

Rising To The Challenge

by **Phil Kratovil**

A CONVERSATION WITH MARY WALKER

Mary L. Walker is the General Counsel of the U.S. Air Force. In that position she serves as the Chief Legal Officer of the Department of the Air Force in Washington, D.C., giving oversight, guidance and direction for the more than 1,600 Air Force military and civilian lawyers worldwide.

Q: How has your personal background contributed to your professional success?

A: My father died when I was little so I grew up as the only daughter of a single mother where finances was always an issue. I remember thinking that I would have to rely on myself to ensure having a roof over my head and food to eat. I never had the sense that you could depend on someone else. Even if there was someone to provide for you, they might die. Those circumstances of my youth had a lot to do with my determination to be successful. It took me many years to learn there is a God on whom I can depend.

I also wanted a profession that challenged my mind. In college I was working as a waitress to help pay my expenses. My employer was a major corporation that had restaurants everywhere. They asked me to consider joining their management team after I got out of college for a career in the restaurant business. I remember thinking that I wanted more intellectual stimulation than this career would afford me. I wanted something where I would be challenged, where my mind was engaged. That's why I chose science as my undergraduate major and then went on to law school. I wanted to be involved in policy development at the highest level and lawyers in our society are often involved in shaping policy.

Q: How did you end up in government?

A: I was a partner in a law firm in California and had been involved in some cases that drew me to policy issues in the context of land use. When builders in California were faced with regulations that made no sense and jeopardized their businesses, I began to write about it. This led to some meetings with folks working those issues in Washington DC. I was approached soon after Reagan was elected and asked to consider serving in government. That led to my first appointment as the Principal Deputy in the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the Department of Justice in Washington. In this job, I supervised all of the federal government's environmental litigation, including enforcement and defense, criminal matters and wildlife and marine resources. It was a big job and there was a lot going on at the time.

Q: How do you define success?

A: Success is using your talents and time to achieve what God has intended and equipped you for. It doesn't matter if you are a sanitation engineer, a gardener, a homemaker, a secretary, the head of a corporation or a mid-level manager. You have been uniquely equipped to do something and if you are able to identify that, educate and prepare yourself, and then apply your talents to that with your whole heart, then I believe that is success. It isn't defined by money or status but by achieving a goal and accomplishing a purpose--the intended purpose for your life. There will also be seasons in our lives that may call for us to accept roles as spouses or parents. These will be priorities that bring personal success. Success also needs to be accompanied by the satisfaction of significance. That which is significant in the long run, like relationships, may not be defined as success in the business world.



Q: What lessons have you found to be most important for achieving success?

A: I think it's important to know who you are. I must know my strengths and weaknesses because I will never be fully successful without others complementing my weaknesses. And I can strengthen others who are weak in the areas where I am strong. Relationships are important. I can't identify people to work with if I don't know who I am. It's important to have learned the lesson of understanding myself and how I fit into the group effort.

Another key to success is having the courage that is developed with enduring trials and testing in life. Courageous people have faced difficult issues over a long period of time and have weathered the storm. They make tough decisions daily where they have refused to compromise. That's what character is all about: courage and integrity. It's someone who values the important things in life and is able to put them into perspective each and every day.

Q: How is faith relevant to success?

A: I can't divorce faith from success because God is the foundation for my life. I became a follower of Jesus of Nazareth when I was young but neglected that faith in my college years. I returned because I realized I needed that foundation. It helped to find someone who could mentor me and help me see my faith as relevant to the challenges of life and work. My relationship with God and with others in the community of faith has been central in my life. So often the bottom falls out, professionally or personally--or both. That's when you need a spiritual family who will mourn with you, pray with you, stand by you and point you to God. God has sustained me through those people in times when I might otherwise be inclined to be discouraged and give up.

We live in a world of terrorism and snipers where personal security is never a sure thing. Life is fragile and it can be cut short at any time. Nobody has any guarantee for the next day, the next month, or the next year. To live your life in that context while depending on God for whatever the outcome takes faith and courage. Making moral decisions in the workplace where it is easy to go along and get along takes courage. It takes moral strength and courage to say, "I'm not going to do this because I don't think it's the right thing to do." I don't believe I would have the courage to live that way if I was not personally connected to the God of the universe.

Q: What are some important principles for leadership today?

A: Leaders need to see the big picture, have a vision for those they lead and the organization in which they are serving. People want to know that the person they are following has a is committed to a course of action that is right and that they're making progress in getting there. As a leader I try to get the big picture and communicate it to the people I am serving as soon as possible. And I talk about it over and over again until the vision is caught by those who are following me. A leader must also set an example of character and determination so their followers know they have a leader they can trust and believe in.

As a leader I also love to see people grow and develop. And sometimes that has to take them out of their comfort zone. I am in the people stretching business. I am constantly asking people to do things they have never done before: to do a more excellent job, to do something new or to do something a different way. What I find is that people will respond by rising to the challenge and becoming leaders themselves. Never be afraid of someone who expects much of you because they may believe in you more than you do. As a leader that's part of my job: to believe in people and see abilities in them they often don't see in themselves.



Q: What advice would you give to today's leaders and emerging leaders?

A: If you limit God to one place in your life, like Sunday in church, you will never experience the excitement that life can hold. When God is the center of your life and everything you do revolves around His plans for you and the world, then that is when life really gets exciting. It's a travesty to be in a place of strategic importance to the world as a business or political leader and not allow God to accomplish the truly significant through you. If you let Him, He will enable you to do things you could never do otherwise. He will use you in ways you never dreamed of and when you look back on your life you will have the satisfaction of seeing a legacy of eternal significance and not just temporal success.