

Women's Wisdom

Women's Conversations ~ Beijing, May, 2010

What is the Role of Women in Global Leadership?

Conversations with women in Beijing revealed intense transitions women are experiencing as they continually and persistently move into their own personal power. Both the pain of the challenges and the bone-deep sense of "rightness" as these women were becoming more fully who they really are - - - highlighted the vital need that women have for being with other women.

May you enjoy and be inspired by the Reflections on these Conversations, and experience the community of connecting with other women - whose circumstances may be different from your own, but whose intent is similar - to be who they can be and contribute their gifts to our common good.





Sunday afternoon, May 16, Beijing

Originally from four different Provinces in China, the women who gathered for conversation on May 16 now work in Beijing and represent the current experience of many professional women in urban China. Figures from the Chinese Civil Affairs Department indicate an increase of nearly 20 % in the number of divorces in 2009 compared to 2006 in Beijing. Some of the women participating in the conversation believe it to be much higher and feel that this is a significant commentary on women taking charge of their own lives. “In the past,” one woman commented, “women were expected to truly serve their husbands, wash their clothes and wash their feet, have babies and take care of the children and all of the household needs. Slapping and hitting their wives was acceptable behavior for husbands.” Now, the women agreed, even in rural areas government laws provide women the chance to move out of an abusive situation by divorcing their husbands.

Of course reality is always more complex. For some women, the opportunity for education makes it possible to get a good job and to avoid being dependent on a man. One of the women spoke of her personal experience. She is divorced, well-educated, ambitious, has a good-paying job, has purchased her home and is quite independent. At the same time, she describes the attitudes around divorce as making it difficult for her to have a satisfying social life. “Divorced women are considered ‘used,’ “ she commented. Another woman pointed out



that women who have children usually are much more dependent on the income of the husband. In addition, even without a desire for divorce, professional women struggle with choices about how to find time for family and for their professional work. One woman acknowledged wishing that she had spent more time with her son when he was younger.

One of the participants in the conversation is a Ph.D. candidate, researching and publishing in the field of health care. Specifically, she is examining the roles and responsibilities of the family and the state in emergency medical care. She is paying for her own education. "My family is not able to do that," she says, "so I work and make money to pay my own way."

One of the women was trained to be a teacher and taught for seven years. While she enjoyed that, she felt complete with that experience and wanted a new profession. So she started over again, gained her training in computer science and works as a project manager and technician at Accenture. She also is divorced and feels a great deal of pressure to remarry, to have a family, and is struggling with discerning her own path in the pressure of traditional norms and expectations. The group saw in her questioning, the essence of the transition women are experiencing, as the traditional roles and expectations - and the support system around that - are no longer working for them. They affirmed the isolation that is experienced as they move into more independence.

It was at this point that one of the key themes of the conversations surfaced, that “women need other women.” There was a strong sense of ***the need for women to intentionally create connection with other women to avoid the isolation.***

“We need a space just for us, where we can express ourselves without judgment and get clear about our own values and goals,” one person summarized. There is little support for opportunities for being mentored. A clear sense arose within this group that women need to take the initiative to create their own groups where they can have meaningful conversations about the issues that concern them, where they can speak with their own voice, be themselves without being judged, where they can support, challenge and encourage one another - where they can create the sense of belonging and community that, in earlier times, might have been provided by extended family. One of the specific actions that surfaced was that any woman could convene an intentional, on-going Circle of conversation and support.

As we imagined together what the world would be like if women were acting fully out of their own power, these women imagined more opportunities for women, a society that was fair - where women would not be subject to the stereotypes and whims of men who hold the power, where women’s voices would truly be heard and valued. The women grew excited thinking about ways they can create new forms of social organization such as “Time Banks.” Time Banks are created by small groups of women who each commit a specific amount of time each week, or each month, when she will contribute her expertise - whether that is computer expertise, fashion or cosmetic advice, cooking instructions, child care, budgeting lessons, etc.



The Conversation closed on a deeper note - recognizing that women not only have the power to envision and act to create the kind of world they want, but that also each must create her personal balance - determining her values and prioritizing how she spends her time and energy so that she truly creates the life that is most satisfying for her. The power of the support of other women was clear. That amplifies the individual’s power to create her own life, to develop relationships that nurture her, and to contribute to the world in the way most meaningful to her.

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It was also clear, that in this transition these women are experiencing, it is important to not merely flip the balance of power so that men feel powerless. This will only create resentment. Rather, the vision was to create a world where every person can make her or his own contribution in a way that supports the common good.

The themes of transition, choice and connection were clear. And the importance of women supporting one another was a powerful, palpable awareness.



The second Conversation quickly moved to exploring the two sides of the coin - of the devaluing of half of the human resources of the planet. For individual women, the cost is intense pain - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Whether the pain comes from lack of medical attention, hard physical labor, and inadequate food, as is the case for some, or whether it comes from the quiet and isolated desperation of being dependent on a husband's income and firmly "bound in place" by norms and expectations of family and social settings, the pain of not being "whole" and able to use one's talent is debilitating.



The gift of the conversation was the awareness of some "light" we can bring to change this situation. Women need other women. Connecting with a few other trusted women creates a space where a woman can dare to speak her truth, to confront her own reality, to honor her own gifts, to hear her own voice. It can be a space where a woman can fully value her self, her own being, her own values, and recognize her basic rights of safety and respect.

As Kristof and WuDunn posit (in *Half the Sky*), unleashing the creativity, caring, wisdom, insight and courage of women brings resources to the planet that are desperately needed. If these resources were oil - the frenzy to release and leverage these gifts would be unbelievable.

For women in the West, reconceptualizing our timeline could have a powerful impact. The traditional framework for thinking of life lines - childhood, education, worklife, retirement - actually serves no one. And it certainly does not serve women or reflect their life path. Many professional women invest in education, enter the workforce and then take some time out to focus on family and devote time to their children. Later, as the children need them less, they are ready to engage more fully again in their professional work. What if part of the agenda for the woman, during those "family focus" years, was personal internal research to reevaluate - Who am I? What are my gifts? What are the needs of the world at this time? What am I called to do, now?

Women, it seems, are needing to call all of us back to the "dance of life." For years we've approached life as a march - putting one foot firmly in front of the other, with little awareness of whether our original destination and strategy still makes sense.

And what about the organizations of the world? What if women who were re-engaging more fully in the workforce - were welcomed for the new perspective they brought? Creativity and innovation in organizations always grows at the edges, where differences and diversity spawn new connections and new insight. Moms who have been nurturing young children and coordinating the complexities of family and community needs and demands, bring a fresh view point to research, production, sales, and customer service - to say nothing of deep compassion, insight and courage to the many community organizations which need their leadership.

By heritage and by choice, one of the women who participated in the Conversations this week, personifies the idea of a global citizen. With grandparents who were French/German and Jews from northern Tunisia, she was born in France, developed her career in Strategy and Finance in Europe and England, and met her husband in Switzerland. He is from South Africa and embraces strong Christian beliefs. Now this woman, her husband and their two children live in Beijing.



Having been used to working professionally, as well as nurturing her family, and loving her work, she suddenly found herself feeling quite isolated in this new culture. She realized that there must be many people moving to China and struggling with similar issues. So, she decided to “re-invent” herself. She founded a coaching and consulting practice, at first hiring trainers who could support individuals in both the inner work of clarifying personal strengths, values and vision, and the practical training of learning about Chinese history, culture and the current business environment. She also founded a Women’s Professional Network, and engaged in coach training, gaining the skills she needed to be able to provide coaching services herself.

The authenticity of her life is essential to her and fuels her strong sense of integration of the personal and collective, the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual, the professional and the family. Her mantra in her coaching work is

that each person has a social responsibility to bring her or his gifts to the world. She resists the tendency to relate our worth to our paycheck by asking herself, her clients, and her children, not “What did you accomplish today?” but rather “How did you contribute today?”

Another woman who moved to China from the U.S. discovered that when the “external” world she knew disappeared in this move, her “internal” world blossomed. Taking advantage of this she focuses on her own spiritual development, leads meditations, creates “purpose tribes” of women who, like her, are taking seriously their personal and professional development. She is using this time for deep reflection about who she is, what her purpose is, how she can best leverage her gifts to the world.

Another founded the Yin/Yang Community Center, a place of respite and regeneration in the midst of the frantic pace of life in current Beijing. She went on to co-found a business venture that leases traditional courtyard homes that



are in poor condition, restores them and prepares them to be leased to new families - with continuing income stream to the owners. She founded a Village Fair - that brought together traditional crafts, foods, and entertainment as well as the first Beijing Organic Farmer’s Market, representatives of zero energy construction and the Slow Food movement.



The creativity, courage, energy and commitment to the common good of all of these women - are inspiring models of leadership for all of us. The theme that “Women Need Other Women” rang through all of the conversations - and the corollary, “Women Support, Encourage and Inspire other Women,” was also powerfully present, generating the vision and vigor for creating a world that values and benefits from women’s wisdom, and women’s gifts.

And a brief note about the GlobeWomen Summit

The Conference was great! Over a thousand women from 80 countries around the world! Just being with them was a powerful energetic experience for me. AND, it was hard to be there - because the disconnect between the issues these women live with - and the possibilities explored at the conference seemed huge to me. Irene Natividad, the woman who founded this GlobeWomen Summit annual conference (20 years ago) in her keynote spoke about the need for development that did not repeat the processes used in the West that have resulted in the global mess which we are now experiencing. However, later in the same evening a manager of Marriott Hotels was bragging about their 52 hotels in China and how they expected to double that within the year. NO acknowledgement of the impact of travel, of who currently might own the hotels they may buy and what would happen to those folks, NO sense at all of the impact they would be having! Another example - a beautiful woman I met was a farmer from Cameroon. She is a trained agricultural engineer and has purchased her own plot of ground. They primarily harvest cassava and palm. The palm provides a marvelously sustainable resource. The first process they use as they work with the fruit results in food (oil, I suppose), the next process results in a substance used in cosmetics. Then they grind some of the left-over and feed to the animals and grind other parts of the left over and feed the fish. So - no trees are cut down. No overplanting of the soil. etc. Her issue was how

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to create a sustainable market for their products. So one of the speakers described the answer to that - a Chinese Coop that is building huge shopping malls in rural China! Aye, yi, yi! A huge opportunity exists for envisioning alternatives to the “bigger is better” and “let’s centralize everything” paradigm we’ve created!