

EPISODE 51

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:06] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:19] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. As you know, if you're a regular listener, this is a place where we have conversations with people who have made a decision to raise their hand and choose to lead on some challenges that civil society faces, that the world faces and their pursuit is to see if they can make an impact for the common good.

I say this all the time, because it's always a pleasure to have any guests on. But today's a little different for me. I have a friend of about 30 years, named Tom Tyner. Tom is a neighbor in our community of Bainbridge Island where we live. He is the Legal Director for The Trust for Public Lands, which is a national non-for-profit conservation organization based out of San Francisco. Tom is their legal counsel working for Trust for Public Lands on projects all over the country for that matter. I've come to learn a bunch of things about Tom that I did not know in the 30 years we've known, because we don't usually talk about work. We're going to get into some of that stuff. First of all, Tom Tyner, it's so good to have you on the podcast, 10,000 Swamp Leaders. Thank you for coming here.

[0:01:20] TT: Well, thanks for having me, Rick. It's great to be had.

[0:01:22] RT: Okay. All right. There's a bunch of stuff to get into here, but I want you to have a chance to tell people what it is you think is useful for them to know about you for context purposes? Then from there, we'll go into some detail. It's all yours.

[0:01:36] TT: Well, I'll keep this short and sweet and simple, because my life is short and sweet and simple. I had a very middle-class upbringing. I was an English major in college, went to law

school, not because I had a burning desire to be a lawyer. In fact, I didn't even know a lawyer. I had never met a person who was a lawyer when I applied to law school. But I had an English degree and didn't know what else to do with it, so the law interested me, and I went.

I got my first job out of law school for a bank as a transactions lawyer, which was a great training ground, but it never really fed my soul, you might say. Drafting loan agreements for big companies and banks didn't really get me too exciting, but it gave me a lot of good training. At some point, I made the decision that I wanted to do something in the law that was more satisfying to me personally, met with my personal interests and goals, and sought out a job working for a non-profit conservation organization, and that's now almost 30 years ago that I've been with them. I've never regretted a day that I made the switch from being a banking lawyer to being a conservation lawyer. That's who I am, and I won't go into detail about my kids and dogs and living arrangements, but unless that's critical.

[0:02:47] RT: Well, it might pop up in our conversation, but we'll leave it for that moment spontaneously. It's interesting to me, because the name of the podcast, Swamp Leaders, comes from a quote by a guy named Donald Schön, who was an organizational development scholar at Harvard. He wrote a book, and inside the book he talks about the choices that people make, oftentimes not everybody, but choices that some people make, somewhere in the age of about 30, 35, where they decide that they'd rather spend their time working on problems that he calls ill-formed and ill-defined. He goes on extensively about this choice that they make. He says at the end, and when they make that choice, their life turns out different.

It struck me that I know, you spent 11 years in a big bank, and then you made this choice to go to The Trust for Public Lands. Share with people right out of the gate, what are the parts that made up the decision? Because we have people listening who are maybe 11 years in a place, and they're wondering, "What's the move like and what's the process I might want to account for that helps me think it through clearly? For you going back, how did you make that decision?"

[0:03:53] TT: It is a convergence of a couple of things. One is my first job out of law school was at the bank, and I was there for 11 years. For the first few years, as a new lawyer, you're basically learning the ropes, getting a little bit of confidence, understanding what you're doing, getting good at the craft of being a lawyer. That was all great. At the same time, we were

starting a family, so I had a couple of young kids when I was working at the bank. The kids reached an age of five or six, and it was time to start thinking about, well, actually, it was slightly younger than that, but at school age, where they were going to start going to school pretty soon.

We were living in San Francisco Bay Area, working in Downtown San Francisco. I had reached a point with my job where I knew my job. I could do it very well. Each project I worked on brought certain challenges, but it was the same process. There's a certain satisfaction in putting together a transaction, and everybody signed in my case, loan agreements and all the documents and close a deal. You feel like you've moved the organization, the bank on, you've done something good for the borrower. You've completed a transaction. There's a satisfying feeling about that, but it's a very mild feeling of satisfaction.

At the same time, when we had kids, and we were probably living in an area we didn't think would be optimal to raise kids. I just started realizing that I was bored with the work I was doing. It became routine. It didn't really excite me. I mean, frankly, I did it, because by that time, I was fairly good at it, and it brought in a regular paycheck. My wife and I talked, and we really said, "This is not really where we want to be living for the rest of our lives. This is not where we want to raise our kids."

My wife's the teacher, and she can teach anywhere pretty much at the time. We started thinking about what's next? Where could we go and find an environment that was more conducive to the place we wanted to live, and where I might be able to find work that would be more interesting to me personally and more satisfying? That's where I say, it kind of converged. We started looking in the areas we wanted to move to. Bainbridge Island popped up on a number of our screens. We visited it. We visited the large Seattle area and really liked the area. It had that perfect mix for us as a rural, undeveloped areas with access to a big city, sophisticated city, where I could find work as an experienced bank lawyer.

But I didn't really want to be a bank lawyer, so I was also at the same time, looking for a job that was more satisfying. I was reading Wendell Berry in John Muir and getting excited about the outdoors and conservation. I said, "Boy, wouldn't it be great to get a job doing that kind of work?" There's not a lot of opportunities in that area, but I started looking around. Everything people say about networking, which I avoided all my life, actually works. Through a series of

coincidences, my wife started talking to another mother at the preschool that our kids were going through in Marin County. They got to talking about me, because the decision that we were going to move at some point, just a matter of when.

This woman said, “Oh, that's interesting. Your husband is looking to make a move and to get into conservation work. I just happened to be married to the general counsel of a non-profit group in San Francisco. I don't know if they have any openings, but you certainly ought to be in get in touch with them.”

[0:07:01] RT: Have you ever heard of The Trust For Public Lands at this point?

[0:07:04] TT: Never heard of them. I had never heard of them. Other than the Sierra Club and the nature conservancy, some of the big organizations, I had never heard of this little group and it was a relatively small nonprofit, was established – it's been around 50 years now, but at the time it was only around 20 years. I knew that their mission was conserving land for people. I followed up lead that my wife had given me and I reached out to the general counsel, who contacted me back immediately and said, “Well, we don't have an opening right now, but we might. We might have an opening here in our Seattle office. If they do, you certainly ought to apply for it.”

A year later, we had made the decision to move to Bainbridge Island and had done that and I was living there and I followed up with the attorney of the Trust For Public land in the Seattle office, who by coincidence said, “Well, I'm really glad you called. This is a great timing. I'm leaving this position and I haven't announced it yet, but I'm going to be leaving. If you want to get a resume in here and a letter of interest, you had to be the first one.” The next day, I dashed off my resume and sent it to him. After a couple of weeks, I mean, it felt like a couple of months, but it was probably a couple of weeks of interviewing and discussing.

It didn't hurt that the person who was leaving had himself come from a banking background. He worked for Seafirst Bank in Seattle when he took the job at The Trust for Public Land. We had that in common. I had the fact that I knew the general counsel through this preschool in San Francisco. One thing led to another and suddenly, I got hired. It was both the most exciting day

of my life and the most terrifying day of my life. I said, "Oh, my God. I don't really have the faintest idea what they do."

I learned a little bit from research and all that, but truthfully, you never really know until you show up at the office, hand you your portfolio and say, "Well, here it is." It worked just the way networking is supposed to work, with help from a timely decision on the part of my predecessor to leave the organization, just about the time I need an opening.

[0:08:58] RT: I'm going to add also, with a very qualified candidate to fill a position, but you're going to be modest about that point. We'll come round to that again, though. I want to come back to this process a little bit. But first for people, let's help them understand what the work is for The Trust of Public Lands, because for a lot of people who may not know anything about what you're up to there. Get people some sense of what the purpose of the work of the organization and then what you do in support of that work.

[0:09:22] TT: Absolutely. Yeah, I'll give you that. My elevator speech when people ask is pretty, pretty simple. The Trust for Public Land is a nonprofit land conservation organization nationally based in San Francisco, offices throughout the country. Essentially, we do two things. We buy and sell land and we build and refurbish parks. They're both related to the core belief in the organization that people should have the opportunity to get outdoors. People should have an opportunity to get into nature relatively close to home. Whether that's going to a local park, going to a green belt to go for a hike, getting to a community, or regional park, or getting out into the wilderness, getting out into backpacking and seeing the national parks and national forests of this country.

Our mission is to identify and protect those lands that have some unique conservation value. Scenic, recreational, whether it be skiing, hunting, fishing, camping, bicycle riding. We also work at conserving working land, working forests, because working forests have great habitat value and they oftentimes have trails that go through them, camping opportunities, hunting and fishing opportunities on private forest lands. We often work to conserve working ranches, because, again, those ranches have acreage that's available for habitat that has in many cases, grows local food, that provides jobs for the community. If it's a working forest, it provides timber jobs.

We just see a lot of benefits to people having access to public land. When I say we buy and sell land, we do buy and sell land. We typically buy land from private landowners, timber companies, other kinds of industrial corporations that have holdings, things like that. We also buy land from people who just happen to own land in the mountains, or lands that would make a good regional park, or lands that would be adjacent to existing public lands. We buy land from private parties, but we sell them to typically, government agencies, all of the kinds of government agencies that own and manage lands, local park and rec districts, cities, counties, state parks, national parks, national forest lands, fish and wildlife, preserves.

We work with all these federal, state, and local agencies who are, as part of their mission for their constituents are owning and managing lands that are open to the public to visit and camp on and recreate on. We help those lands get into public ownership and be available for public use. On one level, my job, and the same thing with parks, there are a lot of underserved communities that don't have parks that people can walk to, or easily access. And so, their children don't necessarily have access to those opportunities to get outdoors for the exercise value, for the sake of socializing with other kids.

We spend a lot of time locating those parks and working with communities where they're located to refurbish them, bring them up to be modern parks with surfaces that are good for activities, soccer, basketball, the usual things, play areas, but also meeting areas and green belts, water features, things that give them an opportunity to experience the outdoors and both for the healthy reasons, the exercise and also, just to see how nature works, to see how water is retained in some landscapes and some water features and how trees had shade factor into climate change and things like that.

A lot of benefits to the organization, believes that access to public lands serves. My job is to work with our project managers who are working on those projects of buying that land from a private landowner and then selling it to a government agency. Just like anybody else buying and selling land, there's a lot of due diligence you have to do. There are contracts you have to enter into, there are appraisals and sometimes surveys. Then we work with the landowner to acquire those lands. At the same time, we're working with a government agency partner, who's going to be the ultimate long-term owner. Let's just say, it's the US Forest Service, for example.

Well, the Forest Service is always looking to add to its holdings and expand the land that it owns as the population increases. They need to expand the amount of land available for the public. When land is available that they have on their wish list of lands they'd like to acquire, they don't always have the funding. They never have the funding, in fact, because they get funding appropriated by Congress, just like towns get their money appropriated by the city council and it comes on a yearly budget.

The land that they've been having their eye on is a critical piece of important conservation, or habitat land is up for sale now, or available for sale now. They can't do anything about it, because they don't have an appropriation. They won't have it for about a year. There's that lag time before they can actually have an appropriation and money to buy it. We as a private nonprofit group, have the ability to go out and negotiate with that landowner for an acquisition of that property with the intention and expectation that we'll ultimately get it into public ownership. We work with the timeline that the landowner has, as well as the timeline that the government agency has, who's going to ultimately acquire it from us.

[0:14:18] RT: This begs the question that I've never thought about, because I've heard you talk a little bit about this process. Does TPL have a campaign to get contributions, or people who are going to endow the organization with money so they have the liquidity to do some of these transactions? Or how does that work in this process?

[0:14:35] TT: With us, it works a couple of different ways. We are a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, so gifts to The Trust for Public Land are tax deductible. We have a robust private philanthropy part of the organization, people who fundraise and professionals who seek donations from individuals and from foundations. That's a big part, not the biggest, but it's a big part of our operation. We also apply for grants from large foundations, the Ford Foundation, all the big foundations and many of whom make grants to conservation, or natural resource types of organizations.

We also have access to, like any other business, lines of credit. When we need money to buy land that we're going to have to hold for a little while before we'll be able to sell it to the government agency before they'll get their funding. We do have access to both reserves and to lines of credit with our commercial banks that we can borrow money. We try to avoid that as

much as possible. We try not to use our own money, like any good non-profit and keep our costs down by timing our purchases and our acquisitions whenever possible to occur concurrently.

The day we buy the property, we're selling it to the government agency and they're funding our sale to them and then we turn around, that money flows right back through the transaction to the seller from whom we're buying the property. About 80% of our deals close that way so that we're not using our own money, unless we need to do so to buy and hold the property for a period of time.

[0:15:56] RT: Let's give listeners some stats. How much land over X period of time has The Trust for Public Lands facilitated to turn into these varying forms that public has access to? What can you tell them about this? Because it's pretty impressive numbers.

[0:16:12] TT: Well, yeah. The number is very impressive, and I should have them on my fingertips. We as an organization, we close transactions involving a purchase and sale of land into public ownership. We do organizations, maybe I want to say 300, 400 transactions a year, and any given transaction can be as small as a vacant lot in an inner city that's going to be converted into a small playground. To transactions on a landscape scale, we're buying tens of thousands of acres of timberlands to add to an existing national forest, or we're buying conservation easement over a 100,000 acres of forest land owned by a timber company that will keep the property in private ownership.

The timber company will own it, but they'll own it subject to a conservation easement that will not allow them to convert that land to non-forestry uses. It's in the tens of millions of acres and the billions of dollars in terms of fair market value of land that we've conserved. In my little office in Seattle here, I personally close about 20 transactions a year, anywhere from 50-acre regional lands, regional park to 50,000 acres of forest land in Idaho, or a 100,000 acres of forest land in Oregon.

[0:17:28] RT: It's pretty plausible that a lot of people in this country are visiting and experiencing parks and varying green belts and trails and stuff that one way or the other has the fingerprints of The Trust for Public Land on it, I would think.

[0:17:43] TT: It'd be unlikely, if anybody has gotten outdoors to a park, or a national park, or a wilderness area, hasn't set foot on some land that we had a hand in saving. In most cases, you won't see any footprint from us. You won't see a sign up saying this was a TPL project, because most of those lands go into government ownership. But some of the park work we do, if you look hard at a park in your local community, you may find a little sign that says, "This park was created with the support and help of The Trust for Public Land."

[0:18:10] RT: Let's link back again. You're an attorney at a big bank in San Francisco. You're there for 11 years. You learned your craft about how to be a lawyer. You take a leap. You moved to a place you've never been, don't know anybody, you've got two small kids in tow, you don't have a job. In spite your best efforts to be a poor networker, you actually network and link yourself to a position where you end up in this organization that has this level of impact around the country.

Help people understand, because we have people out there who were in some version of a similar work, career path as you're describing you were in and then they're trying to figure how to do what you've done. When you reflect on lessons learned on how you did that process, what advice, or suggestions do you have to people who might be edging up against that line and trying to decide, go, no go, etc.? How would you counsel them if you're having a cup of coffee with them and they were wondering about this?

[0:19:08] TT: Well, that's a really good question, because I got very lucky, but there was a lag between the time that I had the contacts at The Trust for Public land and the time the person whose job I filled left. During that period of time, while I was in touch with them, we had already made the move when we were here. We were living on Bainbridge Island. In the interim, I took some part-time jobs that were a local attorney on the island, who was doing insurance defense work about which I knew nothing. But I learned a little bit about that, and so I was working part-time for him.

I also took a part-time job working in evenings at a pizza restaurant that was owned by a former Bank of America is another connection. A former Bank of America banker who I didn't work with, but when we found out we both worked with Bank of America and he found out that I was making this transition and had some free time on my hands while I was looking for a permanent

job, he offered me a job working in his pizza restaurant. I took it. I was working in the evening making a little hourly wage. All the time, I was looking for other jobs and doing this other part-time legal work. There was a period of time there where we looked at each other and said, maybe we were a little hasty in the timing of this move and we should have not made the move until one of us had a full-time job lined up.

If I had to do it again, that's probably just because I'm generally conservative by nature, I would not have made the final decision to leave my previous job and make the move to my new community where we're living, without having the job I wanted lined up and walked right into.

However, having said that, we made the move, we rented a house and basically used the proceeds from the sale of the house we had sold when we left California to get us through the first months and the first year while we were working part-time. When I got the job, of course, everything turned out to be fine at that point, but for a while there, it didn't look like it was going to be fine. It looked like we were really going to be getting to the point where how much longer could our money last before it started to get a little bit desperate. That was lucky in that sense.

I never regretted making that move, even though it set us back a little financially, because we had started over. If we hadn't made the move when we did, I wouldn't have been here to take that opportunity for the job that I have now. It was definitely a leap of faith and it's not one that I – I encourage people to do that only if they're really certain, if they're absolutely dead certain that they want to make this move and are committed to do whatever they have to do once they make the move to network and take part-time jobs. Maybe that the job is going to be your permanent job to find something that you can do to make ends meet for a while and to be prepared to deal with little fear and anxiety, while you wait to see how things are going to work out.

[0:21:46] RT: Because you're drawing a line under the transition and careers. Meaning, you could have been approached by a search consultant representing another bank doing the same legal work you're doing in the bank you're in for more money. Maybe it's in a different location. You got to move out of California. That transition is a geographic transition, but you're making that move based on a high degree of similarity of the work. The transition adjustment for the family is contextually positioned and also smaller.

You on the other hand, you're leaving familiar territory, you're leaving a network of people, you're changing your career completely from something you know quite a lot about 11 years to something you don't know much about at all as near as I remember, into a community where you don't know anybody. Talk a little bit. I know the answer to this question, but for listeners let's talk about this. I know that where you landed communally-wise on Bainbridge Island has had a very positive support structure for the transition for your family from California to here and also for you work-wise. Talk about the degree of value that you've learned from that that you might counsel people on and what's – because I think that's a thing people can forget about in a transition.

[0:23:00] TT: You're absolutely right about that. We were very sure that we wanted to make a transition. We found the geographic area we wanted to make it to. We didn't know anybody, but we were absolutely confident that this was the right place for us. I felt that way driving onto the island for the first time we rented a house. I drove up, brought the dogs with us, sight unseen, I walk into this rental house. The minute I got to the house, I know this is the right place for us, this is where we want to be. I never had any doubt that that was the right decision.

Even during the next series of months when we began to get to know people in the community and that reinforced we were in the right place, but the job search was going slowly and that created a lot of fear and angst, but we never doubted that we made the right decision for ourselves and our family. Very quickly, got connected with a group of friends, including you, of course. We knew that kept us grounded and said, this is the right place for us, this is exactly what we were hoping to find, is the kind of people we were hoping to meet when we got up here. These are the schools we want to attend.

It was so clear that we were in the right place, that even the fact that we were spending down our savings and our money, the trepidation of that cause was less than the certainty that we were in the right place. Just professionally, I didn't know how long I could continue the legal work for an organization where I just didn't feel passionate about it at all. It was very routine. I could see myself becoming a different person if I continued that job. Not a bad person, but I just would not be a very satisfied person. I always wish that I had made a different decision that had gotten out of being a bank lawyer.

Again, not that's a bad way to make a living, but I knew that if I came up here and just got into a different bank working situation, I'd be right back where I started from when we started our journey, because I'd be doing what I did for the paycheck so that we could continue to live in this community, because it was clear we wanted to be here, but I would not have been particularly satisfied. I would have been bored. That was one of the reasons we wanted to make the move. We wanted to have a change in our lives, and I wanted to have a professional change, where I was excited again about going into the office and excited about doing the work I did and seeing that it really had tangible results in the world that made me proud of it and excited about it.

I have talked to people who have thought about making the move and I say, well, it was the best decision we ever made. It worked out great, but it didn't always look that way. If you're thinking about doing it the way we did it, be prepared for a period of time where you're going to perhaps do a little soul searching and wonder if you made a mistake. But my advice to those people is if you were absolutely certain that you're in the right place and you want to do something, hang in there and be tenacious and be looking hard and taking every available opportunity to talk to organizations that you feel like you have a kindred spirit with. In my case, it worked out and I think it'll work out in most people's cases if they're diligent and really committed.

My experience is people who really have a passion for doing something, they can go to interviews and send letters, that's reflected in how they approach the job. There's a new opportunity. I couldn't be more excited about doing it. I have this skill set, which I think is transferable, even though I'm not entirely sure exactly all the things you do. Since I've been in an organization, I've now seen people coming in making career changes similar to the one I made and there's just something about them. There's an energy about them that they're embarking on something that really gets them excited. I say, "Oh, boy. This is a person we want to really bring onboard if we can, because they're going to bring this energy and commitment and new birth, a new professional career excitement to the job," and that's going to be –

[0:26:45] RT: It's going to work. You're bringing up this P word, which has come up on this podcast a few times, which is passion, or what Joseph Campbell used to refer to as following your bliss, which we all listened to and go, "Oh, yeah. That sounds ideal. Who wouldn't do that? Who wouldn't chase passion and bliss as an expression of their contribution to the world?" But

you brought it up. Since you brought it up, all people want to know the answer to this question that they've been searching forever, so in a bit of seriousness.

I mean, you have two kids who are now grown and out in the world and doing their thing, but let's just play with this a little bit. From your own perspective, related to – you can relate it to whatever you want. It could be a life in the context of this podcast, it's about how I choose to use myself to lead in the world, which could be in work and all sorts of other places, but what is the thing that stirs you and is probably consistent across all the different forms that you use yourself in the world?

For example, I know for listeners, you work at TPL, you've served on several boards in the community, so you use yourself in that way. We will get into a little bit about this little side business you got about writing and you're a book publisher. What connects the dots there around the things that you're willing to invest time and energy into for something bigger than Tom?

[0:28:10] TT: I think, it grows out of two things really. One is that the work I'm doing now, I see an immediate tangible benefit in the world, because of something I worked on. I see a park that I can walk to. I can see a mountain range that now is available for people to visit. It's physical. I can go there. I can stand on it. Even we've done some projects here on the island. I can go stand on a Pritchard Park which was a project that we worked on, that I worked on, and it's just down the street from me. There's a real sense of accomplishment and pride that comes with that. Even the projects I don't see, I've done projects in Alaska and I did a project in Puerto Rico and I do projects all over Idaho and New Mexico. I'll never see some of them, but I know that there's someone like me and there's some person out there is now walking on that land saying, "Oh, this is terrific." We wanted this to be open to the public forever, and now it is.

I know that I played a little bit of a role in that. That gives me an immense amount of personal satisfaction, which is important because any legal job, I mean, we're buying and selling land and we're dealing with landowners, from sophisticated corporate landowners to mom and pop folks and everybody in between. The work we do is great and inspiring and I love it, but the people aren't always easy, and the problems you encounter in any real estate practice can be very frustrating in trying to – working with government agencies can be very frustrating. You've got to

work hard, and so you need a reason to want to succeed, rather than just say, “Oh, well. Here’s a brick wall. Here, I guess, we’ll move on to the next project.”

That drive to at the end of the day, be able to put a little flag on a map somewhere and say, “Okay, one more victory for some kids can have a park to play and some families can get to go camping and some ranches can remain a ranch, rather than become a bunch of homes, fourth homes for billionaires.” You need that to get through any kind of a work environment, because there are going to be days when it’s just no fun. We just have days where everything seems to go wrong and the problems pop up.

If you can take a deep breath and say, “Yeah. But in the end, it’s worth it if I can figure out a way to get around this problem, or make it go away, or come up with a fresh approach,” we can get to the end result of getting this deal done. That gives me an immense amount of satisfaction and it gives me the passion to want to get it done. Over the years, I think I’ve closed 800 projects. That’s 800 pieces of flag, or little flags, little pieces of land markers out there that I can look at. That gets me excited. But it also puts me in touch with all of these local nonprofit groups.

We do a lot of work with local land trust, because they are sometimes advocates for the land that we’re trying to save. Well, now I’m suddenly meeting people from the Bainbridge Island Land Trust and from the Nature Conservancy, all these other groups, who are very much like the people at TPL. They’re smart people who’ve made a decision to work in an area that gets them excited, that they feel personal connection with. That’s expanded, because that ended up being on the board of directors for the Bainbridge Island Land Trust for six years, including a year as president.

Through them, I’ve met a lot of people on the island who are conservationists in other areas. It’s opened doors for me to meet this group of people who I never would have been aware of, or come across. They all turn out to be pretty cool people and I’ve become good friends with some of them. I find the things they do inspiring and we have a lot in common. It’s just the best.

Then one other component is working at the bank brought in a paycheck and it paid for our living and a good life and all that, but it didn’t really feed my soul. I use that term. Now, the work

I do really does feed my soul. It makes me feel good about what I've done, even a long, hard day. When I've been on a hard day, but I've done something that's energizing and feels good, I'm not ready to shut down. I'm ready to quit my work, but my mind is going and I've got energy to do something else and that's what led me in to do some of the things I do on the side, like writing.

I find that I have energy and I want to do something, so I sit down and I write a little something and write a little essay, or write a little funny story. At one point, I've got a quite a collection here of these funny little stories. I wonder if the local newspaper would be interested in running them. I followed up on that. Sure enough, they said, "These aren't bad. We'll run a couple of them and if the public doesn't scream too loud, we'll run a few more." That's been a 20-year gig for me now, writing a humor calling for the local paper. I never would have dreamed of doing that back when I was a bank lawyer. It just didn't seem like something that I would have the time for, or the energy. Frankly, at the end of a working day at the bank, I was just done using my brain.

Now when I'm done with my TPL work, I'm just beginning my day. I read something, write a funny column, do something else. It's open doors for me that I never would have opened if I wasn't doing something.

[0:32:50] RT: Open doors inside yourself.

[0:32:52] TT: Inside of me that I just might have been there, but they were doors that I thought were going to be shut, because my life was something else. Now, I feel like possibilities are endless. If I had the stick-to-itiveness, I could write a book. I don't think I've got, I mean, write a book, I think I'm a column guy. But nevertheless, I could. That's the door that I now know I have the potential to pursue that if I want to. That's a great feeling. I'm no longer looking at work is what I do during the day and what I do outside of that beyond, eat, watch television, go to bed. I now think that I've got paths that are open, things I could do, hobbies I could take up in the future and pursue.

It's a totally different energy. Totally different energy, and a mind space that says, there are no limits really for what I could do. I've got things I can get involved in. If I see something looks exciting and interesting, I can dabble in that, because who knows? Maybe it'll turn out, you'll pan

out and be something I'll be good at. Maybe I'll scratch that itch, check it off the list and say, "Okay, I'm going to drop my calligraphy class."

[0:33:49] RT: For all listeners out there, I'm going to say, because I have vast experience with Tom and this, he carried this to the extreme and took up golf and all that stuff he said about how it gives you energy and that he's still pretty much an average golfer like me, but we enjoy each other together and that endeavor. Tommy, this is called 10,000 Swamp Leaders. As you know and we discuss in a run up to our conversation doing this that my view is, and it's not a view that I created. It's a view I share with a lot of people, who spend a lot of time trying to understand this weird concept of leading, which is one of the ways that leading is defined is it's a choice in an activity, rather than a position.

Meaning that you could look at the TPL org chart and the map is really a map of authority, because each position comes with certain responsibilities to do certain things. But if you leave TPL tomorrow, somebody replaces you, you don't get that authority. It stays in the position. Whereas, leading on the other hand can come from anywhere and anybody and usually does. It's from that point of view that the podcast is oriented. From your standpoint, the first question is independent what I just said, what's your definition of leading?

[0:34:59] TT: That is a good question. I think I have in my tenure, well, both at Bank of America and at The Trust for Public Land, I filled positions of management. I'll say management, not leadership, because on the org chart, I had legal assistance, junior attorneys who reported to me, as many as four, or six, seven at a time. Now, I've got one. It's a woman in our Bozeman office who, while she reports to me, she's smarter than I am, she's better at what she does than I am, and it's absurd to think that I manage her. I lead her. I certainly manage her on the organizational chart sense of it, but we are peers in every way otherwise.

For me, I certainly don't attach leadership with positions in an organization. We have senior leadership at The Trust for Public land in the 30 years I've been here, it's changed dramatically and is virtually no one there now who was in that position when I started. Some of them have been great, inspirational. I've come with them, I was good friends with. Others, I never quite understood what their agenda was, what they were talking about, whether they really had a firm

grasp of where they wanted the organization to go, and they certainly perhaps didn't have the inspirational skills you want in a person who's the head of an organization.

We have people in our organization though who don't have those titles, who are absolutely leaders, people who have been doing this work for nearly as long as I have, in some cases longer and they've done remarkable things; landscape type projects, projects that seemed impossible, projects that other people had tried and failed and given up on. Those people are people like me look up to, and we talk to you from time to time and just want to maybe have them say something to drop a little nugget on us that we're going to be able to file away and use later in our work.

To me, a leader is somebody who sets an example, that inspires you and makes you want to emulate them. Not copy them and be like them, but to bring to your work the same commitment and energy and passion that they bring to their work. Invariably, these people are smart, funny, free of ego, first to downplay what they do. I'm lucky, everybody else gets credit for what I do. I just sometimes get it and I don't really deserve it, because I'm working with other people. We all know those types of people who have that leadership skill deserve all the credit, because deals can fall apart at any time if there's not somebody. Not by being virtuous, saying, "I'm the boss here," but by being virtuous, saying, "I don't want this to fail and I'm going to devote myself to making it not fail. I hope everyone follows me."

Sees, that I'm working hard and then I'm racking my brain to come up with solutions that allow this thing to go forward, rather than raising red flags that don't need be raised, just to show how smart I am, or how – what a deep thinker I am. That kind of example, setting an example, both in the work ethic, the way they treat other people, and the way they refuse to acknowledgement for what they do, or downplay their acknowledgement, those are the people, are the true leaders. It doesn't matter their title is. Doesn't matter what their job is. They just show me the path, or how you can accomplish something and how you get things done and how you deal with that, how you react to people, how you treat people.

[0:38:16] RT: Usually, how they move through life in a community, the choices they make and the outcomes that come from those choices, independent of people even paying attention to them. I mean, they just have a perspective on the big picture and the common good and they're

not seeking a claim for it, but they know that their endeavor's in a common good, come authentically from themselves. If that's so, do you think that's possibly so? Is that possible?

[0:38:42] TT: I think it's absolutely true.

[0:38:43] RT: I'm going to say for the listeners, that's why I asked you on the podcast. I know you work at TPL, but I know you get on the ferry and go to Seattle almost every day. Not so much anymore, because of COVID, but your 30-year commitment to that speaks for itself. But in the smaller community of Bainbridge Island, I know you've been highly active in lots of different places, formally and informally. The reputation that Tom Tyner has in this community is all the things you just described about others. I'm just going to say that for the record, because I know it so and I can list a bunch of people who will say the same thing for me. I'm just dang glad you're doing what you're doing.

A couple more things before we come to an end here, because that is coming on to us. You've probably done this a little bit with your kids for sure, but you spoke to it a little bit earlier, but I want you to be specific here. Maybe two or three things that you have, because there are people behind us on this journey who are trying to figure out how to lead and have the impact and do good things in the world. If you had two minutes with a group of people who are trying to figure out how to use themselves to lead for a common good, what are a couple of nuggets that you've learned that you say, these can help you? What counsel do you have for them, counselor on a couple of bits?

[0:40:00] TT: Well I'll make this very personal, because I'm sure everybody has different things, but things that when I see in others that tell me that there's a person who's a leader, who's going to get things done, one thing is that I have found that having a sense of humor is an underrated talent and one we're developing. Because there's virtually no situation that I've been in where a well-timed humorous comment, a joke, a good – and I'm talking about good-natured funny comment breaks some tension, breaks down some barriers, gets people saying, “Ah, these guys aren't so bad.” You go from being arm's length adversarial to suddenly saying, “Oh, I know this guy. He can joke about this.” It breaks down barriers and it lets you take that relationship to a different level, where it's just now you're both on the same team, you representing different sides, so you'll have to represent their interest and all that.

Your winning doesn't have to be that person losing. You can both be a winner. A sense of humor. I think there's a fallacy that leaders are people who dominate the conversation and I think as often as not, being less, being quiet from time to time, listening at meetings and other things, rather than interjecting every thought that crosses your mind let people wonder whether you have – you're lost, you don't know what's going on, or whether you are way ahead of them, you know what's going on. When you do say something, make sure it's worth the air time that you're going to use to say it.

Too many people feel like they have to fill every conference room, or telephone with a dialogue and comments and stories and whatever. When things are going well in a meeting, I could sit there the whole the time and just not once in a while, and at the end of the day, we've accomplished nothing. I've said nothing. Later people, they said, "I don't know if Tyner was smart, or if he was truly daydreaming, but we got where we needed to get in this meeting and he didn't have to pound the table and try to show how smart he is, or we try to embarrass somebody else."

Listen more than you talk. I think, the people I was thinking of when you were asking me about what makes a leader, virtually, everybody I know fits in that category if they talk less, listen more. When they do say something, it's well thought out. Sometimes it goes back and touches on things other people have said, which proves they've been listening and not just sitting there, crafting their own their argument and rebuttal and then launching it into the air as a freestanding, but unrelated diatribe of some type.

Sense of humor goes a long-ways. Yeah, in the thousands of meetings with thousands of different landowners and lawyers, and the most impressive people there are the people who are normal, who make their point succinctly. They are afraid to inject a little humor, you are afraid to be human and friends with people who theoretically there on opposite sides of a negotiation and people who listen and clearly track everything, but save their words for what when they're really needed, rather than feel like they have to weigh in on every point.

There's no type. It doesn't discriminate on gender, or height, or title within the company. Most unassuming person in the room can end up being the person who everybody walks out in the

day saying, "Wow, that person's input really got us over this impasse." In line with that, just being open-minded. Don't discount anybody, or anything. Don't presume that you know when you walk into a room, you can pigeonhole people and that guy's going to be this person and that person going to be that, that. You just never know. Just assume that they're all good people and they've got good ideas and they really want to make things work.

You'll find out soon enough if that's not the case, because there are people who are there to say no, and fight tooth and nail for everything. Okay, well now I know. I like to give people the benefit of doubt. Assume that they're of like mind, that they want to do right by their client and would like to do it in a cooperative, collaborative way if that's possible, and they're willing to get a little tougher, if in fact it doesn't turn out to be the case, moves life forward for me.

[0:43:55] RT: All right, Tom Tyner. I want to thank you for making time to come into the Swamp. I hope your boots are good and muddy, that's a required period to be in the swamp with us. Thank you for everything you're doing with The Trust for Public Lands. I'm personally going to say, thank you for being a friend, and I appreciate your time.

[0:44:12] TT: Thanks for having me on, Rick. I appreciate your friendship more than you'll ever know.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:44:18] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please, take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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