

excerpt from
The Highest Goal
by Michael Ray

Introduction

MICHAEL BUSH LEANED on the edge of a table in front of one of our classes in Personal Creativity in Business at Stanford University and began to tell his story. He started on a happy note. An alumnus of Stanford as well as the course, he is now president of Tetra Tech Wireless. Then he gave us a little background: After completing his master's degree, he became chief operating officer of a fast-growing high-technology firm. He is married and has two sons, and his wife is the chief technology officer of another company.

His company was a great place to work. It promoted high values and personal development for its employees. Company retreats featured outdoor events and generated an exciting atmosphere that supported trust, community and creativity. Word-of-mouth brought top talent to the door—people knew this was a great place to work.

Then the industry took a downturn. Michael's company lost business as more and more companies replaced its services with in-house departments. He was in trouble.

"I'd look into the mirror in the morning," he confesses, "and say to myself, 'You're going out of business!' Some nights I'd come home and my wife would know to keep the boys away from me." He admits at times he despaired. When he was really low, he even cursed his courses at Stanford—including the one on personal creativity. But through it all, his sense of the highest goal would snap him back into focus.

He remembered that the highest goal for him translated into one word: Teacher. He got energy and felt a connection with something higher when he was teaching in the broadest sense. He knew that he could serve others if he drew on this strength. He knew that if he stayed in a giving, generative, collaborative role, he could navigate the worst situation and create a meaningful life. Having profound faith in himself and his highest goal, he slowly turned things around.

He persevered through the stuff of COO nightmares. He took drastic measures, laying off ninety percent of the workforce. He rallied those who remained, and their values and high level of trust carried them through adversity. Inspired by his resolve, his people pulled together to reinvent the company.

Within a year the streamlined company began to grow as it served a completely different client base. Within two years, it was the industry leader, and its stock rose accordingly. Eventually the company merged with Tetra Tech, and Michael became the president of the resulting division.

Through it all, he stayed true to the principles of this book: He drew strength from his highest goal. He ended his talk to us by describing a full and well-rounded life. He came home promptly for dinner virtually every night. He participated in community activities. He taught in a nearby college in addition to his company duties. His wife continued in her CTO position at another company, but has negotiated a shorter workweek. Everyone in the family has grown as the result of the experience.

Of course, life will continue to happen. New challenges come up all the time. Even when, like Michael Bush, you know your highest goal and the best ways to move toward it, you must cope with life's surprises. None of the stories in this book are about living happily ever after. Instead, they are about living with more strength, perspective, peace and excitement.

Living with the Highest Goal

Michael Bush's story is not unique. People who live with the highest goal (even if they don't call it that) are able to weather the most difficult storms. In fact, they find themselves relying on this powerful resource as they navigate whatever challenges life tosses their way. Lorna Catford not only took the creativity course but also became one of the main teachers and developers of it. She has lived with her highest goal for decades, and she recently found herself drawing strength from it in a very immediate way. When her doctor's office didn't let her know about the results of a test for cancer, she came face-to-face with fear. Her mind raced as she imagined the worst of scenarios, and then, something happened. But I'll let her tell the story:

Omigod. I'm going to die of cancer! No, it's just that they're disorganized in their office. No it isn't. They PROMISED they'd get back to me if it were OK. How will my family cope with me gone? On the way to work, I was writing my farewell letters in my head, planning the music I'd leave for my husband and kids, planning the music for my funeral. I knew about facing fear, and the more I faced the fear, the more I alternated between panic and doom. I knew about moving towards pleasure. What pleasure when your days are so numbered? I knew about finding a gift in all of this. Right. Joke of the century. Then something happened. As I drove down the highway, the fields and even other cars seemed beautiful, filled with a sort of spiritual glow. I felt at peace. Parking in the far-away parking lot, as is my habit, and walking across campus to my office, I breathed in the beauty of the grass, the trees, the million-colored flowers, the million-colored leaves. In class and in meetings, I was ON. Electricity, or maybe energy, was present in everything and every interaction — from the ridiculousness of a malfunctioning computer saga to the inspiration of students in class. Somehow, I'd come to the place of walking through the fear, although I sort of did it blindfolded, or backwards, without realizing it. When I arrived home there was a message from the doctor saying everything looked fine. Phew. This was enough of a test for me, though. And the gift? The proof positive that even in the face of a "worst fear," spirit comes through.

Often a crisis, such as Michael's troubles with his company or Lorna's health scare, gives people a sense of their highest goal. It enables them to survive crises and turn them into breakthroughs in business and elsewhere in their lives.

What Is the Highest Goal?

So what is this Highest Goal? What is it like to experience, and how can it revolutionize your life? Many philosophical traditions tell us that we have within us amazing potentiality, including that of the whole universe. In one tradition, the saints and sages talk about experiencing this potential as a tiny, shimmering blue pearl of light. They tell us that they gaze at the blue pearl, and it fills their body or it explodes to reveal the universe.

Eastern nonsense? Well, consider that as Western science catches up to this kind of "nonsense," it has discovered that the power of many nuclear reactions is present in even a cubic centimeter of empty space—if only it could be utilized. The highest goal is simply to be in this experience of connection or truth (no matter how you refer to it) all the time. That remains a goal, of course, because this is something you spend a lifetime working toward rather than attaining. But your commitment motivates, inspires and guides your journey, and gives you more and more time in this state of connection.

If you live for the highest goal, you are living a life of the spirit—whether or not you consider yourself to be on a spiritual path. If you consciously notice the larger aspects of life, always consider whether what you are doing coincides with these aspects, never forget the times when you were enlivened by the power of the highest goal, use those memories in new situations, and act with the knowledge of the support you have and the journey you are on—you will be living for the highest goal.

As one spiritual teacher put it, "On this globe there is almost endless diversity. Nevertheless, the greater fact is that when it comes to the treasures of the soul, differences vanish. In the place of the heart, only one light shines. This light is the same in all beings. Unveiling the Truth, becoming established in the experience of this light, is the goal of spiritual pursuit." Similarly, this spiritual pursuit takes many different forms, but the paths all lead to the highest goal. The great choreographer, Twyla Tharp, spoke of it when she said, "I work for God. Me and God."

Bob Landouceur, a high school football coach who has led his team to more than one hundred and forty straight wins over a dozen seasons (perhaps the longest winning streak in sports at any level), says it another way: "If a team has no soul, you're just wasting your time."² Every week he attempts to get his players to strengthen the bonds of community and openly speak of the love they feel.

"This is his ultimate goal every season," observes *Fast Company* magazine in an article about Landouceur's approach to the game. "His winning streak is a national obsession, but keeping it going seems to mean less to him than getting 45 boys to say the L word out loud."

What's It to You?

Stories about other people achieving and overcoming odds may be inspirational, but until you consciously experience how you are supported by your own connection to the highest goal, it is difficult to comprehend and make a part of your life.

So take a few minutes right now to think about, contemplate and even relive a situation in which you experienced resonance with the highest goal. Concentrate on one of these situations, whether it happened recently or a long time ago.

The situation you pick can be simple, even commonplace. You can experience the highest goal when you look into the face of a newborn baby (particularly if it is your baby), when you hit a perfect golf or tennis shot, or say just the right thing in a meeting or to a friend. You get this kind of rush of energy and peace when you execute a series of perfect dance steps, get absorbed in a sunset, experience love for someone, or feel at one with the water while swimming. You connect with your highest goal when you awaken full of enthusiasm for the day and when you know you are making a contribution. It is synonymous with being in the flow, —periods in which you are so totally absorbed with what you are doing that time stops and fulfillment comes naturally. It is making your life itself a work of art. It is working at something that you're getting paid to do that you would secretly be willing to pay someone to be able to do.

It is the experience you have when you first fall in love. Problems at work don't seem to be such problems anymore. You can handle them. You can work productively with people you may have considered enemies. You see their goodness underneath the tough exterior. You're in love. Everything looks, feels, is different. This kind of resonance is catalytic. Similar to a chemical catalyst, which causes reactions without being diminished, it is endlessly generative. Once you realize that it has been there for you a number of times in your life, you begin to see the enormity of it. You see that you are operating in a world in which you can draw on grace. Once you see that possibility, you can begin to act with intention relative to the highest goal and better align your efforts with this generative process.

The Most Meaningful Thing

Do you have a situation in mind? You may find it hard to put your experience into words. Resonance with the highest goal has that overwhelming power that the scientists tell us about, that the sages see as the dazzling blue pearl, that your own experience validates. But how can you talk of its enormity? You can start on this journey of noticing your times of connection by using the following series of questions to help you go deeper. Once you have tried this several times, you can begin to get into a beneficial habit of acknowledging your inner greatness and enjoying its various aspects.

You may find it helpful to take some notes as part of this exercise; yet know that you can do it in your head without any writing if that is more convenient for you.

First, recall the most meaningful thing you did in the last week or so. It could be something similar to the situation you just recalled, but think of something that happened recently. Whatever it is, re-experience doing that activity. See it in your mind's eye and get the feeling of what made this activity so meaningful. (Notice that I am not asking you to recall some earthshaking event or accomplishment, just the activity that was most meaningful in the last week or so.) You may want to jot down a few notes about this situation just to identify it for yourself.

Second, answer the question, "How come this was so important, so meaningful to me?"

Then answer the question, "Why is that (the reason you gave to the previous question) so important to me?" And keep asking the question, "Why is that so important to me?" of every answer you give until you get down to one word. That word, if you dig below possible negative reasons (such as fear) or external reasons (such as money) that you have for doing something, represents just one quality of your essence, your Self. When you see what that word is—be it Love, Communication, Wisdom, Energy, Tranquility, Fun, Creativity, Service, Silence, Connection, Peace, Joy, or any number of other qualities that may be part of who you are at core—acknowledge that quality as being part of who you really are. Remember it. Revel in it. Contemplate it. See how it has been a guiding quality in your life. Notice it coming up as you deal with each new situation.

When I ask a group of people to do this Most Meaningful Thing exercise together, we shout out our words at the same time. Then we make time for individuals to say their personal words that came from the exercise. We are moved by the depth of these words as qualities of who we are. Eventually we get the truth that all these words are part of who we are, although they have different meanings for each of us.

If you look at the various words that surface as you use this exercise for any activity, you can see how you can move more quickly to faith and flow in your life. For instance, one man who did this exercise talked about visiting and taking care of his aged and ill father. He first wrote about fear as a reason that he did the activity. He was afraid that if he didn't take care of his dad, he would not be seen as a good son. But then as he worked through the exercise, he realized successively that Connection, Creativity, Joy, Love, and, finally, Peace were underlying the meaningfulness of this activity.

Outer responsibility and fear initially moved him to act, yet the activity became meaningful because of deep traits that were part of his Self. Peace was the highest goal for him. He kept working with this realization with each visit, until his faith propelled him to an experience of genuine Peace with his father. Even though there were difficulties in their relationship, out of this came a flow of compassion and energy that made their last days together complete, an experience of the highest goal for each of them.

What Is Your Highest Goal?

You can use the Most Meaningful Thing exercise to get an idea of the highest goal for you. Review your most meaningful activity and the process you used to get to the one word. Look at that one word as a quality that represents you at core. Consider how that quality has operated in your life. See how often it has figured in your various experiences of the highest goal that you may have contemplated earlier in this chapter. Remember crises and turning points in your life, and see how this quality figured in these events. Savor what your life is like when you are living from this quality.

Remember, it is ultimately an experience of resonance with a larger energy. Though people express it in different ways—connecting with God, merging with the absolute, being in flow with the Tao, enlightenment, doing God’s work, being a channel for love and compassion, being conscious at all times, and finding and living from one’s Self—they are talking about the same thing. The highest goal is to have this experience all the time, to become established in it. Essentially, I’m asking you to state the highest goal in your own words, which might be different from the examples I’ve given here.

Are you ready to make an initial statement of the highest goal for you? Remember, you’ll be exploring your understanding of the highest goal throughout this book and your life. Here, just see what comes up.

Please complete the following sentence:
The highest goal for me is _____

_____.

Once you’ve written this statement or thought about it, you might share your understanding with someone who has done the same thing. Notice how your statements, however different, are ultimately based on experience that connects them at a deeper level. There might be some nervous laughter and joking about this, because you are thinking and talking about a great, almost transcendent purpose for your life, and this conversation can be uncomfortable at times. But these conversations usually produce insights into the highest goal.

For instance, Steve Piersanti, founder and CEO of Berrett-Koehler Publishing, originally thought his highest goal was the same as his personal and business purpose: “Making a World that Works for All.” But when he did the Most Meaningful Thing exercise, he came up with the word/quality Family. He saw that his highest moments came when he experienced that everyone was part of the same human family. This highest goal sustained him as he built his business around his purpose and as he faced challenges in all parts of his life. I believe Steve’s highest goal led to the diverse, creative and compassionate community that makes up his publishing team, and that makes it possible for his purpose to be realized.

John Renesch, an entrepreneur who became an author of many books (for example, *Getting to the Better Future*), publisher, keynote speaker, founder of the

Presidio Dialogues, and social observer and philosopher, felt quite clearly that his calling was to help people negotiate the jolting paradigm shift in the world of work with exultation rather than misery. He talks about how this has always been his purpose, even before he knew it, even in his entrepreneurial days. But when he did the Most Meaningful Thing exercise, he distilled his experience down to the word Trust. He realized that his trust in God helped him through difficult business and personal times, and supported him in his calling. When he experienced that, he saw that living with that highest goal was the foundation for his work.

I have done the Most Meaningful Thing exercise dozens of times, and the word or quality that comes up for me is some version of Communion (Communication, Connection, Compassion or Community). My work is helping people to live from their inner resources in order to create a world that works for everyone, a world in which people can see themselves and each other with their hearts, a world based on Truth and Love. But the highest goal that underlies that purpose is Communion, that sense of unity and flow that I get when I am living and moving toward the highest goal for me. It helps me see problems as opportunities.

Discoveries to Use on Your Journey

What about you? Do you see the nature of the highest goal for your life? As you contemplate this question, you may want to jot down a few thoughts. Make this a continuing process of understanding. As you read this book and bring its ideas into your life, you'll get a better sense of your own quest and touchstone. Let your statement that you put into words earlier be the start of your commitment to live from the highest goal.

Know that this is a journey; only a few of us achieve the highest goal fully in our lifetime. Yet you can integrate the journey to the highest goal into your everyday life, bring out your best as you face challenges and bring harmony and energy into every moment. Once you commit to living with the highest goal, certain steps will help you on your way. These steps are the discoveries I've made in the Stanford creativity work. If you practice any of these steps, you'll be ahead of the game. Do them all and your life will be changed for the better forever.

1. Go beyond passion and success. Living for the highest goal is radically different from what is normally considered the highest: reaching success in external terms and having passion for what you do in life. Most of us "sub-optimize," that is, we go for the short-term and transitory. Go beyond these lesser goals to use the gift of life you have been given.
2. Travel your own path. You can create your own path by simply paying attention to your own best performance—the critical incidents in your life—when you feel most your Self, in flow and in tune with the highest goal. Remember the experience of these times, apply what works to new situations and keep improving your path to the highest goal.

3. Live with the highest goal. Because everything in the world is a connected system, you can't beat it, you can only join it. And the best way of joining it is to live with heuristics—generalizations or rules of thumb for learning and discovery. Without this practice of living with heuristics—such as Pay Attention, Ask Dumb Questions, See with Your Heart, or Be Ordinary, or other “live-withs”—the content of this book remains just that, content. Enliven your journey with live-withs.

4. Find true prosperity. The more you express and experience your highest qualities, the more you are filled with a rich feeling of self-worth, and the wealthier you will become in the truest sense. Find the prosperity that will sustain you through the ups and downs of life and keep increasing, even through difficulties.

5. Turn fears into breakthroughs. When you have the grounding of the highest goal, you can see your fears for what they are. Learn from them, and turn their energy into breakthroughs and opportunities of the most lasting kind.

6. Relate from your heart. I define “compassion” as seeing the highest in your Self first and then seeing the highest in others. If you have a full, rich feeling of self-worth, you have already taken the first step toward having compassion. See others from this perspective, and you begin to change the nature of your relationships for the better and make connections that move you toward the highest goal.

7. Experience synergy in every moment. You can achieve synergy—a much more dynamic state than balance—among the parts of your life by developing organizing structures based on your highest goal and by getting into the flow of intuitive decision-making. 8. Become a generative leader. Generative leaders pass along their experience of the highest goal and ignite creativity in others. Share the fruits of your quest for the highest goal with others, and spread its effect in a beneficial spiral.

The rest of this book is devoted to these steps. In a sense, once you know your highest goal and these eight discoveries, you know everything that is in this book. But unless you live with the highest goal and interact fully with these discoveries, you will have only knowledge. Use them, and you will go beyond knowledge to live with wisdom—the wisdom that comes from within you and beyond you and that sustains you in your life's journey.