



Realistic Optimism

An Interview with Captain Chesley Sullenberger III

From my mom, I got my intellectual curiosity and a lifelong love of learning and reading – those things have helped me throughout my career.

In fact, with the current global marketplace of ideas, it's imperative that we all become life-long learners because it's the rare individual these days who can make it through an entire professional working life with only one skill set; we have to keep reinventing ourselves and I certainly did after this event – to be a public figure and have a greater voice about these things I've cared about for so long.

Many young people suggest it's tough to be optimistic today. What advice would you offer them?

One of a leader's most effective tools in life is realistic optimism. It's not wishful thinking; it's having a long view and knowing that, based upon reality and actual skills and abilities backed by hard work, we will ultimately succeed. At the same time, it's being able to hold onto a very different idea, which is to acknowledge today's very difficult immediate reality.

But that can be used as a motivation to get to where we need to go – by creating and sharing a vision of a brighter future. That is in essence what leaders do: they have core values and personally live by them, and they have a vision that they are able to effectively share with others who will help create it. That is the essence of humanity.

I was recently in Washington, D.C. speaking about ways to apply aviation safety methods to medicine and patient safety, because medical mishaps and hospital acquired conditions cause 200,000 preventable medical deaths every year in the U.S. alone – that's a dozen 747s a week crashing with no survivors. My talks have been geared towards rejecting the status quo because it's failing us. We need to have a real sense of urgency and not say that because these deaths happen almost invisibly a few at a time, they are a cost of providing care. We need to stop thinking about them as unavoidable and start thinking about them as inexcusable.

Does it concern you that there isn't more of a call to action when there is so much need in this country?

We need to have leaders who can help us not be distracted, who can help us have a greater perspective. Most of us just work full-time trying to get through our daily lives. But we need to be reminded every once in a while about what matters and why; and why is always important – it gives us a deeper understanding.

One of the interviews I conducted in my second book was with Sue Sheridan, a mom from Boise, Idaho whose family endured two awful and preventable medical tragedies. But rather than devolve into anger and bitterness, she educated herself, made allies, and has become one of the foremost patient safety advocates working with the World Health Organization to change the standard of care for newborns globally. It's about these people who have this ability to connect and use storytelling as well as the facts to motivate people.

Did you know these books were going to be a reality at some point?

I never thought I would write a book prior to January 2009, but these books were in me. They were about thoughts I'd had about things that were important to me, about ways I had tried to live my life for decades. The flight just gave me the opportunity to put them on the page, with some help of course. I turned out to be a better storyteller than I might have thought.

What is the message you're looking to convey?

Highest Duty gave people reassurance; it reminded them that human nature at its core is potentially good, even in dark times, and there is always a way to make the world better. Each of us has a responsibility to try – we owe it to each other. Part of a leader's duty is to convince us that not only is change necessary but it's possible and that collectively, we can accomplish things that we could never accomplish individually.

Is there a lack of leadership today?

There are many people who exhibit leadership every day; we just don't know who they are or what they have done because they haven't been publicly tested yet. Countless people are doing a lot of things that involve integrity and courage and they don't make the news. You can be a leader at work or at home if you have core values and you choose to live by them and you are willing to work hard to touch people's lives – that is one of the take-aways of *Making A Difference*.

Will there be more books to come?

Yes. There are so many needs to fill and there are so many things that could be said and so many ways we could try to make the human condition better than it is. And I want to keep trying. If we were all to take on a cause greater than ourselves and look at the longer term more often, those would be great first steps. ●

EDITORS' NOTE Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger is the Airline Captain who gained fame when he successfully ditched US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River on January 15, 2009. All of the 155 passengers and crew aboard the aircraft survived. Sullenberger is an international speaker and consultant on safety, reliability, and management and has helped develop new protocols for airline safety. As of September 2009, he is the Co-Chairman of the EAA Young Eagles youth introduction-to-aviation program. Sullenberger retired from US Airways after 30 years as a commercial pilot in March of 2010. In May 2011, Sullenberger was hired by CBS News as their Aviation and Safety Expert. He is the author of *Highest Duty* and was ranked second in *Time* magazine's "Top 100 Most Influential Heroes and Icons of 2009". His latest book, *Making A Difference*, was released in May 2012.

You have had a long and successful career, but January 15, 2009 brought you to the world stage. How did you develop your vision from that day forward?

It's something I've thought about my whole life and something we've worked on at the airline – I actually helped develop a team-building and decision-making course that we taught all of our pilots and flight attendants.

But I think preparation began before my birth. My grandparents were all born in the 19th century and yet all four of them attended college; my mother was a first-grade teacher for 25 years in the small town in Texas where I grew up and my father was a professional, so I had the great fortune to grow up in a safe, stable environment in which education was valued, ideas were important, and striving for excellence was expected of me.