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The Time is Now. Feminist Leadership for a New Era

La hora del liderazgo feminista

Ed. Araceli Alonso & Teresa Langle de Paz

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Feminist leadership as care for the whole: modeling and co-creating a livable future

Miki Kashtan

Abstract

Feminist leadership in a patriarchal world is born of struggle and remains precarious. The struggle begins with freeing ourselves from what we have internalized through patriarchal socialization, and continues with facing external obstacles, ranging from encoded patriarchal norms of leadership all the way to risk of death, depending on political conditions. Embracing feminist leadership means nothing less than facing and transcending the inner and outer pressures of patriarchal norms of separation, scarcity, and powerlessness, reclaiming instead the foundation of interdependence, generosity, and choice as guideposts for a different, feminist, definition of leadership as the willingness to take responsibility for and care for the whole in interdependent relationship with others, even when those others are not doing so themselves.

Choosing and living into this type of leadership invites reflection on how we can question the separation of leader from group. It calls on us to seek support for the task of challenging patriarchal norms. Feminist leadership reshapes our notions of power and to choose transparency as a significant part of our practice in service of our purpose and values. It is an integrative discipline infused with empathy, love, courage, and deep humility. Lastly, developing rigorous understanding and practices of feminist leadership is, by necessity, a collaborative project that takes many of us, across the world, to co-develop.

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Feminist leadership as care for the whole: modeling and co-creating a livable future

A core challenge in embracing a feminist approach to leadership is that our experience of and thinking about leadership have been tainted by millennia of patriarchy. There is no simple way to “declare” our leadership to be feminist. Feminist leadership is born of struggle and remains precarious. Internally, the struggle is to free ourselves from notions, perspectives, feelings, habits, and even desires internalized through patriarchal socialization. Externally, we are likely to run into obstacles, because patriarchal norms of leadership are internalized by others, too, and are encoded into the way our modern societies function.

Conventional definitions of leadership stress motivating others to follow, and have synonyms such as guidance, direction, control, management, and supervision. These words connote separation between leader and group, and unidirectional action. They point to power being concentrated in the hands of the leader, the power of getting others to do what the leader deems best.

Leadership can also be defined from a perspective of care and responsibility rather than one of direction and control.

This path was apparently the norm in pre-patriarchal societies, and is still visible in the few remaining matriarchal, matrilineal societies. The Mosuo, for

example, choose “the person who cares the most for everyone” to be the next clan mother. (Goettner-Abendroth, 2013, p. 108). This path also matches Carol Gilligan’s findings of a trajectory of moral development that moves on an axis of care, responsibility, and relationship, rather than progressively more abstracted rules that are applied without consideration of relational context (Gilligan, 1982)¹.

Both our evolutionary legacy and the threat of extinction that the patriarchal path has brought us to invite us to fully re-sculpt what it means to show up as a leader. This means nothing less than facing and transcending the inner and outer pressures of patriarchal norms of separation, scarcity, and powerlessness, reclaiming instead the foundation of interdependence, generosity, and choice as guideposts for a feminist approach to leadership. For this article, and for my work with thousands of individuals and dozens of organizations from around the world, I choose to see leadership as an orientation to life rather than a particular position of authority.

I define leadership as the willingness to take responsibility for and care for the whole in interdependent relationship with others, even when those others are not doing so themselves.

¹ I am deliberately sidestepping the question of whether this different path is biologically associated with being female, or is socially constructed to be more prevalent in women. My aim is to focus on what is possible, and what all of us, regardless of gender, could consciously choose to adopt.

To make this paper practical and accessible, I am using a real-life example from a weekly leadership coaching course that I have been offering since February 2017². One of the calls started shortly after I had an emotionally distressing experience. Because of my commitments to interdependence, authenticity, collaboration, and drawing connections between everything that happens – including within me – and what is relevant to whatever I am leading, I chose to speak of my experience and fold that into the learning. I opened the session that week by stating that I was in emotional distress and then saying: “I am coming here with a question to myself and to all of us: ‘what does it mean to be a leader when you are emotionally challenged?’”

What follows is gleaned from participants’ notes of our shared learning, looking both at what was happening during that call and at questions others brought from their own leadership situations. I highlight several core themes, each of which opens a rich area for inquiry and practice. For each of these, I pose a set of questions, and offer insights and/or practices expanding on class discussion.

As I consider humility key to this approach to leadership, it is vitally important for me to say, upfront and

² See http://nvctraining.com/media/_2018/MK/responding/index.html for the course description. There are regularly 50-60 people who show up, using Zoom technology. Most of us are visible to the rest of us. The class has no curriculum, and is based on using real-life examples and questions that emerge from me or participants, to tease out principles of leading in the way I speak of in this paper.

clearly: everything I say here is partial knowledge, work in progress that continues to unfold. Developing rigorous understanding and practices of feminist leadership is, by necessity, a collaborative project that takes many of us, across the world, to co-develop.

Interdependence

Questions: how do we foreground our inseparability from those we lead? How do we create peer relationships while honoring our own experience and authority?

It’s clear to me, from reading, experience, and deep reflection, that in societies in which people provision for themselves in interdependent community, leaders are not separate from the people. Instead, an ongoing relationship continues even when people take on specific functions of caring for the whole. They still share food with others. They still share ceremony with others. They still care for each others’ children.

Conversely, ministers of some Christian denominations are instructed not to attend services in their own church after they retire, suddenly severing ties that existed possibly for decades. I believe the separation between leader and group this practice exemplifies was born of patriarchal thinking, and is not healthy for the individuals or the community. For me, feminist leadership grounds itself on reclaiming our connection with everyone, including those who look to us for leadership.

One of many ways in which I aim to do that in my own leadership, facilitation, and teaching emerges from replacing the expected distance with the rigorous principle of care for the whole. Since the whole includes me, this practice includes caring for me. I am not separate. When I make decisions as facilitator, instead of me versus the group, or me versus this particular person, or this person versus that person or the group, I choose to care for the whole, to integrate seeming incompatibilities, and to invite people to care for the whole with me.

Support

Questions: how do we prioritize setting up robust support structures for ourselves to sustain our capacity to live and lead in ways that are so far outside of patriarchal norms? What do such structures actually look like?

Embracing this form of feminist leadership, and the practices that emerge from it, challenge fundamental assumptions of millennia of patriarchy. Doing so consistently requires inner and outer support to withstand the permanent risks. First, to overcome the ways we have internalized patriarchal norms within ourselves. Second, to find effective ways of navigating others' internalized patriarchal norms, which lead to expectations, putting leaders on pedestals, and/or criticizing and undermining those who take on leadership. Third, if we branch far enough away from the norms, there are practical and material risks, starting from potentially losing friendships and all the way to forced psychiatric hospitalization, incarceration, and even death.

While the risks, if we walk far enough, are significant for all, the challenges are different for women, for men, and for people who identify with any non-binary gender. Everyone who embraces feminist leadership, including the expression of feeling and vulnerability, stands at odds with patriarchal norms and loses credibility. And yet the loss of credibility is different depending on location within the complex, multi-layered gender hierarchy of the current patriarchal world.

When a man shows feelings, in a patriarchal world, he can lose credibility by showing himself as “not a real man.” When a woman shows feelings, in a patriarchal world, she can be dismissed for doing what women are expected to do, which is considered incompatible with leadership; we are discredited as leaders for not negating what we are otherwise supposed to be. If a person whose expression of gender lies outside the normative binary shows feelings, within a patriarchal, binary-gender system, it adds one more to the cultural norms they are already subverting, further increasing the likelihood their leadership will be dismissed or challenged.

For all these reasons, we need lots of support as we embark on this path. And, simultaneously, asking for support is also considered inconsistent with certain forms of leadership, as vulnerability is at odds with patriarchal norms. Indeed, it has taken many years for me to embrace and make clear to others what it takes to sustain me functioning so openly,

collaboratively, and vulnerably. Every ounce of this support is increasing my capacity and effectiveness in modeling the world I want to live in.

As we take this seriously, each of us can build different support structures to address different needs, different risks, and different available resources. What is key is to think through what support we have before, during, and after challenging moments of leadership. It's also essential to recognize that support invariably means leaning on other people, not just on inner practices, because we need collective access to exiting from the isolating and individualizing pressure of patriarchal cultures. I describe my own support structure in significant detail in this blog post: <http://thefearlessheart.org/what-it-takes-to-support-a-conscious-disruptor/>.

Power

Questions: how do we mobilize resources, including our own power as leaders, in true service to the whole, including those whose actions or opinions most frighten or upset us? How do we attend to the reality that so many people are conditioned to defer to anyone who steps into leadership, especially in the context of structural power differences?

Transforming patterns of leadership requires shifting how we use power. It's not a surprise to me that liberation movements, both feminist and others, have adopted Mary Parker Follett's distinction between "power over" and "power with" (Follett,

1918; 1924)³. As feminist leaders, one of our core tasks is to use whatever power we have *with* others: to take actions that both care for others' needs *and* engage their choice and autonomy, so that use of power *over* tactics and imposition would dramatically diminish and return to their original place: reserved for extreme situations of imminent risk.

At all other times, feminist leadership means welcoming dissent instead of putting pressure on people to agree with what we want⁴.

Transparency

Questions: how do we move beyond either suppressing our inner lives or letting them run us without choice, and towards embracing our full experience and choosing whether, when, and how to share what is inside us? How do we learn better what does or does not serve the present purpose?

As you may recall, this exploration began with a transparent expression of mine on a Zoom call with 60 people present, where I transformed my own personal challenge into a learning question for everyone.

Key to successful transparent expression with a group (or with individuals, e.g. during a therapy session) is maintaining the following principles:

³ It is a sad testament to the way the world operates that few know that Follett is responsible for this distinction, at least 100 years ago.

⁴ For an example, see Kashtan, 2017.

Tying the expression to purpose: In this case, I connected my own choice of expressing my emotional challenge to the purpose of the call – learning about leadership. Were the purpose different, I would tie my expression to a different purpose and perhaps express it differently (or sometimes not at all, or much more briefly, just to come to full presence).

Reducing potential anxiety for the group: Hearing of an emotional challenge on the part of the facilitator can easily lead group members to anxiety about the leader's well-being and/or capacity. In this case, I supported the group by mentioning that I had ample support and inner resilience to deal with my challenge.

Giving people clarity about what's wanted: Rather than leaving my expression hanging, I made a clear request of participants to reflect on situations in which they experienced an emotional challenge, including how they navigated those circumstances or what support they would need to do so effectively.

These principles make a big difference between likely useful and potentially detrimental forms of transparency⁵. They allow feminist leaders to step out from the isolation and pretend self-sufficiency, and to come forward with full humanity while maintaining clarity about what needs and which purpose are served. This allows us to transcend the internal either/or and find inner choice about whether and how

to express what is within. I experience that choice as soft, engaging, caring, and integrated; not tough and protective.

The capacity to discern and grow in clarity is an ongoing practice. It starts from noticing when we over- or underdo it, and reflecting on two questions: 1) What were the beliefs or assumptions that led me to think I had to suppress my feelings or had no choice in holding back from sharing them fully? 2) What is the vision I have for what is possible and what I could have done, instead of what I did, to advance that vision? Persisting with this practice leads to growing mastery and freedom from having to control anything within or without.

While emotional transparency is, indeed, complex to decide upon and to navigate effectively, one form of transparency that is almost invariably helpful and simple is sharing with people the decisions we make, and the reasons for making them. This practice supports trust, increases willingness, and makes it easier to challenge our choices than when they remain implicit and our reasons and process invisible.

Integration

Questions: how do we move beyond either/or approaches to an ongoing process of integrating seemingly opposite approaches? How do we increase the likelihood that groups will find solutions that work for everyone even in polarized situations?

The task of reclaiming feminist leadership is ours at a time of transition, when patriarchal, capitalist structures are crumbling. Many

⁵ For a thorough discussion of these topics, see Kashtan, 2005.

forces are trying to shore up and reinforce what is not working, out of fear of loss of much that is familiar to all and dear to many (especially those in position of power), creating rigidity around the existing structures.

Integration, then, means, simultaneously, full willingness to engage collaboratively with those who are opposing change, and full willingness to keep asserting that, even without knowing fully how to create change, we do know that massive change is needed, lest we perish. Integration includes a willingness to be “messy” and to experiment.

Integration also means embracing deep collaboration, even across big divides, remembering that collective wisdom is more resilient and robust than individuals deciding for the whole. For example, aiming to throw out everything that patriarchy has brought to the world is in itself a patriarchal idea. An integrative process⁶ relies on the deep faith that shared human needs exist, that we can agree at the level of needs even with clashing positions, and that we can find solutions that work for everyone even in deeply polarized contexts⁷. Instead of opposition, we can offer questions that invite all involved to find what is of most value to them. Staying

6 Another contribution of Mary Parker Follett: “There are three ways of dealing with difference: domination, compromise, and integration. By domination only one side gets what it wants; by compromise neither side gets what it wants; by integration we find a way by which both sides may get what they wish.” (Follett, 1942, p. 30-49).

7 See the example of my work in Minnesota to support fully collaborate lawmaking in the area of child custody. <http://efficientcollaboration.org/minnesota-case-study>

in questions without collapsing paradoxes, tensions, confusions, and uncertainties into something that can be packaged, we encourage a shift from defensiveness to curiosity and from protection to trust.

Embracing the Path

Feminist leadership is a journey, not a destination; a process, not a set of predictable results. In this short essay, I attend to only a few of the questions that this path presents. Embracing feminist leadership calls on us to cultivate a number of additional qualities, and with them, a host of questions. In closing, I want to name a few of those, leaving them to all of us to answer with our lives.

As a feminist leader, I want to cultivate empathy and love. How can I engage better with people who challenge my ability to stay open-hearted to all, to be affected by what’s important to them, and to honor my own perspective?

As a feminist leader, I want to cultivate courage and humility. How I can grow my capacity, skills, resilience, and presence, and maintain my clarity that I am no better than anyone else? In particular, how I can stay open to learning and discovery, remembering that I am only one human being, and cannot know any answer better than what we can grapple with collectively and collaboratively? In Greek tragedy, hubris generally brings calamity on the protagonist. Patriarchy is, in part, hubris writ large. Embracing humility is a core parting with this legacy, a way forward that allows us to remain open. Not knowing may well be what’s needed for a future for humanity to be possible.

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