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Advancing Women In Leadership

Struggling for Authentic Human Synergy and a Robust Democratic Culture: The Wellspring Community for Women in Educational Leadership

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As our struggles to develop our authentic selves as educators, leaders, women, and researchers continue, we all gain a greater appreciation for how difficult it is to incorporate the values of democracy into our lives.

In this paper we will introduce a community of women educational leaders, their struggles for personal and professional accountability, and their inquiry toward the development of leadership wisdom in a democratic culture. Such leadership wisdom is not the norm in today's educational organizations. Influenced by the work of researchers, educational leaders, and professors of educational administration, traditional leadership has been based on hierarchical thinking and prescriptive skills that have promoted the status quo (Davies & Foster, 1994; Maxcy, 1994). This paper tells the story of a group of women educational leaders who are supporting each other as they challenge tradition and explore the application of democratic leadership in educational settings. Their story is a result of the analysis of data collected over the first three years of the Wellspring Community's existence.

The authors of this article studied the Wellspring Community for Women in Educational Leadership as participant observers through the qualitative examination of their own and other participants' experiences. As participant observers, the authors have struggled with their own biases and have attempted to ensure the trustworthiness of their interpretations and reporting by "checking" each other's perceptions for credibility and relying on other group members for data verification. Where applicable, the authors have also utilized participants' voices to ensure authenticity in reporting.

Democratic Values, Women, and Educational Leadership

The overarching belief in the value and superiority of the democratic political system unites most Americans. Images of the American flag, political campaigns, and first amendment rights are pressing concerns that are fiercely defended across America. When our country was in its infancy, Alexis de Tocqueville identified the values of liberty and equality as the bookends that support democratic beliefs. de Tocqueville identified many threats to the democratic society, but saw the “aristocracy of manufacturers” as perhaps democracy’s greatest threat. He recognized that the workplace had the potential to create conditions similar to the aristocracies that caused most Americans to flee their European homelands. de Tocqueville also recognized the leadership dilemma of the master and the workman in a democratic society when he said that the workman was “born to obey,” and the leader was born to command. As de Tocqueville predicted, the American workplace has become one of America’s most powerful institutions and the struggle for democracy within this setting has become a pressing concern for leaders who seek to embrace a democratic, value-based leadership style.

Many women educational leaders articulate a heightened pressure to create and maintain more democratic workplaces for several reasons: a) Their knowledge about any social phenomenon, including their leadership, is strongly influenced by their social, cultural, and historical contexts; b) Their life experiences are closely connected to those of others about whom they care and with whom they work; c) They believe that female leaders do not have to exercise power over others (Astin & Leland, 1991); and, d) They believe that the American educational workplace should be more of a community than an organization. Because schools are different in structure and purpose from the typical American business organization--different because most education in this country takes place in a not-for-profit or a publicly supported setting—their espoused missions resemble more those of human service agencies rather than those of large business organizations (Sergiovanni, 1992). Consequently, many women struggle to conduct their leadership in a more authentic, socially responsible manner. They are keen to create and maintain an enlivened educational culture grounded in the principles of democracy that profess human affairs to be conducted best through intelligent activity rather than through habit or force (Dewey, 1932, 1936; Garrison, 1997; Hawthorne & Henderson, 2000; Henderson, 2001).

However, women face a number of challenges as educational leaders today. Because early theories of leadership failed to include the social, historical, and cultural contexts of women, the organization’s behavioral expectations for women leaders are often incompatible with women leaders’ world views and life experiences. Furthermore, because women’s experiences are closely connected to those of others (Gilligan, 1984; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Helgeson, 1995; Astin & Leland, 1991; Hackney & Hogard, 1999), on a more personal level women leaders are challenged as gender influences transactional relationships among themselves and others. A woman’s sense of self is highly affected by others’ perceptions of what constitutes being male or female and assuredly has impact on what it means to be a female leader. Moreover, women in

educational leadership historically have combated culturally engrained beliefs that self-assuredness, confidence, and directedness are not acceptable female traits. Women who ascend into higher leadership positions must contend not only with their own development as their world views evolve, but also with cultural expectations and biases that are "added to the burden of legitimizing their positions among their followers" (Curry, 2000, p. 3).

The work of Curry (2000) and others (Hackney & Hogard, 1999; Hackney & Bock, 2000; Hackney, Bock, & Runnestrand, 2000) has suggested that women leaders are acutely aware of the development of their own leadership personae. They are readily able to reveal the effects of the intellectual, the cultural, and the experiential on their growth, and profess strong belief systems that have helped them to discern who they are. These findings are consistent with the research of Josselson (1990) and Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, and Orlofsky (1993) who posit that identity is a formative process influenced by values, beliefs, goals, interests, commitments, and relationships.

If we accept these feminist constructs, along with the democratic principles discussed earlier, we are challenged to incorporate the social, historical, and cultural contexts of women into a reconceptualization of leadership characterized by interdependence, sharing of power, collaborative problem solving, and a focus on democratic values for more socially altruistic ends. Greene (1988) eloquently described this as "opening spaces where freedom is the mainspring, where people create themselves by acting in concert" (p.134).

Leaders who ascribe to this social philosophy will engage in collaborative, creative, and intellectual leadership activity. They will demonstrate a love of learning, embrace human growth, commit to continuous self-development, and at the same time remain sensitive to the beliefs, styles, and circumstances of others. They will readily demonstrate empathy and reject oppression, exploitation, segregation, and neglect. Moreover, they will be morally driven to exhibit and engage in socially responsible practice (Dewey, 1932, 1936; Garrison, 1997; Greene, 1988; Hawthorne & Henderson, 2000; Henderson, 2001).

Women face challenges when they decide to engage in a reconceptualization of leadership. This prompted the authors and others to develop the Wellspring Community for Women in Educational Leadership, a place where like-minded women leaders could come together, grow together, and explore what it takes to create a more democratically principled workplace. The women participating in Wellspring believe that effective democratic, value-based leadership must begin with a personal and professional formative process. They believe that self-exploration and development are vital to a woman's leading, and that this exploration and development happens more readily when they are involved in self-study and professional inquiry among like-minded others. The "creative tension" they experience as women leaders in traditional educational organizations encourages them to challenge prescriptive notions of leadership, to question the "taken-for-granted" roles and responsibilities traditionally ascribed to women (Curry, 2000, pp. 87-101), and to activate their critical reasoning to construct their

own conceptions of leading. They “engage dialectically with the determining forces around [them]” (Greene, 1988, p. 72).

From Self Discovery to Social Action

Women need space where they can “break through the masked and the falsified, to reach toward what is also half-hidden or concealed” (Greene, 1988, p. 58). For women to develop the confidence and courage to reconstruct leadership theory and practice, they need the support of other women leaders. Participants are finding that support in the Wellspring Community for Women in Educational Leadership.

Grogan (1996) attests that often “missing [among women] is a source of confidence for bringing about social change” (p. 32). Though some women have succeeded in securing top-level leadership positions, they are often alone in the organization, without peers, and without the company of like-minded others. Consequently, challenging the prescriptive notions of leadership, disrupting the rules, arbitrating conflicts from a “different” value base, and upsetting the balance of power become frightening endeavors for women serious about deposing the “truth” and broadening the accepted practices of leadership.

Practical considerations, such as keeping one’s employment and avoiding alienation of peers, often supercede a woman’s desire to precipitate change in the organization and in her life of leadership. “Going public” (Palmer, 1998) with beliefs and values for organizational change requires a security founded in knowledge, conviction, and the support of others. The transformation of culture by challenging existing value systems is a dangerous task, one that might easily never be initiated or might be abandoned in process. If women are to “create a clearing, a space, where in the midst of things” they might explore, challenge, and transform existing notions of traditional, hierarchical power and authority with any success, they must do so with the support of an enclave.

Reynolds (1995) suggests that for women to develop as authentic leaders true to their leadership personae, they must develop cultural and social insight; they must understand the politics of feminism and the “genderization process within an organizational culture;” and they must move beyond the “difference” paradigm (p. 8). This translates into women studying themselves in formal leadership roles, actively promoting the expansion of knowledge and experiences of all types of women in all types of leadership settings, analyzing barriers against and strategies for social change, and exploring how the male hegemony has affected women and men in formal leadership roles (Reynolds, 1995).

Women need to continue to challenge authority as it has been prescribed historically and “create their own discourses about the ethical dilemmas of leadership in everyday practice” (Harding, 1991, p. 49). The women of the Wellspring Community recognize that critique alone is insufficient if, as women leaders, we want organizational and social change to occur. Likewise, they recognize that for multiple truths to be known and plural conceptions of leadership to be accommodated multiple voices must be heard. Only then will organizational structures be altered through changes in policy, programming, planning, evaluation,

and organizational development.

More practically speaking, to displace the traditional hegemony that surrounds leadership theory and practice, Harding (1991) suggests that women leaders will need to re-evaluate and disrupt the rules that have defined feminine dispositions toward leadership as inferior to the masculine. This would require the study of existing power relationships and open arbitration of value conflicts. The structures that have held the hierarchy in place, and power in asymmetrical balance, would need to be challenged so that an organizational reconfiguration can occur.

The Wellspring Community was conceived with these ideas in mind and has developed over the last three years to address the unique needs of women educational leaders. Our experiences are chronicled in the next section.

The Wellspring Experience

A group of women involved in educational leadership at a northeastern Ohio university and local school districts had been talking about creating a professional group that would support, encourage, and provide resources to women school leaders in the area. Everywhere we went--to meetings, conferences, and classes--we were hearing the voices of women who felt alone, isolated, excluded from the power players in the profession. Because one of us taught a course on women and leadership, and the others held responsible positions at the county level, we were considered the locals who could "make something happen." Fortunately, at around the same time, the male superintendent of a local educational service center believed there was a need for such a group. He told us, "I know we need to do something for the ladies, I just don't know what." We assured him that we would find out "what" the women school leaders needed and would have a plan for him in the near future. When we presented our plan, he graciously pledged institutional support for the first year.

Establishing the Need: What We Learned

In the years previous to the establishment of Wellspring, several members of the group began hearing a common voice of concern among women leaders. Through a series of conversations with other women leaders significant themes about who they were and how they felt about themselves emerged. A diverse group of educational leaders expressed a number of common concerns, but one theme emerged as dominant. As the only female, or one of a group of very few females, practicing leadership in their organizations, these educational leaders were experiencing an enormous sense of personal loss. Specifically, these women expressed the feeling that what had been lost for the sake of survival or "fitting in" was a sense of self. Missing was the authentic self and what remained was a shell of the former self. Having to conform to the male structure and model of leadership and organization had forced many women into a chameleon role. For the sake of fulfilling the mission of the institution, these women had made huge personal sacrifices. And while each would have been described as successful, many of these women were emotionally exhausted. The denial of the self had left many of them with a feeling that their souls had been damaged. In order to survive, many women

were opting out of leadership positions or leaving existing organizations. This pattern of flight was seen as a potential problem. What would happen to their organizations if the really talented women leaders left? Through these conversations, the same idea kept emerging, what was needed was some way of assisting these women leaders in "maintaining their souls," which would allow their authentic selves to prevail within their organizations "so that the next generation of women leaders would not be faced with the same dilemma."

We knew that we still needed more data than we had to establish a need for what we were thinking of as a "center." We facilitated several focus groups and conducted many interviews with women educational leaders in a three county area. Overwhelmingly, the results of the interviews confirmed what we were hearing and observing: a desire for professional, intellectual, and spiritual "renewal."

The women we interviewed envisioned a place "to confront issues of concern," dialogue, reflect, problem-solve, and "move forward" together. These women did not want to come together to complain and commiserate, but to raise the "level of professional development out there." They envisioned a shared place "to develop skills, to learn and grow with colleagues, and to challenge each other's thinking." They were interested in a multi-faceted program where they might research together, write together, and become better acquainted with women's issues. They also felt called to social action. They wanted to understand the cultural and professional insensitivities in their professional organizations and to develop professional support systems. In doing so, they would be better prepared to challenge the status quo and to redefine educational leadership as more democratically inclusive and just. But most importantly, they wanted "to associate with a group of like-minded others," to build collegial relationships, to find support, and to be intellectually challenged.

Collaborative Planning

After collecting and analyzing the data, the original group of planners invited a group of twelve women, representing local school districts and universities, to join us to plan for the future. We met several times to understand what we had learned and to translate it into a mission, to articulate them as a purpose, and to respond to them with a structured program. The planning sessions were enlivened with hope, commitment, and creativity! Yet, we grew to know each other as individuals who did not always agree. Biases were exposed. Irritability levels were piqued. Power relationships were negotiated. Concerns were voiced. The group grew to understand the meaning of the term collaboration. We were determined not to reproduce the traditional male model of planning and implementation. Yet, as women who had "grown up" in the hierarchical organization, we struggled with the process. A couple of the women who would become part of the group called us periodically to ask, "Aren't you ready yet? When will this group get-together?" Finally, we felt it was time to expand our group to those who would accept our invitations to join us in this formative process.

We invited positional school building and district leaders, university faculty, and doctoral students who had expressed interest in our work. These were women who

were risk-takers, attempting to lead in alternative ways; they were women who were vocal about the place of spirituality in their work; and, they were intellectually active women who prioritized their own growth and development. Fifteen women accepted our invitation and met for the first Wellspring salon in December of 1999.

We developed a position statement that would periodically undergo review and revision. The original statement included a mission, the purpose, and the proposed structure of the group. The mission stated:

Wellspring Women's Leadership Community is committed to linking female educational leaders together for constructive educational reform through leadership development, professional renewal, inspiration, and personal growth.

It was decided that the community would invite female positional or non-positional leaders of both public and private educational organizations that serve students from pre-kindergarten through the university to become a part. The participants would be asked to commit to an active role in planning and leading the salon format, in sharing resources, and in setting the community's course for the future. Once participants were assembled, they concurred to a formal purpose statement:

The Wellspring Women's Leadership community will provide a sustained intellectual, professional, and spiritual renewal for participants. Through Wellspring, women will find opportunities to share resources and find affirmation, support, nourishment, and inspiration as educational leaders. The community offers women educational leaders opportunities to reshape the educational culture through their collaborative efforts toward investigation of alternative dispositions to leadership, expansion, and redefinition of their conceptions of leadership, development of creative approaches to leadership, improvement of communication and collaboration across the continuum of roles and responsibilities in educational organizations from pre-K through the university, and renewal of their spiritual selves.

Structure of the Wellspring Experience

The dream of the original group was that Wellspring would become a place where women could meet and find resources. We thought of creating a data bank, stocking a professional library, editing a journal, and offering professional development programs and services. That dream was somewhat modified when the actual group-- those who accepted our invitations to participate-- assembled.

We had methodically scheduled an inaugural two-day session together, our first "salon," the first "regular meeting of distinguished guests" as Webster would define it. We knew that we wanted the experience to be meaningful for the participants, to be characterized by serious professional and intellectual challenge, and to be a source of inspiration. We also wanted participants to shape the future direction of the community. That became reality when the group decided to abandon the planned agenda and recreate what our two days together would look like. The

original planning group learned the first of many lessons: letting go. What we had scripted as a tightly programmed two days composed of “checking –in,” professional reading, dialogue, reflection, contemplative quiet time, and collaborative planning for the future turned into something that looked much different as authored by the newly conceived group itself.

For the time being, putting aside the idea of a “center,” and responding to the desires of the participants, we formed a group that meets regularly, at least four times a year in a salon format. We share responsibility for planning each future salon. In enactment of our mission, at each salon we incorporate intellectual activity. We read together, discuss issues of concern, and acquaint each other with new theories and research. We have read works by Heilbrun, Blount, Grogan, Capper, and Bateson, among others. Yet, for many Wellspring participants, the discussion of individual issues and concerns has been the most beneficial part of our time together. The practical application of theory and current thinking has guided the discussion of many topics generated for discussion: dealing with overbearing men in the workplace, handling changes in leadership in the organizational hierarchy, accepting a woman leader’s social responsibility to others in the workplace, knowing “when to leave and when to stay” in a position.

During each salon, we also nourished our spirits through inclusion of the arts and humanities. We have enjoyed experiences with clay, collage, poetry, meditation, and inspirational prose. We are finding it more and more essential that we weave care of our spirit selves into the entire salon experience. We are finding that these experiences become the mettle that gives shape to our intellectual and the professional wisdom.

After the first salon, three women decided that the group was not for them. Two others have dropped out over the course of the past year, both for personal reasons. Three more have joined and are active members. Our group has stabilized with twelve committed members and has assumed the responsibility for its own sustenance.

Initial Impact

Although this project is in a pilot phase, members have already reported benefits from participation. During each salon we ask each other three questions: a) What has changed for you in your life and leadership since our last meeting? b) How have you made your workplace a more compassionate and democratic place? c) How has your participation in Wellspring influenced these changes? In response to these questions members have shared evidence of their growth and the growth of their organizations. Such examples have included growth in self-confidence, accomplishment of projects or goals that were essential to the leadership potential of the individual, and advancement along career paths. Many of the participants have attributed this growth to the intellectual, professional, and spiritual support and challenge they have received from the group. The narrative that follows is one participant’s reflective description of the intellectual development, the personal and professional growth, and the spiritual renewal she has experienced as a result of her participation in the Wellspring Community.

Lucy's Story

After the first meeting of Wellspring I felt empowered to take control of my life in a new way. Putting my struggles out in the room where no one had an agenda regarding my success or failure was a safe process. This allowed me to be really honest. This "no strings attached" environment is one I rarely have the opportunity to enjoy due to my position. I believe that, because of the environment, members are able to give much more honest feedback to one another.

When asked at our second meeting to describe what had changed in my life since the last time we were together, I felt I had a story of transformation to share. At our first meeting I was angry, hurt, and lost. Due to a change in leadership and leadership style in my institution I felt that for the first time in 12 years I was needed but not wanted. I felt that in order to survive, I was going to have to become a new person or leave. This was reflected in our artistic spiritual renewal time when I created a clay woman with a giant hole in her middle.

The group held up a mirror so that I could reflect on my choices. At the time I was debating on applying for a presidency in an area institution. In hind site I realize that my application for president would have been to prove my competency versus coming from a sincere desire to be president. One member of the group held up what I will call a reality mirror. She told me I wasn't even being realistic. I didn't have my Ph.D. completed so I was wasting time debating whether or not to be a president. She advised me to finish the Ph.D. now. She also told me to take my sabbatical. I felt the timing of taking the sabbatical during my new president's first year would make me very weak. She felt it was the only way I would survive the situation. By leaving and finishing my Ph.D. I would give him a chance to establish his own presence. I would allow him to see the benefit or lack of benefit my presence brings to the institution. I would have time to reflect and stop spinning around. I would finish my Ph.D. and then no longer feel trapped should I decide that I, indeed, needed to leave.

She shared a story with the group about stepping back. That was the best advice I received in a long time. She told a story about being a little girl and trying to learn long division in school. The more she struggled with the process of learning long division the more upset she became and thus the more confused she became. She became so upset about the process that her mother decided that "running around in all that confusion" couldn't possibly be good for her so she took her out of school. She stayed home and played and left long division behind. After being out of school for a couple of weeks the school phoned to inquire as to why she was missing school. Her mother explained the situation and said that "the school had her so confused that there was no way learning could take place and that when she was no longer confused she would come back to

school." A few more weeks passed and she finally went back to school less confused. She stated that this was her first sabbatical and that she had learned from this lesson that sometimes she had to step out of the situation in order to see clearly the appropriate path she needed to follow.

A second piece of advice that came from that first Wellspring meeting was the idea that "if you have to be present for your ideas to become a reality then they were only your ideas." In other words, no one else had bought into them strongly enough to assure that they would be brought to fruition. In addition, if you always have to push ideas then maybe you are the one who is out-of-step. This idea of letting go and just seeing what would happen was foreign to me. But understanding this idea empowered me to take the sabbatical. I was certain that the projects led by me would not move forward without my presence, thus I could not find time for the sabbatical. This new realization helped me realize that my ideas or my projects might only be my priority and my absence would allow me to know what the community valued. In reflection on this experience I now realize that this process of letting go and letting the community accept or reject ideas is the enactment of democratic leadership. Now that I have had this experience I recognize the value of creating a more authentic democratic community by applying this in my work. I am striving to weave this style of leadership into my life and am finding that it is freeing.

The personal outcome of the first Wellspring meeting was the completion of my Ph.D. Greater even than this accomplishment was the letting go of my accumulated anger and frustration. The decision was strategic. It allowed me to gain a clearer vision on how to work when I returned to the institution. The process validated my leadership style as authentic even if different than the changing style of the organization. In addition, I learned that I didn't always have to push my ideas or be present for the ideas to become a reality. Those ideas that were important to the community were completed. The lack of completion of some projects gave me the opportunity to reevaluate their appropriateness in the community.

In response to our second question of how we are making our work places more humane, I responded that my absence had allowed all of us to breathe. It also created a greater understanding of my role as a leader by other members of the community. It allowed those who traditionally follow to lead in new ways. It forced me to look beyond myself and into the community for support, solutions, and leadership. Because I gained a greater sense of peace, the division also gained a greater sense of peace.

Other Women's Experiences

Members have shared several examples of the benefits of the group through their responses to the three questions. During our last salon, Elaine reported to the group a "greater sense of self worth" as related to her role in an institution of higher education and to her primary relationship. This sense of self worth allowed

her to negotiate a new position, salary, and other resources in a manner she previously would have found uncomfortable. In addition, the new sense of self worth and personal clarity allowed her to end a “nonproductive relationship.”

Mary had always felt that her female support staff at work was dependent on her leadership and direction for their success. After the first Wellspring retreat, she “began to think about their development and success in a different way.” She began to realize that “leadership is the art of developing leadership in others” and that with her support, these women were capable of assuming responsibilities for their own growth, development, and success at work. With the change in her leadership orientation, the women began to change: they are now exhibiting greater self-esteem and collaborating among themselves.

With the support of members of the group, Alexa successfully assumed a new position at a women’s college. Though she “loved the rigor and scholarship required of faculty in the research institution,” the patriarchal nature of the institution left her “frustrated, hurt, and often discounted.” She reported at the first meeting of Wellspring as being tired of the “boys’ games” and feeling “sucked into them to survive in the institution.” Members of the group encouraged her to find the courage to let go of dominant culture status issues and follow her heart to a more appropriate institutional setting. She is now the Dean of Graduate Studies in a small private women’s college.

Many members of the group have reported the importance and benefit of being able to share the issues that are critical in their personal lives. Karen openly has discussed her family obligations and how they have affected her work. Meeting the needs of her husband, children, and her institution has left her “empty and exhausted.” The group has offered Karen support and encouragement. She “arranges” home and professional commitments, including visits from in-laws, so that they do not keep her from group meetings.

For its members, Wellspring represents a place where they can be whole persons who do not have to compartmentalize their various life roles. Members have found support for a number of concerns: dealing with empty nest issues, sibling relationships, conflict in the family, struggles and conflicts with significant others, and the issues of raising children. We participants feel that discussions around these concerns are vital to our well being; we make sure they are woven into the fabric of the salons and addressed with the same importance, authenticity, and support as those issues that stem from work related discussions.

Dilemmas: Struggles for Authentic Human Synergy

The women of the Wellspring Community face concerns that have arisen out of the evolving personality and dynamics of the group: concerns based in conflicting and competing interests, honesty, balance of purpose, and moral and ethical responsibility.

Conflicting or Competing Interests

Some members of the community have wrestled with their relationships as employees in the same work organizations and as members of the Wellspring Community. To complicate this situation, after competing for the same position, one of the members was placed in a supervisory position over another. Fearful of jeopardizing or damaging personal and professional relationships, the women involved were overly cautious with their words and actions. Alexa wondered how these two members of the group were able to take full advantage of the community in which expectations are that others "listen, encourage, and renew each other's spirits." Moreover, the strain the relationship was putting on the rest of the group became most uncomfortable. The tension between these two women became more and more tangible; within a few months, the woman in the subordinate position quietly made her excuses, retired from the group, and declined to discuss the situation any further.

The group also dealt with a request that could result in a similar situation. Joanne's work supervisor had repeatedly expressed interest in joining the group. Although her presence could create inner group conflict and could also cause discomfort for another woman who had professional difficulties with her in the past, Joanne was concerned that if her supervisor was not invited to join, she could suffer a loss of friendship, or even withdrawal of support for her participation in the group.

The community addressed this dilemma, and felt it healthiest to leave the group intact. Yet, the community had been struck by a comment Joanne had made: "How can we give back to the world? We need to help people to recognize what they have contributed. Maybe our worth-while-ness comes from helping other groups to form." Thus, the Wellspring Community has assumed responsibility for outreach to other women leaders. It is often difficult for women to take care of themselves as well as they take care of others (Gilligan, 1984), so Joanne and Alexa have chosen to be involved in expansion beyond the original group. They have agreed to assist another group of women, led by Joanne's supervisor, who are interested in forming something similar to what we now have. They share with them processes, experiences, and resources. Alexa offered them a "home" at her institution; the group is meeting quarterly; it is healthy and growing!

These dilemmas have forced the group into deliberative dialogue about our responsibility to support other women educational leaders. If, in fact, we are serious about promoting a democratic culture, rich in diversity and characterized by inclusion, why are we conducting our group in a way that suggests elitism and exclusion? We wrestle with questions: "Is this an expression of selfishness, or is it responsible care-taking of a group that has become precious to us?" Joanne stated she is "worried about our bigger purpose and mission." If we are true to our mission and purpose should we not be "concerned with organizational and social reform beyond our own selves and our organizations?" Do we not have a responsibility to others and to our profession? However, Emily's comment, "Isn't it enough that we grow individually...why do we have to have a collective initiative?" illustrates the conflicting opinions within the group.

Over time, the group has settled into an intimate group of loyal friends and

professional colleagues bolstered by their work with the extension group and the support they experience with each other.

Balance of Purpose

In preparation for the writing of this and other articles reporting on the Wellspring Community experience, concerns about our mission and purpose were expressed within the group. The Wellspring mission states that the community exists to offer women educational leaders intellectual, professional, and spiritual renewal. Earlier in this writing, we described the ways the group has attempted to infuse these components into every salon we collaboratively plan. Because we are a group of academics and practitioners, there exists what Mary calls "a natural, predictable tension" and we struggle with what constitutes a balance of these components. Of course, some of the academics believe we are shortchanging the intellectual; and, of course, those who are practitioners believe that the application of theory is most important and essential to their leadership development and feel that we should not spend too much time on esoteric ideas. We have had discussions about this issue periodically and try to become more comfortable with the notion that we are all part of a profession: we have different roles, one group is not superior to the other, and we can learn from each other. The academics offer us lofty ideas; the practitioners keep our feet on the ground. This creates what Suellen calls "an eclecticism, an interesting fusion of things."

This "interesting fusion of things" has evolved into more symbiotic relationships within the group. Personal and professional barriers have been crossed and intellectual power has been diffused. Through no real conscious effort, participants have ascended to a higher common place where roles have become irrelevant. Our analysis suggests that the safe, open space created by the group has encouraged participants to relinquish hierarchical roles and traditionally defined superordinancies for more egalitarian, mutually respectful inter-relationships.

Honesty

Being able to share authentically one's knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and feelings, is the bedrock of the group; commitment to authenticity is critical to the success of the group. Mary expressed this well when she said, "The group is becoming so intimate that honesty is an imperative." However, several situations have occurred that threaten authenticity within the group. One, of course, is the situation that has arisen among the co-workers discussed earlier in this section; the others are more reflective of some members' apparent discomfort within the group. The group has hesitated confronting this dilemma and four women have decided to leave the group. Their leaving is not perceived as a positive outcome, and at this writing we are not aware of why they chose to leave. We wonder: Did they find the group process uncomfortable? Were other members impositional with their opinions and beliefs? Did they experience a philosophical rift with the group? Elizabeth stated that these women's leaving is the result of the group's failure to deal with issues in a forthright manner: "Maybe if we had talked to them about this they might have stayed." At this writing, the four who left the group are still unwilling to discuss their decisions beyond a very superficial level.

Personal Moral and Ethical Responsibility

A more difficult dilemma we face, perhaps an extension of our problems surrounding honesty, is related to the responsibility we have to one another as it relates to the more personal sides of ourselves. More specifically, recent concern over one member's apparent emotional problems caused Lucy to raise the question: "To what extent do we intercede in one another's lives?" If a group member develops a behavioral problem, such as chronic depression, personal anxiety, alcoholism, or an eating disorder, is it the role or responsibility of the group to confront that issue?

Also, as our group matures, closer relationships will develop among some of the members. If, for example, two women within the group were to develop a romantic relationship, what sort of effect would this intervening personal/social factor have on the group? The sharing and support found in our group encourages close ties and intimate relationships. Yet, much in the way that nepotism can violate equity in the workplace, such relationships could threaten the constructive dynamics of the group. We wonder if future close relationships, or at worse, the dissolution of those relationships, will affect the group's mission and purpose.

Issues of morality and ethics complicate the discussion as we debate these questions and we have not come to any consensus about how, or if, we would handle such problems. Though composed of "successful" and powerful women leaders, the group has exhibited stereotypical female gender-linked behavior: we have hesitated to surface those issues that begin bubbling in the sidebars for fear of offending others, hurting others through confrontation, damaging fledgling relationships, and altering the group's dynamics. As the group evolves, we do know that we will need to be gently confrontational and deal with these issues if and when they arise. This, too, must become the work of the group.

Conclusion

The Wellspring group has had many successes, but has also uncovered many concerns. Though initially we did not begin with a stated value of democratic leadership, we have all come to characterize many of our leadership challenges as an effort to democratize our leadership style. The process of collaboration has helped us to name our challenges and identify our struggles. This is just one of many benefits of collaboration that we have grown to appreciate. The benefits of having many minds apply their unique talents to a specific problem or issue adds a dimension to our group that many of us find lacking in our workplaces. The recognition of the value of collaboration has increased our commitment to the development of a democratic workplace.

Though we are convinced of the Wellspring's value to each of us individually, we continue to be concerned about the effect our efforts are having on our respective organizations. The impact we have in the lives of our organizations and professions is primary; we all want to make positive contributions.

Perhaps our overarching conclusion is the difficulty of creating authentic

experiences for ourselves and for the others with whom we share our lives. This struggle for authenticity takes on many dimensions. We struggle to make the Wellspring experience authentic. How do we create an environment that is safe? How do we peel away the defense mechanisms we carry with us in other social settings? How do we remain authentic when sometimes an authentic response would threaten other members? How much challenge or disagreement is appropriate in this setting? To date, the Wellspring members have avoided confrontations and disagreements, we wonder if this will continue and also wonder what will happen if it does not continue.

Another dimension to our concerns about authenticity relates to our future research efforts. Can participant observers report honestly about experiences in which they are intimately involved? As researchers, we wonder how we will balance issues of safety and trust with the need to report accurately the experiences of the group. We realize that the group's verification of data is imperative if we are to maintain the integrity of our research. This too will become the work of the group.

As our struggles to develop our authentic selves as educators, leaders, women, and researchers continue, we all gain a greater appreciation for how difficult it is to incorporate the values of democracy into our lives. We struggle with how we will become more generous and generative; how we will respect autonomy, yet share a collective purpose; and how we will prioritize our own and the group's learning and development. These questions have not dampened our efforts and enthusiasm, but have given us a new appreciation for the work that lies ahead.

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