

The Beauty of Balanced Leadership

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Current thinking, expounded upon in numerous works on learning organizations stewardship and servant-leadership, supports the notion that women, with their unique perspectives, insights, and innovative ways of dealing with their worlds, make the kind of leaders we need in greater numbers represented in leadership positions. Women's leadership skills are in high demand. Women's style of leadership focuses on relationships and on meeting the needs of others and so they have a leadership advantage in their ability to communicate, to prioritize and to see the broader picture.

Women have a great deal of experience in leading their roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, home-makers, volunteers, employees, or business owners. Each of these roles call for the abilities and skills necessary to inspire, persuade, communicate, guide, lead, teach, make decisions, use organizational skills and handle conflict between valued members within each of these units. Women have demonstrated their capacity for 'socialized power' of providing service for the benefit of common welfare, and that these so-called 'feminine principles' are exactly what organizations are calling for in leadership today.

Virgin girls

The founder of the Brahma Kumaris, Dada Lekhraj, realized that women represent a huge, under-utilized, spiritual resource and that with the power of motherhood within her, a woman can influence the whole world. After a series of spiritual visions of the future of mankind, he set up regular meetings to discuss and seek truth and many of the women that visited the so-called satsangs were young. A community was formed in which many of them assumed positions of authority.

The low position of women in India was of relevance to the life of Dada Lekhraj and this sensitivity gave him an intuitive concern for the needs of women. It came as no surprise then, that later in his life he would officially give women the leading role in the organisation he founded in 1937. This was an advanced vision, taking into consideration that Lekhraj was a male living in the early 20th century in a patriarchal society in India, in which joint families lived under the authority of the man of the family. Dada was born in 1876 in the region of Sind in northwest India where Hindu women still held a reasonable position, compared with women elsewhere in India. These young women were perceived as 'virgin girls', goddesses, with sacred energy and power. However, after marriage they became the helpmates of their husbands and also came under the general control of the father-in-law. When a woman's husband died, her status declined from being a mother, and thus Shakti, (power personified) to a widow with no independent existence in her own right.

Although Lekhraj's insights occurred in a time period between the first-wave feminism, starting off throughout the world in the early 19th century, and the second-wave feminism that began its activity in the early 1960's, his vision was still revolutionary according to Indian standards. Indian women in general were excluded from religious celibacy and complete retirement, which was reserved for men. This general subservience of women to men was heightened by their minimal education possibilities and many Sindi women spent most of their time in the house. Visits outside the home were often limited to religious gatherings and family ceremonials. Their husbands were away on business for months or even longer, and it was common practice for men to have extra-material affairs in the places where they visited. On their return their wives found that they were perceived by their husbands to be the sexual 'property' of their 'masters'.

The practice of Sati – the social funeral practice among some Indian communities in which a recently widowed woman would sacrifice herself on her husband's funeral pyre – highlights the extreme subservience of women, which only a century before was quite common. It was only in 1829 in India, that, after several attempts, Sati was banned by the

British. However, since India's independence in 1947, about forty cases have been officially reported, but unreported incidents may increase those numbers substantially. They remain unofficial due to the controversy and social turmoil that the country experiences whenever an incident is reported. Although Sati did not evolve from religious background, but rather social, women who performed Sati were highly honoured and their families were given a lot of respect, having temples or other religious shrines built to honour the Sati.

Women's turn

The concern of Dada, later named Brahma Baba, was beginning to move towards spiritual education, high values and practical matters such as diet and celibacy, and the community needed to become more official and legal. He formed a management committee of eight women and transferred his money and property into a trust. Women were to be the official and informal leaders of the new institution and the constitution determined that women would always take the leadership roles.

For centuries men had been vested with power and authority, so it was time to redress the imbalance and give women the chance to exercise a different kind of leadership. It was now their turn.

Brahma Baba's style of leadership was one of leading by example; a feminine, nurturing type of leadership. Guided by him and other women leaders, it was this style, exemplifying a deep, humble and caring notion of spirituality that was later adopted when local centres were established. Very few of these young women had been trained to do a job, to speak in public, to administer, to teach or to write well, and yet, they were required to set up a centre in which they would have to lead both men and women. Brahma Baba and the women leaders of the movement provided them with, not only a basic education in reading, writing, arithmetic and teaching, but also with another important lesson. They were taught to develop a greater awareness of the self in which they learnt to consider themselves as spiritual beings rather than the limiting identity of being a woman. It was this spiritual awareness, added to their female leadership skills that empowered the young women and helped them to operate successfully in a world dominated by masculine power.

Role models

The high profile of women in the Brahma Kumaris has been unique in a religious context because, unlike leaders of female orders, such as a nun in the western world, their role has been to lead both men and women. Even today, in the twenty-first century, Roman Catholic leadership still refuses to ordain women officially or even to recognize that women are capable of ordination. But, by now we know that it is not only girls that need women leaders in order to see a picture of themselves in these roles, boys need them as well. That is true in a family, the corporate world as well as in religious and spiritual traditions. Boys become more sensitive, more respectful and more affectionate men when they have, besides men, women as their role models that can inspire them in developing their own leadership styles with their accompanied virtues, skills and talents.

Brahma Baba was a leader who played the role of both father and mother to the young women, but, being a male, he also appointed Sister Radha, the woman that was working closely with him, to play the role of the mother, taking care of the women and at the same time being an example of female leadership, embodying the Sacred Feminine, which is so much part of many of the ancient peoples traditions.

It is believed that the Sacred Feminine is coming back, mostly through women, but also men who are able to follow their intuition. The success of fiction such as *The Da Vinci Code* and others that delve into the figure of Mary Magdalene, are also indicators that the missing feminine element holds deep meaning. In some Protestant churches, prayers are directed to 'Mother-Father-God'; in Judaism, more emphasis is given to Shekinah, a feminine divine presence; in the Orthodox Church, an increased emphasis on Mary as Theotokos, a Greek title that has no English equivalent, although it means 'the God Bearer.' In Catholicism, the apparitions of Mary, the Mariology movement to elevate her further, and the increased importance of the Black Madonna's are all indications. Whether referred to as goddess, or called the feminine face of God, or by a particular name, the Sacred Feminine represents maternal concerns, the feminine principle and compassion.

It is important for women whose religions define them as inferior to men to learn that before there was God, there was the Goddess. In ancient Greece, the original trinity was the triple goddess, as maiden, mother, and crone.

The Brahma Kumaris holds an image of God that is purely universal in its form of incorporeal light, representing both the Mother and Father of all souls. Humans have probably always had mystical experiences and spiritual revelations. These mystical moments are an opening to this field or realm that feels divine, loving, beyond male and female, and yet both. Beyond religion and negative notions of gender, people of all faiths can experience God as a loving Parent.

Peacemakers

Women do have qualities that grow out of being nurturers and caretakers. If there is ever to be peace on Earth, it will largely depend on women bringing their personal and innate mothering skills into the world. Women are peacemakers. Women, as a gender, can talk and listen to each other with empathy, bonding and an increase in oxytocin. Peace negotiations are stressful and it would be beneficial to have more oxytocin and oestrogen to dilute the adrenaline and testosterone in the room. There are examples of peace accords that finally ended the conflict once women became involved, such as the peace process in Sierra Leone, which was finally settled in 1999 after women were included in the talks, and in Northern Ireland where women became go-betweens, carrying messages back and forth from and to the Protestants and Catholics, as they were initially not willing to even sit down together in the same room. A recent example is the woman, now considered a national heroine, who started to talk in a non-aggressive manner to one of the murderers of a British soldier in London, in order to give the police more time to get to the scene.

The women of the newly founded institution of the Brahma Kumaris in India had to face a lot of opposition from angry husbands and other men from their community. Some of the women were abused, some were beaten, some had their possessions confiscated, some were thrown out of their house, others were locked up, and some were forbidden to go near the institute. Other women were even chained to their beds and deprived of food for days at a time. There are many stories of bravery emanating from that period. Matters came to a head in June 1938, when some of the aggrieved husbands and their comrades marched on the building to force a showdown. A confused series of events ensued during which the marchers tried to get inside the building, but were bravely and peacefully repulsed by the women.

However, the notion that the world would be more peaceful if women held key power roles depends largely on the traditional view of females as the less aggressive and, conversely, more peaceful and conciliatory sex. By examining the behaviour of women who have held important leadership roles, it may be possible to assert that those who succeed in leadership display traditionally masculine characteristics, like Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir and Indira Gandhi did, with their militaristic actions.

Although some would say that due to the nature of women, issues such as racial tension, resource shortages and religious clashes, seen as leading causes of violent conflict in recent years, would be approached from a more co-operative angle, and therefore the possibility of violence would be minimised. However, the international system remains ultimately based on competition and the survival of states. When case studies are considered, there is evidence that details the pacifistic nature of women. The establishment of a grassroots movement by Libyan women in an attempt to end the Libyan civil war was largely successful, and would be a significant example of the more co-operative, as opposed to hierarchical, approach that women bring to political action. This also exemplifies what is seen as the feminine model of rule – a focus on discourse and rejections of domination and the use of force or exploitation.

Observations that women are far less likely than men to support increases in military spending, would also suggest that women are less inclined to conflict than men, or at the very least more willing to employ alternative methods of dispute resolution. This does imply a different leadership style would become evident if women dominated power positions. An increased focus on communication and reconciliation over individualism, alongside the suggestion that women hold a high moral superiority, could have the potential to bring a more peaceful orientation to foreign policy issues. Peace is not defined solely by the absence of war, but equally by the presence of social equality, an area that is largely considered to be given more precedence by a female leader.

Ultimately, one could draw the conclusion that a more peaceful society would be founded, not through female domination of power roles, but instead by an equal concentration of men and women in these positions. Researchers found that when women make up 20 percent or less of a decision-making body, they tend to be marginalized and they are less likely to press for their own policy preferences. But, once they make up 50% or more of a group, women begin to implement new styles of decision-making and more inclusive policies. When women's numbers reach a certain critical mass, they can change an organization's culture. Or, even our world.

Inner Transformation

Changing the world is not about replacing patriarchy with matriarchy, as is the case in a small hilly Indian state of Meghalaya, where a matrilineal system operates with property names and wealth passing from mother to daughter rather than father to son. However, some men in Meghalaya are now campaigning for change and have established their very own men's rights movement.

Change won't occur by replacing all men in leadership positions by women. Women can be as power orientated and un-empathetic as men and there are lots of men who are as nurturing and empathetic as women are. Although the greedy bankers are mainly men, women can of course be as greedy and materialistic.

One common notion is that women need to develop masculine qualities and men to acquire feminine qualities, in order to become more balanced leaders. That might be true, but drawing from the wisdom and experience of the powerful women who have governed the Brahma Kumaris for decades, one could also see it in a different light.

By adopting the specific principles of the other gender, perhaps one becomes a more balanced leader, but in reality it might not be so easy for men to develop such qualities. What would be possible is for them to deal with the negative side of their personality, their ego, which prevents them from being humble, tolerant and forgiving. This would also enable them to transform their tendency towards bossiness and control. So, it's not a question of men developing feminine qualities, but rather about letting go of their bossiness and ego.

By the same token, women often have a heart that is very soft and tender and it can come into feeling very quickly. They can get hurt easily and become fearful, which is the negative aspect for them. Their option is not to compete with men and mimic their leadership characteristics, but rather transform their own over sensitivity. By overcoming this weakness, no one would be able to be bossy or to have authority over them. During the development phase of the BK organisation, a key focus of inner transformation was for the women to strengthen their hearts.

When men and women work on their own specific weaknesses, this ultimately leads to self-mastery and a balanced style of leadership in which actions are performed with vision and drive, collaboration and compromise, showing respect to others whilst appreciating each one's qualities and uniqueness.

Brahma Baba's vision of the future was one of harmony between sexes and of partnership rooted in spirituality, for he believed spirituality and inner transformation to be the key to trust and respect. It was for this reason that he placed the women in front and suggested the men do the same.

Men are now very much part of the Brahma Kumaris network. The women give them respect, and the men reciprocate, which makes for success. The institute started off with 350 women and 5 men, but the current numbers of males and females are now close to being equal, at least in India where all centres are run by women. In Western countries 10% of the centres are run by men and the rest by women who represent 70% of the management. The global network is run by 3 women and 3 men, with one woman being the Administrative Head.

Men and women who follow the path of spirituality learn to work with each other and to value each other's soul qualities, learning the lesson that 'no matter what may happen, continue to give respect.' With spirituality there is a deep understanding of the values that lie within the self and that the more you stay in the awareness of your own value, the more you are unaffected by any disrespect that may come from outside. With the focus on respect rather than 'situations', one is able to forget the things of the past. When both sides give regard they discover more about their own

self-respect. Self-respect is the basis of giving and receiving respect. Learning to give respect makes one's own life elevated.

Soul Sisters

Men and women need to overcome their passions by making way for their virtues. Passions are the ego-driven, emotional states that dominate our lives, such as anger, pride and fear. Passions are the dominant qualities of the heart when under the influence of egoic experience. This manifests as inner attitudes that both express the fixations and drive their particular actions. Passions, such as anger, envy, avarice, and lust, express the egoic self and become major obstacles to the path of transformation and realization. Conversely, virtues are the expression of the openness and development of the heart, due to the realization of a spiritual nature, resulting from inner transformation. The virtues reveal how inner realization impacts us as a soul by adorning us with the attitudes of serenity, truthfulness, humility, nonattachment and so on. The virtues turn out to be the visible signs of inner realization in both attitude and action.

In the light of womanhood, women need other women to collaborate with, build up, inspire, encourage, transform, redefine and challenge them to achieve great personal success as well as a healthier life balance. Successful women do not engage in pettiness, gossip or slander about other women. They don't hold grudges, they apologize when they are wrong (even if they are right), and they are willing to go the extra mile to save a soul sister relationship or pursue peace even when it may be badly broken. However, the reality is that the challenges to female leadership are often located among women themselves. Female conflict is not neutral. Their petty in-fighting and name-calling are tangibly destructive. There is something about the female heart that seems especially prone to attack women with whom they disagree or feel jealous, or tactically undermine or even sabotage one another because they feel that helping their female co-workers could jeopardize their own position.

The human heart, when limited and constricted by the ego personality, cannot but express the passions of anger, pride, deception, envy, and so on, with their attendant psychological suffering. The human heart, when open and mature through the realization of inner transformation, is arrayed with the beautiful and generous virtues of truthfulness, sobriety, equanimity, courage, serenity, nonattachment, humility, true action and essential innocence.

If our practices and our orientation towards our personal process are those congruent with the ways our deepest nature operates and the ways that it affects the human soul, our inner work is likely to bring us closer to our depths. The virtues depict attitudes and orientations that are not only the expressions of our realization, but they are attitudes and orientations that help make that realization possible.

Women who have achieved governance over themselves can offer balanced leadership. Once they have mastered themselves, they can lead the way forward and work with their soul sisters in a harmonious way.

When women connect with women, seeking ways to feel related, they look for what makes them similar rather than what separates them. Research from sociological studies, to the latest in brain science, show that above all, women value connection and community. For women, it's not about 'me' it's about 'we'.

Spiritual credibility

There is a strong public preference for selflessness, empathy, and loyalty in their leaders – traits that people identify as feminine. People want leaders that care more about others than themselves, leaders who want to change something rather than 'be somebody'.

However women need to stay true to and act from their innate strengths, and identify their unique talents. Despite the many painful experiences women often have to go through in their lives, they somehow know how to remain faithful to their innate values of love, loyalty, forgiveness and compassion. It's this amazing, super terrestrial power with which they are able, not only to respond constructively to adverse circumstances, but also to overcome their own doubts and fears.

Common internal barriers for women include low confidence, perceived lack of advancement opportunities, poor self-

image, and weak determination and motivation. Holding a leadership position, together with taking care of the family and having to fulfil various social activity and obligations, another challenge that women are facing today is that of losing their vitality and creative powers and becoming too functional, planning life from minute to minute, leaving no time to relax, reflect or recharge themselves.

The first step towards overcoming any challenge is awareness. Leadership always starts with personal leadership. Spirituality happens when a woman realizes her own dignity and understands who she is. Once she comes back to her spiritual identity she starts getting in touch with her own inner world.

The Brahma Kumaris brought soul awareness to female leadership. The young women, now in their 80's and 90's, have proved fine leaders during an era in which global female leadership has been somewhat scarce. Their special attribute for their mission of bringing peace back to the individual and to the world at large is -besides courage, fearlessness and determination – self-respect and integrity based on a spiritual awareness. By investing time in self-awareness, self-knowledge, exploration and meditation they brought balance to their lives, helping them as leaders better understand and deal with people and relationships.

One of the young women that joined the movement in the early days in Sind is Dadi Janki, the present administrative head of the Brahma Kumaris. Dadi may not be a CEO of a publicly listed commercial company, as we understand for-profit entities today, but you can easily liken the Brahma Kumaris global reach to that of any multinational bank or consulting group. The global network is held together and delivered by over a million volunteers who offer their services for free.

Born in 1916 in the then north Indian province of Sind, now part of Pakistan, Dadi spent only three years in formal education, but underwent an intensive training in meditation and knowledge for many years, which later became a continuous experience of life-long learning.

Now aged 97, Dadi is seen as a role model for both women and men, and as much as she is a globally revered spiritual teacher and one of the most experienced female leaders in the world alive today, she is not a remote guru or an inaccessible leader. Her leadership is not based on the official position that she holds, but her real power comes from her spiritual credibility. For her, cooperation is based on four specific things: Firstly, constant pure feelings and elevated motives, secondly, faith in God and thirdly, trust in your colleagues and those who you are close to. Finally, constant communication of your motives, using easy and simple language, making it possible for everyone to understand and feel a part of the whole.

Dadi Janki shows a new type of leadership. She is not comfortable with the label of 'leader', but rather perceives herself as a 'servant' or 'instrument'. Even though the term 'servant leadership' is a style that is in vogue, the idea of simply being a servant and working without any desire to be recognised is truly outside the norm.

After the founder passed away in 1969, Dadi moved to London to lead the international development of the Brahma Kumaris outside India. Her faith in God and in the values of honesty, love, trust and patience, have proven to be an effective formula that has brought continuous growth and success to the Brahma Kumaris network which has now expanded into 120 countries and territories.

Women may wonder why is it that 40 years after commencing serious work on gender equality there is still only limited progress. Of course there has been a lot of change over the last 20 to 40 years, but not as much as one might have expected. There are currently 17 female world leaders in power and half of those countries are classed as developing countries. However, despite the existing legal provisions, women are often deprived of their basic rights, subjected to sexual harassment and given low wages.

We should not become hopeless or give up. Dadi's life shows us that it might take time before our visions, initiatives or projects take hold, flourish and show results or give a return on our investments, but that it is important to have faith in our endeavours and stay true to the path which we feel guided to work on. By staying positive and not feeling tempted to give up before the fruits ripen, we will create what we are looking for.

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