

**DIRECTOR OF STATE COURTS'  
ADDRESS  
2013**



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**2013 Wisconsin Judicial Conference**  
**Wednesday, November 6, 2013**  
**A. John Voelker**

Last year, I spoke about the difference one individual can make in contributing to the whole. I thanked you for your work, not just for what's expected of you on the bench, but for going above and beyond to help improve the court system overall. I am fortunate to be in a position to see the numerous contributions you make to the court system. The Wisconsin court system is what it is because of you.

As you know, the court system experienced a significant loss this year. Dave Hass was one of the people who helped make a difference as part of the court system team. His work directly influenced many of you and how you do your jobs each day. Suffice to say that collectively, we have experienced a loss we didn't expect. As an organization, I can tell you the court system felt the loss. Our presence here today is a testament to Dave's efforts.

Personally, Dave's death got my attention in particular because my father passed away when he was 58. I was a sophomore in college, and I still think about some of the things he missed, including meeting my wife and watching my boys grow up. I know he would have been in the front row of any activity or athletic event my boys were part of — just like he was for me. Sometimes, it can be difficult to assess what a loss means when it occurs. But with time, we often learn a bit more about ourselves, who we are and who we want to be. In short, we begin reflecting a bit more on our own lives and searching for meaning. I did some of that reflection in the wake of Dave's death. Today, I am going to share with you three questions from a book entitled: *Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*. You may have seen the PBS series based on the book. Dr. John Izzo interviewed over 200 people from the ages of 60-106 and asked them to reflect back on their lives and discovered secrets to a purposeful, successful, and fulfilling life. While my approach today is a bit more philosophical than I usually take in my annual presentation, I think it is fitting for this year in particular. The questions to ask yourself:

- Am I following my heart and being true to myself?
- Is my life focused on the things that really matter to me?
- Am I being the person I want to be in the world?

You may not answer these questions the way I would, but I found that going through the exercise provided some insight, not only on myself, but also on the court system and how it fits into my life. Let me break it down by addressing each of these questions,

Am I following my heart and being true to myself?

Obviously part of being true to yourself includes your career — what you get up most days and spend your time doing. In other words, is this what I want to do? Does the work have meaning?

Steve Jobs once said that he would get up in the morning and look himself in the mirror and ask: *“If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today? And whenever the answer has been 'No' for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.”*

Jobs continued: *“Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.”*

*Five Secrets* takes a slightly different approach to answering a similar question-- At the end of day do you feel a “good tired” or a “bad tired?” The author encourages readers to assess what factors contribute to these types of tired. In doing this, I realized that there was a pattern — on days that I felt we were treading water as an organization or focused on the wrong things, I was more likely to end the day with a “bad tired” feeling. I have to admit, I’ve had a few more of these days than I’d like in recent months.

Here are a few contributing factors:

- We are confronting the largest cut in the court system’s budget in our history. As a result, I get to be the guy that says “not now” to good ideas — ideas that can improve our institution. Ideas that may not even be that expensive, but still require some resources. What makes that particularly frustrating is that we are in this difficult financial position at the same time the state is projecting a surplus and recently passed a \$100 million property tax relief bill in four days and only 17 total no votes in the legislature.
- We are witnessing unprecedented political divisiveness in Madison — a situation that can affect morale and our ability to get the job done. I know I have talked with judges, clerks of court, and others who actively communicated concerns about our budget to decision-makers. These communication efforts were invaluable, and I personally can't thank those individuals enough. Unfortunately, these same individuals may not be interested in assisting next time because they got the impression that their time was wasted because politics, not need, was the basis for decisions.
- On top of this, we are seeing good people — judges and staff alike — decide to take their talents to other organizations because the level of compensation is no longer competitive, and they have little confidence that will change.

These circumstances can complicate our work. We are frugal, but we can’t fulfill our responsibility as effective partners in the justice system without quality people, adequate resources, and respect as a branch of government.

Despite these challenges, I can tell you I also have a lot of “good tired” days. These are the days when I see first-hand how important, valuable, and impactful the courts can be in individual lives. I recently attended a meeting of the Judicial Committee on Child Welfare, and as I listened to the discussion was struck by the passion of those judges for the kids that come into

our system. Kids that need help getting to a safe and loving home. What could be more important? I value what the court system stands for and what we do. I am fortunate to have a job that allows me to follow my heart and be true to myself.

I am very fortunate to work in an environment with professionals who believe in what they do, and who are willing to put in the time and effort to do it well. Thanks to you and your work, the courts provide great value, I think, to the justice system, our form of government, and society as whole. How can you not feel good about that?

Now, on to the second question: Is my life focused on the things that really matter to me?

One thing that that gives me the most satisfaction is when I feel like I have made a difference. From contributing to youth baseball players improving their knowledge and skill level when I coached little league baseball, to serving on my local village board, I have always had a strong sense of public service or giving back. My hope is that I leave my community a better place than I found it.

As judges you make a tremendous difference in people's lives. Individuals, families, and businesses rely on you. Your decisions carry the weight of law. I like to think that as an administrator that the work I do and the work that court staff does, helps you all do your jobs better. This is work that really matters to me, and it was especially gratifying for me to recently get a hand-written note from a judge, I greatly respect, thanking me and my staff for assistance and support provided on an issue.

My toes always curl up in my shoes when I hear the phrase, "Good enough for government work." I don't understand why the expectation for those of us in government should be lower. If you look around the court system, you will find that we are in fact leaders in a variety of areas. I think it is clear that we have a culture that values excellence. Let me give you a few examples:

- The development of treatment court performance standards. Thanks to collaborative efforts, our treatment courts have matured to a point that performance standards can be established, and there is broad support to implement them.
- CCAP was recently nominated for a national technology innovation award that recognizes notable contributions to the judiciary in technology and court business processes for the development of the new Jury Management System. CCAP's efforts in migrating to the thin client environment will soon make it possible for you to access your work files and judicial dashboard from anywhere.
- Our commitment to the use of certified interpreters has resulted in 98 percent of the Spanish interpreters used in courts last year being certified.

When I look at the accomplishments of judges and court system personnel and the small part I may have contributed, I get an immense sense of satisfaction. We are all contributing to making this state a better place.

And finally, the third question: Am I being the person I want to be in the world?

This is an easy question for me. The primary thing I want to be in this world is a great dad and husband. But beyond that I want to live my life in an honorable fashion. While being honorable is not easy to define because it is a characteristic which contains many other qualities, from my point of view it is having a keen sense of right and wrong, having honesty and integrity.

I saw early in my life the value and the difficulty of living an honorable life in public service. Some of you probably know the story about my father because I have referenced him in past speeches. When I was about 5 years old, my dad became a whistleblower. In his position within the public works department, he had strong reason to believe that the mayor and others were involved in a kickback scheme. He had limited options because the organization from top to bottom may have been involved. Doing the right thing could have cost him his job and the ability to support his family.

He got his chance when a new mayor was elected and immediately took his concerns to him. Long story short, individuals were held accountable for personal gain on the backs of taxpayers. Companies were held criminally liable for their practices.

I was only a young kid, and I didn't understand exactly what was going on, but I can tell you, this had a lasting effect on me — probably more than I realized over the years.

I am fortunate to have had a father who lived and instilled these values. He held true to his principles despite the added stress and media attention that resulted from his actions. I will never forget his courage. I often think of that when I see judges making hard case decisions and having to deal with personal attacks for doing their job. I feel strongly about these values. Considering that, could there be a better place for me to work than the court system? Just look at court system's mission statement:

The mission of the Wisconsin Court System is to protect individuals' rights, privileges and liberties, to maintain the rule of law, and to provide a forum for the resolution of disputes that is fair, accessible, independent, and effective.

Reflecting on these questions provided me some perspective, especially on the "bad tired" days, and reminded me how fortunate I am. I feel I am able to be true to myself, focus on what really matters, and to be the person I want to be. Research by a Yale psychologist shows that people see their work in one of three ways: As a job, as a career, or as a calling. Those that see their work as a calling are happier. Of even more interest is that research shows seeing your work as a calling is less about the job itself, than the mindset of a person. Those that feel they contribute to a larger purpose, feel connected and work harder. Thanks to the work you do, and what this organization stands for, I see my work as a calling.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said this about the purpose of life. "*It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.*" Upon reflection, I couldn't agree more.