

Giving “Voice” To What We Do

Notes of *The Power of Yin* conversation, November 12, 2008

It seems the Universe has been conspiring with us during the last month. Our conversation in October, revolving around “What is women’s leadership?” led to the recognition that we need to become more visible and we need to support one another in doing that. Also, we need to speak more clearly and powerfully about who we are and what we do connecting our “voice” with who we are. So the questions for focusing the November conversation were:

- How do we connect “voice” with who we are?
- How do we support each other in being visible?
- How do we help build one’s another’s authority?
- How do we “package what we do” as women leaders?

Between the October and November conversations, several of us heard Cathy Allen speak at the Global Issues and Perspectives event on “Women’s Global Power: Inching Towards Equality.” Through substantive facts and statistics and powerful stories she described the progress women around the world are making in moving into political and governmental decision-making roles.

As though she had been tuned into our conversations Cathy described a way of introducing ourselves that causes others to engage with us and remember us... building visibility and authority. And she had each of the forty people present stand and introduce him or herself in 30 seconds: Here are her instructions:

- Give your name
- Give your “claim to fame,” that is some context – where you work or what you do
- State your message. What is your point?
- Identify your vision, intention or passion
- Give your name

Try it! See how it works for you. We’re finding it powerful, and fun... room 100 came alive with energy! It forces us to be clear and succinct as we acknowledge what is important about us. It causes us to attract others because when we speak our message and our vision, our heartfelt energy just flows right out through our eyes, our stance and our voice. The process is also magic in a group as the knowledge, skill and passion, sitting in a room quickly becomes “visible.”

Another of the themes of the November conversation centered on what it is that causes women to be invisible. A panel discussion at Antioch the week following the election had highlighted ways in which the media undermines the importance of women and those of other than Caucasian race by giving less air time,

focusing on personalities rather than issues, comparing to a typical white, male standard... addressing the need for media reform.

We realized that one way we undermine our own visibility is by assuming that what we do well, everyone does well; thus it seems ridiculous to claim it. Another way we undermine ourselves is by accepting the white male standard. For example, we figure anyone can convene conversations about topics that matter. Or we discount the value of conversations, bowing instead to traditional debates or discussions or papers defending our position on a topic, as being more important. As we are now realizing, the power of conversation is huge. The ability to engage in the give and take of conversation is highly productive. In her presentation at the Global Issues and Perspectives event, Allen highlighted the fact that Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in Parliament world-wide – 56%. And that these women have initiated a practice of sitting down together for lunch three times a year. That is, women of all parties in Parliament sit down for lunch three times a year. Not for debates, not for positioning, but for lunch and informal conversation. See also the attachments this month for more powerful examples of generating compelling conversations

As we continued to explore the notion of becoming more visible, we asked ourselves, “How do we know who we are?” and realized that much of that knowing comes from feedback we receive from others. Glenda shared a suggestion from a recent conference she had attended. Women can help one another in connecting our ‘voice’ with who we are by asking these two questions of one another:

- What do you see in me that I don’t see?
- When do you see me excited, and about what?

She cautioned that asking and responding to these questions needs to happen in a structured setting so that we **truly hear** the feedback.

One of the questions for guiding the conversation this month had been: “How do we ‘package’ what we do?” As we talked about this notion, we found that the term “package” did not work for us, for several reasons. First of all, it carries the connotation of “consumerism” so rampant in our society, and that, in fact, is not what we are about. Of course, some of what we do is for the purpose of generating income, but that term is far from representative of the wholeness of who we are. In addition, the term “package” is often thought of in terms of putting pretty wrapping on the outside so as to make what is inside more appealing. In this sense it can be seen as almost contradictory to transparency, which is very important to women leaders in our experience. And finally, “packaging” something seems to make it rather static. Instead, much of women leaders do is continually emergent, co-creating new realities.

Instead, what evoked excitement in us was thinking in terms of telling our stories, describing who we are and what we do through story telling. Sarah’s story reveals her practical, creative, ‘make it happen’ competencies, as well as the

kind of emergent leadership women contribute. Consultant to non-profit organizations, wife, mother of two young children, who recently completed her Masters Degree in Organizational Psychology, Sarah tells this story:

“I know there are principles, and even a whole industry, focused on how to do effective fundraising,” said Sarah, “but when a friend needed support for a project she was working on, I invited three other couples for dinner and made soup. At the end of the evening we had raised \$2000.”

The Power of Yin Circle will not meet during December. The next meeting will be Wednesday, January 21, 2009.

Between now and then may you have a wonderful holiday season and may these questions prompt you to continually enhance your visibility as a woman leader:

- **In what ways do I continually bring “voice to what I do?”**
- **What stories do I tell others that convey who I am and what I do?**
- **How do these stories build my authority?**
- **Am I speaking about what I do with clarity that attracts to me those I want to be with and work with?**

And, finally, ask yourself these questions and see what comes up for you:

- **What am I not seeing?**
- **What am I not paying attention to?**

Attached are three items to inspire you and make you proud of women leaders.

The first is shared by Vanessa Damelio, a current student in C3. It is a story of the increasing power of women in Pakistan, told by Masuma Hasan, who rose to the post of Cabinet Secretary, the highest civil servant position in the Pakistani government.

The second, Kliptowns Community Conversation, is a story about the July 11, 2008 community gathering in Soweto, South Africa where community members met for 3 and 1/2 hours to talk about the HIV crisis and what they could do. You will be fascinated both by the content of the meeting and by the conversation strategies used by the facilitators!

The third is the second Dialogue for Justice organized by the Nelson Mandela Foundation. There were two themes this year:

- **Business Unusual: Speeding up Economic Empowerment for Women**
- **Harvesting From Each Other**

Best wishes from Barbara and Glenda who prepared these notes.