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Women Leaders and Spirituality
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Women Leaders and Spirituality

In addressing leadership, there are often two interlocking strands. One of these strands centers on the contributions of leadership grounded in men's leadership experiences (Regan & Brooks, 1995). The second interlocking strand includes feminist attributes. This contributes to nuances of meaning that arise from women's experiences of leadership. Regan and Brooks noted five attributes of leadership among women: collaboration, caring, courage, intuition, and vision. Often these attributes are embedded in firmly held beliefs which are at the heart of a notion of relational leadership. Over twenty years ago, Jaggar (1983) further emphasized that "feminist theory is at its best when it reflects the lived experiences of women, when it bridges the gap between mind and body, reason, and emotion, thinking and feeling" (p. x).

Yet, most researchers acknowledge that there are differences in how women and men lead. For example, men are more likely to be oriented toward "rights," while women are more likely to be oriented toward "caring" (Gilligan, 1977). Women leaders tend to focus more closely than men on instructional tasks, as well as on students' individual differences (as cited in Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). Other studies of superintendents noted that men exerted leadership within and without the organization while women exerted their leadership within the organization and in those activities most closely associated with their role (as cited in Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). Other studies pointed out that male groups competed with each other and rarely expressed feelings; male groups were more likely to have a differentiated division of labor; female groups were more often characterized by interpersonal relations and concern for one another; and in mixed groups men developed a more personal orientation and were less aggressive (as cited in Ortiz & Marshall, 1988).

Clearly, the traditional public perception of femininity and a woman's ability to be an effective leader are often in conflict. In fact, for women to be seen as a leader in their field, women must have more credentials than male counterparts, be better prepared, and be more knowledgeable (Jamieson, 1995). According to Grossman and Chester (1990), further research is needed that explores a deeper understanding of women's experiences by including research in which women leaders make meaning of their own experiences. Consequently, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional experiences of nine women leaders who have earned public recognition for their contribution to education as teachers, principals, superintendents, and university professors. This paper focuses specifically on women's lived

leadership experiences in relation to spirituality.

Leadership in Education

Today, 70% of teachers are women (Steffy, 2002) attributed in part to the fact that many women choose to teach because they feel career options are limited. Yet, despite the prevalence of women in teaching, of even greater concern is that men continue to dominate in educational leadership roles. While female principals actually constituted 55% of elementary principals in 1928, by 1973 this number had fallen to only 19.6% (Johnson, 1973). However, in the 1980s, 25% of principals were women, and by the early 1990s this had risen to 48%. Most women were elementary principals, with only 12% serving at the high school level (Natale, 1992; Saks, 1992). Central office positions have typically been the most likely administrative level for women, with as many as 48.2% of women making up general administration positions, such as finance or personnel (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988).

The superintendency has historically been conceived of in "distinctly male terms" (Grogan, 2000, p. 121). The Committee of Ten of 1892, which formulated policies for superintendents, included only men. Other early leaders recommended that education adopt a business model and hire administrators from these ranks, which, of course, excluded women. At the turn of the 20th century, the business influence on American schools became even greater. For example, from 1865 to 1910, the superintendent had been seen as a scholar-educator and a teacher of teachers, but in later years he became more of a "business manager-school executive type" (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988, p. 125). Glass (1992) referred to the superintendency as the "most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (p. 8), and, until recently, even the language used to describe the superintendent has been almost completely male: *statesman*, *he*, *warrior* (Grogan, 2000). Even today, when over half of students enrolled in educational administration classes are women, only 13% of all superintendent positions are held by women (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

Barriers to Leadership

In 1909, Ella Flagg Young envisioned that "Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. . . she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership" (Blount, 1998, p. 1). While certainly there are many more opportunities for women in leadership today, Young's prediction has fallen far short of its target in schools. Yet this conflict for leadership is not isolated in education alone but continues to dominate other career fields for women as well. Typically, the barriers in this "woman or leader" conflict fall into two primary categories: marriage/family responsibility and cultural stereotyping.

Marriage and Family Responsibility

Women who have family responsibilities must consider several factors when making career advancement decisions, all of which focus on the effect their work will have on their family. Thus, when women plan careers, they factor inequality into their futures by assuming they will move in and out of the workforce due to family responsibilities (Orenstein, 2000). This phenomenon is called *sequencing* (Jamieson, 1995). In fact, 7 out of 10 women surveyed indicated that they expected their spouses' jobs to take priority over theirs. Thus, even before they begin their careers, most young women decide that their careers will be secondary to the careers of their husbands.

Prior to 1978, sequencing was often forced on many women, particularly in education. For example, an NEA study in 1930-31 found that 77% of districts surveyed would not hire married women and 63% dismissed female teachers if they got married. As recently as 1974, the courts were considering school policies that required pregnant teachers to leave the classroom as early as the fourth month of pregnancy "to spare children the sight of pregnant women" (Jamieson, 1995, p. 66).

Traditionally, lack of mobility has been another barrier to career advancement, limiting many women to only those opportunities that are in the same area where their family lives (Harris, Arnold, Lowery, & Marshall, 2001; Ramsey, 1997). In fact, Ezrati (1983) found that 90% of women would not even consider relocating unless husbands found jobs, yet 75% of men would relocate if they found a better job regardless of whether or not their spouse found employment.

The influence of marriage and family responsibilities on a woman's work life extends to other areas as well. For example, Ramsey (1997) suggested that a husband's support may exert such a powerful effect on women who become superintendents that it can influence her level of success in that role. Also, other studies have indicated that career advancement for women in professions often causes some women to limit family size (Hensel, 1991).

Cultural Stereotyping

An especially important barrier is the traditional stereotyping of leadership which has failed to address the female perspective and its related qualities (Irby, Brown, & Trautman, 1999). After all, most of what is learned in administrative leadership courses comes from male-based experiences. This view is supported by Hudson and Rea's 1998 study which found that while female and male teachers identify the same qualities as desirable in a principal regardless of the principal's gender, male principals are viewed by females as having legitimate authority based solely on the position, whereas both males and females say that women must work to earn their authority. Yet, Colwill (1997) noted that while women are less able than men to influence others, they are more effective at getting things done.

A barrier related to ingrained cultural perceptions of leadership is that of sponsorship or networking. Historically, men have been encouraged toward management and women to instruction. For years, male organizational leaders have supported and mentored each other in "a good ole boy" network, filling administrative positions with friends and proteges, while largely ignoring qualified women for these positions (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). Over 30 years ago, Barnett (1971) found that men tended to select careers based on interests, aptitudes, and financial possibilities, while women, on the other hand, tended to be influenced in career decisions by career role models or significant others.

Additionally, cultural stereotyping has placed women into non-leadership roles limiting women's goal orientation. While men typically enter education with the goal of becoming a principal or superintendent, women enter teaching with only one goal--becoming a teacher, not of becoming a leader in the classroom or in administration (Ortiz, 1982; Pankake, 1995). This same lack of goal orientation often results in women spending more years in the classroom than men. In fact, men often enter administration as early as their mid-20s, while women often wait until their late 40s (Glass, 1992; Shakeshaft, 1989; Zemlicka, 2001).

Women and Spirituality

Often *educational* leaders are faced with enormous "demands and pressures such as ensuring equitable outcomes for students, including parents into decision-making bodies, ..developing strong professional communities, and developing broad learning outcomes for all students" that they sometimes need deliberate intervention requiring the moral use of power (Bogotch, 2000, p. 2). This leads educators to respond to our true meaning and purpose. Our day-to-day quest for personal and professional meaning, our spiritual purpose, can be pursued as "the path with a heart" (Shepard, 1984). According to Best (1996), the word *spiritual* refers to anything that may be regarded as a source of inspiration to a person's life (p.77).

Characteristics of leadership that are echoed in our spiritual experiences include relationships, connectedness, power, influence, and transformation. For many, spirituality is the essence of an individual; his or her inner being; the real self (Klenke, 2003). Beyond that, most definitions of spirituality also

acknowledge a dimension that is non-physical, unbound by time and place that transcends our five senses but is every bit as real as the physical realm. However, spirituality in leadership entails the way a leader is present to the people she or he works with and to the deep realities of the work they share in common (Shields, Edwards, & Sayani, 2005, p. 67). Further, Fullan (2002) suggested that "spiritual leadership in education is an alluring but complex phenomenon" (p. 14). At the same time, Solomon and Hunter (2002) pointed out that pairing spirituality and educational leadership might seem incongruous and even dissonant. However, they resolved the incongruity by explaining that spiritually is one's "meaning system" (p. 38). Along this same line, Bolman and Deal (2001) indicated that spirituality is a leadership challenge that is as forbidding as any challenge that educators will ever face. Yet, Wheatley (2002) noted the importance of this and implied that leaders strengthened by faith who act as servant leaders find the courage to face the challenges of life and their jobs. This led Robert Starratt to suggest that educators must "take the pulse of their own spirituality and understand how they are present to the most inner realities of their world" (Shields, Edwards, & Sayani, 2005, p. 154).

Educational leaders must assess all actions, decisions, and ideas through a critical lens of spirituality, measured by the standards of ethical, moral, just, caring, equity, fairness, and democracy. Thus, Bolman and Deal (2001) suggested that "integrity is rooted in identity and faith. . . one reason that spirit and soul are at the heart of the most successful leadership" (p. 42). They further argued that when individuals live superficially, they pursue goals limited to material success, and rarely stop to listen to the inner voice which indicates spiritual development.

Fostering the development of others and making a difference in their lives is the first order of spiritual leadership, and this is nourished by the quality of relationships between individuals. Additionally, Solomon and Hunter (2002) argued that one's spiritual being influenced one's decision-making processes by pointing out Howard Gardner's concept of existential intelligence. Gardner (1999) described existential intelligence as the capacity to locate oneself with the infinite and infinitesimal which is the significance of life. Further, Oladele (1998) insisted that "spirit is the heart of a meaningful education" (p. 62-65).

Methodology

As stated earlier, our primary study explored the experiences of women leaders through written narratives. Qualitative research methods appeared most appropriate since making meaning was essential in this study. According to Creswell (1998), the use of qualitative methods helps researchers study things in their natural settings, creating a complex, holistic picture from which a narrative is formed.

Population

The researchers purposefully selected nine women at various levels of education because we believe that leadership occurs at every level. All women had won public recognition for their contributions to education. The women, who ranged in ages from their mid-30s to their early 60s, included principals, university teachers, and superintendents. Four of the women were White, one was American Indian, and four were African-American. The women chose to use their own names rather than remain anonymous.

Data Collection

According to Palmer (1993), "the interview, that favorite tool of social data gatherers, is meant to be an 'inter-view,' a way of looking into other people's behaviors and attitudes that opens our own lives to view" (p. 62). Therefore, we developed a structured interview guide that included queries about these women's childhood, work ethics, career path, mentoring opportunities, leadership styles, and personal and professional barriers. Using a personal experience design to frame our inquiry, we engaged participants in dialogue through face-to-face and telephone interviews to produce stories of women in leadership. All

original data were drawn from the book *Winning Women: Stories of Award-Winning Educators* (Harris, Lowery, Ballenger, Hicks-Townes, Carr, & Alford, 2004). This paper represents a secondary analysis of original findings and reports only on the spiritual aspect of leadership with these nine women. Polkinghorne's (1991) analysis of narrative technique was used to re-examine the stories of these recognized leaders to further analyze the major theme of spirituality which emerged from the original study.

A Description of Nine Women Leaders

A brief snapshot of each woman is captured in the following section.

Donnya Stephens

Donnya is an African-American woman who was born in rural East Texas . She never married and has devoted her life to her career. Her mother was a teacher and an administrator in rural East Texas , and her father worked as a blue-collar worker in one of the local industries. Her maternal grandmother was her greatest mentor. Donnya received her high school diploma and Bachelors degree from segregated institutions in East Texas . While she has taught in both segregated and integrated institutions, she has taught for the past 27 years in higher education where she has won many honors, including being named a Regents Professor.

Sharon Richardson

Sharon Richardson is an African-American woman born in rural Northeast Texas . Sharon is an only child. Her father was the bus driver in the school district where she attended school as a child. She now serves this district as superintendent, the first African-American woman to serve in this role. She was honored recently with the naming of the elementary school, Sharon Richardson Elementary School . Sharon has one son.

Sandra Lowery

Sandra is a White woman born in rural East Texas . Her father worked as a pipeline welder when she was a child, and the family moved frequently, every few months at least. Consequently, she attended many schools every year. Sandra learned at an early age from her grandmother that "you can't let someone tell you that you can't do what you know you can." She has served in nearly every position in the public schools. In addition to being a teacher and central office administrator, she has also served as elementary principal, high school principal, the first female superintendent in three school districts, school board member and president, and university leader. Sandra has recently retired. She is married with 3 sons and 5 grandchildren.

Molly Helminger

Molly is a White woman and the sixth of seven children who lived in a single-parent household from the age of six. Molly's mother established the non-negotiable that every child would compete in at least one sport and learn one musical instrument. Practice was expected, as was diligence to the task at hand. Molly's musical and athletic talents were accompanied by strong academic skills, and this combination led to Molly's career choice to become a music teacher and athletic coach. Molly taught for five years, during which time she also earned a Master's degree in guidance and counseling. Focus and discipline grounded in faith and manifested in positive actions are Molly's trademarks. With this combination, she has continued to rise in the educational field having already served as a school superintendent for 10 years by the age of 46.

Patsy Hallman

Patsy, a White woman, was born and reared in a small town in Northeast Texas . Patsy describes her parents as "smart, hard-working, ethical, and nurturing, with high expectations for their children and a commitment

to do whatever was necessary for their children to achieve their goals." Patsy's mother and father encouraged Patsy through her graduation as valedictorian of her high school class, completion of a Master's degree, and attainment of her doctoral degree. Patsy taught for 22 years before moving into the field of university administration and ultimately becoming Dean of the College of Education . Patsy is married and has grown children.

Candace Newland

Candace, an African-American woman , grew up in a family of educators. When Candace first went to the University of Oregon as a freshman, her ambition was to be an international lawyer. But life intervened in her early plans when she married and had a child. She later re-enrolled in Oregon State University , and went directly into elementary education to become a teacher. Soon, she moved into her first administrative job. Currently, Candace serves as Director of the Portland State University Center for Student Success. She has two grown daughters.

Bette Davis

Bette is an African-American woman who has taught English and composition for over 35 years. The oldest of four sisters, Bette " . . . played the grown-up with them, helping my mother, especially after our father died, leaving her a widow at twenty-eight years old." Bette went on to graduate from Rowan High school with honors. A couple of weeks later, she left home to attend Alcorn A&M College , a predominantly Black institution in Mississippi . She attended Alcorn for three years before leaving to work full time. When she returned to college, she completed her undergraduate at the University of Southern Mississippi , which had become integrated. Bette taught at the high school for 27 years before retiring, at the junior college for 2 years, and is presently in her 8th year of teaching at the college level in her home state of Mississippi . Most recently, she was honored as Humanities Teacher of the Year at William Carey College . Bette has grown children. Dawn Lynette Smith Dawn is a member of the Klamath Tribe. Her father, a Native

American, was the first member of the Klamath Tribe to graduate from college. He became a high school teacher and coach, a civil rights activist, and tribal chairman. Dawn's mother is White and was a librarian. As a junior high student growing up in Salem , Oregon , Dawn became interested in the State School for the Deaf and volunteered there. Consequently, she went to the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley to study deaf education. In her senior year, the tribal elders of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation recruited her to come to the reservation as a teacher. She accepted the call and transferred to Oregon State University in Corvallis . She stayed on the reservation as an educator for the next thirty years. In 2003, Dawn was named Oregon Principal of the Year. Dawn is married and has children.

Dawn Shelton-Mitchel

Dawn, an African-American, decided when she was only seven years of age that she wanted to become a teacher. She began her undergraduate career at Wayne State University . She completed a five-year degree majoring in the education of mentally impaired, homebound, and orthopedically impaired. Since that time, Dawn has gone on to earn two Master's degrees. Both Master's degrees, one in Learning Disabilities and the other in working with the Emotionally Impaired, were earned at Wayne State University . Continually working to improve herself as an educator, Dawn has earned an Educational Specialist Degree from Wayne State University and currently holds all but three certification endorsements in Special Education . She has taught in the Detroit Public school system for 25 years . Dawn has two grown daughters.

Discussion

As we re-analyzed the stories of these women specifically exploring spirituality, it became apparent that

each story was different, yet, there were strong similarities.

- * Dawn Smith's story was one of dedication to "building a safe sense of community for children."
- * Sandra's story resonated with achievement and the "importance of being encouraged to achieve."
- * Molly shared her passionate "focus on high standards for herself, her faculty, and for children."
- * Donnya's story was rich with "determination" as she opened new vistas for leaders to follow.
- * Joy flowed from Patsy's story - "the joy of living, giving, and doing."
- * Candace told a story that was rich with creativity focused on "improving schools for children."
- * Bette told of being "called to teach" and of her "continued focus on excellence in learning for herself and others."
- * Sharon 's story emerges as one of the importance of setting goals for oneself and the influence this can have on a school district.
- * Dawn Shelton-Mitchell's story resonates with her life of service for others.

From our original interviews, many themes had emerged, such as an early love of learning, strong work ethic, and the importance of mentoring. However, one major theme connected all of these stories: a sense of power nurtured in spirituality. Within this theme emerged four sub-themes: cultural barriers, a sense of community, a sense of joy in serving others, and a sense of excellence for all. It was apparent that the women saw all of these issues as connected rather than in isolation. Through their discussions, it was clear that their sense of self and sense of power in handling barriers and opportunities of leadership were rooted in a strong spirituality.

Cultural Barriers

Within their communities, these award-winning women often faced cultural barriers caused by gender, as well as that of color; often the distinction was unclear. Dawn Smith spoke about "being brown" and did not know whether barriers were "due to gender or skin color, but the school board refused my first application to become principal at the elementary school." Molly was told by her superintendent that the district was "not ready for a woman." Donnya sat on committees at the university, "but my voice was not heard." Sandra was called "the skirt" when she was principal at the high school. Most of our women were place-bound. Patsy failed to look for a deanship, although she qualified, because she "could not leave the area."

Families sacrificed, yet, by and large, the women were supported in their quest to become leaders. The time needed to do the important job of leadership and to do it well took a toll on families in many ways--loss of time together, strain on relationships, eating lots of peanut butter sandwiches, but almost invariably these women described how these sacrifices brought a stronger family commitment to their vision. For example, Dawn Shelton-Mitchell described how even her two daughters committed to careers working with children, an outgrowth of their mother's influence. Yet, despite these barriers, they drew strength and their sense of self from their spiritual commitment to doing something "bigger than myself" as Sandra noted.

Sense of Community

Developing a sense of community was a guiding, passionate vision that grew out of an almost spiritual desire to bring people together. The goal in every case was to make education better for children. Whether it

was "forging a respect for the school within the community," "creating a writing community where children could express their feelings safely," or in "leading a district to excel," repeatedly, the importance of a sense of community was articulated in their stories.

This sense of community was created through an understanding of empowerment that was collaborative and collegial. While the leadership styles differed in each unique circumstance, each woman cultivated a team of professionals on her campus and invited parents to be part of the school leadership team. While Donnya said, "I lead from behind," others were clearly more directive, especially at the beginning of their careers. For example, Sharon pointed out that she was "most effective when [she is] direct, sharing [her] vision and goals up front."

Joy: Finding a Deep, Abiding Joy in Serving Others

All of our women leaders shared that from the earliest times, they had strong, nurturing home support from family members, mothers, and grandmothers, generally, who instilled a joy in learning, a desire to achieve, as well as an understanding of hard work. Several pointed out that their earliest memories centered around books and reading, and, as children, they found great joy in reading. Bette remembered walking "the mile to our little 'branch' of the town's public library" when she was only nine and remembers the poetry that she would read.

Even as youngsters, these women found joy through the service of teaching. Dawn Smith said that from "the beginning she knew that she wanted to be a teacher." While Sandra often "played at being teacher, complete with her own grade book," Candace told about teaching children, even as a child of ten. Several used the spiritual expression that they were "called to teach."

All of the women noted the importance of mentoring that helped them find a spiritual, joyful satisfaction in teaching. Each was mentored by family members growing up. Professionally, however, they were mentored by other teachers, but, more importantly, by educators, both men and women, who were already in key leadership positions. Invariably, their leadership qualities were observed, and mentors encouraged them to pursue greater challenges. Often, mentors contributed to this happening by placing them in positions of greater power and authority. For example, Sandra Lowery described how her superintendent pointed out "the importance of achieving the superintendency through the high school principalship." When this position was available, with his support, she became a high school principal. Patsy Hallman noted that the previous dean "paved the way for me to move into this position." Sharon attributed her "awareness of her leadership abilities" to her mentors.

But mentoring actually played an even more profound role in the women's lives. In addition to providing opportunities for them through mentoring, each of our nine leaders expressed a spiritual awareness of their own need to give back and mentor others. Thus, while they shared about the importance of mentoring to achieve greater positions of leadership, they also shared about their own commitment to mentoring others and the joy derived from service. For example, Molly "spends a good portion of [her] day coaching and mentoring principals and other school leaders." Additionally, as Bette described tension in her work, the intrinsic joy of "connecting" her passion of teaching with a compelling need to mentor adolescent girls in the community--the intrinsic joy of serving was obvious.

It was obvious through all of these stories that joy abounded in the job of these women leaders. Candace described being an educator as "the best and most rewarding work in the world because of the opportunity to guide generations of children." When parents told Dawn Shelton-Mitchell that she was "a blessing to them and their children," she responded that they "can't know how much a blessing your child is to me."

The talk of standards of excellence in education today occurs so often that we were almost reluctant to use the word "excellence" for fear that it would seem a mere common phrase. However, each woman possessed a spiritual commitment to a true standard of excellence, which is clearly obvious in all of the stories.

All of the women talked about the importance of having a high standard for children, and it was evident through the stories of their childhoods that even as very young children, each were held to a standard of excellence. For example, Molly recounted taking music lessons and competing in athletic events as a youngster. Donnya told of having a grandmother who required the children to "hold a book for an hour by a kerosene lamp, even if our lessons had been completed at school." Bette was driven toward excellence by her desire "to be a better teacher." She lamented that she is "never quite satisfied with the quality" of her work and admitted that "I'm forever trying to do something to make things work better."

Being more excellent than others is often a necessity for women. Some of the focus on excellence is from necessity. Donnya told of racial barriers that she encountered at the university: "I was looked upon as an African American female professor to the faculty and to my students. Everyday I walked into the classroom I had to prove to my students that I was worthy of having this position." Molly emphasized that for women to be considered for leadership roles they must "be clearly outstanding. . . Women must be well-prepared to compete."

The women spoke of long days and exhausting struggles to accomplish all that should be accomplished. Most of them did this while also having families and raising their own children. There is no doubt that the work day for a leader is long; "can 'til can't" was how Sandra described it, and Molly described herself as a "workaholic."

The stories resonated with spiritual passion as the women discussed their drive for excellence to improve schools for children. Dawn Smith spoke of the problems of education on the reservation, yet student achievement has steadily improved under her leadership. Molly described the school improvement process as one of "riding the rapids" and repeatedly shared her belief of how important it is "when we work to achieve a high quality education for every child."

Candace described the excitement of creating "her dream," an arts magnet school, and recounted that she "wrote continually for six weeks," "even waking in the middle of the night." Bette's desire for excellence began with herself, but it extended to her teaching to provide the best for students. Sharon "established credibility" through her commitment to excellence and became an "accepted insider" within her district, all because she had the credentials, knowledge, and skills to do an excellent job.

Conclusion

Through everything, the women's sense of self seemed to be drawn from a well of spirituality that provided courage, energy, and wisdom. Thus, opportunities were created and barriers overcome. Molly emphasized that her courage "is in response to God's abiding love." Patsy talked of a strong faith and her commitment to her church. Dawn Shelton-Mitchell recounted "the grace of God" in helping her overcome barriers. A sense of spirituality weaved inextricably throughout these stories. The process of sharing stories is an example of Bette's mentor, Jacquelyn Jones Royster's invitation to "bring all of yourself into this room." These nine award-winning women educators invited us in and permitted us a glimpse into their lives as leaders. In so doing, they brought to life an added understanding of leadership. With a sense of power and direction nurtured and fueled by spirituality, these women navigated cultural barriers, developed a sense of community, displayed a profound joy through service, and upheld a strong commitment to standards of excellence for all. In reading their stories, we better understand the role of spirituality in women leaders.

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