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Voices of Women in the Field— To Everything There is a Season

Nancy Howell

My pathway to leadership has been long and winding and I have, at times, approached that path hesitantly and with trepidation. I, like many women of my generation, did not visualize myself as a leader in my younger years. I believed that because I was basically shy and introverted, I would never possess the qualities that I believed were necessary for leadership. In the 1950s of my childhood, leaders were men, with few exceptions. At least, those people officially designated as leaders in that society were men. It has only been through experience, maturity and education that I have recognized my talents and realized my potential. Without a doubt, raising four children forced me to develop skills and abilities I did not previously possess. Being active in the schools and my community forced me to confront my shyness and find ways to engage and communicate with others. Returning to school for my Master's degree opened up a whole new world of possibilities for me, even as my youngest child was leaving the nest. And finally what I have learned through my doctoral program during the past five years has cemented for me the certainty that leadership opportunities exist for me in the future.

Women have been leaders since the beginning of time, although they have not always been acknowledged as such. Even during those times and in cultures when women were little more than property, their influence was felt through the values they instilled in their sons. The ability to create new life, a mystical and powerful force, was revered by early civilizations who understand that the fertility of earth and humans was the basis of their continued existence. Debra, the Hebrew judge of the Bible, the powerful wives and mistresses of the Roman emperors, Cleopatra of Egypt, Catherine the Great of Russia, the pilgrim women who helped settle this country, these and countless others have helped shape our history and our culture, although they were often unappreciated and unacknowledged.

Education, that most empowering and liberating of experiences, has not always been easy for women in this country. Few colleges admitted women prior to the Civil War. During the Romantic Era (1820–1860), women were put on a pedestal and considered too fragile for the rigors of higher education. There were actually some authorities who believed that too much education might interfere with a woman's reproductive health. One of the only reasons some women were allowed limited access to education, usually at ladies seminaries and academies, was so that they would be better prepared

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to raise sons who would be contributing members of society. The advent of the Civil War required that women take over some duties previously performed by men, and as war widows struggled to raise families alone, education became more open to women. The Morrill Act of 1862, which established land grant institutions in each state, also opened the educational door for more women. As the Western frontier opened up, higher education was seen as a way to emulate the culture and progressiveness of the east coast. Women were needed as teachers, and the new colleges established in those new western states were vital and forward looking, offering women new opportunities. From 1890 to 1920, the number of educational opportunities for women grew exponentially, however these younger women did not always appreciate the struggles of the feminine pioneers who went before them. During this period, a backlash began to grow regarding women's education. Some university professors believed that the education of women would result in a society of spinsters, who would not bear children, and thus create "race suicide." By 1920, women had begun their long struggle to combine family and career, which continues to this day.

Leadership brings with it both privileges and responsibilities. Women are uniquely equipped for leadership because they are collegial, team oriented, unafraid of risks, and more likely to use reward instead of punishment as a management tool. As explained by Jonathan Zierdt at the 2008 Women in Educational Leadership Conference in Lincoln, Nebraska in October 2008, women are lacking the "killer gene!" While this was a light-hearted poke at the super competitiveness of men, there is some truth in the assertion expressed in the YouTube video that women are just naturally better at building consensus than are men. Along these lines, Ruthellen Josselyn's research found that women's identity is formed differently than that of men. She suggested that men must differentiate from their mothers in order to establish a healthy identity, while women do not need to do so in order to develop healthy identities. This presents an interesting way to explain some of the differences in men's and women's differing approaches to leadership.

A recent Pew survey, reported in August 2008, found that the public's perception of women as leaders has changed. On the majority of qualities that people associate with leadership, women scored higher than men. Women were deemed more trustworthy, more compassionate, more creative, and more intelligent. Men were seen as more competitive and more

ambitious. The public's perception of current women leaders was also high. Nonetheless, 21% believed that men made better leaders, while only 6% felt that women made better leaders. The good news is that 69% believed that there was no difference between the overall effectiveness of men vs. women leaders, both were equally effective.

There are still obstacles to women obtaining leadership positions in our society. Lack of access to educational opportunities and family and child raising responsibilities still affect women more than they do men. Men with families do not seem to experience the conflict between career and family as severely as do women, but that may be changing. In addition, the lack of women in leadership positions creates a less than supportive culture for women attempting to climb the corporate ladder.

My own experience of leadership has been one of evolution. As a young mother of four, I found that other young mothers sought out my advice and respected my opinion. I freely chose to stay home and raise those children for almost 15 years. Doing so required that I manage our finances very frugally and I was fortunate that I had a supportive husband during those years. I know that many women did not and do not have that luxury. We lived on a very tight budget, but my strong belief in balance in all areas of life led me to believe that the parenting of those four children and the economical managing of our finances was my primary and most important responsibility during those years. I do not recommend this path for all women, but I do believe that each woman must negotiate her own compromise between the demands of family and career. We must respect the decisions that our "sisters" make in this area, even when we do not agree with each other's choices. It was very difficult during the years that I stayed home not to resent those women who worked outside of the home and could not understand the fulfillment I felt in my own unpaid job. That experience enabled me to understand the inner conflicts that women deal with and to accept that whether a woman chooses to be a stay-at-home mom or work outside of her home, there will be internal and external battles. When I returned to graduate school as an older, non-traditional student in my 40s, I realized that I possessed and could hone my inherent abilities and my learned skills in order to make a contribution to society beyond raising my family. As an academic advisor, I have realized the tremendous power I hold to influence and help students who are floundering and I have gained tremendous fulfillment in that role. As a trainer and supervisor of other advisors, I understand my responsibility to empower and educate them. For me personally, "to everything there is a season" has worked well. I encourage all women to take advantage of every educational opportunity. Know your limitations and your strengths and accept and understand the interrelatedness of the different areas of your lives. Finally, have tremendous respect and admiration for all women who combine career and motherhood and for those women who choose one over the other for a time, knowing that it is never as easy as it looks for anyone.