

WHY NOT ?!?!!!!

Celebrating Women's Leadership

The Power of Yin April 16, 2009

Examples of Women's Leadership:

***Stories of women's leadership - in your family,
at your workplace, in your community, and
in the world***

I just think of this woman whose leadership represents overcoming so many difficulties. As a young woman, Madam Bonkougou was fortunate because her parents had the foresight to send her to school, at a time when education, especially for girls, was not seen as important. At the University she studied law and after graduation worked for the government, where she was successively promoted to become Director of the National Television and then Ministry of Public Administration. Supported by the World Bank and other stakeholders, she revolutionized policies and practices and launched a campaign to train public employees. While serving as Minister she became convinced that she could improve people's lives and proceeded to go through the country organizing and meeting people to talk about politics, the necessity of change and the role that women can play to help reach better results. She won election to represent people in the National Assembly and, as a Deputy, worked with her peers to propose new laws, mostly favorable to women, and also developed strong relationships with external peers. Her leadership has been strongly recognized and she was chosen to be the Ambassador of Burkina Faso in Canada.

As I think of her I wonder, "What is her secret?" She went through so many challenges And I realize that her way is always to say "Why Not?" "It is possible!" "I can take advantage of this situation."

Claudine's story of Madam Bonkougou captured the theme and energy of the Power of Yin Conversation at this meeting. In addition, Glenda described Meg Wheatley's definition of leadership as "anyone who wants to help." The nexus of these two concepts was exhilarating! If any of us who want to help, adopt the attitude of "Why not?!!! It is possible!" - - - - seems like there are few limits to what we can accomplish.

Kierstyn illustrated the power of this idea that "a leader is anyone who wants to help," in a story of the leadership of a mother who stepped up to participate in a Shea Butter Cooperative in Ghana. Through her work in the Coop she has

created a stable life for her family, enabling her three children to go to school. Kierstyn and Jennifer both wondered aloud if these women had been given the opportunity to participate in the business of the Cooperative or just in the production. And whether or not having women engaged in the business of the Coop would have brought differences in the way business was done. “Dynamics change as women’s economic role changes,” Jennifer commented. As women gain economic power they are more involved in decision-making and often significant changes occur.

Facilitating a special work project of ten Vice Presidents of her corporation, nine of whom are men, Susan noted that it was the woman who worked the hardest and set the pace for the group as a whole. “That’s a rather dicey action,” Susan commented, because others may resist or resent the pressure that puts on them to participate. “It was fascinating to watch her navigate the interactions and keep the respect of her peers.” At the same time the woman helped Susan, sometimes by talking with her, sometimes simply by eye contact as a member of the group to whom Susan was speaking.

Carolyn described a First Nations woman who waited and worked for 20 years in order to pass her lineage on to her son. Her culture was matrilineal. But the government of Canada declared that it must be patriarchal. Since this woman was married to a man who was not a First Nation person, this meant that it was impossible for her to pass on her legal status as a First Nation person to her son. Carolyn shared a conversation with a First Nations woman about what it was like to have the government make such a change, how they dealt with it. The woman responded, “We’re just waiting,” that is, we know that eventually we will achieve what we want.

Colleen spoke of women stepping up to leadership with passion and grace. She described Christine Gregoire who, when she was Attorney General, attended, and spoke, at a domestic violence rally. She didn’t have to be there, Colleen noted, but she **was there!** Her passion and integrity as she described her efforts through her office to eliminate domestic violence were inspiring. And, her presence was inspiring.

Though Carol is in Washington D.C. she sent a story she wanted to share. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female president in Africa, is one of my role models, Carol said. “I have so much faith in her.” Sirleaf is president of Liberia, and recently engaged with Liberians in Diaspora in Minneapolis. She was cautioned not to go as the Liberians there would be hostile and would be demonstrating. “I said I will go, because that’s what democracy is about, when you can meet people who have differences, you can express those differences and you can still have an understanding.”

Persistence, tenacity, patience, creativity, resilience, determination, practicality, and simply intentional presence were powerful patterns reflected the stories of

these women. The stories of women's leadership spanned several continents, cultures, corporate, government and non-profit worlds. Another inescapable theme was that the leadership described was not for personal gain in status or wealth, rather influenced positively the lives of others from families to nations.

A few other strands were woven through the conversation. When women move into roles previously considered "man's domain," it seems they often take on the characteristics of the men who have preceded them. Glenda shared a comment of a depth psychologist who works in organizational development at Boeing. "I work with these really great women, but they have this hard shell cover." Others shared experiences of women seeming to be more flexible than men in the way they work, more focused on getting the work done and less on role definition. Carolyn described a woman who has been at the top of an international company, and who has been unemployed, who is highly respected in her industry. Given the opportunity to go back into the roles and expectations of a corporation, she has instead moved into a whole new way of being in her career, working with a local community to create a different economic system.

And the question surfaced, "Are we now able to 'be ourselves' as leaders, and let go of other's definitions of leadership?" Are we able to step outside our own comfort zones and authentically engage "who I am" with "the need I see." Are we in a place to "pass the flame" of collaborative leadership, partnership leadership?"

So the questions to stimulate our thinking until we **meet again** ~ on **May 20** (Wednesday):

What if we asked ourselves "WHY NOT?" every time we had a good idea?

What do we need to walk out of . . . , in order to walk on?

How do we redefine our idea of leadership - moving from "role" to authenticity?