted, you are probably doing the right work. If you are very comfortable, you may not fulfill your vision!

So what I have talked about are one or two very basic ideas it will take for you to be truly successful in fulfilling your Yonder Star or vision. It will be hard at time. It will take courage. You will forget your vision, you may not be able to find your commitment, and will have to be reminded. Your relationships can often be confronting, frustrating, or just disappointing. Discovering the joy and satisfaction of equal partnership as you express your passion and purpose on the path to leadership will make it all worthwhile.

As I summarized in my keynote it will ultimately come down to listening to your heart and trusting yourself. Identify your Yonder Star and the next steps on your path to fulfilling it and get to work. Be courageous, authentic, collaborative, compassionate, patient, and persistent. The joy is in the journey and the learning along the way. Be thankful that you are one of the people who will have the opportunity to live a meaningful life!

