In October 1988, near Barrow Point on the northern tip on Alaska, Inupiat Eskimos discovered three California Grey whales who were trapped by the winter ice from heading south on their annual migration. The story is retold in the 2012 movie “Big Miracle”. It shows news reporter Adam Carlson (played by John Krasinski) doing a feature about them that arouses international attention. Carlson draws in his ex-girlfriend, Greenpeace activist Rachel Kramer (Drew Barrymore), and together they rally a huge collaborative rescue project “Operation Breakout”. They mobilise the local Inupiat whale hunters, arouse media interest, get big business and small entrepreneurs involved. And they organise and advocate for the involvement of American government leaders at all levels, the National Guard, and even Soviet government connections to enlist the help of a Soviet ice-breaker.

The “Big Miracle” or “Operation Breakout” became a massive collaborative effort to do what it takes to free the whales form their small hole in the ice. It cost $5.8 million. The experts remind us that more than a thousand large whales are still violently killed each year and that there are bigger, albeit less cute, environmental issues than a few whales being caught in natural ice. (Cf. Campbell Plowden, Freeing the Whales: How the Media Created the World’s Greatest Non-Event. Secaucus: Carol Publishing, 1989).

But the story is an inspiring miracle, for the surviving whales, but also for different sectors – media, non-profits, business and locals – who worked together to stand in the gap for animals who could not help themselves. It took courageous leadership to pull the different players together and set them to work on the project. The collaborative effort inspires me to stand in the gap for environmental activism, but also to channel similar collaborative energy into standing in the gap and letting emerging leaders and their dreams swim free.

Remember it takes courageous leadership to give permission to others, so they can exercise their own courageous leadership.