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Voices of Women in the Field: Laundry and Leadership: A New Dance

Ginny Curley

It was the towels that did them in. I sat across from my new clients and probed a bit further. “The towels, you say?” The husband shared a story of how he had wanted to do something nice for his wife, who was studying. So he folded a load of towels and put them away. “And then?” I continued, not quite sure of how this act of kindness had led to their request for an appointment in our counseling center. “I re-folded them,” his wife interjected. “You what?” I asked, breaking the cardinal rule of good counselors who never ask a rhetorical question. “I re-folded them. He had them folded in half and they don’t fit right in the linen closet that way. They need to be in thirds.”

This story has served me well as I speak to engaged couples. I talk about the need for focusing on the “big stuff” in marriages and overlooking lots of small annoyances. I talk about personality differences and how couples can learn to balance, not change one another. I even talk about Berne’s theory of Transactional Analysis and the common development of parent-child relationships in marriage instead of adult-adult relationships. But I had never thought of this story in relation to my role as an educator and a professional woman. Until now.

Now I know too much. I have immersed myself in feminist psychology and social role theory. I have studied theories of leadership and explored gender influences in power. I know statistics about how women of influence are viewed and how they view themselves. I’ve explored the bold, ground-breaking work of early feminists and those who opposed them. I’ve considered how my life would be different if I weren’t allowed a college education or my father hadn’t invited me to help fix the car. And I have shuddered at the reality that, born in a different time, my husband would not be sharing in the care of our children while I pursue graduate work and joyfully engage in my profession.

But my knowledge has not developed into an anti-male stance. I am confident that is only because I was born in 1967, too late to know first-hand the legal limitations placed on women. Instead, it has left me in a quandary. What is the next step for women in leadership? Where do we go from here? And how do men fit into this? How often do we catch ourselves re-folding the towels?

About the Author

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The work of Glick and Fiske (1996) who placed sexism in two camps has given me pause for thought. There is hostile sexism, the stereotypical cry that women have gotten “too big for their britches” and need to get back in line with men at the lead. We’ve come far enough that this seems antiquated and there are not many in leadership who would make such claims. But much more common is ambivalent sexism that takes a softer approach. It is either the directional approach that says, “Yes, women are capable of lots of things but they are not strong enough to make tough decisions and men should make the final call,” or the paternalistic response that wants to “take care of women.” Lest we deceive ourselves into placing the blame squarely on men, Goodwin and Fiske (2001) assert that women participate in and perpetuate these stereotypes as well.

Clearly all three forms of discrimination are wrong and demean women. We rail against those who adopt these stances and work overtime to dispel the myths. But what was most interesting to me in this piece by Goodwin and Fiske (2001) was the connection between these forms of discrimination and the concept of fear. Men fear that if women get too strong and assertive, they will no longer have a place for men, except in the bedroom. And women, perhaps silently acknowledging the benefit they receive by having men ready to defend and protect, fear the loss of that role. But is there more?

Let’s return to the young couple who was arguing about towels. Why *did* this young, busy, bright, successful, happy new wife decide to re-fold the towels? I believe it was fear. I don’t think she knew it was fear, but I could hear it as she talked. Her return to school meant her husband had to pick up more family jobs. She was less available to go grocery shopping, run errands, and pick up the house. Her husband was proud of his wife. He pitched in where he could and looked for ways to support her (even if he didn’t always tell her that). Her decision to re-fold the towels was her way of asserting her place in the family. It was as if she was saying, “Before you start thinking you can run this place on your own, just remember who calls the household shots.” The irony, of course, is that just the week before she was complaining about household tasks falling squarely on her shoulders.

So perhaps this volley points to a new phenomenon: the wife who fears that if her husband contributes too much, she may be obsolete in the household. We yearn for partnership, yet reinforce a system of power on our own terms. I will not detail the number of conversations I have had with women who, in the same breath, complain of how little their husband does and then critique the effort he gave to help fix dinner or ready the kids for bed. As a counselor, the notion of reinforcement is easy to detect: do not repeat that which brings you scolding. The young husband got the message: "I will never again fold towels. That's her domain."

I do not share this story to suggest that women need to "relax." Or to claim that women need to "decide" between being the homemaker or the breadwinner. Current statistics indicate working women still bear the burden of household chores (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006; Bianchi, 2000; Bianchi, Sayer & Robinson, 2000). Women in the workplace continue to earn a fraction of the wages of men, even accounting for years of service and education (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Women's Fund of Greater Omaha, 2007; U.S. Government Accounting Office, 2003). And women are routinely evaluated more negatively than men for similar work (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). So it is not a matter of unfounded perception that women feel burdened by unfair treatment. It is fact. Indeed, Carli's (1995, as cited in Carli, 1999) work on perceptions of competence bear this out: female leaders generally fall in one of two camps: "competent, but not likable," or "likeable, but not competent." Men are more often perceived as both "competent and likeable."

So what must shift for women to be perceived as both competent and likeable, for women to be both nurtured and nurturing, both strong and vulnerable, both decisive and open to influence? As I talk to couples preparing for marriage, I am aware of the gap in cultural role models for couples who want a more balanced relationship. They both want to develop careers and they both want to be available to their family. What role will each take? Who will come home early with a sick child? Who folds the towels? Who mows the lawn? How do they navigate these uncharted territories in a manner that allows for both individual and collective growth?

In 1988, Peggy McIntosh, scholar of women's studies, wrote a piece entitled "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." The piece was an exploration of privilege for McIntosh as she came to understand male privilege through the lens of her own privilege as a white person. McIntosh compared this unearned privilege to carrying a knapsack that had all kinds of great tools in it, and were with the bearer from birth. McIntosh's point was not that white people should feel guilty for holding the knapsack, nor engage in endless apology. Her point was that the first step in fighting racism (and sexism, and ageism) is to acknowledge the knapsack. Name it. See it. Note that others are not born with it and do not, therefore, have the same tools at their disposal.

Modern men are not to blame for previous acts of discrimination. Nor is it particularly helpful for them to engage in endless apology. The path to

greater collaboration is through the ability of men to acknowledge that they bear an invisible knapsack, by nature of their birth, which gives them access to privilege.

And then we must ask what is the role of women in this transformation? How do we move from powerless to powerful without repeating the injustices of our oppressors? History is full of examples of those who move from being victims to being perpetrators. How do women engage in dialogue with men without bringing the baggage of our past?

My hope is that as women, we can move from fear to strength. I make this wish each time I witness a colleague abandon her position on an issue in favor of her male colleague's position. "Why are you deferring to him?" I wonder. I also make this wish when I hear a colleague complain of the burden she bears in workload compared to her male colleagues. "Stop saying yes!" And I have begun to wonder if there have been times when I have held onto a project rather than encourage a male colleague out of some irrational fear that my place will be lost in the organization. "Stop folding the towels!" I cry.

So there I am, back in my office, flipping through a book given to me by my mother to find a nugget of wisdom to share with my clients. "A good relationship has a pattern like a dance and is built on some of the same rules," (Lindbergh, 2003, p. 96) I have underlined. "The partners do not need to hold on tightly, because they move confidently in the same pattern" (Lindbergh, 2003, p.96). Wise words, spoken by Anne Morrow Lindbergh in *A Gift from the Sea*. My father once admonished me, "Ginny, though I firmly support women's rights, the dance floor is a place where only one person can lead. And traditionally, it is the man." It helps for partners to have social norms that guide actions, as long as "they never destroy 'the wingèd life' in each other or in themselves" (Lindbergh, 2003, p. 97).

I revisit Lindbergh's words a bit differently today. Is it possible that leadership can benefit from the same advice? Is leadership a dance that seeks to find the right pattern between partners? Have the social norms changed enough for men and women to learn a new pattern? Can we work our way through the clumsy adolescent stage of this *shared leadership* to find a new pattern that allows both men *and* women to lead? Based on what I have seen transpire in marriages, I am certain of it.

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