

# **The Will to Rise**

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McGill-  
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Master of  
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## **Abstract**

This paper is an exploration of volunteerism as servanthood – a faith-based response to a call. The author presents a personal account of her experience of “extraordinary leadership” as a McGill-McConnell Program participant in relation to her roots in a Nova Scotia coastal community and her work as a grassroots organizer of school lunch programs, soup kitchens and manager of the Halifax Metro Food Bank Society (now FEED NOVA SCOTIA). The discussion is amplified with reference to the thought of Parker Palmer, Robert K. Greenleaf, Vaclav Havel and Mother Teresa, among others, and encompasses the author’s first-hand experience of the meaning of globalization during a visit in 2001 to the rural community of Lohari in India.

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## Prologue

This is my story, one that had not been shared in its entirety with anyone until I began writing reflections for the McGill-McConnell Program. These reflections and journeys back into my childhood and teen years sent me into a tailspin of emotions and feelings that plagued me throughout the program.

On some level I knew that my self-esteem was fragile, that I did not always have faith in my own decisions. On another level, I trusted a Being that was larger than life itself, and called on Him so often for the strength, the wisdom that I would need to face whatever crisis or situation was happening in my life at that time. I knew intellectually that those things that had happened in my childhood had shaped many of my life's decisions, but so much of what had happened had, over the years, been buried deep in my subconscious.

Feeling "called" to the world of food banking was real for me. Yet when I tried to put that into leadership or management language, the two became disconnected. This program helped me to realize the legitimacy of the "call" and the responsibility that one has to not only respond and accept the call, but to make sure that they are on a continuum of learning, spiritually and practically. There is a link between the two, the Spirit guides what the mind absorbs through earthly methods, books, concepts and dialogue.

The reflections also led me to a realization that life is so short that to miss an opportunity to say thank you is almost unforgivable. I have gone back to thank all of those people who helped in so many ways to bring me to where I am today. Unfortunately, not all of them were still living so I shared my thoughts with their families. I would encourage everyone to do this exercise, as there is no greater gift to another than to say a simple "Thank you for my life."

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## The Acceptance

There I sat alone in my office, reading a letter and blushing at the message contained in the letter. I was being urged to submit an application to McGill University into a Master's Program! That was a laugh! Whoever this person was, he certainly had a lot to say about the work I was doing in Halifax with the Metro Food Bank Society. It was complimentary, that was certain; however, he had written at length about this great program he himself was taking and was quite emphatic that I would benefit from this program as well. I did not recognize the name of the author of the letter, but he had stated that he would drop in to discuss it. I put the letter and the brochure aside, forgot about them and went about my business.

A week later a package of material about the McGill-McConnell Master of Management Program for National Voluntary Sector Leaders arrived in the mail. At first glance it appeared to be junk mail, and I almost threw it in the recycle bin. Then I remembered the letter I had received, and realized that this was probably what the writer had been referring to, so I gave it a cursory glance and put it aside with the letter. A few days later, I had the privilege of meeting the author of the letter. He talked to me at great length about the merits of the Master's Program, and was very emphatic that I should submit an application. What I could not bring myself to tell him was that I did not stand a chance of being accepted, as I had a high school diploma and an undergraduate degree to finish first. He had no way of knowing this. I was not prepared to share this tidbit of information with a stranger. I thanked him, assured him that I would read over the material and consider submitting an application. When he left, I collected all the material together and put it in the file cabinet in my office and promptly forgot it. This was June 2000.

In August 2000 I was in the process of cleaning out files and found the envelope of material from McGill. As I started to drop it in the recycle bin, something made me hesitate. I opened the package and started to read through the brochures and literature. I felt that twinge of regret for never having completed high school and not finishing the Arts degree that I had started as a mature student. Even though it appeared that the

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McGill-McConnell program was designed for those with an existing degree, I sat there and thought to myself, “What do I really have to lose? They can only say ‘yes’ or ‘no.’” I had to at least try for acceptance. With only four days to submission deadline date, I set out to get transcripts, reference letters, an up-to-date resume, application form completed, and essay questions answered. When it was all done, I sent it off, put the copies of everything back in the same envelope the material had arrived in and tucked it away back in that same file cabinet.

I told no one, other than my husband and those who provided references, what I had done. That was so I would not have too many explanations to make when I got the rejection letter. Embarrassing myself was not one of my favourite pastimes, so the fewer who knew the better.

A few months later I arrived home, late on a Friday night, from Toronto. My flight had been delayed because of an unexpected storm and it had been a rough trip. When I got home I just collapsed into bed and fell asleep. Around three in the morning I woke up, incredibly thirsty. While sipping on a glass of water, I glanced through the mail and an envelope with the McGill-McConnell logo caught my eye. I started to shake. I put down my glass and picked up the envelope as if it were a burning torch. Should I open it or not? Maybe they just needed more information. Maybe they were going to tell me ever so nicely, “Nice try lady, but you’re lacking a few credentials!” I could picture this group of professors sitting around a boardroom table, laughing uproariously at the nerve of this lady trying to get into a Master’s program! Didn’t she openly admit that she never finished high school? So there I was, standing alone in my kitchen, clutching that envelope. Finally I convinced myself that I should just get it over with, so I ripped it open and started to read, “Dear Ms Swinemar . . . you have been accepted . . .” and I started to cry. As I was running down the hallway to my bedroom, I’m crying “Thank you, God! I’m in, I’m in!” My poor husband, Lloyd, waking from a sound sleep, thought someone had died. I eventually got through to Lloyd about what the letter meant; he congratulated me, and promptly fell back to sleep. I lay awake and giggled all night. I couldn’t believe it! I had been accepted into a Master’s Program and at McGill University! And so began a new journey.

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The words “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13) became my chant over the next few months, as I prepared myself for this new experience.

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## Early Challenges

I grew up in a small coastal community in the province of Nova Scotia. Being the eldest child in a family of four children in a turbulent household meant that premature maturity was inevitable. While I did not completely understand all of the implications of what was going on in my home, I did know it was wrong for my mother to have men visit when my dad was away at sea. One evening, as I was preparing for bed, my mother came into my room and confided that she was going away with a man she had been seeing. The night before my father was due home from sea my mother packed and got ready to leave. While she was doing that I baked her a cake and wrote “Good Luck” on the icing. I was thirteen years old.

Before dawn the next morning, Mom left with that man. I remember getting up as I heard her moving about and getting so scared and so sick to my stomach. I waved them off and then went upstairs to check on my two younger brothers and sister. My little brother was standing at his bedroom window, silently crying and waving – but no one was waving back. I tried to comfort him while needing comforting myself. That was the day I learned how to put on a brave face in the midst of fear and uncertainty.

When Dad arrived home from sea that same day and found out what had happened, his first course of action was to get a housekeeper for us. He had only a two-day leave before having to report back to the ship. The woman he hired, Ruth, moved in with us temporarily; but she was not happy with us. Reflecting back, I realized that Ruth, who was only in her early twenties, would have found being responsible for four children, between the ages of six and thirteen years, quite onerous. In any event, she was unhappy and tended to be cross with us most of the time.

My grandmother and some aunts lived near by. They visited our house often, and began doing a major cleanup in the house. Everything that had belonged to my mother was thrown out. They were so angry with her and did not hide their feelings nor soften their words of criticism, so we became subjected to this day after day. I was torn between feelings of anger at Mom for deserting us, and defensiveness on her behalf against their

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harsh words. At the same time, my brothers and sister started to come to me more and more to be their “buffer.” If they needed something they wanted me to make the “ask.” They came to me for help with homework, to pick out their clothes, to talk to Dad about the awful person he brought in to look after us.

While I was going through my own feelings of loss and loneliness for Mom, I was assuming more and more responsibility for the care and nurturing of my siblings. At the stage in life when I needed guidance and direction from an adult, I accepted the challenge of trying to act and think like an adult. Even when I really felt like curling up in someone’s lap for a hug and reassurance, I was usually holding and trying to reassure my siblings that everything was going to be okay. Although I did not understand the requirements, did not have any experience, nor was old enough or qualified to handle the responsibility, I became the “parent” in our home. I learned how to approach the adults in our life and to “lobby” on behalf of my brothers and sister. I could be very firm if I felt someone had been unfair to one of my siblings. I also discovered I had a deep sense of needing to seek justice if someone had been wronged and quite often got myself in trouble for expressing my feelings. In the process, I, a former follower in so many situations, became a leader of our pack of four. I became adept at masking my feelings, especially when terrified. I matured very rapidly through necessity and became a survivor.

As I got older, my physical and facial appearance started to resemble my mother more and more. I looked like her in every way. My grandmother, who had moved in to our house to take care of us at this point, had a very difficult time dealing with this and as a result, started treating me quite differently. She kept saying to me “You’re going to turn out just like your mother!” and I was just as determined that I would not be like my mother! We couldn’t seem to get along at all. So, the summer that I turned seventeen, after completing Grade Eleven, I left the small community I had grown up in and moved to the city of Halifax to look for a summer job. I had hoped that some time away from my grandmother would help our relationship. I applied for a position with a medical insurance company as a file clerk. At the end of August, I decided to stay with the company when I was told that there was no room for me at home. My grandmother had closed our house and moved my siblings into her home. There was only enough room for them. I would have to live elsewhere if I wanted to continue at school. So I stayed, and

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my summer job became my permanent place of employment. Because I learned quickly, worked diligently and accurately, promotions came quickly. That company invested in me. They sent me on management training courses, and when I was twenty-one they paid for me to go to university as a Mature Student so that I could take English courses. I had just been made a department head of one of the largest departments, consisting of nineteen staff members. We had responsibility for all of the communications for the company. I continued with this company until I had my twenty-sixth birthday, when I decided one morning that it was time to do something entirely different. My husband's brother had just died a tragic death and it shook me to the core. I started to ask myself so many questions. Where was I going? What was the purpose of my life? What did God mean for me to be doing? Surely it wasn't to be working day in and day out for an insurance company, even if I did enjoy my job. After nine years of employment, I resigned.

My husband and I had been married for eight years at this point and he wanted a family, but I hadn't wanted one until recently. We agreed to apply to an adoption agency – and the miracle arrived: our chosen baby daughter, Jennifer. Then a second miracle occurred: the arrival of our birth daughter, Rebecca, just one year after Jennifer's arrival. Busy is only one word to describe our household. We had started our own business, a courier company, when I left the medical insurance company, so that I would have something to do with my time while waiting for the adoption to go through. Everything had happened so quickly! The adoption wait was not as long as we had been told it might be. The pregnancy, hence the second child, was totally unexpected and our courier business was becoming busier and more successful every day.

Time passed so quickly. All too soon the girls were old enough to start school. When they did, I started to take university courses and, in my spare time, to volunteer at the girls' school and at our church. I had been home long enough. It was time for a change. This decision was to lead me, eventually, to where I was meant to be.

Hunger and poverty were issues that I encountered early on in my volunteer experience. At the elementary school, I assisted the kindergarten teacher, and as a result I met other mothers. So many of them were struggling to bring up their children on their own. Day after day I'd watch little five- and six-year-old children reach into a near-empty lunch

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box. As I was working in the classrooms, assisting the teachers, I heard the tummies of small children rumble regularly. I'd talk to the teachers about this; but no one knew what to do even though they were aware that there were children in the school who were not getting enough to eat. Finally, not able to handle this situation any longer, I approached the school principal and convinced him to let me try to do something about the problem. In a short time I had set up a lunch program in partnership with McDonalds and Pizza Hut. They just needed to be convinced that they should be good corporate citizens – after all, someday these children would be our community leaders. We all needed to take care of them! No one ever knew which kids didn't pay for his or her lunch. The owner of a coffee shop across the street from the school was convinced that it was his civic duty to give me a few dozen muffins every morning to take in to that school. Along with the juice provided by the school's principal, we then had a breakfast program as well as the lunch program. The children started performing better in the classrooms and the teachers were thrilled with the results.

Church had always been an important part of my life and volunteering in my church gave me another opportunity to meet hunger and poverty head on. My priest asked me to represent our congregation to assist at a city soup kitchen. I will never forget that experience. Hundreds of young men and women showed up for a hot meal. When I talked to some of them I quickly realized they were not stupid, or uneducated, but they were jobless, penniless, sometimes homeless, and very hungry. However, what struck me the most was their sense of shame at their circumstances. Many would not look us in the eye as we tried to talk with them. Powerless is the only word to use to describe how I felt every time my shift was over. There had to be more that I could do besides make shepherds pie once a month. But what else was there? The answer eluded me. It all felt too big to tackle.

Later, when I was asked to represent our congregation in an initiative to start a community food bank, I remembered the young moms I had met at the school and their children – dressed in poorly fitting clothes, carrying empty lunch boxes. I remembered the young men and women I had served at the soup kitchen – a sea of faces, most nameless, but all needing help. I remembered my own brothers and sister leaning on me for support as they grew up. It all called out to me, and I got very involved in food banking: volunteering on the front lines, serving on the board of directors, grocery

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shopping, whatever needed to be done to help these people who were so ashamed of their circumstances – these victims of economic change. The more I volunteered, the deeper the burn inside me to do something more substantial.

Strangely, when approached in 1991 to submit a résumé for the position of Executive Director at the Metro Food Bank Society (a warehouse model food bank) I really did not want the job. My volunteer work extended to this organization, so I was familiar with the role of the organization and what would be expected of the executive director. I had not held any position remotely like it in my life and did not feel qualified or equipped to handle the responsibility. After declining the opportunity three times, I was asked once more to reconsider.

Believing in the power of prayer, I asked God to help me with my decision. He gave me this verse, guiding me to a decision:

*Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”  
Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”*

Isaiah 6: 8

Reluctantly I accepted the position and assumed the responsibility. It was not long before I discovered that I needed to call on every skill I possessed to run the organization. The executive director’s position had been vacant for ten months prior to my assuming the role. Files were missing, the facility was a mess, and there were no procedures or policies in place. The organization had no profile, no stable funding, no staff, no resources, and yet had to supply food to thousands every month. There is a ten-year history between the decision to take on the executive director’s role at the Metro Food Bank Society and the day I discovered I was accepted as a participant in the McGill-McConnell program.

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## Acknowledging the Call

I became confident in my role at the Metro Food Bank Society. Yet, when one of the McGill-McConnell Program professors, Nancy Adler, declared that this program was neither a management program nor a leadership program but boldly stated that this was “an extraordinary leadership program” and that we were all “extraordinary leaders,” my confidence waned. She stated that extraordinary leadership demands that one must be able to reflect on where they have been to determine where they are going. The term “extraordinary leadership” sounded more like a challenge than a declaration. One of the quotes chosen to reflect on was: “If one has a fearful focus on results, one may miss the objective. To be a leader is to move forward despite the obstacles.” In my own reflections that day I noted the following:

When challenged in the past, my first instinct was to retreat, back off, and give up. But in reflection I realize that at those very moments I would “dig in” and try to overcome whatever obstacle was in my way. I became very determined to make something happen. In life’s challenge, I’ve used my faith first, my determination second and skills third to overcome them. To accept the challenge, or not, is the only question ever to be answered. Does this constitute being a leader? Interesting that I have never considered that word as one to describe myself. Committed to a cause? Definitely! A leader? Not sure.

This exercise forced me to acknowledge to myself that I had always been dependent on the good opinion of others. I always wanted to do the right thing. I wanted to be liked. I was a high achiever. Whatever I got involved in, I knew that I gave it one hundred percent of myself. But never had I really stopped long enough to ask myself questions about my leadership style, qualities, shortcomings or strengths. What I knew with certainty was that I felt “led” to the position of Executive Director at the Metro Food Bank Society, and lived that out in my life. I performed well in the role; raising the resources that we needed and leading the staff team through challenge after challenge. I felt very privileged to have a job that was the embodiment of a mission that I believed in so completely. I had felt “pulled” into this role, and once I had responded to God’s will, I never questioned it. But did this make me a leader? Was I any different than anyone else in a similar position?

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“Finding a work to which we can dedicate ourselves always calls for some kind of courage, some form of heartfelt participation.” This sentence from David Whyte’s *Crossing the Unknown Sea* (2001) called out to me. Over and over, I read this line. I loved my work. I thrived on what I did at the Metro Food Bank Society, literally. When I had started there in 1991, I was recovering from an illness that had lasted for six years and at times had me bedridden. I had been working only on a part-time basis, and the position at Metro Food Bank Society was full-time. Against the advice of my closest and dearest friends, knowing how concerned my doctor was, and with only a half-hearted blessing from my beloved husband, I accepted that position. To do otherwise would have been to deny the voice calling me to this place.

To say that I thrived is a mild way to express how I felt so often. I felt alive and vibrant in my role. Never did I look back and wonder if I had made the right decision; I knew that this was where I was supposed to be. I did question the responses I made to the issues that I faced and the challenges that I encountered. I learned to use and rely on my instincts and I prayed for guidance always. I was confident that I was being “led” in the right direction, making the right responses, doing what needed to be done. I always knew when I had made the wrong choices. My “gut” – my “heart” told me. What’s more, my health improved tremendously, allowing me to work insane hours when necessary, to do what had to be done. As a result, the organization grew and thrived. We became known in the community, our credibility was established and donors were investing in our mission to feed hungry people.

I didn’t feel “extraordinary”; I felt blessed. Yet I felt very reluctant to share any of my feelings and thoughts with my fellow classmates at McGill. At one of our early sessions when I had taken the risk of expressing my innermost thoughts about this subject of leadership, stating that I believed it was a “vocation” and not “occupation”, I imagined a chilly response. I backed off to reflect inward. I knew that I needed to listen and learn. Learn about me, learn about leaders, and learn about leadership. Was I really a leader?

In his book *Let Your Life Speak* (1999), Parker J. Palmer focuses on leading from within. He wrote about his own inner journey and how he emerged on the other side of the “valley of depression.” When he did so he found himself “re-engaged with community” and better able to offer leadership to the causes he cared about. This reminded me of my

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journey through my own illness, that time when I could do little more than think, pray and weep about lost time. I came through that experience so much stronger spiritually, if not physically.

Palmer referred to an address made in 1990 to a joint session of the U.S. Congress by the president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, in which he speaks of human consciousness. Havel believes that “authentic” leadership is found in the human heart, and that it is awareness, spirit, thought and consciousness that gives oppressed people the leverage to “lift immense boulders and release transformative change.” Palmer goes on to say that a leader is someone with the power to be able to project either shadow or light on to some part of the world, and that a good leader needs to be aware of this interplay of light and shadow if he or she is to avoid doing more harm than good.

As I read this material, I thought back to some of the members of my staff team. Some had joined our staff because they found themselves unemployed and on social assistance. They had been “placed” at the Metro Food Bank Society as a training opportunity. They had certainly not always arrived at our work site eager to learn; often they were reluctant and resentful of their circumstances – and of us. Our challenge was to help them really look at the situation others were in – to recognize that no matter how bad their own life seemed, there were so many others in worse circumstances. Once that happened, once our new staff had walked through their own pain – that valley of despair – and then out the other side, they changed. They became leaders in their own right, especially in the context of the mission of our organization. Witnessing their transformation, from being so self-focused to caring for others, to reaching out instead of turning away from the needs of others, gave me the greatest sense of accomplishment. I had always believed that my role is about empowering people, whether it is a member of the staff team, or one of the thousands of food bank recipients. I knew that this was “the light. And it was good.”

This concept of the leader projecting either light or shadow plagued my senses, however. So many times when I had been away from the office for a few days, I would be told that I had been missed – that the spirit of the organization was missing, that it just wasn’t the same. That always made me feel good – special, in some way. It made me feel needed and important to the people I worked with. In fact, it fed my ego. The dark side of this was that when I was tired and feeling “down” or worried about some aspect of our

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program, I brought the organization with me into the depths of the despair that I was experiencing. On some level I knew this and would try to hide what I was feeling. Unfortunately, that has not been one of my strengths; my facial expressions almost always give away my feelings. That the atmosphere and the mood of the organization reflected my own emotions became a huge burden. I realized that those are the times when I am the loneliest and need people around me the most. I also realized that those have been the times when I shut myself off and wallowed in the shadows, taking myself lower and lower in depression and despair.

Ironically, as I was trying to internalize this material, that first week of the McGill-McConnell experience, I went into one of those depressions. I had convinced myself that I was there because someone had felt sorry for me, that I was unworthy of the opportunity, that I did not deserve what both the McConnell Foundation and my own organization were investing in me. My inferiority complex, my shadow side, flourished at the very time that we were to think of ourselves as “extraordinary, global, authentic” leaders.

I realized that at times I have a hard job liking myself. If someone said something negative I believed it, I embraced it and I internalized it to the point that I could not function. There were times that I had been paralyzed by darkness, by fear that I would rub off on others, that I would do harm to those I loved and to an organization that I loved. Until encountering Palmer’s work, I was not able to acknowledge this about myself. Once, about twenty years ago, someone told me that they did not like working with me. In fact, she said that working with me “left a bad taste” in her mouth. I was devastated. Do I remember the circumstances that brought about that comment? Not at all. But I do remember the telephone call and her words that cut me to the core. Absolutely! And yet I have never asked that individual the why of that statement. I just accepted it as true. Palmer’s referencing to shadows and spirituality led me on an inner journey and through the beginning of a healing process. I am a child of God and I am worthy. The boulder has been lifted.

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## Servanthood

When standing and looking down at the water pouring over Niagara Falls, I recall feeling so small and insignificant in the greatness, the vastness of that wonderful place God created. There was such power there. As a believer, however, no matter how insignificant we judge ourselves to be, God can use us in great ways. Martin Luther King, Jr. summed this up best in a sermon he delivered in 1968. He quoted from Mark 10:43: “Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant.” Reverend King then went on to say, “Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. . . . You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.”

In *Servant Leadership* (1991), Robert K. Greenleaf writes: “Servant and leader – can these two roles be fused in one real person, in all levels of status or calling? If so, can that person live and be productive in the real world of the present?” Greenleaf answers “yes” to both questions. We do not choose our time of birth, nor do we choose our time of death. Many times I have heard it stated that there are two things that we can be certain of, birth and death. This being true, there are those years between birth and death for which we are responsible. It is in this time and space we become involved in the great scheme of things and are challenged to make a difference on this earth. We will see the world for what it is. I know the cliché “Life is not a bowl of cherries” only too well. As a young person I learned that you must be strong because life can hand you some challenges; but I also learned the art of loving and giving.

As I looked back over my life, I realized that my greatest influence came from my Christian beliefs. According to Greenleaf,

One does not, of course, ignore the great voices of the past. One does not awaken each morning with the compulsion to reinvent the wheel. But if one is *servant*, either leader or follower, one is always searching, listening, expecting that a better wheel for these times is in the making. It may emerge any day. Anyone of us may find it out from personal experience. . . . The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.

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No service in itself is small,  
None great, though earth it fill;  
But that is small that seeks its own,  
And great that does God's will.

– *Anonymous*

As I read these words, I realized that someone had a plan for my life: that I would become a servant-leader.

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## The True Mission

*A calling is when a deep gladness in your heart meets a deep need in the world.*

– Frederick Buechner

The question that burns deep in my heart, in the context of my role in my organization, is the question of the true mission. Are we there just to feed hungry people? Is there not more to do? Where is the justice? Am I not to lead the broader community to view the world of food banking at some higher level? Why did I really get involved? What was God asking me to do? As I thought through these questions, I was reminded of a poem that I had written in December 1998, when I was struggling over a speech I was trying to write to deliver at a business luncheon. What could I possibly say that would touch their hearts, which words would call them to action against the injustice that food bank recipients experienced every day? The poem became the speech:

### **A CALL FOR JUSTICE**

From a one room ministry  
To the complex today,  
Responding to a child's cry  
In a manger lay.

There's no room in our city  
For the poor – though they be  
Isn't it just a pity?  
How do we help them see?

The pilgrimage begins from the break of dawn,  
They begin to line up out on the church lawns.  
To arrive means to be served in that great line,  
A bag of groceries, made from your donation and mine.

Is this the boast of a city we all call home?  
Do we want food banks, soup lines and people without homes?  
Is there no passion for change – for their sake?  
There must be! Please! For the children whose future is at stake?

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Spread the word with all of your might.  
“Food banks are not the answer!” Our mission is to fight.  
“Eliminate hunger and poverty please. ”  
Bring this city and citizens to their knees.

Joy to the World, for the infants and moms,  
For the seniors and teens, they are humans, not bums!  
O Come All Ye Faithful, May there be joy in this place  
Spread the word “Justice, Not Food Banks!” That is our case.

Noel, Noel, hear the Christmas bells,  
That time of year when our heart swells.  
We know the meaning of peace, and of joy,  
Help us bring this to all girls and all boys.

Peace in our city, food in their homes,  
Places for everyone, no one alone.  
Spread the Word. Help all to see the light.  
Merry Christmas to all, good will to all men  
The mission is over! Please God?  
Amen.

I shared this poem because I believed that this spoke of my own values, to my light, my despairs and to my own leadership. Motivating others to action, bringing the best out of other people, is what I believed leadership to be all about.

I know why I am doing what I do. I am involved in food banking because the eyes of children, who seemed bewildered by their circumstances, haunt me. What I do know is that when you are called upon to do things in life, you can accept the challenge and then use the God-given skills, talents, and common sense – whatever it takes to overcome the challenge. Learning comes in so many forms; it is often not until so much later that you actually realize the learning curve that you may have experienced. You just do what needs to be done and keep responding to the “call.” I have a vision, there are many tasks attached to achieving the vision, and above all, I have hope of one day living in a hunger free world. I was to discover that my vision of the world was small.

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## A Broader Insight

To me, globalization prior to September 11, 2001 meant the NAFTA agreement, and the loss of thousands of jobs in Canada. In contrast, it meant job security for food bank workers across Canada. I had this as my most basic understanding of the global economy. However, as I watched the planes fly into the side of the World Trade Centre in New York, globalization took on a whole new meaning. That was fear, insecurity and vulnerability. Forty aircraft from all over the world were directed to our Halifax International Airport. The travelers were brought to three recreation facilities and to one of the high schools in my community. They remained there for a week. Each day, as I went for my daily walk, I met people from different countries and I found myself wondering if they felt friendly or hostile toward the terrorist groups. Never before had I felt such strong feelings of anger and, yes, racism towards another human being. This was for real – and I was ashamed of the feelings, so I didn't talk about it to anyone.

Less than six months later, my world expanded when I traveled to India with my McGill-McConnell classmates to meet with non-governmental leaders and to visit their agencies. From the time the plane hit the tarmac I was terrified. First I was afraid that I wouldn't get my luggage, and then I was afraid that someone would grab it from me as I was trying to find my way to the bus. On the bus, I was afraid that we would be in an accident, and then I was afraid that we would be kidnapped when the driver and his assistants all left the bus (to pay a toll, as I was later told). I was afraid that we had been hijacked when we started down the road towards our country hotel, and then I was afraid of the people when they wouldn't let us have our luggage. When we were shown to our cottage, I was just – afraid. I felt cut off from my home and my family, and I was so homesick that I was reminded of the first time I went to camp as a child and I could not control the tears when they started to fall. I was embarrassed and ashamed of my lack of control over my emotions. Nothing had happened, I was safe, and my luggage eventually arrived. But I couldn't talk about it.

I felt that the people I encountered were strange. They dressed differently and spoke differently. I did not allow myself to trust anyone. After all, no one understood what they

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were saying, so they could have been plotting anything! These were new emotions and became more difficult to deal with as the trip advanced.

The first morning in India, when we met for instruction, everyone was so excited to be in India. I stayed very quiet and tried to understand what my classmates were experiencing that I was not. I listened and noted comments, and made a decision to be open to the experience ahead of me, to listen to learn, to open my eyes to “see” new experiences. I wrote in my reflections, “I must try to be a sponge to absorb so that I may learn from this gift I’ve been given, this opportunity that I have here.”

The test was a trip to Lohari, an Indian village. Leaving the environment of the hotel compound, I realized just how different this place, India, was from anything I had ever experienced before. The sights, the smells and the sounds were overpowering. I went from one shock to another as the bus rattled and rolled through the countryside. From the stench of the piles of cow manure patties, to the drab shacks that people were actually living in. From the cow carcass that the birds were pecking apart at the side of the road to the wild pigs running through garbage piles everywhere, from the half-naked men sitting around playing some sort of a card game, to the women carrying heavy loads on their heads in the fields – it was all so foreign. These were just a few of the unusual and disturbing sights of the trip. There were children everywhere; in fact, there were people everywhere. Everything was strange and yes, frightening! And everything appeared to be so drab and dirty.

The questions that had been going through my mind from the moment we had landed in Delhi were, “What does this have to do with my organization? How will I use this experience?” My eyes were alert, and I vowed to keep my mind open to this learning opportunity.

As we were introduced to each elder of the Lohari community, it was not too difficult, even with the language barrier, to understand the sense of pride they had in each other and in their village. We started on the walking tour, and they took us to their schools, their temple, the ancient well that no longer held any water – all of it interesting. Cows roamed through the village, a man drove a huge tractor through the village, and the longer we were there the larger our group became as we were joined by the men of the

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town and then the children once they left school. The women stayed in their homes. When we finished our tour, we assembled outside, all sitting in a circle, on plastic chairs, asking and responding to questions from each other. I found that I kept tuning out of the exercise and could only focus on the faces that were surrounding us. Some of the children had climbed the trees for a better view; the rest kept moving in closer and closer to us, just watching the happenings. These children appeared to be healthy and well fed. I kept wondering what they were thinking and if they were feeling as strange as I was about this whole experience. Once again I was struck by the contrasts – the contrast of the modern tractor and the obvious lack of any sewer system; the traditional Indian dress of the female residents to the western attire of the males, including the children (one little guy was wearing Calvin Klein pants); the satellite dish attached to one of the buildings contrasting with the slates they were using in their schools.

The most disturbing moment (other than the bathroom experience) was meeting a twelve-year-old girl, who through the translator told me that she wasn't going to school because she was married. That took me by complete surprise, because I had read that arranged marriages for children under eighteen years of age were considered illegal. I thought of my own two daughters, and could not comprehend a parent allowing such a thing to happen to such a young child. She would be robbed of her childhood.

All through that day, I watched the members of my class interact with the children, communicating through actions and even with a digital camera, and I wondered why I didn't feel that same freedom to embrace the beautiful kids that surrounded me. Instead I watched, smiled and kept wondering how there could be any place so backward as this little community in India, with the city of Delhi not that far away. It was very confusing.

Nonetheless I returned to the hotel at the end of our time in Lohari thinking that I would be able to cope with this new environment after all. I was no clearer on what I was to take back to my organization from this experience. I was however, reminded of my visit to Petty Harbour, Newfoundland. When I had gone there to meet with the Town Council members to discuss their situation after the collapse of the cod fishery, they were quite proud of their community and took us on a walking tour. As we moved along the kids started following us and soon we had this whole entourage going from one fishing boat to the other, climbing rocks as we viewed every aspect of their community. Petty Harbour

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and Lohari were rural communities, their way of life more relaxed than urban life; everyone knew everyone else and each family took care of the others. Perhaps this was the connection that I was to make.

What bothered me the most about India, however, was not the lack of sewers or the different attire; it was my own reaction to the poorest of the poor people I saw in Delhi. As we made our way by bus from our country accommodations to the city, I was struck once again by the dirt of that country: wild pigs digging through garbage mounds, open sewers, dirt and dust covering everything. My senses were assaulted. However, upon arrival at the Hyatt Regency in Delhi, the opulence of their foyer, a waterfall, the marble everywhere, was a beautiful sight and I breathed a sigh of relief that all would be okay. There were telephones and one could call home, there was lots of hot running water and soft comfy beds with no mosquito nets in sight. What an absolute snob I had become – all was well!

All was well until we went outside the hotel compound to make our agency visits. Our “demolition derby” trip by minibus to the first site, the medical clinic, was a nail-biting experience. Once there and inside meeting with the young lady that ran the clinic, I realized just how different things were in this country, at least for the poor. They were powerless, at least in this setting, according to my observations. In Canada, regardless of one’s income level, all are entitled and treated to privacy at their doctor’s office. At this clinic, the eight of us (seven students and our leader) were given a tour of the clinic and as part of it we were taken right into the examining room where a young woman and a baby were seeing her doctor. There was no request for permission to enter nor was there an apology for us intruding on this lady. We just barged in, were introduced, chatted, in English, with the physician, and left. “Madam Patient” was ignored as if she didn’t exist. I shall never forget the look on that woman’s face when we all trooped in. She was terrified, as I would be if the situation had been reversed. (Incidentally, I lost all respect for the young man who was our guide, as this was to be the first of many instances that day where women were treated rudely, including those of us from McGill.)

Next we were called by drumbeat to a puppet show just outside the clinic. We joined the residents living in the surrounding shacks: young and old, all coming out to hear about the ills of HIV and AIDS. I could not concentrate on the puppets as my eyes were drawn

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to the sea of faces surrounding me. I realized that I was seeking a look of welcome to a visitor, a smile to encourage one to stay and visit, but found none. The eyes that looked back only stared blankly or with suspicion. No one tried to explain our presence to the residents; we were just there in the midst of this Indian community. It was a strange experience.

Our next two stops were at orphanages for boys. The first one was for those boys who had no parents. Their living accommodations were minimal: a cot, a blanket and, for each boy, a metal box where he could keep his own belongings. These boxes were not very large. There were thirty-five cots ranged in two rows along opposite sides of the long room. Privacy appeared to be nonexistent in this environment. As I toured their classrooms, listening to the teachers proudly sharing their ideas on what they would teach these young boys so that they would have trades, an incredible sadness overcame me. They were teaching them to be tailors, using brown paper to cut out the most basic of patterns and sewing these pieces together on a treadle sewing machine of the early 1900s – my Grandmother had owned one, which had been her mother’s before her. They were teaching them to type on manual typewriters like those that had been in North American offices in the mid-1950s. I had seen these in museums. And on it went. A depression was taking over my spirit as we moved from room to room, program to program. I was incensed that adults in this century would actually believe that these children would be able to support themselves. Who were they trying to kid?

It got worse.

The next orphanage was for boys who had been picked up on the streets by the police. They actually had parents who were prostituting these young boys to earn a living for the family. I looked at the eight-year-old as he was trying to string beads, but I looked into the eyes of a forty-year-old. This child had experienced more in his young life than I had in my fifty-two years. And I was so angry. I didn’t want to see any more, or hear any more, I didn’t want to be there. I could not comprehend parents being so cruel to children. And at the same time their deformities, their dirty faces and hands, repulsed me. I didn’t want them to touch me and I was ashamed of my reactions. I kept praying, “God help me, God help these children. Will this day never end?” But there was more. Next we went was a residential home for girls, many of them young teens. More of what we had

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seen with the boys. Archaic resources to try and teach young women trades to survive in the twenty-first century. Finally it was time for us to return to the Hyatt Regency. Sleep escaped me that night.

Over the next few days, as we met and dialogued with the Indian NGO leaders, we were to discover that they and the NGO leaders of our country had much in common. They were frustrated with the decisions of their government, particularly those that caused more hardships for the indigenous people. They too were at the stage of development in their organizations where they were striving to find ways to work with the corporate sector without having to sell their souls. These leaders recognized that many of the multinationals that would give their organizations money were the very ones that were causing destruction of land and performing human rights violations. These leaders also knew that they were swimming upstream, that as each moment passed, the problems were multiplying and that any hopes of overcoming the ills of that nation were nonexistent. Yet, just as in Canada, one's belief in the basic goodness of another human being allows you to don the rose-colored glasses and look forward with hope to a new and better tomorrow.

These were my reflections on my last day in India. While I had expected to see poverty, I really could not visualize beforehand what I might see. The numbers of street people or shack dwellers surprised me the most. Rows and layers of people everywhere. There was no privacy for them. I witnessed men bathing, shaving, urinating and having bowel movements. That shocked me.

The second thing that I noticed was the sense of connectedness, the sense of community that was everywhere. Whether it was a load of people on a bus, a load of men on the back of a truck, or the villagers of Lohari, people were engaged with each other. They looked each other in the eye and connected.

The third thing that bothered me personally was how easy it was to turn away from those begging on the street. At first I felt so incredibly sad that little kids, sometimes holding babies, elderly men, and so many with deformities were begging for money or food. I could not tear my eyes off them. Around the third day we were travelling around Delhi I was looking dispassionately through the window at them and able to dismiss the beggars

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as they approached seeking help. This bothered me the most. It was my response that appalled me. How could I do this when I worked for an organization that had a mission to feed the hungry? And to do so in such a way as to allow the individuals in need to maintain their dignity. It seemed as if there was no dignity in India: the way thousands were forced to live, forced to beg for food – nor was there any dignity in the manner in which I dismissed them, physically and mentally.

I could not talk about India to my friends, because that would have meant revealing what a shallow selfish person I felt I was while visiting that country. I could enjoy their luxurious hotel, the shopping and the great architecture. I did not engage with the people of India. My personal space was well guarded. I guarded my emotions, as I was afraid to allow myself to feel. I did not know how to handle the anger that brewed deep in my soul, so I closed off. Not until I looked at my photographs did I feel at last. Then I wept: for the little twelve-year-old married girl-woman; for the little beggar girl in the blue skirt; for the elderly man with the diseased arms; for the young woman and her baby in the doctor's office – for so many that I felt powerless to help.

As a leader, this trip taught me that working in the voluntary sector means that the problems and issues are the same, but may differ in degree, from one country to another. One must work against all odds to try and find a way to overcome challenges, because defeat is not an option. When I thought of the children in the orphanages and their classes, I realized that while stringing beads would probably not be the trade to teach them to support themselves, it wasn't the trade, it was a matter of teaching them to take pride in doing something well and being willing to learn new things. The experience made me realize that I had gone looking for program ideas to bring back. I was quite a snob about the "primitive" programs that I saw. But as I watched a child struggle with her embroidery at the last place we visited, it all finally clicked into place. It wasn't the programs or projects that were important; I had been brought to this place to learn about people, it was all about people and how we treat each other. This is the souvenir, the gem that I brought back to my organization.

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## Conclusion

Overall, the McGill, McConnell Program has allowed me to explore and to learn so much about myself. I entered the program so afraid that the other participants would discover how different I was from them. I felt as if I had this deep dark secret that needed to be hidden at all costs. I was not well educated. When we went to India, I feared the strangeness of it all, the unknowns that could not be anticipated. In the end, what I have discovered is that although we can allow fear to limit our response to life, acknowledging that fear can convert it into a tool to maximize the experiences that life has to offer. I have chosen the latter. No more will I ever apologize for not having finished high school. No more will I hide that information. Life has been my teacher, and the experiences offered through programs such as the McGill-McConnell Program have truly been my “finishing” school.

Mother Teresa, a woman that I have truly admired, a humble servant of the Lord, had these words pinned on the wall in her humble room. They have inspired me.

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centred;  
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;  
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;  
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;  
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, some could destroy overnight;  
Build anyway.

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If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;  
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will forget tomorrow;  
Do “good” anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;  
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;  
It never was between you and them anyway.

I shall try to live out my life in humble and obedient service, open to each new experience, each new learning, knowing that my life shall be richer because of being open and being willing to pick up the challenge.

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