

Community Foundation of Tompkins County
Eleventh Annual Women's Fund Luncheon
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“Stepping Out of the Shadows: An Embracing of New Leaders, New Voices”

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It's an honor and a pleasure for me to be here with you to mark Women's History Month 2015, as we pay tribute to the lives of countless women who have made great sacrifices, embarked upon meaningful endeavors, and torn down historic barriers of prejudice. Women's History Month, in itself, has some history behind it that I would like to share.

March 8, 1911 was the first International Women's Day, and it was 1980 when President Carter established National Women's History Week. Then in 1987, Congress acted to make that week the entire month of March.

Women, of course, are also a part of history for the rest of year. And I would add that women were influencing the course of history long before 1911 or 1980. In any case, I am glad that there is, each year, time set aside for the world to think about the role of women, because history is more than simply what happened.

History is what we choose to remember. It is the lessons we have taken from the past and the knowledge we draw on to live today and to shape the future.

For me, one lesson from history is that it is no coincidence that the great successes of the past century came as women steadily increased their participation in every aspect of society.

Women gaining the right to vote and our ever-increasing presence in the workforce, have been major factors in sustaining growing family incomes and opportunities. Making fuller use of the talents and efforts of women in the workplace, in science, in the arts, in the body politic has made us all more productive and prosperous.

Today I'd like to speak to a particular kind of woman. And I can't say how many of these women are sitting in this room, but we have all met her or recognized her in ourselves to varying degrees. She does a lot of work, but never really takes any credit for it. Her role is supportive in nature and when credit is given for the success of things, she remains in the shadows or behind the scenes. She is a natural-born problem solver, but only those close to her regularly benefit from her talents. Her humility may stem from her youth, inexperience, or she may have been socialized to accept the role of being seen but rarely heard.

And although I'm eventually advocating here for a more public leadership model, I truly believe that a fully self-realized woman can justify a certain measure of modesty when her own recognition of her worth and talents sufficiently satisfies her.

But for those women who are leaders in waiting, for those with principled but unheard voices, for those wanting to have an impact on the greater good, for those who yearn to inspire and to be inspired, for those who feel they have something helpful to say or to offer – it's time for you to come out of the shadows, because our community is ready to embrace your voice and feel your impact.

We know, grassroots social and economic justice efforts cannot be sustained without generational transition — because on a global and local scale we continually face new barriers that must be overcome. And we need to think out of the box in order to solve long-standing problems of injustice because the strategies of the past have not yet succeeded. New voices, new faces, new life experiences, and new approaches are crucial to our collective success.

So let's say you are on the precipice of stepping out of the shadows, are there words of wisdom I can offer you regarding leadership? Let's just say, words you will definitely get — I'll try my best at the wisdom part.

Realizing that George has wisely limited me to 90-minutes (laughter), I share with you the abridged version of what I've learned about leadership over the last twenty years. Just know these are the lessons I have learned, partially through my successes, but also by way of utter failure. They are personal to me, and they have become the guiding principles for my social justice work.

Seven (7) Guiding Principles of Social Justice Leadership

(1) The prize is all about the greater good — so keep your eye on it

The essence of great leadership starts with a universal principle — the ultimate goal of which is to serve the greater good. I happen to believe that a universal principle, if successfully achieved, lifts the lives and souls of every human being. And great leaders tend to rely on these principles to guide their strategies and to motivate others. I believe a principle well-sought after will move all of humanity forward, not just a chosen few. It does not bend to the interest of any particular individual, clique, political party, or identity group.

Some may argue, "Well, what about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement? Wasn't that focused solely on rights for African-Americans and doesn't that qualify as a just cause? Which is an opportunity for me to assert that at the core of MLK's philosophy and the civil rights or the women's rights movement (for that matter) was the principle that we are all created equal and we

should each be treated accordingly. MLK's dream and his letter from the Birmingham jail clearly promote the universal principle that we each be judged by the content of our characters — not by the color of our skin, not by our sex, not by our religion, not by any other difference. And when he said this, I have to believe he meant it to apply not only to the oppressor, but also offered it as a guiding principle for every human being.

(2) Principle strategies should be based on respect for human dignity

There are varying models for leadership, but since my leadership role has generally been practiced in the governmental arena, my approach has been to work within that environment in a way that promotes internal changes to a power structure that most outsiders don't have access to. For me, that means equal protection under the law for every human being in Tompkins County. It means implementing impartial enforcement mechanisms. It means developing impactful outreach initiatives.

Other valid leadership approaches that can be witnessed throughout our community include advocacy, agitation, conciliation, research, media, study circles, private enforcement, and so many others. Whatever the approach may be, it's important that it be based on the promotion and protection of human dignity and respect. No leader should use the demeaning strategies of the oppressor in an effort to fight for the human dignity of the oppressed.

(3) Don't demonize the voice of opposition or your detractors

Let's just start out by agreeing that no person is *right* 100 per cent of the time and no person is *wrong* 100% of the time. So we should never apply this measure to any leadership model. Keep in mind when developing leadership strategies that from time to time the faces of allies and stakeholders around you will (and should) change. Meaning — there's always a chance that someone who was once an opposing voice is now a voice of agreement. It may be about the same issue or a completely different one. Either way, some of the problems we face as a society are so wrought with complexity and so deeply imbedded, it is crucial that we learn from many diverse groups in order to agree on mutually-beneficial solutions. If it is for the greater good, don't turn your back on potential allies because of who they are, because of what they look like, or because of past misunderstandings. To wit, don't demonize the other, because one day the greater good may greatly benefit from your working together.

(4) Being a leader doesn't always guarantee followers

Sometimes, leading a life by principle can be lonely, not to mention unpopular. Let's remember that many leaders in history (along with their ideas) were well ahead of their time. And while most of their

stories did not end well at the time, many of the underlying principles for which they advocated have now become paradigms in our day and age. Even today, there will come a time in every leader's life, where he or she will have to decide whether any particular approach is worth going it alone and whether doing the right thing will be sufficient in itself.

(5) Work well with others

Be the kind of leader you want to be. But keep in mind, there is a wide-variety of stakeholder roles to be played in our community which is rich in diversity when it comes to social justice perspectives. Not every stakeholder is best suited for protest, or public speaking, enforcement, lobbying, organizational prowess, or tank-thinking — but all these talents and approaches can play an important role in promoting comprehensive change to systemic problems. On the other hand, your kind of leadership may prove to be rare, untested, or before its time. So don't easily give up in order to fit in with other voices.

(6) It's not about you

It's about the work that needs to be done. Need I say more?

(7) Don't believe everything you think

Be well-informed about the underlying issue, including all aspects of the problem you are trying to resolve. Make every effort to understand the argument or position of the other, so you are not misleading stakeholders about stated goals and objectives. Be diligent about exposing and squashing misinformation, even if that misinformation tends to bolster your own strategy and help mobilize your allies. In the end, the less time spent on conclusion jumping, motive guessing, blame gaming, and slippery sloping — the easier it will be to find common ground, reach consensus, and move ahead together.

To sum it all up, I leave you with the following — before you speak out, before you lean in, you must first step out of the shadows. And when you do, there will be others there to embrace you.

*The inspiration for these remarks is based on the following:

The life story of Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian peace activist responsible for leading a women's peace movement that helped bring an end to the Liberian Civil War in 2003. You can read more about that heroic effort in her book, "Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War."

Remarks by Janet L. Yellen, Chair Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, at Women's History Month Reception, U.S. Capitol, Washington D.C., March 25, 2014.