



carol@carolrossandassociates.com | www.carolrossandassociates.com | 303.666.0580

### **Getting a Glimpse of Myself**

A friend asked me to submit an article for a newsletter on the theme of women and leadership. I'm a woman with my own business in consulting and coaching, and a writer as well.

My first reaction was that I have nothing to say. I told another friend about this request and she challenged me to write about this. She was sure I had something to say.

Maybe my husband and I are gender confused. He has been Mr. Mom for almost 9 years, taking care of our two sons while I worked full time, first as an engineer, then as an organization development consultant and finally, as a business owner, consultant, coach, and writer.

In the midst of all this, I had an epiphany. I am not a man. I was at dim sum with my kids and my parents, my brother, and his family. My husband had stayed home to watch a major sporting event on television. The kids took advantage of the fact that their father was not around and misbehaved. I knew that I had lost the battle even before the opening shot was fired. My digestion system was under stress--spilled glasses of water, chop sticks being used as weapons, and threats of banishment to the car. When we got back to the car for the ride home, my first words were "You would not have behaved that way if your father had been here." Famous words from any mother. My 9-year old son was matter of fact. "Dad has an air of command." WHAT? I run my own business, coach managers in Fortune 100 companies, and I don't have an air of command?

I told my husband about the incident. His reply was also matter of fact. "I know you take this personally, but it's a gender thing. You'll never have the same presence with sons as I will as their father." Ding! Ding! Ding! There *is* something that a man is better at than a woman? I worked in a nuclear power plant with a hard hat and steel-toed shoes. I led teams of geeky software developers to create the next whiz bang feature on a telephone. What do you mean a man garners more authority, more credibility, more attention span from his sons than a woman? I didn't want to hear it, but deep down, there was some truth to what my husband had just told me.

I am not a man. Yes, I had been the major breadwinner of our family for nearly a decade. Yes, I had made my mark as an engineer, where I mixed with men and logic and reason with ease. Yes, I had built a business that any man would be proud of. I even had male mentors. But I was not a man.

I attended a workshop for organization development consultants. Part of the workshop was around understanding the masculine and feminine qualities that we all have. The men and the women were divided up and each group had its turn to talk about the upside and downside of being a man or a woman. When the women had their turn to talk about the downside, I was dumbfounded. Self-doubt, problems with self-esteem, giving so much that you had nothing left for yourself? Honey, get a hold of yourself. These notions were foreign and only vaguely familiar from having read parenting magazines when my children were young.

So if I couldn't relate to being a woman and my husband had just told me that I am not a man, who am I? And what does leadership have to do with all of it?

We lead from who we are, in the moment. There are times when I am all woman, when my intuition takes over and guides me beautifully through the roughest of journeys. When my intuition is on target, I can navigate the convoluted roads and highways of New Jersey, find the right exit for Newark airport and get to the gate with plenty of time. (This has not always been the case.) When I'm in the flow of coaching, I can feel my client's tears welling up in my own eyes. I am able to give my client what he needs in the moment—compassion, understanding, empathy. When I am all man, I'm the whirlwind that means business. I don't accept no for an answer, can see the result before the task is finished, and revel in the achievement of even the smallest item. Logic and efficiency rule.

I was having dinner with my coach, a man. We had not seen each other for over a year. Mid-way into the evening, between the appetizer and the main course, he asked me about the pain of child birth. No one had ever asked me about this experience before. Not in this amount of detail. In his own way, he was saying, "You're a woman. Tell me about this experience that only women can know and talk about." Not only had he pointed out that I am not a man. He was asking me about an experience that was unique to women, to mothers. Whoa, Bessie. What was going on here?

Okay, damn it. I do have something to say about women and leadership. Even if I have to be embarrassed into it.

Here's what I know about women and leadership. Women do have something unique to bring to leading others. Those who have had children know the intense pain of childbirth and the persistence and focus it takes to get something that you want badly enough to give your life for. Women know what it is like to be in a society that expects aggressiveness in the morning at the office and demureness in the evening at home. They know about changing roles often. Women hear babies cry in the middle of the night, even when their bodies are craving sleep and rest and quiet. They hear and feel the unspoken. Women know the emotional pain from a failed love affair. They know it in their heart. They know it in their bones. And yet they are ready to face the world and try again when their grieving is done. They are resilient.

I can't speak to being a man. I can only speak to being a woman in a man's world. What I know to be true is that there is room for both women and men to lead. There is room for men to "be men" and men to be downright feminine. There is room for women to "be men" and to be downright feminine. Will we each have our own preferences? You bet. Some days, I'd much rather be a man than a woman. And other days, I'm thankful that I use the bathroom with the toilet seat down. We have much to learn from each other. We have even more to learn about ourselves.

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