

# The sustainability of a woman's leadership organization

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores how a learning community for women leaders has been sustained through twenty years, from its formation through its various transformations. This research is based on various modes of research and organized by the metaphor of a spiral, which describes various phases of the author's reflections and forms of inquiry. It begins with the collective story of the community's formation via the narratives of the three founders, and is enhanced by a review of the community's archives, which serves as a historical record of the organization's development. The next turn of the spiral involves the background work that supports this inquiry. Three areas of related literature are explored: 1) the emergence of relational leadership theory; 2) women's leadership practice as seen through the lens of four waves of feminism; and, 3) an emerging literature coalescing around the notion of a "community of inquiry" and practices that support sustainability and emergence in learning communities. The final spiral turn describes research conducted within the community. Three community dialogues, four community events and a survey are described and interpreted.

The findings highlight five organizational themes that help sustain the community and this inquiry. These five are: 1) the ethic of love as a relational stance; 2) hospitality, ritual, symbols and aesthetic creations as means for enhancing group connection, 3) a "web" structure that supports power sharing; 4) practices for collective inquiry and reflection; and 5) attention to community energy cycles and rhythms. Suggestions are provided for ways to encourage collaborative and relational leadership practices, not only in communities of practice, but also in traditional forms of organization. These include practical ideas for strengthening relationships, encouraging collective inquiry and reflection, supporting collective meaning-making through image, metaphor and story, and attending to human needs, limits and life cycles to support and sustain organization life.

## **Dedication**

For Debbie and Marcia who began the journey with me.

For all the women of WLC whose stories have helped shaped my own, who experienced the magic and want to sustain it, and who have supported me throughout this project, especially, Michele, Diane, Corrie, Jo, Margy, Alice, the facilitator, board and alum circles, the WhoKnows, and all those who gave time to participate in the dialogues and events for this project.

For the friends, family members and colleagues who always seemed to show up at just the right time with a word of encouragement, a reference, a push, an ear, a review drafts, pictures, technical support and a belief in my ability to get it done. Special thanks to Laressa and Kristin who helped with everything from concept to the final last minute details.

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For all the guides at the Taos Institute and Tilburg University: especially my advisor Mary Gergen. No matter where in the world she was, she responded.

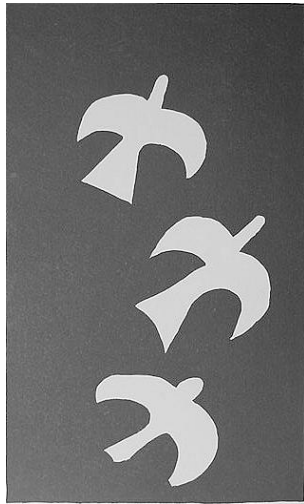
For my learning group: Jerry, Lynn and Maggie for not only our co-learning experience but for our friendship.

For Ellen and Ben, Nick and Christianna, Meghan and Ace, Brent and Gabrielle and Xavier, Cora, Finn, Gianna and Kateri; my family who also believes in and supports me to keep learning, even as a grandmother.

And for Dan, who listens to me "talk it out", delivers food to my desk at mealtimes, and unfailingly supports me no matter what. Words can't capture what you mean to me.

## Background & Introduction

*Once upon a time, not so long ago, three very tired business women came together and said, "There has to be - a better a way. We need to create more life affirming work."*



This begins the storyline in our online DVD of the Women's Leadership Community, started 20 years ago when two colleagues and I met around my kitchen table. We were tired, not only of the load we were carrying as working women. We were tired of the way our corporate jobs were draining the life out of us. We wanted to find a better, more life-affirming way to work, to live in the world. We formed a learning trio. Making the time to meet regularly over six years was not easy. We lived in three different cities (St. Paul and Lutsen, Minnesota and Toronto, Ontario), two different countries. We were starting businesses, raising children, moving households, changing relationships. We created quarterly retreats to meet in person and stayed in touch by phone. We found that coming together was helping us make the kind of changes in our lives that we were seeking and we wanted to engage other women to join us in our learning.

We experimented with hosting a weekend of "storytelling and transformation" for fifteen women colleagues. The momentum from this retreat encouraged us to form a year-long learning cohort for women leaders called Women in Leadership, a Learning Community Exploring the Path of Wisdom, (WIL). Our purpose was to inquire into questions of meaning, purpose, authenticity, courage and voice in our work and in our lives. With the success of our first program we formed a non-profit organization, the Center for Emerging Leadership (CEL), to sponsor more cohorts and learning events. The cohort program evolved into an ongoing community of practice we now call the Women's Leadership Community (WLC). It includes all those who have participated in the cohort program now called the entry retreat series. Cohort groups launch annually and those who finish the one year series, called alumnae, are invited to stay engaged with the community on an ongoing basis through alumnae events and projects. The community has grown to 90 women who stay engaged through the community mailing list.

Three circles have evolved to guide the community: 1) the board circle oversees programs, projects, communications and budgets, and the health and sustainability of the community; 2) the facilitator circle leads the entry retreat series and guides the design and facilitation of



alumnae retreats; and 3) the alumnae circle initiates and manages ongoing community learning events. Learning activities and events emerge from the shared interests and energy of members of the community. These have included publishing two journals and a book of women's leadership stories, monthly in person and virtual learning circle meetings hosted by members, and a variety of retreats, workshops and conferences for women leaders.

This study grew out of my desire to research what we have done to create and evolve a learning community for women leaders that has sustained for twenty years. Although there is a growing body of research and writing about women and leadership and relational practice in groups, there has not been much written about sustaining these approaches over time. The Women's Leadership Community offered me a unique set of conditions for a qualitative study of relational leadership. I am a co-founder of this community and have been involved since the formation. As part of our meaning-making practices, we maintain an extensive set of archived documents that date back to the beginning learning community of the three co-founders (see appendix A for a list of the archive documents). We have enacted leadership and organizational practices that are collaborative, collective and relational. We have engaged in ongoing inquiry into the collective feminine and leadership. As a learning community, we engage in dialogic and reflective practices, both individually and collectively. At the intersection of these three areas: relational leadership, the feminine and learning community, I began my research.

In our community we seek to broaden the definition of leadership. We have defined leadership as *"the capacity of people to develop, to create, and to sustain over time. Paradoxically, the very acts of leadership that enable people to self-govern are often invisible, and rarely seen as leadership. We seek to discover, give voice, and create visibility for these subtle, yet critical, forms of leadership. In our retreats and circles, we explore invisible and unclaimed aspects of leadership (defined as the archetypal feminine) such as relationships, community, connection to place and history, and the appreciation and affirmation of life and life cycles. These aspects are often overshadowed by the more prevalent leadership practices (the archetypal masculine) of focus, power, control, and achievement. When integration of both feminine and masculine occurs, we move towards wholeness and tap our greatest potential for leadership and creativity."* (WLC website)

The community's structure and operations are guided by six principles and six practices that evolved through dialogue with the founders and community members. They serve as both a guide and a boundary, influencing all aspects of our organization. Below is a description of the

principles and practices of the Women's Leadership Community (WLC) as they appear on our website ([www.womensleadershipcommunity.org](http://www.womensleadershipcommunity.org)) today.

### ***Principles***

***Respect:*** We hold a stance of deep respect for all people and a place where our most authentic selves can be present. We "make room for one another," opening new possibilities for learning together.

***Awareness:*** As we illuminate the assumptions, beliefs and feelings that root our actions, we learn how these either help or limit us in creating what we want. We strive to create greater consciousness within ourselves as individuals and within the communities in which we live.

***Wholeness:*** Wisdom encompasses more than the intellect. Balancing heart, body, and mind with tasks and relationships is key to creating healthy environments. The journey towards wholeness is a healing process, integrating all parts of ourselves, the archetypal feminine and masculine, and connecting us to one another.

***Authenticity:*** We support and encourage development of authentic self-expression; to peel away the layers that cover our gifts and bring greater power to our leadership work.

***Memory:*** We seek to remember the past, our journeys as individuals, and the collective story. We explore our mythology and claim the truth of our own experience.

***Emergence:*** We explore a generative approach to leadership and how we participate in the unfolding future. We tap into and participate with the flow of energy and resources all around us. We look for what is trying to emerge in our lives, our organizations, and our communities.

### ***Practices***

***Story/Image/Myth:*** Stories and images are windows into our life experience, our culture, and our dreams. Listening to each other's stories helps us better understand ourselves, our differences, and our commonalities.

***Reflection:*** To become more fully aware and conscious we must become observers of ourselves and able to surface and examine our embodied assumptions. We follow a spiral learning path that moves from reflection to action. The path circles back on itself, allowing us to hear and see with ever-deeper perspective.

***Centering:*** Grounding and centering in our mind-body-spirit helps us integrate all parts of ourselves. We return to our center again and again when we find ourselves challenged by the realities of daily life.

***Dialogue:*** We practice open inquiry where participants tell the truth of their own experience, listen deeply to others, and collectively explore the issues of leadership in today's world.

***Intention:*** Choosing a focus sets energy in motion, creating a powerful magnet that attracts resources and support. In working with our intentions, we look for what is emerging, attend to the next steps and let go of predetermined outcomes.

***Ritual:*** Our co-created rituals help us maintain and pass on our traditions and create a continuity of experience together. Rituals help us build and sustain the community as we grow.

## ***A Question Emerges***

*“The spiral symbolizes the process of growth and evolution. It is a process of coming to the same point again and again, but at a different level, so that everything is seen in a new light. The result is a new perspective on issues, people and places” (p. 47, Arrien, 1992)*

The spiral is a symbol that has been associated with dialectic, the interaction of two opposites that find harmony, as in the yin yang symbol. The spiral is also linked with the transition, regeneration and transformation (Ciriot, 2001). As a symbol of growth and transformation, the spiral metaphor became the organizing metaphor for my dissertation. Condensing twenty years experience into a dissertation was at first overwhelming. Through each round of my process, new language, new questions and new insights emerged. The question emerging at the core of the spiral was: **How has relational leadership sustained a community of inquiry for women leaders?**

My methodology took shape around a framework that we developed to organize our retreats: 1) naming the past-current story, 2) exploring the deeper story 3) finding the “new story”, and 4) living the new story. I started my research by reviewing community archives, including journal entries from the co-founders, meeting notes, references, images, stories, and artifacts. Thinking I was going to approach the project as an auto-ethnographic study, I began to write my story of the founding and development of the community. In the process of writing, I found the story that wanted to be told was from the “we” voice, rather than an “I” voice. I was interested in unfolding the story of how we, as a group, had created and sustained a self-organizing community that now operates beyond the day to day involvement of the founders. Chapter one introduces you to WLC through the story of the founding and evolution of the first seventeen years of the community.

My exploration of the deeper story took two forms. I conducted a literature search on three topics: Relational Leadership, the Feminine and Leadership and Community Inquiry. Current literature in relational theory and leadership offered me a framework to describe our leadership practices. Reviewing the literature on feminism helped place our work in an historical context of four phases of feminism and their relationship to leadership for women. Exploring collective practices of inquiry and reflection provided the third context for reflecting on our community’s principles and practices. Findings from the literature are presented in chapter two.

I did another round of deepening the story through a qualitative research project within the community. I facilitated three dialogues, one in each of three core community circles: alumnae, board and facilitators. In the dialogues participants were asked to describe how they had been drawn to this community, what kept them engaged and caused them to identify as members of the community, the value and impact of various community practices in their lives, and what they had learned about creating this community's identity. I also analyzed four events and a survey of community members occurring within the community during the three years I was conducting my research. The four community events were 1) a group dialogue held with Parker Palmer, 2) a retreat in which participants explored "Facilitation, the WLC Way", 3) the formation of a new community circle, "Who Knows", and 4) the Re-imagining Retreat held with board members and facilitators to set future direction for the community. The methodology for my research is described in chapter three and the research is presented in chapter four.

In the next round of the spiral I pulled out key themes from the story, the literature search and the research: a naming of the "new story". I identified seven ongoing deliberations and five organizational themes which are presented in chapter five. The deliberations describe the topics that have been part of the community's ongoing discourse. These topics highlight some of the challenges and conflicts that arise repeatedly and offer members opportunity to continually explore community identity, purpose and future. The five organizational themes summarize my findings on how WLC is sustaining relational practice over time. Each theme has an organizing image that was drawn from dialogues within community cohort groups:

- 1) Making Room for One Another: The Ethic of Love as a Relational Stance
- 2) Engaging Hestia Energy: A Container through Hospitality, Beauty, Rituals and Symbols
- 3) Weaving the Webs of Connection: Structures for Organizing and Sharing Power
- 4) Walking the Rainbow Path: Transformational Learning through Inquiry and Dialogue
- 5) Feeding the Energy Ball: Rhythms, Cycles, and Emergence

The sixth and final chapter explores some of the possible applications of our learning to other organizational contexts, including how some of the members have brought community practices into their leadership work. I discuss what is missing from this research and what some of the limits may be in sustaining a relational community over time. Finally, I share an update of the community's current inquiry and possibilities for unfolding the next emerging chapter of our story.

# Chapter One: The Story of the Women's Leadership Community



## *The Founding Story*

*"All good stories have a prologue – a ground – a context out of which the 'new/deeper' story emerges...CEL and WIL were born out of the collective experience of BHA [Ginny Belden, Marcia Hyatt and Deb Ackley]. Ginny, Marcia and Deb gathered seasonally, usually on the shores of beautiful Lake Superior to learn together, share, support and challenge – and befriend each others' learning journey/each other's story. The image of The Women's Leadership Community was born in these early gatherings."*  
Deb Ackley, from WLC archives

I introduced my two friends Marcia and Deb to each other around my kitchen table in 1991. Marcia was my new business partner, my friend since our early twenties and a work colleague who had also been my boss for the last four years. Deb and I had just completed a graduate program in organization development at Pepperdine University in California. We had been matched as roommates and had become close friends over the two years of residential retreats. We found we three had a lot in common: we held leadership positions in corporations, were in the process of launching our own consulting practices, and were married and raising children. We also shared similar frustrations with many aspects of current leadership and organization development practice. My friendship with these two women was the starting point for our coming together. A couple of stories of our respective friendships may shed light on the chemistry that formed among the three of us.

I was sorting my laundry in my apartment's laundry room when Marcia, came in to post a sign about a workshop for working women she was offering through the county extension service. I was 21 years old, recently married, new to the community and missing my connections with women friends. I signed up for the workshop and began connecting with Marcia who lived in a neighboring apartment. We were in different places, personally and professionally. Marcia was single and working for the county extension service. I was married and still going to University. We found a shared propensity for doing projects together, which initially took the form of cooking. We picked apples and berries, making jam together. One particular baking project became a classic memory in our friendship. We coined it the "cookie phenomena". We decided to make Christmas cookies together. We each identified numerous cookie recipes we wanted to make, assembled the ingredients and began early morning in high spirits. By late afternoon, we still had many partially completed cookie batches; there was flour everywhere and we were exhausted. Yet, we believed we HAD to push on through to finish. This propensity for taking on

big projects and getting them done was a shared trait that would later help us launch our business partnership. And it would also challenge us in the form of overwork when the “cookie phenomena” was in full force.

Deb and I were always grateful that we had been matched as roommates at Pepperdine. We found ourselves quickly becoming “soul mates”. A story we tell about our Pepperdine retreats will give you a flavor of our friendship. We stayed in condominiums along the sand dunes on the Pacific Ocean that were connected by a series of wooden walkways. We were warned to bring a flashlight because there were no lights and it was easy to get lost at night. Neither Deb nor I ever remembered to bring a flashlight and we frequently misplaced our keys. At night we would grope our way along the walkways in the dark, fumbling for a key and laughing at our shared lack of detail orientation. Staying connected and going into the dark became a common theme in our relationship. In late night conversations I found a kindred spirit, someone who listened and seemed to understand those parts of me that I was not yet ready to bring out into the light of day. Bringing together these two friends helped me develop and integrate two sides of the explorer within me: the inner questioner and the outer seeker.

## **Forming a Learning Trio**

We felt a strong chemistry and desire to learn together from that first meeting and agreed to become a learning trio. Marcia described our meeting as a threesome from her perspective this way:

*Early in my new business with Ginny, I met her graduate school roommate, Deb. Ginny often told me how she and Deb had talked into the night deconstructing the organizational theories they were learning at graduate school. When Deb described her theory of learning organizations, I said, “That makes sense, but it probably sounds like anarchy to most people.” Her beliefs were wild, like nothing I had ever heard before. She contended our notions of control were tied to a mechanistic view of organizations that no longer worked in a post-modern world (I didn’t know what a post-modern world was, but I nodded and smiled, intrigued.)*

*We committed to study and learn together as a three-some. We were a powerful mix. Recently, Ginny came across an author who said for creativity you need a visionary, a hugger and a practical – and that was what we were. Deb was always out beyond the edge.... Ginny was the one who tended to relationships. She tolerated our imperfections and kept the heart in the circle. She reminded us to appreciate each other. I was practical, needing to understand the ‘so what’, needing to document our conversations and needing to turn concepts into action.”*

As women we had come into the work world during a time in the women's movement when women were proving they could be as competent in leadership as men. We were part of the first generation of career women entering positions of leadership in large numbers. We all three had been raised by mothers who had "had to" work outside the home and who had struggled in a world that allowed women few career opportunities. We had read the books on how to appear strong and confident and wore the corporate "costume", a mini-version of the men's suit in dark colors with a white blouse and little bow ties. We were also part of the first wave of women to hit the "glass ceiling" as we entered mid-career. It was not that we didn't have opportunities for upward mobility, but we found corporate leadership work was sucking the life out of us. We left the corporate world not so much for greater opportunity, but to have more life balance, a sense of wholeness and to live in a more life-affirming way.

One of our first activities together was to engage in a dialogue about our personal values and assumptions. Using a framework developed by Edgar Schein, we explored similarities and differences in our assumptions about human nature, relationships, and truth (Schein, 1985). We found we held similar assumptions and talked about how we engage in more learning together.

### **A Dialogue at the University of Massachusetts**

We started by reading two books together; *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge (1990) and Margaret Wheatley's (1994) *Leadership and the New Science*. Both books were asserting fundamental changes in how we view organizations. They shifted the view of organizations from mechanistic, Newtonian metaphors of a clockwork universe, to a complex adaptive, self-organizing world. These concepts were congruent with our own assumptions and we challenged ourselves to find organizational practices linked to this new theory. Through Deb's connection with Gareth Morgan, we had come across an article examining epistemological assumptions in social science research work (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Their description of different theoretical assumptions with corresponding research methods offered us a way to understand how different worldviews might translate into different organizational practices.

We sent a letter to co-author Linda Smircich at the University of Massachusetts to explore the possibility of meeting with her to further study the connection between practice and theory. To our delight she responded positively and asked us to send her more information on what we

wanted to discuss. That spring we traveled together to Massachusetts and met with Linda Smircich and one of her colleagues for a day of dialogue. What I remember from the day was not much about organizational theory, but rather the connections we made with academic women and our shared challenges as women in professional and leadership work. The other professor we met that day became a long-term friend and part of the first cohort of women in WLC.

## **Writing Together**

Our second learning opportunity came shortly after our trip, when Deb learned of a potential project with the Ontario provincial government in Toronto to develop a written guide on implementing the Learning Organization. I traveled to Toronto to help Deb pitch a proposal and we were granted the job. The three of us would write and publish a guidebook and our consulting fees would help underwrite our travel and time. We met for a week to scope and outline the book, and to assign parts that we would each draft. Writing a book together proved challenging. Our writing styles were very different and we had to negotiate how we would edit our work. We met again for a week after completing our research to lay out the structure of the book and worked virtually to write, edit and layout the final copy.

The book project provided a great jumpstart to our learning together. Between the three of us we reviewed over 140 articles, books or manuscripts, including authors whose writing was shaping new paradigms in social theory. Our book: *Towards the Learning Organization: a Guide*, was printed and delivered to the Ontario Provincial government in early 1993 and ultimately published and distributed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) in Toronto (Belden, Hyatt, Ackley, 1993). In the book were the beginnings of the principles and practices we would later apply in WLC: reflection, dialogue, framing and reframing, respect, action learning and shared vision.

## **Going Inward**

*“Reflection is the process of knowing how we know. It is an act of turning back on ourselves. It is the only chance we have to discover our blindness and to recognize that uncertainties and knowledge of others are, respectively, as overwhelming and tenuous as our own.”* (Maturana & Varela, 1987)



We met again shortly after the completion of the project to celebrate and determine our next steps. The combination of completing a master's degree, starting a consulting practice and writing a book within 24 months on top of a full time job and two young children at home had taken a toll on me. My husband and I had separated during this time and come back together, struggling to keep our marriage together. I was experiencing physical symptoms of stress. While Marcia was ready to move forward to market our book, I wanted to stop, rest, reflect and take stock of where we were. Deb was feeling the same as me. Marcia supported our proposal to take a break from any further work on the book and shift our focus to implementing the practices we had identified in our learning trio. This reflected a pattern in the trio in which we were frequently challenged by differences in determining how to go forward together. In this case, we chose to wait on further book promotion and take a time-out for reflection.

Using a process developed by the Institute for Cultural Affairs (ICA), we assessed our past year not only for what we had accomplished, but also for where we had been energized or de-energized. We explored our future desires, our current obstacles and identified a few shared strategies to focus our energies into the next year. We created titles and images that would hold these emerging threads together and guide us forward. Our strategies led to several specific actions. Marcia and I recognized that much of our consulting practice was rooted in positivist assumptions. We committed to limiting this work and doing more joint work projects in line with the practices we had identified through our writing. We also set a 3-way intention to strengthen our relationships and support each other's personal lives.

Our time spent in reflection was opening me up to new ways of looking. I was focusing less on "problem-solving". Instead, I was seeing things more holistically and learning to stay in the discomfort of not knowing, to stop pushing so hard at the areas of my work and homelife that were exhausting me. In our trio, we became more intentional in our reflection. We scheduled weekly conference calls and quarterly retreats. All of us were doing journal writing, and we agreed to send our daily journal pages to one another using the technology of the day: fax machines. Our conversation shifted from theoretical concepts to personal experience. Our focus expanded beyond work to creating the lives that we wanted.

How we spent time together changed over the next several years. We experimented with new practices focused on our inner growth and transformation. We began documenting and sharing our dreams. We practiced dialogue, observing our reactions and deeper assumptions. We

explored the use of image and myth as windows into self-reflection, drawing images to summarize our conversations. We had retreats where we took long walks, did art projects, cooked, wrote in our journals, and shed tears together. It was a shift from a “doing” external orientation to a “being” internal orientation.

We did not give each other advice; we did not “rescue” each other from the feelings that we each experienced during this time of inner work. Parker Palmer (2000) describes this as “relationships in which we protect each other’s aloneness”. The supportive container we created helped each of us make significant changes in our lives over the next three years. Marcia made a physical move and lifestyle shift with her husband from the city to a rural artist’s community on the north shore of lake Superior. Deb made a second departure from a corporate position and began a consulting practice. I ended a twenty year marriage and moved into a new home with my two teenage children.

## **Cape Cod, the Whales and Our Emerging Principles**

While we continued our reflections and inner explorations, we also attended several workshops to learn from authors and teachers who were influencing our thinking. One of these trips was to attend a workshop with Margaret Wheatley on Cape Cod. On a boat trip to see the whales one afternoon, I was struck by the shift taking place in me. The captain would announce that the whales were off to one side of the boat, causing everyone to rush across to have a look. After several times back and forth, always getting caught behind a large crowd, I decided to sit still and just wait on my side of the boat. Seconds after the crowd rushed to the other side, I looked down to see a giant whale with an open mouth directly below where I was sitting. Letting the whale come to me was a metaphor for the transition taking place in our trio and in my life. I was learning to let go, stand still and allow life to emerge around and within me.

Sitting out on the dock of our cottage on the cape later that week, we mapped out five values that guiding our trio and a plan to sponsor a retreat for other women. The values were:

1. *We are committed to holding the circle, staying in relationship while embracing the tension of self in community.*
2. *Information is fully shared and not owned by any one of us.*
3. *We are a learning community honoring/honouring multiple ways of knowing and creating shared meaning as the glue of our community.*
4. *We relish life: seeking more beauty, vitality, juicy living and play.*

5. *Our work emanates from the center. We support each other to live with integrity in our practices, theory and in our lives.*

## **Storytelling and Transformation**

It had been four years since we had started our learning trio. We had been struggled to determine how to go on together as a trio. Marcia and I had a shared work entity in which Deb often felt “other”. Deb and I had a close personal friendship in which Marcia often felt “other”. The time and expense required for meeting with our busy families and careers proved difficult. We found ourselves in conflict more frequently as we continued down differentiated work paths. At the same time, we had friends and colleagues who were intrigued by what we were doing and interested in having the kinds of experiences we were creating together. Wheatley had been talking at the Cape Cod seminar that to deal with breakdowns in communication it helps to “hook more of the system up to itself”. We felt that engaging others with us would help to deepen our dialogue and perhaps also find expanded ways to go on learning together.

We decided to offer a retreat weekend for other colleagues who had been expressing interest in the learning we had been doing together. The retreat, titled “Storytelling and Transformation”, was attended by 17 women. We had been reading about image, story, myth and the power of narrative in shaping reality (Boulding, 1961; Campbell, 1988; Feinstein & Krippner, 1997; Houston, 1987). We had also experienced the transforming affects of sharing our own stories with one another. Participants desire to come back together convinced us that there was a need for women to continue gathering and sharing their stories.

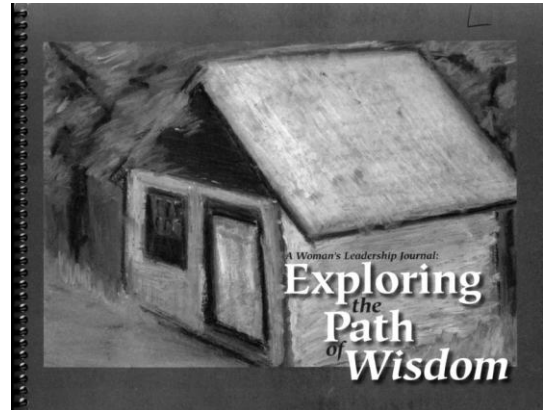
## **Women in Leadership: A Community Exploring the Path of Wisdom**

At our next trio retreat Deb showed up at the airport in MN and said “*I know this totally violates our process, but I have a clear vision that we should offer a year-long learning community for women leaders.*” Marcia and I didn’t hesitate. We immediately said “*Yes, let’s do it!*” We scheduled a retreat at Marcia’s cottage to develop the idea. We put the offering out to women we knew, including the women who had been at the Storytelling and Transformation retreat. Our invitation said we wanted to expand our small circle to include other women to deepen our inquiry. We invited women seeking to create a life-affirming story in work, to bring authentic voice and greater courage to act. We stated our belief that many women in the workplace need this type of a forum to claim the wisdom within us, to find our voices, and to be encouraged through a community of other women. We titled the learning community *Women in Leadership*,

*A Learning Community Exploring the Path of Wisdom.* The path of wisdom we saw as a journey toward greater wholeness, congruence between who we are and how we bring that to our work, and more awareness about the ways we can make a difference in our work.

Some of the issues we offered for exploration included:

- wisdom vs. intelligence
- relationship vs. roles and hierarchy
- reframing power: power from within, power of community
- leadership as process, as meaning making, as capacity within individuals
- the shadow side of leadership
- wholeness: reclaiming the lost parts of ourselves, healing ourselves and the collective
- experiencing the sacred: personally, collectively, in our work
- suffering, compassion and leadership



## **The EISA Framework**

By reflecting on our own transformational experiences we developed a four-part framework called “EISA”, which stood for 1) Experience, 2) Image, 3) Story and 4) Application. It followed a consistent pattern of other experiential learning models we had studied, including ICA’s Discussion Method (Spencer & Kanter, 1989), Action Learning (McGill & Beaty, 1992) and the adult learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). The EISA framework was our linkage of these experiential learning models to the meaning making practices found in our readings on image and story. Image and story were ways to deconstruct not only the prevailing theories within our work, but ways we were deconstructing our selves, exploring practices which could uncover and challenge our prevailing assumptions.

Reflection on our current experience was the starting point for us. “Experience” might be a current issue or challenge we were individually or collectively addressing. We started our gatherings with a check-in on what had happened since we had met last. In our quarterly retreats and our annual reflections, we made lists of our activities and accomplishments, both at work and in our lives. Moving to the “image” level, we reflected on the associations and feelings we were making. Image refers to the way in which our experience is encoded; the patterns and

images that filtered our experience. We were exploring language in a broader way, encompassing not only verbal, but also symbolic and somatic “language” and how these connect, for example how your mouth waters when you imagine biting into a lemon (Boulding, 1961). We sought to uncover the images we hold of ourselves and our world and how these shaped the way we perceived reality. We found ways to engage in symbolic play with pictures, metaphors, and dream images to help us see how we were giving meaning to our current experiences. We also explored new images that might offer us new interpretations.

The third step of the cycle for us was Story. We defined story as the way our images and metaphors are strung together to give interpretation or meaning to our experience. The “current story” described the existing meaning or interpretation. By examining our current story, we could see where other interpretations might be plausible. Application is the step in which we move the new story into action, through new ways to relate to the current story, new intentions and/or new behaviors. As a group, it is how we coordinate our actions to move forward around what has collective meaning. We focused each retreat’s agenda on one of the four parts of the framework. In preparation for the program, we revised our principles and practices. With this as the backdrop, and a first retreat designed, we signed up 15 women to participate in our first year long learning community. Following are the revised principles and practices, pictures from various retreats and a composite story of what a WLC first retreat might be like.

*Principles:*

*Respect – comes from a belief that both individual and group are equally honorable. When we create a stance of deep respect for all members, we create a place where our most authentic selves can be present. We tap the true genius within the individual and increase the power of the community.*

*Awareness – allows real change and growth to occur. We need to understand our assumptions, beliefs and feelings and how they either help or limit us in getting the results we want. Learning communities provide ways to surface these in a more conscious fashion.*

*Wholeness – means the balancing of head, heart and body with tasks and relationships in creating healthy environments. The wholeness is based on our personal and collective integrity, which comes from the life-affirming spirit at our core. This connects us to ourselves and to each other.*

*Intention – creates energy. A clear image of our purpose moves us to new growth and creativity. A powerful image attracts resources and support to create momentum for change.*

*Practices:*

*Story/Image – is sharing of stories and surfacing the images that are the carriers of deeper meaning. These then help us understand who we are and who we are becoming*

*Reflection – is surfacing and examining our beliefs, assumptions and ideas in order to learn about ourselves*

*Dialogue – is the practice of open conversation where participants speak authentically and listen deeply while paying attention to what has heart and meaning.*

*Action Learning – is continuously reflecting on what we’ve done and experienced in order to allow us to see new perspectives and make new choices in our actions.*



Entrance to the Retreat Center



Circle Candle



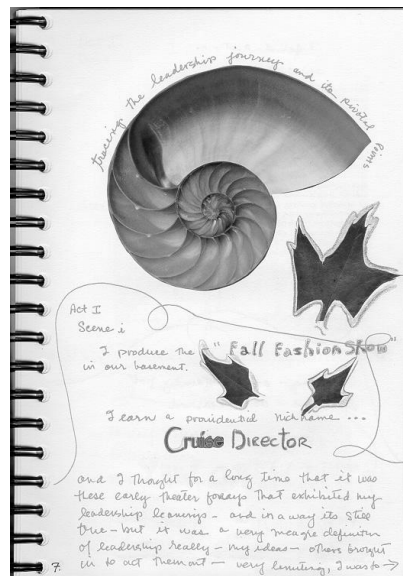
Welcome and Hospitality



Image cards



Image Theater



Journal page from a participant

## A WLC Retreat

*The three of us arrive late afternoon to the retreat center. We come the day before the first retreat to settle in and connect with each other before the women arrive for their first retreat. Coming early helps us come into relationship with one another, set intentions for the three days, create the space and build the energy field that welcomes the group to their year-long cohort.*

*When I get out of my car I am filled with the scent of pine and smoke from the wood stove. It is quiet, except for the birds and I can hear the frogs beginning their evening song of early spring. I see the creek water has risen and I notice the new labyrinth created in the meadow for walking meditations. The lodge was built by volunteers out of wood logs. Each room has one or two log beds covered by a quilt. The rooms are simple, quiet and always make me sleepy as I leave behind the busyness of my usual routine.*

*When the women arrive the next afternoon, we are ready to greet them. We have a snack of cheese, crackers, fruit and a large pot of hot tea for those who may not have had lunch. Our journals and book of women's stories, along with a spiral notebook of background materials have been tied up in beautiful cardboard folder boxes and tied with a purple ribbon. We have set up a circle chairs in the main room which has a larger cathedral ceiling and a picture window overlooking the tree tops towering over the park-like lawn spread out to the creek below. In the center we create an artful centerpiece with our circle candle, a bouquet of roses and various artifacts gathered over the years. Once everyone is present and refreshed, we invite the group into the circle and light the candle. We open the retreat with a warm welcome. We tell a little of our founding story to set the context for the retreat. Although we have met individually with each woman to describe what happens here, we review some of our principles and practices, how we use the centerpiece and other rituals, our check in, story and dialogue practices, our use of bodywork and the role of the trio of facilitators to help us co-create our experience together.*

*We begin with a simple breathing and self-massage exercise to encourage each woman to be fully present, letting go of whatever preoccupations she may be bringing with her. Using the artifacts women were invited to bring, we spend the first afternoon in a rich sharing of personal stories about who we are and where we are in our leadership journeys. We add the artifacts to our centerpiece to become part of the emerging story of the cohort group.*

*When the storytelling has ended, it is time for a break. We have wine and cheese and some time for socializing before dinner is served. We are served a light, home-cooked supper of organic and locally grown foods, many from the garden at the retreat center. In the evening, after another brief movement exercise, we introduce an activity to explore images of our current stories of leadership. We bring out magazines, cards, glue sticks and scissors. The exercise feels a little like a "quilting bee". While we visit, we cut pictures from magazines, using our intuition rather than our rational minds to pick our images. We paste these on cards, creating collages from the images and words torn from the magazines. These "image cards" become aids for our reflection the next day.*

*The next morning begins with another body exercise. This time we learn basic centering practice: breathe, feel the support of gravity dropping neck and shoulders, balance the energy field. We then have a brief check-in circle to see if anyone has any questions or items to share with the group. After check-in we share our image cards with one another and engage in a reflective dialogue about these until lunch. After lunch we provide a guided meditation on our "motherline" and share pictures we have brought of our maternal lineages: mothers, grandmothers, and other important women in our lives. It is then time for individual reflection on our current stories using our image cards, our motherline meditation, and insights from the body exercises. We ask these questions: What speaks to you at this point in time? What's working you? What are you noticing about where your energy is? How does this reflect what's going on in your life now? We come back together later in the afternoon to share our stories. Then we relax again with a glass of wine before dinner.*

*After dinner, we encourage the group to move upstairs for an Image Theater exercise. There is often reluctance to try this, as the word "theater" conjures up stage fright for some. When we describe the exercise as similar to the image cards, only using our bodies instead of magazine pictures, it seems to help overcome the performance anxiety. We play with individual and collective movement "images", without talking. Our guiding question is "what do I really, really want?" which came out of the stories we shared with each other before dinner.*

*The next morning after our centering practice we set intentions. Different than setting goals, these are qualities that we would like to experience more of in our lives and that we will work/play with over the weeks before our next retreat. We spend our last morning together talking about the application of these reflections to our lives. We debrief the retreat experience; what was valued, what was uncomfortable and why we did what we did. Our closing ritual emerges from the group. This time, the group decides to speak their intentions into the circle with a gesture. We end by collectively blowing out the candle.*





## ***The Formation of the Center for Emerging Leadership: 1997-1999***

### **Women in Leadership (WIL) '97**

The first year of meeting with the '97 cohort was a powerful experience for us. Deb, Marcia and I planned an environment that would be supportive, aesthetic, and reflective. We met in a retreat center on a river with places for walking and silent reflection. Each participant received a candleholder and a vase made by Marcia's husband, a metal artist, along with a long stem red rose, a handmade journal and spa slippers. The contrast between this and the usual hotel room business seminar atmosphere was palpable. The group quickly connected and opened up to one another.

As we progressed through each retreat we generated questions and exercises around a minimal agenda; check-in, dialogue, and reflect. We found it difficult to find words to describe what we were experiencing. On a recent podcast series for women and feminine leadership, a participant described the importance of women claiming their leadership and the need for women to find their voices as essential for this. She said: "*To see another woman is a huge act of resistance. We need to hear each other into being.*" (Thomas & Zammit, 2010) One of our participants described the way we were relating as "*making room for one another other.*" At the end of one year the group did not want to end. Participants took on the planning and facilitating of the subsequent retreats. Marcia, Deb and I felt re-energized in our trio by the expanded dialogue. We decided to move forward to create a non-profit organization that would house annual learning cohort experiences for women. We had reached our first organizational transformation, from an informal learning trio to a "program" for women leaders.

### **The Formation of the Center for Emerging Leadership (CEL)**

We held several discussions on whether we should create a non-profit or a for-profit organization. At the time we had separate business entities for our consulting practices. The advantage of a non-profit was that we could potentially seek out grants and raise funds for scholarships, thus providing programs for women leaders with a more diverse range of economic circumstances. Beyond the financial considerations, we saw this work as different from our consulting work in which we would be co-learners as well as facilitators. Our frame

was initially an educational model and our mission focused on sponsoring dialogues, retreats, and publications on leadership, wisdom and work. We invited 13 women (jokingly referred to as the “13 witches”) to become charter board members and help launch CEL, the Center for Emerging Leadership as a 501C3 non-profit organization, described in 1998 this way:

*The Center for Emerging Leadership’s name took several years to gestate. Each word exemplifies our beliefs and purpose:*

*The word “center” implies a circle and symbolizes wholeness, unity and partnership. We believe it is from the center that our power, wisdom and knowledge emanate. While individual power and wisdom come from within the person, collectively it comes from the center of the group. The collective wisdom that occurs as a result is more profound than that which is held in one person.*

*Like the butterfly emerging from the cocoon a new leadership paradigm is “emerging”. Our beliefs about organizations, leadership, and work are transforming. The Center believes in this new paradigm and to that end, supports the emergence of authentic leadership approach that emerges from within and is exemplified through the experiences of our learning communities. The Center seeks to explore new forms of leadership. We see leadership as less a set of attributes claimed by charismatic individuals and more about the healthy functioning of a group as a whole in creating and manifesting its visions. We seek to create cultures in which people can contribute their talents as a part of a collaborative group supporting an organization’s mission. The Center for Emerging Leadership seeks to discover give voice and visibility to these emerging forms of leadership.*

## **Early Governance Questions**

We researched governance models to determine not only our roles and structure, but also how we could structure ourselves in a way that was consistent with our principles and practices, our approach to meaning making and our desire for sharing power and influence. BHA (the new term for the founder trio: Belden, Hyatt and Ackley) wanted to create an organization that would operate from a shared leadership model but our board members wisely turned the early decisions back to us. We created an image of our WIL program as a baby that needed to develop. And we were concerned about turning the baby we had birthed over to others too quickly before it was mature enough to survive. This image shaped a three phase plan:

1. In Phase One, WIL would be jointly owned by BHA. Expenses would flow through the Belden Hyatt partnership within which Deb’s business was a sub-contractor. The role of the board in this phase was to consult to BHA to help shape how we grew the program, structure the Center and describe the work we do. The board would develop fund-raising

and scholarships for future programs. It was anticipated that this phase would last until approval of our non-profit status.

2. In Phase Two, WIL would become a program of the Center. BHA would be paid as sub-contractors for program facilitation. We anticipated that the three of us would develop a facilitator network to facilitate other programs and that we would be writing up the philosophical underpinnings of our work. The board's role at this phase was to assist us in creating strategic direction. It would act as "godmother" to affirm and protect the emerging organization. The board would continue with fund-raising and review of writings. We also imagined the Center would have a part-time paid director to manage the business needs and anticipated this phase would last through 2000.
3. In Phase Three, we imagined a mature Center. We saw WIL and other programs as widely available, the facilitator network in place, and writings published that described our work. We saw founders still being part of the Center but sharing leadership with others. In this phase the board was going to provide strategic direction, fund-raising, and approve new programs. We wanted a board that would ensure provocation, challenge assumptions and protect the integrity of the work. We thought the administrative needs would increase to full time depending on the number and growth of program offerings. And, we saw this scenario emerging in or beyond 2001.

In retrospect, we did move through these phases. However, our timetable was overly optimistic. The first year functioned as described in Phase One. Upon acceptance of our non-profit status, we began the shift into Phase Two. Here is what happened in our first year.

### **The Launch Year: Overwhelmed!**

At the beginning of the year (1998) the board identified three strategies and differentiated board and "staff" (BHA being considered staff) roles for each strategy. The first strategy we called *Encoding the Dream*. BHA would create a marketing brochure, a "white paper" on our philosophy and document key learnings throughout the year. The board would provide feedback on written communications and help gauge "readability" with target audiences. The second strategy was *Expanding the Dream*. BHA would identify marketing strategies, target audiences, develop presentations and conduct two one-day WIL sessions. The board would help promote these offerings, assist in fund raising and help identify target groups for marketing. The third strategy was *Enacting the Dream*. BHA would develop a proposal for a facilitator network, develop and report on a financial budget and work jointly with the board to establish the 1999

strategy. The board would continue to be a sounding board, providing guidance for these activities.

## **Women in Leadership '98**

Our second cohort group had greater diversity among participants. One participant, a highly paid executive in a large global corporation, decided to leave after the first retreat because she did not feel a sense of affinity with the other participants, who she saw as being at a lower level of leadership than her. Two other participants in this cohort were African American women who brought several new practices and rituals to the group from their traditions, including the importance of space and time for silence and an awareness of kairos time in the African culture versus Western chronos time. We were also being questioned on what we stood for as an organization. It was difficult for us to describe the participatory nature of our approach and we struggled to communicate what we were doing versus what we did not want: a traditional, expert driven, one right way approach. Despite the benefits being experienced, we struggled to communicate what we were doing and why.

## **Board Reflection on 1998**

At the end of the year we held our first annual board retreat to reflect on the year's activities, using the ICA process we had been using as a trio. Besides the WIL 98 program, we had conducted two one-day events, one in St. Paul and one in Toronto. We created two brochures, one for CEL, the organization and one for WIL, the program. Working with a marketing consultant, we identified our target market and put together a recruiting plan. We had started work to create a Canadian entity, created a scholarship fund and had several articles published. While we felt a great sense of accomplishment, we recognized it had taken a lot more time and energy than anyone had anticipated. Our board had coalesced and there was a sense of synergy but we did not have shared language for what we were doing. We felt we had not fully engaged our differences and we weren't sure what the next steps should be regarding our growth. Deb proposed we do a Study Circle .

## **The Study Circle**

The purpose of the Study Circle was to deepen our collective knowledge of the historical and contextual bases of our work. We hoped it would build a shared theoretical understanding and common language for what we were doing. Participation in the study circle was intended to be

the first step for those interested in becoming future facilitators. The Study Circle would also support our writing and provide a context for future dialogues. The study circle met afternoons before each board meeting through 1999. Over forty articles and book excerpts were shared (see appendix B for a bibliography). The major domains covered included: transformational change/double loop learning, action learning, culture as a metaphor for framing organization reality, paths of differentiating masculine and feminine energy, and moving beyond systems thinking to holism.

## **Our Mission is Unclear**

The second year on the board began with two questions for board members: 1) where is your energy and 2) what is CEL to you? Based on the responses to these questions, the board organized into small teams to focus on writing, new programming, marketing, fund-raising, the Study Circle, and WIL facilitation. Along with the Study Circle, we continued to explore new program options. We developed and launched a web page. We applied for a grant to run a program for women leaders in rural MN. We also agreed to co-sponsor our first non-WIL learning event, a play written by Barry Oshry and co-developed by Marcia on organizational power and partnership. The programming group started exploring the possibility of developing a cohort program for corporate women leaders using action learning practices that Marcia and I were using in our consulting work.

This last project raised tension regarding the boundaries of CEL with respect to our (BHA's) consulting practices. At the same time we were developing WIL as a program for women to explore their leadership/life questions; Marcia and I were developing a program for leadership peer coaching for businesses with proprietary materials. We had also been sharing some of these practices in WIL. Many of our participants and board members were also independent consultants doing organizational consulting work. A suggestion came forward to develop a corporate women's "action learning" program that would be facilitated by members of the community using materials we were developing as part of our consulting practice. We had not been clear about which materials were part of our consulting practice and thus proprietary, and which were "open source" for all to use. We thought at the time we needed to have a clearer demarcation between the work we did for pay in our businesses and the learning work we were doing within CEL and for which we were receiving minimal or no pay. The tension between competition versus collaboration were raised and seeded ongoing conversation about "ownership" of WIL.

Deb and another board member mapped a comparison of the action learning focused peer coaching work and the work we were doing in the WIL program. They differentiated action learning work as focused on individual or team effectiveness versus WIL being social change work focused on the symbolic, the feminine and personal transformation. These were not seen as hard and fast lines. The difference was one of intention and naming in marketing work.

In preparation for our May board meeting, BHA crafted a letter to board members with a number of questions related to the role and scope of CEL. Was CEL primarily a learning community, a program generator, or a network? What was our programmatic focus, i.e. programs for women, programs for organizations? How would our work get funded? What work would be “owned” by the Center versus the individuals developing it? How could we maintain a healthy balance between individual freedom and growth as an entity? Finally, what was the best process for addressing these questions, who needed to be involved and how would that happen?

The board responded to our letter by asking us to clarify our vision of what the Center was and what it was not. BHA met to further discuss the issues and had a number of individual conversations with board members. In our discussions, we had looked back to our experiences as the BHA learning group. Our primary purpose in coming together had been support and learning. We had kept our revenue generation separate in our respective business entities. When we developed programs or writings together we each freely used these and credited one another. We had developed a high degree of trust that made this possible.

We sent a second letter to the board in June. We proposed that the Center’s purpose should be the creation of learning communities for pushing out the edges of our thinking. We questioned how realistic it was to expect that this kind of programming would fit an internal business agenda. We also questioned a number of other programs that we were exploring and closed by sharing our decision to put no further energy into the development of new programs until these questions could be addressed by the board at the next meeting. Meanwhile, the WIL ’99 program was in turmoil.

### **Women in Leadership ’99: The Voice of Judgment**

Recruiting for our third WIL program had been slow. We had interested candidates but it was getting close to our cut-off deadline and no one had actually signed up. We wavered back and forth between canceling the program for the year and going forward with a smaller group.

Marcia and I felt that if we were to be a viable organization, we needed to have ongoing programs. To us that meant we needed to commit to a 1998 program and do it, even if we were the only ones who showed up. Deb felt that we needed to take a break and wait for stronger energy and interest to emerge. This was another example of how our differences in energy and activity level played out. This became an ongoing polarity within the organization in which we questioned the need to “put a stake in the ground” to make things happen, versus the need to stop, wait, “not go up the waterfall” (an image from one of my dreams) and let right action emerge without struggling. We resolved it this time by Marcia and I going ahead with another cohort program in 1998 and Deb choosing to take a break.

The program launched with seven participants. The first retreat seemed to be a success, similar to the past two years. However, during our second retreat conflict erupted in the group. An issue had surfaced between several participants late in the evening. Sensing something, I checked in with a participant over our break and she shared the situation with me. I asked her if she would be willing to discuss this within the full group. She held back until the last hour of our scheduled time together, when the whole conflict came out. The retreat could not be extended due to people’s schedules and we had to leave the retreat with the issue unresolved.

In the weeks following the retreat, a flurry of emails went back and forth between participants. This was our first experience trying to facilitate a conflict via email. Despite some ground rules I had sent out, the emails continued to become more judgmental and accusatory. Marcia and I were concerned with our ability to provide a container in which we could have a productive understanding and resolution for the situation. It appeared to us that what had happened was not anyone’s fault. We believed that a lot could be learned by having a dialogue in which we could examine not only our respective emotional reactions but also the individual assumptions that were underlying those reactions. We sent a request to the whole group asking them to refrain from escalating the conflict online and to wait until our next retreat (unfortunately not scheduled for two more months) where we could examine what had happen in person in the full group.

Of the four participants involved in the conflict, one felt we were creating a “pseudo” community and were trying to squelch the group from healthy interchange. I asked this participant for a face-to-face meeting to talk over our differences of perspective. I listened to her concerns. I then explained that our program’s approach was for each of us to examine our underlying

assumptions using a dialogic approach. I said I believed that we could use this incident as a way for us all to better understand ourselves, our assumptions and how those had been at play in creating the conflict. She responded that she did not believe in dialogue, that she did not think it was an effective approach in leadership and had she known that this was our approach, she would not have enrolled. I apologized to her for the misunderstanding in our approach, but reinforced the fact that we would be using dialogue in the subsequent retreats.

As a result, three women did not return to the next retreat. This conflict provided us with important insights into our own program assumptions. When our participants were primarily our own friends and colleagues, our assumptions were shared and did not need to be transparent. When we began to recruit those we did not know, we recognized a need to be much clearer about our worldview. At one point Marcia said to me, *“If we aren’t going to be reflective and examine our assumptions, I don’t want to do this.”* I remember saying *“This is OUR program. We developed it and we get to decide how we are going to work.”*

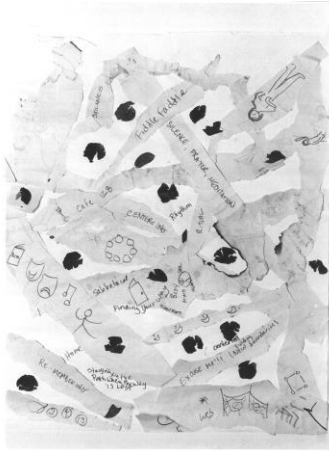
This was a turning point for us. We had reached the limits of diversity in our desire for a co-created experience. We saw a need to be clearer and more careful in qualifying the women who would participate in WIL; to be sure they understood what we were doing, why and our expectations of them. From this point forward our marketing efforts changed. We began meeting with each potential participant individually to find out what they were looking for and how that would fit with what we were doing in WIL. Deb, Marcia and I revised the principles and practices again to be more explicit in our approach. We also decided to create a WIL “workbook” in 2000 that would frame our approach more explicitly.

## **Coming Into Focus and Honoring an Ending**

The board meeting of Sept. 11, 1999 marked another turning point in the creation of CEL. At this meeting we surfaced and discussed the feelings of trying to do too much, a lack of coherence in our vision and the concern on whether we could be an organization without having a strong annual cohort program. We were going in too many directions at once without sufficient resources. We reached full agreement to narrow the focus of CEL to establishing a strong, viable WIL program, continuing only those projects that had a direct relationship to WIL: the Study Circle, the scholarship fund to support WIL and the Web page to support our marketing efforts. The board limited the next year’s meetings to three and decided not to replace the four



vacating board members whose terms were up in order to create a smaller, more focused board going forward.



BHA was also going through a shift in our identity. Who we had been as a trio was ending. Deb was most aware and feeling the sadness of losing who we had been as small learning trio.

Following our final board meeting that year, she encouraged us to co-create a ritual to honor the passing away of our old form and acknowledge the changes, many still unknown, going forward. On a large piece of chart paper, we each drew images, symbols and words to name what had been most meaningful to us over the past 8 years. Then, we tore the paper into strips and pasted them onto a blank sheet, adding dried rose petals from an early retreat.

At our annual reflection meeting for 1999 we titled our year “Coming into Focus”. We projected that 2000 would be “Growing the Next Ring”. The image that came to the group was that of a tree, putting down deeper roots and growing one ring at a time.

### ***Growing the Rings: 2000-2004***

With clearer focus from our work in 1999, The CEL board established areas of focus in 2000: further development of the WIL program, marketing communications for CEL and WIL (including the development of a new WIL program brochure), fiscal responsibility through better planning and budgeting, and facilitator succession planning. In addition, three special projects emerged over the course of the year: 1) a workbook for WIL, 2) the first all class WIL Reunion retreat and 3) the WIL Journal. We began to lay the groundwork for a program in Canada, including completion of the paperwork to create a non-profit entity in Canada.

The board was concerned about the founders’ waning energy. Most of the project work along with the facilitation of the program was being done by founders, all unpaid except for a stipend for facilitation when funds could cover it. While our model of three facilitators in small, cohort groups was working well for developing the learning community model, it was not providing enough revenue to cover the investment of facilitator time for the WIL program. We discussed the need to address financial goals and processes in order to have a sustainable program. We agreed to develop a budget that would be built on our ideal desires, rather than one that

reflected current funds. This included creating a realistic budget for the WIL program, which meant increasing participant fees to cover our total costs, including facilitator time spent in administration, marketing and development.

## **Exploring the Essence**

We wanted WIL to provide a replicable experience, but our program model was in tension with the emergence happening in the learning community. Each year's cohort was creating their own unique expression of the principles and practices. We had identified three new facilitators for future programs. They were asking questions such as "*What is the essence of this experience? What makes WIL distinct? How do we create a replicable experience that would also be unique to each group's uniqueness?*" We also recognized a need for facilitators to help the learning cohorts understand our principles and practices so we could collectively shape our learning.

By continuing to ask ourselves the essence question, we began to identify some of the ingredients for creating the WIL experience: access to nature, good food, time and space for reflection. We recognized the importance of encouraging all voices to be heard and each woman's pathway to be honored. We were providing a place for women on a journey of self-discovery. Through our inquiry, we were helping each other to realize that "*my way, my current story, is not the only way*".

## **Trio Facilitation**

With our first apprentice facilitator on board in 2000, we began to articulate the facilitator role and how we would develop new facilitators. A key learning in 2000 was a better understanding of the strength of the trio facilitation model. We described it this way (archives):

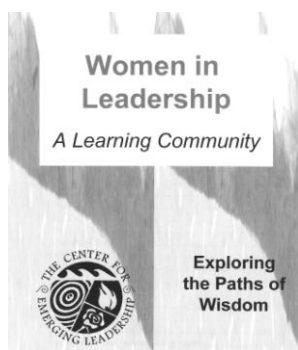
*This model ameliorates the power so no one path is THE right path. This is less like the expert model; the space between the three of us is what's important; how our paths dance is where the safety is; even if we screw up, we have a power check. This is reflective of a different model of leadership, non-guru leadership. It both confuses people and brings leadership as a process to life. The three-some is a dynamic.*

Trio leadership emphasized relationship and dialogue. As facilitators, these were important skills we tried to model in the learning cohorts. A downside of the trio facilitation model was the

time commitment that facilitators were devoting to the facilitation of WIL. Our estimated time for conducting a WIL program was over 30 days a year per facilitator when you included program development, marketing and administration to the trio's relationship building and facilitation time. Facilitator relationships were also a critical component in providing continuity and connection throughout the community. The board decided to budget an increase in the facilitator stipend. While the new stipend would still not reach the going business rates for similar facilitation work, it would begin to recognize the amount of work required to develop the community and move us closer to a reasonable non-profit daily rate. We agreed that philosophically we wanted to begin accounting for our time as a cost, even if we did not yet have the funds to cover this. We believed that this would help us to develop realistic budgets and set appropriate fund raising goals as a board.

The board discussed many times the challenge of our "unpaid" work and the way women too often are expected to, or voluntarily give away their time. We agreed, in theory, that we did not want this expectation within our organization. We set a goal to eventually pay facilitators a fair daily rate for their work. We also discussed the reality of how much founders were contributing to the development of the organization without pay. Without an income stream, with a community leadership approach, and with the demands of a relational model, we found no easy answers for this dilemma. We voted unanimously for a resolution to work towards fair compensation, realistic expectations and balanced budgets.

## **Developing a WIL Workbook**



We decided to begin a multi-year project to provide participants with a "workbook" of background reading on the WLC principles and practices. Deb took the lead role in organizing a collection of readings that were reviewed by Marcia, me and our apprentice facilitator. The first edition of the workbook, used in the 2001 cohorts, was not really so much a workbook as an eclectic stack of readings collected in a folder and tied with a purple ribbon. The intent was to redo this workbook over time using our own writings and images. Over the next several years, the workbook would become a collection of original writings on each principle and practice.

Another project envisioned at the July board meeting was a WIL journal with quotes captured from our dialogues. The journals could be given to new participants and also sold to raise funds

for CEL. Marcia, Deb and I selected 80 of our favorite participants' quotes taken from our notes throughout the past three years of WIL retreats. By December we had 500 copies printed and ready to sell for holiday gift-giving.

## **Connecting the Cohorts**

We held the first all class WIL "reunion" retreat in 2000. The WIL '97 group had continued meeting twice a year following the end of their program. Their follow-up retreats were self-facilitated by members of the group. The '98 and '99 WIL groups had not chosen to self-facilitate reunion retreats, but some of the participants within those groups wanted to continue meeting and had asked facilitators about some sort of follow-up. We anticipated that each year's program would add some women who would want to continue meeting. Facilitators did not feel we had the time or energy to organize and participate in ongoing retreats of multiple cohort groups. We believed that a "reunion" retreat open to all WIL participants would be the most effective way to create a follow-up learning experience to WIL.

Although there was skepticism about the effectiveness of combining different cohorts, a small group of WIL participants from the past three years formed a planning group. They surveyed past participants to determine if they would be interested in attending a WIL "Reconnection and Renewal" (R&R) Retreat. More than 17 women responded affirmatively. A theme developed: "*Mind, Body and Soul: Putting it all Together*". Cohort alumnae were also invited to participate in the design and facilitation of the retreat. Nine alums attended from all three prior cohorts. Feedback from this retreat was positive; participants felt able to experience trust and connection at a level they said was similar to their own cohort groups. This began a practice of regular "R&R" retreats, open to all alums of the WIL program and held at least once a year since 2000.

## **Getting Organized**

2000 was a year of strengthening our foundations as a learning community. Our year-end reflection as a board in 2000 was summarized in three different titles that reflect our growing confidence in what we were creating: *The Wind beneath Our Wings*, *Successful Farming and Seeking Sustainability*. With the launch of the R&R, we began to see the possibility of an emerging learning community extending beyond the WIL program. With three new facilitators, we were articulating our practices and facilitation model. We had pulled together the first version of our written materials and had put in place new financial policies and a new financial

system. Deb was exploring interest in launching a Canadian cohort in Toronto. With a growing number of interested candidates, we now had the resources in place to offer two programs simultaneously in the US and in Canada in 2001.

Meanwhile, we continued to reflect on the purpose of the board and the role of board members. We defined the board's purpose to help CEL become a self-sustaining organization through planning, setting strategic direction, financial development and fund-raising. We discussed board composition and changes that were needed to achieve this purpose, specifically recruiting members who would bring more marketing and financial backgrounds to the board. We were on track to break-even financially with 2001 programming, but we had no plan for how to fund future operating expenses or replenish our scholarship fund.

### **An Appreciative Inquiry into Feminine Leadership**

In our spring meeting, Deb proposed we participate in a study with a graduate student she was advising at Royal Roads University in Vancouver. Her focus question was: "*What do women need to give voice to the principles of feminine leadership?*" The student proposed a methodology in which she would facilitate a board member reflection using Appreciative Inquiry, and facilitate a retreat for past participants that would include small group interviews and the creation of storybooks. The retreat and the board meeting were scheduled as part of our annual board reflection and our next R&R in October of 2001. Her report to the board in early 2002 provided us with her summary of this dialogue. She noted three key themes (her titles are in italics):

- 1) The tradition of the *ever-widening circle* as our organizing form. The circle has been transformative, providing a safe container in which we could confront differences without diminishing others. The circle has been seen as a forum in which women felt they could be authentically vulnerable.
- 2) The power of *metaphor* and images experienced through song, movement, poetry, drawing and other creative vehicles supported women making life transitions. The metaphors were also vehicles for connection as they were repeated and shared across the community.
- 3) *Reclamation of the feminine* included honoring feminine attributes as leadership, bringing invisible aspects of leadership and exploring how women are able to reclaim and reclaim these often unseen and undervalued aspects of leadership.

At our first board meeting in 2002, we validated her themes with our own naming process:

- From *circle* to *ever-widening circle* - like a pebble that sends ripples out into the water, or a web, or the flow of energy that passes between the individual and the collective in a circle.
- From *metaphor* to *exploring our experience and transforming through the symbolic* – image, art, story, metaphor, music, food movement, ritual and dance.
- From *reclamation of the feminine* to *claiming and integrating the archetypal feminine* - broadening the definition of leadership to include the invisible, intuitive, and wholeness.

## **Defining a Replicable WIL Experience**

The facilitator “circle”, now six members, identified a number of creative tensions that were challenging us in WIL. At the core was the question of the role of structure versus emergence, especially as we determined which activities we would repeat with each new group and where we would leave space for activities to emerge from within the group. We questioned in what ways we were a “leadership program” or a “learning community”. The role of WIL facilitators as both leaders and co-learners was another tension to manage. We wondered when we should direct the group and when we should participate as community members. Which frameworks or stories were best to share in order to create the “container” or culture of the circle? What should we make transparent to participants? Tensions were occurring between the BHA founders and the new facilitators, especially in relation to decision-making in the program. Founders were being challenged to make decisions more transparent in order to transfer facilitation knowledge and share leadership with the apprentice facilitators.

We decided to meet for a day as a facilitator “circle” to identify the factors that were needed to support our work together. These included having more private space and reflection time for facilitators within the retreats and more time for preparation for the facilitator trio before the launch of a program. We wanted to ease the logistics by maintaining a consistent location for WIL retreats. We identified the importance of engaging in creative, symbolic and movement practices for reflection. Therefore, we would strive for each trio in the future to include at least one facilitator who could lead body/movement exercises. We would also try to mix ourselves into different trio configurations for better integration of the learnings.

A more conscious recognition of archetypal feminine practices in WIL was occurring. These included celebrating women's traditions and honoring a circular, rather than linear process of working through issues. One person described this as "coming into relationship with your challenges rather than fixing them". We were exploring the power of images and intentions in bringing forth changes in one's life. We added two additional principles to the original four:

*Authenticity: We support and encourage development of authentic self-expression; to peel away the layers that cover our gifts and bring greater power to our leadership work.*

*Memory: We seek to remember the past, our journeys as individuals, and the collective story. We explore our mythology and claim the truth of our own experience.*

## **Shifting Governance to the Board**

We chose to augment this work with an examination of our contradictions, an Institute of Cultural Affairs methodology for groups to examine obstacles to realizing their vision (Spencer & Kanter, 1989). Rather than problem solving, this approach creates a collective inquiry into the patterns that sustain current practices within the group. Identifying these patterns helps a group see what it needs to release in order to realize their future vision. In our contradictions discussion we looked at the pattern of energy depletion and the ongoing question of sustainability. New projects were diluting our focus on developing and sustaining the WIL program. We also continued to be challenged in describing who we were. And for the first time, members were voicing questions regarding how much power/control the founders had in the organization. Meanwhile, the founders were still providing most of the energy and resources for WIL and other CEL projects.

A number of questions emerged from this dialogue. *How could we create more shared ownership? What did we have to let go of as founders, facilitators and board members? What were we in service to? What was the CEL board's role and accountability? What were our strategies going to be?* As an outcome of this dialogue, the board acknowledged their own need to step into the decision making role for organizational governance and strategy. The current board chair recognized the strain being created by the current advisory board structure. There were not enough women willing or able to provide leadership to the projects that were being envisioned, projects that were exciting to everyone because they were also

fueling the growth of the community. Board meetings had been functioning more as times for reconnection and renewal, particularly through 2000-2001 when focused around the appreciative inquiry thesis. With the R&R retreats established for that purpose, the role of the board was changing. The board chair and I saw a need to revamp board functioning and move more responsibility from the founders to the board.

There was a heightened sense of urgency as we approached the fall meeting. Both Marcia and Deb were finding the facilitator role as no longer energizing to them. In the Canadian program, they had experienced a great deal of conflict in creating an effective trio relationship with the new apprentice facilitator. They had also felt burdened with managing program logistics. The resulting experience had been valued by the cohort participants, but had been a draining, rather than a life-affirming experience for Deb and Marcia.

We posed these questions for reflection prior to our meeting:

- What is CEL as an entity? What is our mission/ purpose?
- What shows up as a result of CEL existing?
- What is emerging? What projects do we want for 2003?
- What structure does the board need right now?
- What are the implications for our role and responsibilities as members?

We asked board members to also reflect on whom it was that we served, what sustained us and what we now needed to let go. A final question we posed was: “Are we (the board) in service to WIL or to the founder’s and their journey?”

The dialogue to define our purpose and mission was long and challenging. We had mixed reactions to using the words “the archetypal feminine” to describe what we were doing. For co-founder, Deb, these words were essential language to name her experience of our work in WIL. Without this, she believed we would be denying an essential aspect of our identity and be, once again, silencing the voice of the feminine. Many board members did not want to use this language. For some, even the word “feminine” felt divisive, a term that would separate us along gender lines and would keep us from getting resources. For others, the idea of reclaiming the feminine did not resonate as much as the idea of wholeness, balancing. They preferred other terms for masculine and feminine, such the eastern concept of yin and yang which was not as tied to gender and focused more on wholeness and integration. After much dialogue, we



reached an agreement at this meeting on a new mission statement that included, for the first time, language related to the feminine:

*To create more life-affirming work places and communities by increasing awareness of the archetypal feminine and supporting journeys toward wholeness.*

## **Shifting Leadership and an Ending**

The board changes we made at the end of 2002 marked another turning point. We streamlined and shortened future board meetings and narrowed focus to governance questions. BHA would retain responsibility for overseeing the WIL program and facilitator selection and development. We created a “working board” structure, requiring members to lead a committee or serve as an executive officer. We highlighted the importance of fiduciary accountability, financial oversight, and legal responsibility. The board and the founders reached a consensus that going forward, the board would have “a voice in all CEL activities (e.g. new staff, program decisions, to run or not to run, ensure staffing, resources; maintain integrity of Mission, Principles and Practices). All other work would be done in committees. BHA would retain responsibility for WIL program design and facilitator development. We created five working committees: Fund-raising, Communications, Alumnae, the WIL program and the Book project, a new project to gather and publish leadership stories from the alums. These committees would also become a source for recruiting new board members.

Through this process, Deb was becoming more and more disengaged. Several factors were contributing: the larger and more structured organization, the lack of shared understanding and support for naming the feminine in our work, the challenge of the Canadian program and facilitation trio and a sense of loosening in the bond of our friendship following my marriage in 2000. After the last meeting in 2002, Deb notified the board of her resignation as a board member and began transition out of active involvement in the Center and WIL. Her poem, in hand written notes from this meeting, reads:

*Be gentle with the  
Grieving one – I feel  
Steam rolled – maybe  
It's OK for me to  
Be grieving alone –  
No place for that here  
Work to be done –  
The grief – being in*

*Touch with my own  
Feelings while doing  
This. Dream of  
Nick recoiling from  
Support – what does  
That mean here?  
How to support the  
Grief?*

A hole was being created by Deb's departure from both board and facilitation roles and Marcia's decision not to facilitate WIL. Relationships were shifting as Deb, Marcia and I were no longer in regular dialogue. I was now feeling the loss of our trio relationship that our ritual two years earlier had enacted. However, I was still excited about the work of stabilizing and developing board operations, and developing the WIL program with the two remaining WIL facilitators. In 2002 we resolved two questions dominating our dialogue over several years. We claimed the language of both the archetypal feminine and wholeness. And, we initiated the shift of leadership from the founders to the CEL board.

## Deb's Parting Gift

Over the next year as Deb was transitioning out of CEL, she prepared for us a parting gift. Her letter in the front of the book describes the gift and the Herstorian role she had championed:

*Dear CEL Members and Friends,*

*I have in my leadership "role" as Herstorian taken the last five years of CEL's story and selected a few key items from each year to put in this book. An artist, [name] did the collage work and covers. Another artist [name] created the summary "images", adding another layer to the collage. The full story is recorded in five large binders. These binders contain the full minutes of all meetings through the years; notes, pictures and communications. I wanted to condense this huge but important "knowledge base" to a manageable size.*

*It is my hope that this "story" gets passed "hand to hand" to be read, questioned and lingered upon, not just for newcomers, but for everyone. I have tried to be mindful of the politics of meaning making. I have not edited or added. Everything included is from our actual notes. (I have kept all linking language to a bare minimum, adding only what I thought would illuminate.) And I do understand that even in selection, there is politics. I chose the year-end reflections because they summarized the "year at a glance", so to speak. A few other selections were added to show the spirit of the meetings (poems, recipes, etc.)*

*And so this book attempts to hold the collective memory of this CEL story, its beginning. Wisdom is held in the roots of any system....identity...purpose...the starting point for all on-going reflection and creation of the future...*

*A note about the "Herstorian Role":*

*I think less about roles these days – it conjures up a structural idea for me. I think more about relationship and voice. What leadership role does the "herstorian" hold?*

*In this way, the leadership voice of "herstorian" attends to the organizational story. The herstorian does not just record the "minutes of meetings" (an important function to put down the collective memory – pin it down in words, actual words spoken by the members.), she attends to the story, growing the story through the years. She attends to the language used, changed, and retained, and she holds the space between the language. This shows up as the voice that holds firm for year-end reflection and recording these reflections.*

*As I once said there is only one word "l'histoire" in French for story and history. The story moves, grows, is revised and re-interpreted. This revision is often through on-going "strategic planning" and action and further reflection. This voice is less about me and more about a systemic capability of WIL/CEL/BHA. And I am aware that I have held the "point" energy for this work. So my parting question to the organization is "how will this "herstorian work" get done?*

*Deb Ackley, 2003*

Deb's letter gave voice to the politics in group meaning-making. Those in power have been the writers of our history. Many voices are left out of that process. Sometimes we excavate the

excluded voices and the story changes, for example the books written from the perspective of African-Americans in the U.S. 150 years after slavery. We see a different picture of who we are, retrospectively. History is not just one story, but the unfolding story that continuously shapes and reshapes our past. Our continued storytelling shapes our identity, our culture. Through our stories we reshape ourselves individually and our culture, collectively. Who selects what, what we attend to, shapes how we define ourselves and others. The process itself will always be political. There will be some voices that carry more power and influence than others. The Historian role is one way we have to see that there is a listening for what is unspoken as well as spoken and continue extending the invitation to all voices to be heard within the community.

## **A New Board Story**

The following story was written by our board chair and speaks to the emergence of a new set of questions for CEL:

*The Board Story* Written by Alice Murray, 2003 (archives).

### *Chapter 1*

*Once upon a time not so long ago, three wise women came together to work, to learn and to grow. They were bound by similar beliefs and values and the need to change their lives. They collaborated in creative and new ways asking provocative and thoughtful questions. Their work brought them in contact with other women on their own journeys. Their learning and wisdom deepened as did their relationship.*

*Time continued to pass.*

### *Chapter 2*

*Eventually they decided to share their learning with other women. They called to their colleagues asking for those interested in joining them on the journey. Devote one year to story, dialogue and fellowship was all they asked. Thirteen women came to the first circle. There was politeness, curiosity, questioning, rumbling, growth, more questions and more rumbling and more growth. The group of strangers became a circle for exploration, for integration and for wholeness. The year ended and the circle did not, agreeing to meet again and continue the journey together.*

### *Chapter 3*

*After this successful journey, the three women decided to continue the journey and invite new participants. A foundation and board was established to support this effort. The board was convened. A new circle was started.*

*There were struggles with both.*

*Energy emerged in fits and starts. The board focused and refocused. Questions about purpose and why we exist continued to gnaw.*

*The one clear message: keep the circle growing. Other messages are less clear – where do stories and journals and partnerships fit. Work was accomplished when one woman had an idea and the passion to support it, enlisted others and provided the effort to get it done.*

*If growth comes through discomfort, through stretching, through risk, we must be growing. Some of the possibilities are scary; others seem too safe.*

### *Chapter 4*

*The journey has come to a crossroads. What was once the dream of three wise women has expanded to include other women. Five circles have completed their yearlong journey. The foundation, the board and the questions continue. What has worked may no longer be sustainable.*

*What and who does the board support? What is the role of the wise women? What is our purpose, our role? What needs to emerge? Where is our energy, my energy? What do we want to be when we grow up? How do we sustain? What needs to change? What must we keep? How do we integrate new women? How does the dream expand?*

*“What if’s” abound. What if the board didn’t exist? What if we had fewer board members? What if we met less often? We, who are called, are now entrusted with discovering what is emerging and what is our new direction.*

Over the year we had several board members decide to leave the board and we began recruiting members with specific backgrounds and interests aligned with board needs. Defining the role of board members continued. We set an intention that the board be a place where members use their energy and talents not only in the service of CEL but also in line with their own energy and interests. Expectations were set that board members would attend streamlined board meetings focused on governance issues and the annual board retreat to reflect and set future direction. We established an annual charter process for the committees. Each committee developed a statement of their purpose, membership, responsibilities, past year's accomplishments, next year's goals, and resources/support required from the organization. The board reviewed committee charters to ensure that the scope of activity for the year was manageable within the limits of collective energy and resources. All funded projects would now require a plan and budget. A policy was agreed to that projects must financially "break even" unless the board approved otherwise. We began to include operational expenses as part of the needed funds for projects.

Another shift occurred from a mostly inner focus to an outer look at how we described ourselves. A board member with marketing and communications background became involved in helping us explore a set of marketing based questions used to define an organization's "value proposition". A value proposition describes what an organization offers from the perspective and language of the client/customer or receiver of the service or product it offers. It explores how others see and value what you do, versus how you may see, describe or value what you do. Through a survey, interviews and dialogues with alumnae we developed language used in a new website developed the following year.

At our final board meeting in 2003 board members expressed a renewed sense of vision. The anthology of women's leadership stories (the Voicing the Stories project) was complete and seen as a highlight of the year. Our self-published book, *My Story Listens to Your Story*, had come out in time to sell for year-end gift giving and we sold out our first run within weeks. Another highlight was the "reimaging" of the board and the creation of new structures to move us forward. Images shared in our reflection were of dancing and plants, so different from the expression of drained energy the prior year. Board members expressed renewed enthusiasm for new projects that could springboard from the anthology, including a theater performance and a new website. We named the year's focus, "making the invisible visible".

## ***The Women's Leadership Community Emerges: 2004-2007***

### **The Working Board is Established**

2004 was a year of shaping our language, our communications and alumnae relations. By the end of the year we had a new website with a new look, developed with the aid of both an external survey of other programs for women leaders and an alumnae survey. We again revisited our principles and practices, creating the versions that are still in place today. The WIL workbook was updated, adding original writings for each of the principles and practices. This was now the “theoretical” companion piece to the Anthology we gave to new participants. In the WIL retreats we became more explicit in our framework, principles, and practices. We incorporated more creative, art, body movement and theater exercises in our retreats. We found our balance in blended reflective exercises, dialogue and work with intentions as well as a balance between rituals and activities brought to each cohort and those that uniquely emerged within a cohort.

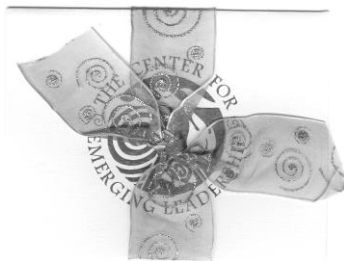
The writing that was taking place in 2004 helped strengthen coherence in who we were and what we were doing. Our new language solidified the use of the term “archetypal feminine”. We said: *“We seek to honor, translate and integrate the feminine archetype into our image of leadership.”* The language of the feminine continued to elicit debate. For some, the concept was just not clear and it was uncertain what “archetypal” meant. Others asserted that claiming the feminine was only half the equation. We were also integrating the feminine with our more developed masculine archetypal leadership capabilities. The focus was on “wholeness” not on just the feminine archetype. For others, even using the word “feminine” was challenging. Some simply did not identify with the word. It's also possible that “claiming” the feminine meant not being gender neutral and for many in leadership positions this was not considered acceptable in the business world. Programs for women's leadership were poorly resourced, got lower fees and less corporate sponsorship. We saw ourselves as a “legitimate” program for women leaders that should be paid for with corporate training dollars. Through ongoing dialogue in 2004, we expanded our language by using multiple constructs such as right brain and left brain, yin and yang, intuitive and rational as ways to expand the definition beyond Jungian theory. This new language garnered support from both the board and the WIL facilitators.

Two alums stepped forward expressing interest in creating a committee to lead the annual alumnae retreats. They started a regular email communication to all alums, called the E-Circle.

They also launched a new offering for alums: The WIL Alumnae Circle. It was conceived as a way for alums to gather on a monthly basis to tap back into the energy of their WIL experience. Circle gatherings rotate between alums homes and are open to any alum of WIL. The evening includes a light potluck dinner and a time to be in circle, focused on a question for reflection. The host for the evening serves as the facilitator for the evening. Over several circles, a pattern emerged in which a topic would be developed at the end of each circle as the focus question for the following month's gathering. The questions and circle highlights were sent out each month to all those who have asked to be on the E-Circle mailing list. Hosts volunteer from the group and a simple agenda was developed to aid those hosting the circle. This minimal structure has worked in maintaining the monthly gatherings and was an important step in bringing alumnae together to continue the practices begun at WIL.

Our financial outlook began improving. A special event sponsored in 2004 netted CEL a profit to cover a significant portion of our operating expenses for the year. Financially, the Fiscal health committee created a new reporting structure and better accounting procedures. We had achieved our goal to give the board financial information at each board meeting. We also set organization policy requiring that for all events and activities a budget be submitted to the board in advance. We had sold out our first printing of the Anthology and were exploring ways to fund a second reprint. By the end of the year, we were moving forward with plans for a 2005 conference. Our program marketing was strong thanks to the work alumnae were doing to recruit participants. Our financial reporting had improved, and we had strong alumnae leadership on all committees. The internal work done in 2004 made it possible to move forward on our plans to host a conference in 2005.

### **CEL Board 2005: “Breathing Out”**



A new sub-committee had been meeting in 2004 to develop a plan for holding a conference in the fall of 2005. They drafted a project plan with a timeline and an invitation. The concept behind the conference was to offer a two-day retreat for both alums and other interested women alums might like to bring. The focus was reflected in the proposed title: “Claiming Our Wisdom: Sharing

Stories of Women’s Leadership”. The conference was an opportunity to share who we were with a broader audience, showcasing real stories of women’s leadership. We decided to devote our

April board meeting to the question of whether to move forward on their plan. Through a discussion on logistics, fees, and marketing, the reality of what it would take to hold a conference became clearer.

A current participant in WIL had volunteered to be part of the conference committee. Her background in project management seemed like a great fit to help with planning the conference and she had already worked on a draft conference invitation. She attended our April board meeting as a guest to bring several key decisions before the board. She helped us identify several critical gaps that would need to be addressed if we were going to be successful in holding the conference in the fall. She also asked the question of whether we had sufficient commitment and energy at the board level to move forward on the project.

Her questions were important in getting the board to face up to the realities of what would be needed to complete a project of this scope. However, her “project management” approach was feeling abrasive to some board members. We were a small, volunteer organization. Our style of working projects was an “inside-out” approach: find the energy, support those with passion and interest to take a leadership role and then find those with specific interests and talents to support the project. We had a “pull” rather than “push” approach to projects. This approach worked well for keeping volunteers engaged and energized. It enabled us to accomplish a great deal with very little financial resources. However, it often meant that our time deadlines moved back until a clear vision and sufficient energy emerged to carry us forward.

The tension between her traditional “project management” style and our way of working continued to grow as the conference plan was being developed. Our new member was pointing out legitimate issues from her project manager perspective: we did not yet have several key roles assigned, some administrative details were falling through the cracks and we were not yet structured to execute a project of this scope. From personal experience organizing conferences, I could appreciate her concerns and was feeling reluctant to commit to the project myself. A few years previously I had watched a professional network almost dissolve after putting on a conference that had so severely exhausted volunteers that most left the network when it was over. Given that experience, I was unsure whether even a modest conference would be manageable for our small group.

We held a serious discussion at the April meeting about whether we had the energy, commitment and resources to hold the conference. It was put back to the committee to propose a budget that included money to cover the administrative tasks that no one wanted to volunteer to do. The board also asked the committee to check in on the energy level of board members to determine whether we had sufficient commitment to move forward. The committee agreed to report back to the Executive Committee who would make a final decision on whether to move ahead with the conference at the end of April. During that time I was involved in several conversations asking two questions: Who was committed to what? And what was needed to move forward? No one had stepped forward to head up the program committee. However, Marcia was excited about organizing two theater pieces for the conference. She had a theater troupe ready to develop and present vignettes on women's leadership issues. The same group would also facilitate interactive theater in the evening, a form of participative improvisational theater based on Augusto Boal's *Theater of Oppressed* work.

In speaking with members of our executive committee, we agreed that due to the scope of administrative and logistical work we needed paid staff to provide both administrative and logistical leadership and administrative support services. A plan was drawn up by the committee that clarified the roles of these two positions as well as volunteer roles that would be needed. We did not want the conference to drain resources from other projects planned for 2005. People were recruited for both paid and volunteer roles. That left one open spot - to head up programming. I was reluctant to take this on because I knew the work it would entail. But I agreed to take it on when I persuaded two seasoned facilitators to join me and it was agreed we would not be doing any of the administrative work. The Executive Committee agreed to move forward. In all we had enlisted twenty-two volunteers and two paid staff to plan and host the conference.



The two day conference was held in early November. Forty-seven women participated. The conference was considered a success on many levels. The theater pieces had provided a provocative beginning. Four storytellers who were past participants of WIL shared their leadership stories, relating these to our principles and practices. The conference feedback indicated we had been effective in sharing who we



were in a clear and coherent way. There was little difference between alums and first time attendees in conference evaluations.

At another level, the conference raised some important issues for CEL. We discovered that three participants, all from the same organization, had left the conference at the end of the first afternoon without letting anyone know. One of the participants was someone that had worked with two of our board members. We received a letter from them soon after the conference explaining they had left the conference because they felt our environment was unwelcoming and offensive to women of color and they asked for a refund of their fees. One of the three had been the only woman of color at the conference, new to the area and the only woman who knew no one from our group.

We were stunned by this feedback particularly given our strong value of creating hospitable environments. Marcia, our administrative leader and I asked if we could meet with the three women in order to better understand their concerns. We approached the meeting with an intention to model respectful dialogue, to explore one another's assumptions and leave with a clearer understanding of what had happened. We were not able to meet face-to-face until a month later. In our conversation we listened and shared back what we heard about our part in contributing to their reaction. We were also able to share our perspective and we felt they heard us. We summarized our key learnings for them and our board (paraphrased below from our archives):

- *As a group based on relationship, it is critical to connect at a personal level with participants at any of our events. In this situation, these women had been invited through a colleague but were not directly known by a participant or volunteer. We were too tied up in conference logistics at the time to be effective hosts.*
- *We need to make our assumptions explicit more than once regarding our approach, what we have done regarding the environment and our principles and practices.*
- *We need to be more explicit in asking "What are some different stories/experiences than the one we just heard?" in order to give space for a diversity of stories. And we needed to be more mindful of diversity in our choice of images and materials.*

Some of the paradoxes that we recognized were:

- We inadvertently created "other" by differentiating alumnae from other participants. While our intention was to help alums and their guests make connections, for these women it created a sense of separation. Attempts to be inclusive can be read in very different ways.

- We wondered if in the desire to create a “safe container”, there was a reluctance to offer stories that deviated from what was being shared, especially by Alums. We may have inadvertently created a situation where someone with a different experience did not feel comfortable sharing her story.

The question of diversity was before us. Women of color, other nationalities, different financial means and different sexual preferences had participated in WIL. However, those that stayed active tended to be a racially homogenous group of primarily white women. We agreed that the question of diversity needed to be discussed in depth with the board.

At our year-end reflection we recognized that 2005 had been a year of many accomplishments. We were energized by Alumnae participation, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Reprint of the Anthology, our work to achieve fiscal health, the ease of recruiting for the WIL '05 program, the Conference, new CEL clothing as another product for sale, our streamlined Board Meetings and the monthly Alumnae Circles. We had engaged many more alum volunteers. We had become the working “web”, no longer an organization whose work was done by the founders. We titled this year *“From three women around a kitchen table to eight women in a basement (reflects our board meeting space in the basement of a community center): CEL puts it out there!”*

With all the activity of 2005, we anticipated that 2006 would be a year of strategic reflection to make sense of where we were and where we were going. I was concerned about the expenditure of energy we had made to create the conference. I sensed a need to pull back in, rest and care for ourselves and our organization before embarking on any more major projects. I offered an analogy of breathing; a great “breathing out” time requires a deep “breathing in” in order to maintain energy and balance. We had just had a full year of breathing out. It seemed we needed a quieter year to regroup and re-energize our board and volunteers.

The activities we had planned for 2006 did not require a significant amount of new energy: monthly circles, an R&R retreat and a learning event already organized for the spring. WIL '06 was ready to launch in March and a facilitator retreat was already planned for January. We had raised a number of philosophical questions that the board agreed it needed to discuss and address in 2006. Philosophical questions were surfacing, on how we would address diversity, on how we defined “spirituality” in the context of our programs and on our approach to fund-raising. We also needed a more coherent strategy for our communications and a strategy for

marketing the Anthology. We had questions about what kind of events made sense for us and what guidelines we needed as a volunteer organization. Overall, we felt a need to clarify our identity as an organization and agreed to schedule a series of board dialogues in 2006 to explore these questions together.

### **CEL Board 2006: “Breathing In”**

At our first board meeting of 2006 we had a dialogue on two of our inquiry topics: diversity and spirituality. Here is an excerpt of a summary on spirituality from this meeting:

*We are not affiliated with any particular religion. We are respectful and open to others beliefs and backgrounds, whatever they may be. As a learning community, we encourage participants to share from their own traditions/experience in dialogue. We hold the container for sharing in a dialogic way...One definition of spirituality that fits CEL is our commitment to a set of deeply-held principles and practices and a purpose beyond our own self-interest. We are a learning organization so we are deepening our understanding of these over time, both organizationally and individually.*

We also made a clear distinction between what we do and what happens in a therapy group: *“Though our work can be therapeutic, we are not trained nor do we intend to provide group therapy. Should these needs arise, we will refer to trained specialists.”*

On the topic of diversity, we wondered if the focus of our activities was as relevant for women of color as it seemed to be for white women leaders. Despite the circumstances that had occurred at the conference, we believed that our principles and practices encouraged respect for difference. We also confirmed that we wanted to be welcoming and open to all types of diversity. However, our relational recruiting strategy had the result of creating more homogeneity than diversity. We recognized that without a strong effort to engage diverse women, it probably would not happen. And we had received feedback from two African American participants that they needed to work more deeply within their own community around healing the wounds passed down to them from slavery and prejudice rather than with a multi-cultural group of women. So we wondered if our agenda of exploring and integrating the feminine had the same kind of value for women of color.

In the end, our practice of following the energy of the community prevailed. We did not have the energy to begin a concerted effort to diversify our community along lines of color. We did have several board members with daughters who had energy to explore dialogue with younger women. We agreed to experiment with one or more dialogues with younger women to see what we would learn from each other and whether this was a direction we wanted to take.

## **CEL 2007: The Women's Leadership Community**

The board agreed to begin the year with a series monthly meetings focused on creating a future strategic direction for CEL. In preparation for the first meeting, I sent out an article by Etienne Wenger (1998) on communities of practice. We began our first dialogue with the question: "What does it mean to be a learning community?" These groups are characterized by a fragile allegiance created through peer to peer learning with the need to offer high-value learning activities (. We agreed that the definition fit our organization. We reviewed and discussed the three components of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998):

1. a group of people (for us it was all of the women who had or would participate in the WIL program)
2. who meet together to learn over time (for us this was not only the yearly WIL circles but also included the board, the facilitator circle, and the alums who participated in our learning events and projects)
3. with a shared domain of interest, which may not be necessarily something recognized as "expertise" outside the community (our principles and practices, the archetypal feminine and our commitment to personal reflection and growth).

Instead of seeing WIL as the "program", the concept of a learning community took hold. As a learning community, our work would shift from marketing and offering a program, to the cultivation of the whole community of alumnae. We would market this as a distinctive difference to other women's leadership programs. Women would join the community, not just attend the program. WIL would be the entry to this ongoing community of practice. The implications of this shift in perspective were immediately apparent for our name, our strategy for growth, the role and involvement of founders and facilitators, funding and recruiting.

We continued our dialogue on the learning community as our new strategic identity in the first three meetings of 2007. The board described this along with the claiming of a new name:

*"We are WLC, the Women's Leadership Community, providing an ongoing experience into deeper learning. WIL (the four part program) is a 'Starter Garden'. The Learning Community is the ongoing gardening. Our learning is more focused on going deeper rather than outward. We collectively organize [for learning], not because we embrace a cause. WLC is a lifelong learning community as long as alumnae energy carries it. Our contribution to the world is helping women bring their best out into the world. We believe that by building our own consciousness and our ability to live out these principles and practices, we impact the world. This reflects a thinning between the personal and the planetary and reflects a view of change that is a 'fractal' – that is, the locus of change is self, group and community all at once. We must pay attention to learning from the boundaries as well as from within. We empower women through stories, including stories of what is possible. Your story inspires my story – a circular process, shining the light on [all] our stories."*

Several areas of opportunity related to our vision were identified, including my new project to write a dissertation about the community, a project to create a DVD of alumnae stories and a growing partnership with the MN Women's Press, whose mission "Changing the Universe through Women's Stories" was closely aligned with our own mission. The image of the whelk shell captured the essence of our dialogue, a visual image of continuous learning and transformational change. A facilitator who could not attend our visioning session sent us these words to ponder as we developed the vision. We sent them out at the end of our meeting notes as they seemed to summarize for us what we had been discussing:

*The questions on visioning led me to think of my personal experience of WIL and CEL...and what I would miss if it was not a part of my life. As those thoughts came I wondered what others might say about their personal experience. I would love to hear the stories! I'm sure there are some similarities in our experiences...but I'm guessing there are differences as well...and perhaps fodder for some discussion about where we go from here. What would we miss if we changed? What would we miss if we stayed the same? What is the essence of WIL/CEL? Is it the same for each of us? Does it need to be? You may not need more questions at this point but this is what bubbled up for me. Summing up my personal experience in a paragraph is not possible; here are a few reflections... Being part of a learning community where there are no 'experts' helped me find the strength of my own gifts and the strength of my own voice. The enclosure of the story circle returned me to the roots of my own experience and value...and an awareness of something ancient and sacred in community. It opened my heart to others' experiences and conclusions even when they are different from mine. I have a grounding now in how I approach my life because of the wholeness embraced in honoring the feminine archetype. My experience of WIL/CEL is that it is powerful work for both individual and community. World Peace may be a little beyond our reach (or not!)...but I think it goes a long way toward contributing to a more balanced, creative and peaceful world. It certainly has done that in my world!*

Another board member wrote this reflection:

*“Personal transformation in a community of practice and empowering women through stories is the core of our work. Meaning making may be the key to dealing with the overwhelming changes occurring and information available in the world.”* Another member said *“finding who you are and allowing that to come forth is core to the transformational work of WIL.”*

At our last planning meeting, we identified four “Strategic Streams” for our future work:

1. *Articulate who we are, why we do this, what it looks like and the difference it makes in the world*
2. *Gather the stories*
3. *Share the stories*
4. *Work at the boundaries*

We then identified some of our “limiting assumptions” and discussed how these needed to shift if we were going to be able to reach our full potential as a community of practice:

- *From ‘WIL’(Women in Leadership) as a program to ‘WLC’(Women’s Leadership Community), a learning community of inquiry.*
- *From thinking we need to do it all ourselves to engaging partners with similar missions and visions.*
- *From fear of losing the core of CEL to embracing new energy and ideas.*
- *From avoiding money to managing financial resources as a measure of our value and self-worth.*
- *From being “invisible” to letting people know we are competent and successful.*

Excitement was growing among board members for our new name, the Women’s Leadership Community. However, the non-board members of the facilitator circle had not participated in the series of strategic planning meetings. At the spring facilitator retreat held in April, facilitators expressed frustration at feeling left out of such a major decision. After an emotional dialogue, they recognized the reasoning and merits behind the change in name and strategy, and we recognized the error of not having all facilitators involved in this planning process. I recognized the new limits of my role as founder and that our growing size brought greater challenges in collective meaning-making and decision-making. We now had to deal with the tension created by not just individuals, but whole circles with needs for inclusion in setting organizational direction. We agreed that future strategic planning would need to both facilitators and board members present.

At our next board meeting we started brainstorming ideas for how we might begin to make the name change visible within the broader alumnae community. We had the idea of holding a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration at which we could share the new name. We discussed if it might be

possible to have the three cofounders attend. It had been four years since co-founder Deb had been present at a CEL event. We thought perhaps by inviting her to come and present a reading/workshop from her new book of poetry after the celebration she would be willing to travel here to participate. I agreed to explore this idea with her.

Over the summer both events started to take shape. In the fall we would host a celebration party for our anniversary attended by all three co-founders and as many alums as possible. The next day we would sponsor a workshop featuring Deb and her poetry book entitled “Born from Silence”. Other projects began to emerge to coincide with the celebration and the name change. One board member began work on a new website look to feature our new name. Several alums were working on the creation of a DVD that would share alumnae stories about the impact of their participation in WLC. As the planning continued, more alums stepped forward with ideas and offers of help. The anniversary celebration was planned to be a bit of a “surprise party” for founders, to share appreciation for the work we had done in leading the community over the years and perhaps mark the shift we had made from being founder led to fully enacting a shared leader model. Here are the comments I made that evening (taken from my journal):

## **The Tenth Anniversary Celebration**



I got dressed with anticipation for the party that evening. Deb had arrived and we spent the afternoon getting organized for the workshop she would lead the next day. Our relationship had a different feeling than in the years in which we had been developing WLC together. I was clearly in a support role for Deb’s “debut” on her work. I was happy to be able to do this for her, to enable her to stand in her own work, her own voice and her own authority, knowing the many years of work it had taken her to achieve this. I also

strongly supported the integrative work she had done to connect her personal transformation with the social justice issues she had faced in her personal life stemming from a brutal attack recently suffered by her son just before his high school graduation. I hoped that this offering of “edge learning” would help WLC members better understand the connections of our work to the larger social issues we face in our communities. Still, the years of separation in our relationship showed in our interactions and I grieved the loss of our connection.

I can’t remember how we hooked up with Marcia but it seems we had an awkward reunion shortly before the start of the party. We focused on what we were wearing, what we planned to say during the time we had been asked to speak. I had taken time earlier that week to reflect on the founding and growth of the organization. We had created several questions for us to reflect

on as co-founders: What was the need or dream that led you into the creation of WIL? What brief story defines a pivotal moment in the development of WIL/CEL? What was the most significant part of this story for you? Why was it important to you? How did your experience in developing WIL/CEL shape you as a person and as a leader? What did this experience prepare you for in your life today? Out of character for my usual spontaneity, I had written my reflection and planned to read it that evening. Neither Deb or Marcia had prepared written remarks. I worried that my comments might be too prepared; yet my approach felt right for me.

The party was being held in a conference center nearby that was run by the Sisters of St. Joseph on the campus of the College of St. Catherine. It had beautiful old parlors and a feminine aesthetic quality perfect for our gathering. I walked up the steps and into the warm greeting of two alums that “oriented” us to the events of the evening. I had expected a beautiful gathering, but was unprepared for the level of creative outpouring that came together that evening.

One alum had created a commemorative oil painting for the event which was lit up near the entryway with a place for everyone to sign their names in gold ink. The story of the painting, “The Spiral Journey”, came out later that evening. She had created an image of the spiral which had been used as the artwork for the event. However, she did not feel the image was complete, and shortly before the event, she let go and just allowed herself to repaint the canvas, creating a painting that seemed almost lit from within.

In one room we had the completed DVD running along with printed samples of the new website and logo. Another space had been set up for community members to share their work. One facilitator had brought bound, abridged copies of her PhD on Tai Ji as gifts for WLC members in recognition of the support the community had provided her. Another alum brought copies of her recently completed PhD on Reclaiming the Divine Feminine: Archetypes for Healing and Wholeness. Other alums brought examples of their work for others to see and celebrate. We enjoyed incredible appetizers, wine and sweets, reconnected with old friends and met the new members of our community.

After a time of socializing, we gathered in a circle to share our experiences. The room we entered was a magical space holding a circle of chairs and pillows for almost fifty women. At the entrance was a snake of white candles, one for each of us, which we lit as we entered. After introducing ourselves, Deb, Marcia and I were invited to speak. Then we opened the circle, inviting the group to share stories of the WLC experience. Letters written by alums who couldn’t attend were read. For over an hour we spoke and listened to each other, laughing and crying as the stories were told. Gifts were given to everyone. The three co-founders and two long time contributors were each given a handmade blown glass specially designed and made by a local artist. After we closed the circle, each cohort spontaneously gathered for “class pictures”.

Later, Deb and I talked about how that party had created a healing space for us and Marcia to reunite. Relationships that might have remained tense and distant were melted by an experience of beauty, connection and loving care. This was what we had been working to create



for ourselves and for others through our founding of WIL, CEL, and now WLC. And, it was the gift that was returned to us by the community to help us unite and heal our relationships. We knew that the “it”, the principles and practices were not only articulated, but now embodied within the community. At breakfast, Deb helped me reach the decision to resign from the board in order to focus my energy on writing my PhD dissertation. I would be the last co-founder to leave the board, leaving the next generation of women to establish the vision and direction for the future. How I would participate in the future was not clear to me. What was clear is that I had chosen to write the story of our community and I would step away from active leadership in order to focus my energy that.

The written remarks I shared at the Anniversary Celebration provide a good summary of my experience:

*This week I did some reflection on what has been significant to me in the last 10 years of WIL/CEL/WLC and the 7 years of meeting with Marcia and Deb that preceded our founding. I remembered the self that was me almost 20 years ago. I was finishing a master's, working a “day job” and starting a business with Marcia. I was raising two children and struggling in a dying marriage. I remember feeling overwhelmed with demands, difficult choices, and other's expectations, as well as my own.*

*A scene came into my mind's eye from those early retreats with Deb and Marcia. We are in Marcia's living room watching the waves of Lake Superior. It is winter time. The wood stove is burning and we are bundled up in sweaters and wrapped in blankets and shawls. Deb has a blanket over her head with her face over a bowl of hot water, steaming her stuffed sinuses. On the dining table are materials from our walk in the woods – twigs, bark, berries – gathered to decorate the covers of our journals. We spent time being together, doing the things that our feminine ancestors might have done – light a fire, walk in the woods, bake bread. It was a pivotal moment for me in creating a time to rest, to heal, to be still; to slow down the pace of my life and find a more sustainable rhythm.*

*Other images come to mind – of walking the Cascade River trail and encountering the waterfall in deepest winter. There was a clear pane of ice behind which you could see the water still rushing behind the frozen curtain of snow. Dream images of struggling up the waterfall, and eventually the dream in which I sailed down river. And the stories came, of rose gardens and holding up the earth and dancing elephants. These were powerful metaphors that supported my healing and transformation.*

*In retrospect, I think what I needed most was a place to be received – the space and support to figure out who I was as a woman. I was searching for some kind of core, a center within myself, an internal place of knowing that could help me deal with the complexity of choices, demands and messages that were coming at me. The questions I was struggling with had no easy answers, perhaps no right answers even – just choices I had to make for myself. This community supported me in making those difficult choices, in taking risks, in feeling at home in my own skin and in returning again to my sense of “center”.*

*I am continuously amazed at the creativity that emerges out of the energy and passion of this community of women. We've got the WLC retreat series formerly known as WIL, the journal, the anthology My Story Listens to Your Story, the 2005 conference, the alumnae circles, a DVD, and as of this week, a new website. We can now add the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration to that list. I don't think this is an accident and even though I know this is an incredible group of women, I also believe that we understand something about what supports us to bring our gifts into the world. We are consciously looking for where the energy is. We feed that. We continuously reflect on the stories we are living out and where the next rings of growth are coming. Above all, we have stayed in relationship, even when that meant going our separate ways. After 17 years that still seems pretty radical.*

*I think our generation of women is the first to define leadership in new terms. We are living on the cusp of radical change. Our institutions are straining and crumbling. We are experiencing a loss of meaning. At a time when we*

*have more resources than any who have come before us, we are at risk of losing everything through our way of life on this planet. How do we make decisions day to day in the face of this change? What sustains us? What helps us through the personal upheaval that these changes bring, in our families, our workplaces, our communities? What can we do, as women of privilege, as emerging elders, to care for our world through this time of change?*

*This community of practice has been vital in helping me change. I am learning to live in a different way; to live in an unfolding universe, to trust and take risks without knowing the outcome, stepping into the unknown with intention, and letting the form emerge. In the Women's Leadership Community I have breathed life into my feminine side and begun a dance that I expect to be dancing for a long time – weaving between the masculine and feminine, between dark and light, between inner and outer, between essence and form, between spirit and matter. I am grateful for the gifts of this community:*

- *The creative, sensual beauty that always pours forth: the conversation, the art, the music, the movement, the laughter, the food and wine, and the light that shines through our eyes when we gather in circle.*
- *Our stories that help me know, simultaneously, how my story is connected to yours and how it is uniquely my own.*
- *The space for my whole self to be present and the quieting of the judging voice within.*
- *The courage to step out more fully into the world and be a creative force for change.*
- *And the reminder to stay open and in the flow of the mystery that holds us all.*

This completes my story/our story of the founding and evolution of this community, from the BHA learning trio to the WIL cohort program to a learning community, the Women's Leadership Community, WLC. Following the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary retreat, I transitioned off the board and stopped facilitating the WIL retreats. I left my active role as Executive Director of WLC. I realized that my personal vision had reached fruition. We had created and articulated a replicable program and developed others to facilitate it. We had formed a self-organizing learning community sponsoring monthly gatherings and inquiry on emergent questions. The working board and committees had assumed responsibility for our financial sustainability, alumni events, marketing communications and special events. We had shifted from a start-up, survival mentality to a new focus on growth and abundance. As the last remaining co-founder on the board, I felt I could step away into a new relationship with WLC.

In completing the story, I invited both Deb and Marcia to review what I had written. There were a few discrepancies in how we remembered the timing of things. It was a reminder that we each have our own story. In the next round of the spiral, I went into relationship in an entirely new way, reading. I reread books and articles that had informed our work over the years, seeing some of this writing with the new eyes of our community's experience. I also discovered writings that had been published at the time we were forming our community, amazed at how much they paralleled what we had been doing experientially. With Deb, I went through the WLC story, pulling out three domains in which to search for new material: Relational Leadership, The Feminine and Leadership and Collective Inquiry. Chapter two is a summary of what I learned in each of these three areas.

## Chapter Two: The Literature Search

### ***Relational Leadership***

When the Women's Leadership Community was forming there were few writers talking about leadership as a collective or relational process. I had problems with the obvious and subtle forms of domination inherent in prevailing definition of leadership as an act of influence and control over others. In working with leaders and teams, I as often saw people working around a leader in order to get their work done as were being effectively led. Initially I was resistant to focusing our community around the term leadership, preferring learning community as the descriptor of our work. When Deb found Palus and Drath's article on leadership as shared meaning making (W. H. Drath & Palus, 1994) I began to shift my idea of leadership as collective and interconnected activities that shaped group meaning and outcomes. As an organization development practitioner, this view fit my work with groups.

When I returned to the literature on leadership 10 years later I found many more articles and books that were challenging the definition of leadership as a bounded individualistic activity. I found the new term, relational leadership and concentrated my reading on those articles that were contributing to this new way to view leadership. To organize my learning I considered three organization development trends in which the traditional view of leadership is being challenged: democratization, complexity and globalization. Then I discuss how social construction-relational theory is contributing to a new definition of leadership that I believe addresses these challenges. Finally, I explore emerging definitions of relational leadership and how these emerging definitions change the way we think about leadership in practice.

### **Leadership Means Individual Leaders**

Early definitions of leadership were focused on "great man" theories of leadership in which good leadership was to direct, command and control others, to be in charge. Leadership defined as an individual activity still prevails in the literature (Bass & Bass, 2008). A 1991 study identified 65 different systems for classifying definitions of leadership of which the majority focus on leader as individual (Fleishman et al., 1991). The "individual as leader" paradigm of leadership crosses the globe. A definition of leadership reached by 84 social scientists from 56 countries in 1994 implies this assumption of bounded individualism: "*the ability to influence, motivate and*

*enable others to contribute to the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members”* ( Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 23).

Wilfred Drath describes the dominant way leadership is defined as an “ontological commitment” ( W. H. Drath et al., 2008, p. 635). He argues that what we see as leadership comes from deeply held beliefs, an underlying structure or paradigm deeper than a simple definition. He further defines the current ontology of leadership as a “tripod of leader – follower – goal” ( W. H. Drath et al., 2008, p. 635). The tripod assumes leadership: 1) is something a person possesses or can acquire; 2) is focused on what the leader does; 3) emphasizes relationships between the leader and all others; 4) can be studied as traits and values outside of the context of the organization; and 5) is the primary factor in organizational goal attainment ((W. Drath, 2001; W. H. Drath et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wood, 2005). Even when researchers challenge the importance of an individual leader in attaining various outcomes, the basic premise of leadership as an individual activity stays intact. The work of Richard Hackman exemplifies this approach. He challenges prevailing views of the power and importance of leadership as “leader attribution error” in which we assume leaders to be the main cause of collective performance. He then goes on to suggest new research questions on leadership that still have an embedded focus on the leader as individual, i.e. “Not what should be taught in leadership courses, but how can leaders be helped to learn?” ( Hackman & Wageman, 2007, p. 46)

Leadership development has focused heavily on identifying the knowledge, skills, and abilities of individual leaders ((Bouwen & Hosking, 2000; Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010; Wood, 2005; McGonagill & Pruyn, 2009). Still the most prevalent way that leaders in corporations are hired, evaluated and developed is through a competency model of leadership that defines and evaluates leadership as a set of individual behavioral characteristics that can be developed in individuals outside of the context of daily work (McGonagill & Pruyn, 2009). As a manager of leadership development, I developed and worked with leadership competency models. They typically consist of 10-15 individual characteristics in areas such as vision, inspiring others, nurturing innovation, customer focus, decisiveness and teamwork. The assumption in leadership competency models is that a leader can and should exhibit all of these characteristics to be an effective leader. To me it seems nearly impossible for one individual to possess all of these characteristics. Development of competencies in individual leaders also fails to consider the differences in the leader's situation and context. It is still relatively rare for

organizations to focus development at the team level rather than the individual manager level (McGonagill & Pruyn, 2009).

## **The Rise of Relational Leadership**

Within the 'individual as leader' paradigm there has been a shift away from the 'great man' theory towards relationship-oriented views of leadership ((Crevani et al., 2010; Drath, 2001; Drath et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wood, 2005). Drath describes a first shift from leadership as personal dominance to leadership as interpersonal influence (Drath, 2001). Situational leadership became a highly popular normative model of leadership as interpersonal influence (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). Situational leadership theory contends that managers need to adapt their behavior based on the maturity level, both task and psychological, of their subordinates. Their normative approach measures leader adaptability and emphasizes the importance of flexibility in leader behavior based on the needs of followers. Hollander's relational theory (Hollander, 1964) went further, considering leadership as a two-way influencing process in which leaders not only influence follower behavior, but followers influence leader behavior.

In a similar manner, vertical dyad linking theory identified leadership as an exchange relationship in which different levels of latitude granted by leaders to members influenced the behavior of both leader and member (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory is another example of viewing leadership as a relationship between leader and followers. LMX theory focuses on how effective leadership relationships form between the many configurations of relationships involving leaders and members, including relationships between team mates and peers. LMX studies seek to understand the influence that effective leadership relationships have on organizational outcomes. (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Other leadership theories that look at the link between leader and follower include studies of charismatic leader relationships, leadership and social self-concept, leader transference , leadership and collective identity, multi-directional influence and leadership, and the influence of social networks on leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). These theories all look at leadership relationships between individual leader and others (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Hosking, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This is a view of relationship that fits within a western, positivist worldview; it

assumes an objective, observable, singular reality, and knowable truth; leadership is seen as something someone can possess and relationships are studied as interactions between discrete and separate individuals (Dachler & Hosking, 1995).

### **Challenges to the ‘Leader as Individual’ Mindset**

New organizational conditions and challenges have pushed definitions of leadership beyond the bounds of an individual and their relationships with followers. Three key challenges are giving rise to a more distributed, collective image of leadership are: 1) The rise of workplace democracy and worker empowerment movements has challenged decision-making that is centralized in the hands of a few and its supporting assumptions of centralized power and control. 2) The rise of complex adaptive systems thinking has challenged the quest to identify cause and effect relationships and thus, the ability to attribute complex interactions and outcomes to a single leader’s interactions. 3) The impact of globalization brought on by technology requires people with very different worldviews to work together, making it difficult and at times impossible to resolve differences through the singular perspective of any one individual. What follows is a discussion of each of these three challenges and how they contribute to the need for new images and definitions of leadership.

### **Workplace democracy and decentralized decision-making**

Changes in the workplace over the past 50 years have created a call for greater participation in workplace decision-making. Some of these changes include greater global competition, an increase in skilled technical and service jobs, and an increasingly educated and diverse workforce (Lawler, 1986). These forces challenge the way jobs are designed in a bureaucracy. Stemming back to Frederick Taylor’s writings in the era of the manual factory assembly, jobs were broken down into small components and decision-making was centralized in management (Taylor, 1967). Research in the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s on worker productivity identified the inefficiency and quality breakdowns that occurred in these bureaucratic organization designs. Redesigning jobs for high quality and productivity meant giving workers adequate “elbow room” to make decisions on the job, and responsibility for control over effort, quality and interpersonal coordination with others actually doing the work (Emery, 1989). These principles gave rise to a movement in workplace democracy and participation, primarily in Australia, Scandinavia, Europe and India, that included participative work design and self-managing team structures.

The movement emphasized democratic work structures with worker ownership and decision-making rather than autocratic, command and control leadership.

Although this movement had followers in the US, it challenged the American value of command and control leadership fueled by individual competition and achievement (Emery, 1989). U.S. workplaces often speak the rhetoric of greater employee empowerment and engagement, while failing to acknowledge or address the fundamental power relationships that must shift for true empowerment to happen. I experienced this in the early 1990's when I was consulting on the implementation of self-directed work teams. Getting the mindset shift within these teams was challenging and within management even more difficult. Ultimately few organizations were willing to adopt self-direction as an organizational norm. Reflective of this dominance mindset, 30 years later the big issue in U.S. corporations is still "employee engagement". Peter Block writes about prevailing power assumptions and their consequences of apathy and passivity that keep people from solving the problems they face today:

- *Leader at the top are essential. They are role models who need to possess a special set of skills.*
- *The task of the leader is to define the destination and the blueprint to get there.*
- *The leader's work is to bring others on board. Enroll, align, inspire.*
- *Leaders provide the oversight, measurement, and training needed (as defined by leaders.)*

*Each of these beliefs elevates leaders as an elite group, singularly worthy of special development, coaching, incentives. All of these beliefs have face validity, and they have unintended consequences. When we are dissatisfied with a leader, we simply try harder to find a new one who will perform more perfectly in the very way that led to our last disappointment. This creates a level of isolation, entitlement and passivity that our communities cannot afford to carry. (Block, 2008, p. 87)*

The mindset of individual leadership shifts responsibility and accountability away from the many and onto the few. Peter Block describes the projection of responsibility onto leaders as a fundamental tenet of patriarchy that prevents the kind of engagement necessary to solve today's community and societal challenges (Block, 2008; Block, 1987; Block, 1993)

Institutional breakdowns are increasingly seen as a demonstration of the inability of mechanistic industrial systems led by bureaucratic bosses to handle the needs of stakeholders and society (Murrell, 1997; Wheatley, 1994; Wheatley, 2007). The challenge is to create responsive

systems in which people operate not out of hierarchical roles, but with the ability to respond throughout the whole system. The call is for organizations that are “leaderful”, that is, where people have the freedom to enact leadership throughout the system (Block, 2008; Murrell, 1997; Senge, 1990; Wheatley, 1994). Despite decades of studies and books supporting empowerment, participation and involvement in the workplace, workplace democratization continues to bump into old paradigms of leadership that support centralized decision-making and individual ownership, power and control. Without addressing this fundamental paradigm of leadership, self-organizing work systems rarely stick, even when the results prove more effective.

### **Complex adaptive systems and interconnectedness**

The emerging field of complexity and chaos theory presents another challenge to the “leadership as leader” view. Margaret Wheatley in her first book, *Leadership and the New Science* (Wheatley, 1994) confronts the reductionist view of organizations in which the parts can be separated and studied. She applied complex adaptive systems theory (CAS) from emerging studies in quantum physics to organization life. In the quantum or sub-atomic world, everything is interconnected; things change form as they interact with one another. Organizations are seen as a complex set of interactions which cannot be reduced to independent variables or singular cause and effect outcomes. Instead of looking for predictability and causality between the parts, the whole system needs to be considered and understood through patterns and probabilities. Parts are seen as fractals of the whole. Instead of fixed organizational controls, a few simple rules help shape emergence and self-organization in an organization in continuous change (Wheatley, 1994).

CAS theory challenges the validity of identifying cause - effect relationships among discrete elements which are foundational to most leadership studies (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). “The CAS view suggests that rather than being “in” someone, leadership – understood as the capacity to influence others – can be enacted within every interaction between members. “This complexity view suggests that influence processes - including leadership - occur continuously, in different degrees throughout the system.” (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). Leadership is understood as a dynamic process that shifts focus to what is happening “between the spaces” of individuals (Lichtenstein, Uhl-Bien, et al, 2006; Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). Leadership from a complex systems theory looks at the connection of individual behaviors within



organizational contexts; at how influence can be “mutual” and co-generated across multiple interactions throughout the organization and its environment.

### **Globalization and working across multiple worldviews**

With the rise of cross-functional collaboration, virtual organizations, alliances, networks and partnerships across the globe, there is a growing need to negotiate agreements across differing interests and worldviews. Kenneth Gergen describes the impact technology has had in radically transforming our social environment. Technology is exposing us to a barrage of social stimulation that threatens our fixed identities as we interact instantaneously with a multitude of cultures. With social saturation, we are exposed to a diversity of views, norms, beliefs and assumptions that defy ordering through a singular leader (K. J. Gergen, 1992).

Thomas Friedman writes “Everywhere you turn, hierarchies are being challenged from below or transforming themselves from top-down structures into more horizontal and collaborative ones.” (Friedman, 2005). He describes globalization as no longer a phenomenon between governments and big businesses, but as the emergence of completely new social, political and business models that are creating changes at warp speed. Friedman goes on to describe the changes made possible by information technology that have increased horizontal communication, opened access to knowledge, and decoupled global supply chains. These forces have expanded global interconnectivity and opportunity, but also have raised the potential destructive outcomes of unresolved conflict to a global level. A new model of leadership is needed to help us coordinate action and resolve conflicts in a world that is socially saturated, highly connected and infinitely diverse.

These three organizational changes: workplace democratization, complex adaptive systems thinking and globalization describe a world that is in need of new images of leadership: one that engages everyone and coordinates action across worldviews. Emerging definitions of relational leadership from a social construction/relational theory view offer new possibilities for coordinated action in a complex, interconnected and global environment.

### **Defining Relational Leadership through a Social Constructionist Lens**

*“All of what we take for reality...is something we construct in participation with others.”* (Drath, 2001, p. 138)

The breakdown of the individual, “heroic” leader parallels the emergence of social construction as a “metatheory” (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Social construction challenges two underlying tenets of traditional leadership theory that stem from an individualist psychological orientation: essentialism and realism. Essentialism says that there is a definable, discoverable essence or nature that can be found. Realism says that our knowledge is a direct perception of reality. (Burr, 1995). Instead; “Relational theory locates knowledge not in the individual mind but in ongoing relationships. In relational theory, the individual is traced back not to an autonomous mind, but to participation in historically situated relationships. ‘Person and context are interrelated social constructions made in ongoing local-cultural-historical processes’” (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Social constructionism sees all knowledge as situated both culturally and historically and challenges the belief in a truth or inner essence that can be discovered (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; K. J. Gergen, 1994; K. J. Gergen, 1999). Rather than the study of individual leadership traits, behaviors or qualities, leadership is defined as an ongoing construction that occurs through the process of interrelatedness. Consider Drath’s third principle of leadership that describes how a social construction perspective provides a way to make sense across differing worldviews:

*“When we let go of the idea that there is some readymade ideal world or truth to be discovered out there, we no longer look for a single person to have the answer or some objective truth that can be found. If we instead consider that we make sense relationally and within a particular context and worldview, then it is through dialogue across differing perspectives (conversation across worldviews) that we can make sense of a new situation, not just within one worldview, but seeing through one’s worldview as an incomplete, partial view of reality.”* (W. H. Drath et al., 2008, pp. 146-149)

From a constructionist perspective, leading and following are viewed as social processes that acquire meaning in relationship (Gergen, K. J. and Gergen, M., 2003; K. J. Gergen, 2009). Neither a focus on the individual social actors, nor on the relations between actors is sufficient. “The ‘essence’ of leadership is not the individual social actor but a relation of almost imperceptible directions, movement and orientations, having neither beginning nor end. (Wood, 2005). Relational theory expands the idea of social construction as it shifts our focus to the

continuous movement in relationship by which meaning is generated (K. J. Gergen, 2009). Seeing leadership through this lens is a movement from the “noun” of leadership as trait, skill, or behavior to “leading” as a verb, the active processes by which people come to collectively understand themselves, make decisions, and take action.

*Relational perspectives do not adopt traditional organizational or management language of “structures” and “entities”; instead they view organizations as elaborate relational networks of changing persons, moving forward together through space and time, in a complex interplay of effects between individual organizational members and the system into which they enter.”* (Uhl-Bien, 2006, pp. 661-662)

Social construction and relational theory offer a way to explore leadership as the generative interchange between people in an organization. It is an invitation to expand our vision of what leadership is; to understand the kinds of interactions and co-action that sustain and vitalize organizations and cultures (K. J. Gergen, 2009). This is a definition of relating that is not referring to simply one person communicating with another. Leadership is defined as a co-created process generated by symbol and language and situated within a specific context. It encompasses the relating in both language and in the relationship to non-verbal actions, things and events (Hosking, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Dian Marie Hosking uses the term “relational constructionism” to describe this new orientation. She compares qualities of relating that support “eco-logical” (participative, power with, interconnected, allowing multiplicity) versus “ego-logical” (centralized, power over, separate, singular truth) relations (Gergen, K.J., Gergen, M., and Schrader, S.M., 2009; K. J. Gergen, 2009; Hosking, 2010; Hosking & Pluut, 2010). Hosking and Gergen both discuss a “figure-ground” shift in seeing leadership as a continuously unfolding process of meaning-making that takes place in an interrelated and evolving universe.

Hosking describes a participatory consciousness that can be seen as the ever present background from which thought emerges. Gergen describes how this approach parallels the Buddhist principle of codependent origination, a consciousness of pure relatedness. Wood calls this the undifferentiated middle, or a place of indefinite inter-relatedness which is the place of real endurance. (Wood, 2005). He further defines leadership as a *becomingness*, in which we “attend to the processes of creation laying behind the individual social actors we value so

highly” (p. 1114, Wood, 2005). These descriptions seem to parallel the dialogue on collective transformation that is occurring in organization change (Scharmer, 2009; Block, 2008; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). It assumes a world of continuous participatory change and suggests leadership as the shaping or “midwifing” of a co-created future.

## **Relational Leadership Models**

In the search for a definition of “relational leadership” I like Kenneth Gergen’s shift in language to a verb, “relational leading”, defined as “the ability of persons, in relationship to move with engagement and efficacy into the future” ( K. J. Gergen, 2009, p.333). This speaks to a generative and ever moving experience of relating that brings forth a sense of connection, meaning, and direction. The question being raised is; what do we attend to and develop if not leadership as individual traits, qualities, behaviors or actions? In the next section, I will describe five new lenses for rethinking what leadership is; how we might research leadership differently; and the implications for the future of leadership development.

## **Leadership as Distributed Tasks**

Leadership as a distribution of roles and tasks began to appear in conjunction with the emergence of self-directed work teams in the 1980s. Leadership was being disbursed into teams taking responsibility for greater self-direction. In establishing these teams, the activities carried out by leadership needed to be spelled out and assigned to the teams. These roles could be split apart, shared or rotated among members of a team (Barry, 1991). Barry’s model grouped these behaviors into four categories: envisioning, organizing, spanning and social. His model included behaviors associated with how relationships are developed and nurtured. For example, his description of social leadership includes behaviors such as surfacing individual needs and concerns, sensitivity to people’s energy and emotional states, respecting differences and encouraging celebration (Barry, 1991)

Another model of distributed leadership goes beyond individual roles or behaviors to examine collective relational behaviors and institutional enablers (Gronn, 2002). Gronn’s model addresses relational activity rather than aggregated individual activity in three forms: 1) how spontaneous collaboration forms in the workplace, such as co-workers who come together for problem-solving 2) the intuitive understanding that develops among colleagues who work

together closely, such as arrangements of co-leadership partners and 3) institutional arrangements for regularized distributed action, such as self-managed teams. (Gronn, 2002)

### **Leadership as Facilitation**

Writers on facilitative leadership suggest that there is a leadership role in helping others to lead themselves. Facilitative leadership descriptions still describe leadership in terms of bounded individual actions, although they do not limit leadership to those in positional leadership roles and they do broaden attention beyond individual interactions to include the environmental context that surrounds a group.

Research on self-directed teams identified behaviors that were helpful in encouraging teams to assume leadership activities formerly the purview of management (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Managers who encouraged and enabled self-observation and self-reinforcement (through questioning rather than telling) created more empowered teams (Manz & Sims Jr., 1987). Peter Block describes the primary role of leadership as “convening” or creating and managing the social space. He defines three tasks of leadership; 1) creating a positive context that nurtures commitment and accountability, 2) convening conversations that shift people’s experience and 3) listening. (Block, 2008) Each of these approaches suggests leadership is about facilitating groups to take charge of themselves and their work.

Roger Schwarz says facilitative leadership is an approach based on the values of participation, collaboration, empowerment, commitment and partnership. A facilitative leader is one who helps others become more effective through building their capacity to reflect on and improve the way they work (Schwarz, 2002). Schwarz’s four core values for facilitative leadership begins with a reinforcing cycle of 1) valid information, which he defines to mean an open sharing of how one is seeing and interpreting a situation, include one’s feelings and assumptions; 2) free and informed choice within the defined constraints of one’s power and authority; and 3) internal commitment to the decision. His fourth core value is compassion, which he defines as the capacity to suspend judgment while listening to others.

### **Leadership as Collective Dialogue**

A number of current organizational theorists emphasize leadership as the creation of a sense of meaning for others (Senge; 1990 Weick, 1995; Thayer, 1988). However, most of these writers are still defining meaning generation as a primary role of individual leaders; to make sense of

what is going on for others and to provide frameworks by which people can see their situation in new ways. Drath's "knowledge principles" provide a constructionist framework for understanding how leadership might be enacted as dialogic practice (Drath, 2001). For Drath, a leadership principle is a set of ideas or rules about reality or life that is taken for granted and organizes how we define what is 'true'. These underlying assumptions related to leadership are what cause us to name something as leadership. Drath's first leadership principle of personal dominance is similar to the "divine right kings" or "great man theory" of leadership in which leaders are those individuals (generally men) born to lead. Leadership is something someone possesses and followers are convinced of the "truth" of their leadership (Drath, 2001, p. 13). According to Drath, this principle does not respond well in adaptive challenges when fundamental changes in understanding, values or direction are occurring. The result is usually a breakdown of belief in the efficacy of the leader's vision and their inherent right to lead.

Drath's second principle of leadership, "interpersonal influence" (Drath, 2001, p.13), has emerged as an adaptive response to change. Leadership through interpersonal influence is a process of negotiation between leader and followers where the most influential person can claim the role of leader. Leadership is no longer a divine right, but can be achieved through the possession or development of certain qualities or skills that enable a leader to rise to leadership through their ability to influence others. This second principle of leadership provides a way for others to emerge as leaders when a group needs to adapt in a changing context. The second principle still vests the power for leadership in an individual, but now people can possess or acquire the skills needed and leadership must be achieved through influence.

It is when differences are very great and worldviews very far apart that the "interpersonal influence" principle also begins to break down. When a singular leader is not able to create a convergent understanding across conflicting perspectives, it is then that Drath's third principle of relational dialogue emerges. In this principle, leadership no longer resides within an individual and their power to command or negotiate meaning. Instead, meaning and direction can emerge across differing worldviews through the shared participation of group members in practices of narrative, symbol, picture and metaphor.

From a social construction lens, meaning-making can be seen as a collective practice in which everyone participates (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Drath, 2001). Sense-making, or creating shared meaning is the process by which we "*arrange our understanding of experience so we*

*can know what has happened, what is happening and so that we can predict what will happen. It is the constructing of knowledge about our self and the world...making sense by placing what happened within some larger frame*" (Drath & Palus, 1994, p.3). From a constructionist perspective, meaning is not just created for us by an individual leader, but occurs collectively through our interactions, our narratives, and our dialogue. Meaning is not only framed by those in positions of authority and power, but through the shared process among a group that grants power and authority to a particular person or a viewpoint. Leadership is happening when certain ways of seeing the world are cultivated within a collective to unite people and build a shared culture. This is a view that emphasizes the role of discourse and the practice of dialogue as key to how we construct the beliefs that we hold.

Seeing leadership as a dialogic process provides a way to explore and go forward with differing world views in which the goal is not to be subsumed under a singular perspective, but to find ways to "go on" while allowing and retaining our differences (Hosking, 2010). Hosking describes this as "a relational view of leadership processes – a view that links the dialogical self and dialogue to openness, listening and history making" (Hosking, 2010, p. 7). She further sees "knowledge as socio-relational, constructed in action, situated and moving, and intimately interconnected with power." (Hosking, 2010 ,p. 8). From this view, one could study leadership through an examination of the quality of dialogue in organizations and between organizations, how well different perspectives and worldviews are heard and not distorted, and to what extent multiple voices and perspectives (not only within the group, but within oneself) are allowed to come forward. Gergen offers three practices for enacting a relational view of leadership: 1) positive sharing that creates a culture of collaboration rather than competition and conflict, 2) adding value versus critique and 3) reality building through narrative, symbol and metaphor. (K. J. Gergen, 2009)

Both Hosking and Gergen point out approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry and Participative Action Research which support a participative, dialogical worldview. These approaches open up a "power to" versus a "power over" orientation that offer multiple dialogues rather than a singular top down monologue. The increasing use of dialogic practice offer ways to engage across opposing worldviews. As an example, the Public Conversations Project hosted dialogues between pro-choice and pro-life leaders in Boston lasting several years and resulting in ways to move forward peaceably together while each side continued to hold opposing views of the issue (Fowler, A., Nichols, N., Gambel, Hogan, F. X., Kogut, M., McCommish, M, Thorp, B. 2001).

## **Leadership as Outcomes**

Drath et al has drafted an ontological framework of relational leadership within a social constructionist frame that focuses on the outcomes that occur when leadership is present. (Drath et al., 2008). The model defines three key means to attaining various ends: 1) Direction is the widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims and mission. 2) Alignment is the organization and coordination of knowledge and work in a collective. 3) Commitment is the willingness of members to subsume their own interest and benefit within their collective interest and benefit. These are seen as both outcomes in and of themselves and as means to longer term outcomes, such as sustainability or adaptation to changing conditions. The view further suggests that leadership is produced not only through individual action, but also through collective enactments. These might include overall patterns of interactions, behaviors, dialogic processes or responses to emergent challenges. All behaviors, interactions and systems in a collective that are aimed at producing direction, alignment and commitment (DAC) are seen as leadership.

How these outcomes are produced is dependent on individual and collective beliefs and linked practices which “occur in mutual webs of support and justification” (W. H. Drath et al., 2008 p.644) to form a leadership culture. What people collectively believe about how DAC is created will influence the practices in place. And change, by definition, implies a culture change that requires a change in beliefs and behaviors of everyone, not just leaders. This view of leadership provides another way to shift the questions for study away from understanding what goes on inside the minds of designated individual leaders. For example, in studying the impact of leader directives, not only would the leader’s behavior be examined, but also how the commands are received and responded to by the recipients, and the historical context of commanding and responding that surround the situation being studied. Questions to ask when studying leadership include how much does the group believe in the importance of DAC to their overall success? What beliefs and practices are most important in producing DAC and how did they come into being? How do people in positions of power participate in various leadership practices?



And, one might frame leadership development as a process in which beliefs and practices for producing direction, alignment and commitment are examined for how they address increasingly more complex challenges. This view evolves from the work of Edgar Schein in seeing organizations as systems of meaning and leadership beliefs as the sources of organization culture (Schein, 1985; Schein, 1999). If organizational practices flow from beliefs, and if these are collective enactments, versus the sole product of designated leaders, then what becomes important to understand is the overall pattern of behavior and how practices and beliefs within a group reinforce, sustain or disrupt these behaviors. Leadership *is* these collectively held principles, or belief systems and practices. Even the definition of leadership itself is brought into being by a collectively held principle that allows people to recognize or know that what is happening is leadership (W. Drath, 2001).

The significance of a focus on behaviors, context, interactions, outcomes, beliefs and practices as leadership is that it pulls the curtain away on our deeply held cultural assumptions of power and control in the hands of the few and begins to examine how we collectively make sense of our world and move forward together in it. I find some of the most exciting new images of leadership are expanding the concept of relational leadership to a cosmological view of interconnectivity. It offers to the imagination a way of thinking about leadership that is both useful and needed in a time of global interconnectivity and environmental degradation. This next lens offers a glimpse into a radically different way to view leadership with roots in ancient philosophy and spirituality.

### **Leadership as Process and Emergence**

A very old lens on leadership might be traced to the early Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, summed up in his famous quote “You cannot step twice into the same river”. In his view of the world, we live in continuous change. Not so different from modern physicists who describe an expanding universe that is moving through time and space at a rate difficult for us to fathom. Process metaphysics would describe this as a world in the constant state of becoming, rather than being (Wood, 2005). Process studies stress interrelatedness and seek understanding of the world through the processes that unfold rather than through studying the world as discrete objects. The interconnectedness (what I will later discuss as “wholeness”) of social, physical, theoretical and more processes is often seen as “ineffable or mysterious” (p.1104, Wood, 2005) perhaps because what we see are the concrete things, the surface effects of what is going on

underneath, much like the iceberg metaphor in which we observe and define reality as what shows up above the waterline, failing to see all that is below.

When identity is seen as both relational and evolving (K. J. Gergen, 2009), there is not an essential, static or unchangeable self/culture, but instead a multiplicity of selves that might be drawn forth through an ongoing interrelatedness with others and all of life. Martin Wood quotes Alfred Whitehead, a leading process philosopher who defines leadership as a “systemic complex of mutual relatedness” (p.1105, Wood, 2005). He says leadership cannot be reduced to one person or even to the relations between people. Wood goes on to discuss Hosking’s relational approach to leadership as one that moves beyond individualism or even discrete relations between entities. Her work furthers an ontological shift in thinking about leadership as process. Wood describes this new image of leadership as part of the “vital process of continuity”, as a “creative process”, as the “empty middle place”, as an “indefinite pattern of inter-relatedness, rather than a definite identity” (p. 1111-1112, Wood, 2005). The focus shifts to the enduring patterns, the choices in the moment that set new courses, the interactions that give support or shift a pattern, the collective values that emerge in a continuous interplay of differences. These processes *are* leadership: 1) as a social practice, 2) as a study of change rather than of things, or 3) as identification of movements that occur in and over time. (Wood, 2005)

Crevani, et al suggests that process ontology be seen as an ideal to strive for and that we “remain reflective and critical to suggestions that processes, interactions and practices do have fixed limits in time and space”(p.3, Crevani et al., 2010). Most emerging models are focusing on processes, practices, interactions and the co-construction of a common direction. Crevani et al also points out that models focused on outcomes may still be too simplistic and linear. They propose leadership as a process of construction (of issues, of problems, of questions), co-orientation (enhanced understanding of diverging arguments, interpretation and decisions) and action-spacing (finding possibilities and opportunities for individual and collective action within the local-cultural organizational context).

Complex adaptive systems theory gives rise to the study of emergence, defined as a process in which interactions throughout an organization, without centralized coordination, result in unintended changes at higher levels within and beyond the system (called the new emergent order) (citation). Lichtenstein and Plowman offer a model of four “conditions” for emergence

(Dis-Equilibrium state, Amplifying Actions, Recombination/Self-Organization and Stabilizing Feedback) and how they can be generated through specific leadership activity: embracing uncertainty and surfacing conflict to disrupt existing patterns, allowing experiments, encouraging rich interactions and supporting collective action as ways to encourage novelty, creating correlation through language and symbols, recombining resources and accepting oneself as a catalyst for action, supporting sense-making and sense-giving and integrating local constraints to stabilize feedback. These actions can be done by both formal leaders and informal leaders.(Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009)

Hosking's relational approach to leadership also speaks to emergence in her description of 'empty' relational processes in which the content is allowed to emerge. She suggests a shift from questions of "what" to questions of "how" (Hosking, 2010) . Hosking, Gergen and others suggest that the focus on relational processes should be on how they open up or close down possibilities and what that might mean for identities, relationships and the ability to sustain an environment of multiplicity. Further, Hosking points out that the global issues of interconnectedness that we face today, including climate change, global communications and economic infrastructure, loss of biodiversity, etc. are calling for more participative ways of relating that focus less on the search for knowledge and truth and more on ethics and local pragmatics. Her suggested practices call for "light structuring" in which groups makes space for emergence and improvisation, for dance and play and for 'being in the now' (Hosking, 2010). She suggests these are part of what it means to be relationally responsive and to create the space for all voices to be heard.

Her description of providing a container for people to engage in ways that allow a gradual emergence of coherence and connection is most clearly descriptive of my experience within the Women's Leadership Community. I relate to "light structuring" as being responsive in the moment to what is emerging. It is attending with "soft eyes" to the whole, staying flexible and moving with the energy of the group. In WLC, we experience this by keeping a minimal agenda developed primarily around questions. We build energy and play off one another much like actors do when improvising who learn to say "yes, and" to whatever others offer.

I think it is this spaciousness, acceptance and play that contribute to the magic that our community members talk about in our retreats. It is an experience I have more often found to

happen spontaneously when women gather. In the next section I will explore the contribution of the collective feminine to the concept of relational leadership.

## ***The Collective Feminine and Leadership***

### **The Entry and Struggle of Women in Leadership**

The founding WLC members were part of the movement of women into leadership roles in the 1970's and 80's. This movement created a radical societal change in a relatively short period of time. Gender tracking in professional and management positions did not even begin until the 1960's. In 1970, women made up 16.6% of U.S. professional/managerial positions. Forty years later, women now represent slightly more than 50% of all U.S. professional and managerial positions and almost 50% of all U.S. business owners are women (Catalyst, 2010). However, the representation of women drops off significantly in the highest level leadership positions, and the tracking of these numbers in the U.S. have only occurred since 1995. For example in Fortune 500 companies only 15.7% of corporate officers are women and there are only 8 women CEOs (Catalyst, 2009).

What may have been considered an issue of inadequate numbers of women in the pipeline for these higher positions is no longer seen as the primary cause of the "glass ceiling" today. A significant number of women leaders believe 1) they have to outperform men to get the same rewards; 2) they do not receive comparable salaries; and 3) they do not perceive that, all things being equal, a woman will be promoted over a man (Catalyst, June, 2006). In a study of European managers, 66% report stereotypes and preconceptions of women's roles and abilities as a leading barrier to women's advancement (Catalyst, 2002). Further, women cite barriers to advancement that include their exclusion from informal networks, stereotypes and preconceptions about women's roles and abilities and a failure on the part of executives to assume accountability for women's advancement (Catalyst, June, 2006)..

In a study of women executives at Accenture, only 30% believe they have the same opportunities as men in the workplace. Both societal norms and corporate culture are cited as causes that sustain this inequity (Accenture, 2007). This is not a problem of perception alone. A meta-analysis comparing women and men's leadership styles and outcomes found that while women scored higher on transformational leadership, a style most likely to lead to positive leadership outcomes and result in career advancement in men, (Eagly, 2003), these behaviors were not as likely to result in women leader's career progression (van Engen, 2001). A recent

study on the pay gap between men and women found 41% of the gap as “unexplainable” (Shriver, 2009). I had a personal experience of the unexplainable pay gap upon entering a leadership role. When I received my first promotion into a management job, my pay remained at a secretarial level, 2-3 times lower than comparable male colleagues. While eventually I did receive pay increases as I progressed, I never reached parity with my male colleagues in that company.

The overlap of career building and childbearing adds other strains on women moving into positions of leadership. Women in WLC frequently talk about their level of overload and how little time they have for themselves. Often in our retreats we need time just to catch up on needed sleep. Women frequently do not voice their concerns about this at work for fear that it will make them less promotable. Most women, even high level women leaders, still carry the majority of responsibility for managing household and family tasks. The highest achievers have work weeks of 50-60 hours a week and frequently travel away from home on business (Hewlett, 2002). Working women in general often feel isolated and stressed (Shriver, 2009). They are without time to connect meaningfully with others, to reflect on their own leadership experiences, to find and access role models or mentors. This can result in internalized feelings of personal disappointment when they are unable to achieve greater work-life balance (Carter, Kim, Pond, & Wong, 2005).

Women make other adaptations when entering leadership ranks formerly dominated by men. A rash of popular leadership books for women leaders published in the 1980's and 1990's, such as *Dress for Success* and *Games Your Mother Never Taught You*, encouraged women to dress, talk and act like men to be successful leaders. When I entered leadership in the 1980's I received coaching to give up “girl” talk, (asking questions, using “feeling” words and tentative phrases) for strong declarative language that reinforced an image of being in charge and in control. As described in a recent *New Yorker* magazine article, there are two tactics for women entering the male power arena; either “become one of them”, i.e. get hard-nosed, cutthroat, lower your voice and eliminate any signs of being feminine; or “dance backwards in heels”, i.e. work harder, over-prepare, be more thorough, better informed, and do more research than everyone else (Fontini, 2008). These choices have left many women feeling alienated and exhausted, and contribute to the failure of women progressing into the highest levels of leadership in business, education and politics.

## **Three Views on Women in Leadership**

Several years ago I participated in a women's leadership literature search as part of designing a Women's Leadership Institute for women staff and faculty at the University of Minnesota. We found women were missing, as both authors and subjects, from the mainstream literature on leadership. The leadership books are written predominantly by white male scholars and practitioners. This same finding was cited by another group of researchers addressing leadership among women of color (Carter, Kim, Pond & Wong, 2005). For them (and us) it became necessary to explore beyond the traditional leadership literature to piece together an emerging picture of women and leadership. Carter and colleagues summarized three different schools of thought about women and leadership. Their first two can be summed up this way:

One school of thought is that women leaders are no different than men and with increased opportunities for leadership women will bring the same approaches to leadership that have been developed by men. This view prevails in first wave feminist discourse. Others believe that women leaders are different, bringing feminine skills and abilities that are unique to women. Second wave feminism brought this view forward. The third school of thought is that there is not enough data to conclude either way (Carter, Kim, Pond & Wong, 2005), however, post-modern and social constructionist feminist writers offer an alternative view that challenges the nature of the question itself and its roots in a fixed and singular definition of gender. This third school of thought (aligning with the third wave of feminism) moves beyond the dualism of the first two positions to offer deeper insight into how gender itself is constructed. What follows is a discussion of these three views/waves and the insights to leadership they provide.

### **Women Leaders Are No Different than Men**

For those who believe women lead in the same way men do, the reason for women's failure to advance may be a matter of timing or a result of outright discrimination. This view is prevalent in many popular and research oriented studies whose aim seems to be to challenge continued sexism and bias in the workplace. The research cited in this view is rooted in modernist, empirical research methods (M. Gergen, 2001). The "women are equal" discourse suggests a first-wave feminist belief that women fare best in society if they are granted equal status with men and any attempt to segregate women as different will derail that cause (M. Gergen, 2001).

Research advocates for this view find no empirical evidence for differences in how men and women enact leadership (Vecchio, 2002); or they see that differences are largely a result of bias and institutional sexism (A. H. Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). In support of this view is a study of women who made it successfully to top leadership positions. The study concluded there were no sex differences in their success as leaders (Burrows & Berg, 2003). One study researched several thousand male and female mid and senior level managers over a thirty year time period. The study found that traditional gender stereotypes not only did not hold up, but the only serious gender difference found was greater competitive behavior among male leaders, which was declining over time (Robinson & Lipman-Blumen, 2003). In a meta-analysis of more than 40 studies, leadership researchers found very little difference between women's and men's leadership. In another study, the biggest negative perception held by men about women's leadership was their problem-solving ability, an ability closely affiliated with interpersonal power. The more male-dominated the industry, the more likely it was that men who report to women believed women to be ineffective problem-solvers. In this instance, the researchers believe the differences were more connected to gender stereotyping than to actual performance by women leaders (Catalyst, 2005).

As studies that primarily assess self-perception, one could question whether these results reflect the adjustments women have made to fit into an existing model of leadership rather than innate similarities in women's and men's styles of leadership. And given how swiftly women progressed into low and mid-level leadership positions, this view does not fully address the slowed progress of women into upper levels of leadership. Working in human resources for a large corporation in which I oversaw company terminations, I found a pattern of women leaders whose careers derailed after their promotion into upper level all-male ranks of leadership. As women who had adopted traditional "command and control" leadership behaviors, they were seen as too aggressive, as unable to get along with their peers and as ineffective in leading their staffs. On the one hand, they weren't doing things that much differently than many of their successful male colleagues and we weren't coaching the men out of the organization mainstream. However the women somehow did seem more ominous as "patriarchs". At one point in my early career, I remember looking around at the women in upper level positions and I did not see a single role model of a woman I wanted to emulate as a leader. I asked myself; "Was this really the most effective way to get work done? Were there other ways, ways perhaps more natural for women, which could be effective ways to lead? Might there be a 'feminine' leadership style?"



## **Women Lead Differently Than Men**

From a leadership perspective, there is still little focus on how gender influences leadership theory. Consider the fact that as recently as 2007 a special issue on leadership in the *American Psychologist* failed to include any articles on issues of gender and diversity (Chin & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007). However, some research studies have found women's leadership style to be more collaborative, inclusive, nurturing, participatory and egalitarian (Adler, 2005; Chin & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007; A. H. Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Rosener, 1990 Fine, 2009). Enter the second wave of feminism; women do lead differently.

Women have been found to be more likely to exhibit a transformational rather than transactional style of leadership. Transformational leadership is defined as a style that inspires and elevates others to a broader sense of mission through individualized attention, charismatic and inspirational interaction. The transactional leader, by contrast, focuses on contingent rewards and management by exception (Bass, 1990). Transformational leadership has been found to be more effective in getting results (A. H. Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). A meta-analysis of 45 studies found female leaders were more transformational, male leaders more transactional or laissez-faire (A. H. Eagly et al., 2003). In a sampling of Fortune 500 firms, women ranked higher than men on all dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass, 1996). A study by Kouzes and Posner showed women outperformed men in two areas of their leadership model: encouraging the heart and modeling the way (Posner & Kouzes, 1993). Sally Helgesen captured this perspective in her popular book, *The Female Advantage*. Her study of female leaders highlighted many of the leadership characteristics commonly attributed to women, such as balancing structure with spontaneity, and inclusivity over hierarchy as assets that made women uniquely better suited to transformational leadership (Helgesen, 1995).

The second wave feminism addressed the historical context of patriarchy, exposing male domination and attacking the oppression of women created by the dominant patriarchal discourse (Singh, 2006). Feminist standpoint theorists of this movement brought to the surface the ways in which women's experience and perspectives had been left out of the scientific western base of knowledge (Harding, 2004). Feminist standpoint theorists also exposed the ways in which our system of knowledge construction, our cultural institutions, and our beliefs

about leadership are biased in favor of male power and privilege. They have an inherent bias for masculine values of objective knowledge, individualism, detachment, hierarchy, and power over. This work raised awareness of the ways in which women have been marginalized, their experiences and perspectives left out of the knowledge base.

Hekman highlights three main dualisms of the modern western world associated with gender: rational vs. intuitive, culture vs. nature and object vs. subject (Hekman, 1995). Consider how we devalue “soft” (qualitative) versus hard (quantitative) science, identification with versus a detached perspective, feelings versus principles, body versus mind. Even in the realm of post-indigenous religion, there is a split between heaven and earth, with transcendence trumping nature. In each of these dualities, the feminine gender has historically been associated with the devalued pole. The second wave of feminism contributed heavily to the awareness that no knowledge is “value-free” and the importance of surfacing who benefits and who is disadvantaged in how we name our “truths”. Naming is a gendered experience and therefore it is important to acknowledge one’s “standpoint” (M. Gergen, 2001).

The scope of writers contributing to the collective feminine literature is too vast to cover in this summary. I wish to highlight a few key areas which have been helpful in the development of WLC and which are related to the emergence of relational leadership.

### ***Women, Connectedness and the Ethic of Care***

Sally Helgesen found successful upper level women leaders in her research focused on relationships. They made themselves accessible to their staff, and viewed interruptions as opportunities to connect. They believed it was important to be caring, to take the time to listen and to build relationships with the people with whom they worked (Helgesen, 1995). Others describe this as operating from an ethic of care (Binns, 2008; Fine, 2009; Ross, 2002) or from “maternal” values, such as compassion, connectedness, empathy, emotional sensitivity and vulnerability (Binns, 2008). Our WLC description calls these values the “*invisible and unclaimed aspects of leadership such as relationships, community, connection to place and history, and the appreciation and affirmation of life and life cycles.*”

Perhaps most seminal to the development of the ethic of care is Carol Gilligan’s work on women’s psychological development (Gilligan, 1982). Her study of development in girls and

women identified an alternative way to view moral responsibility as grounded in connection/relationship (interdependency) rather than separation/autonomy as an individual. Women's lives are more embedded in the lives of others, in webs of relationships rather than in hierarchies. She suggests that for women, morality and identity are linked to being a "self-in-relation", with responsibility to and care for others. For women this creates an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility. Rather than a definition of ethics that elevates an abstracted, universal moral order, the ethics of care is concerned with how, and by what rules, we live in concert with each other (Binns, 2008). This ethical view is informed by practicality and mutuality (Benhabib, 1992; Townley, 1994). That is, ethics that focuses on treating people as "concrete" rather than "generalized" and that is governed by the feminized principles of equity, complementary, reciprocity, friendship and care (Binns, 2008, p.602).

Gilligan identified how gendered assumptions give rise to these two different ways to view ethics. While men see danger in close personal affiliation, women perceive danger in impersonal achievement. Men fear entrapment while women fear isolation. For women, intimacy creates coherence and safety. One might conclude that the seeds of aggression are found in an ethic that fails to value connection. While the ethic of justice values equality (equal treatment), the ethic of care presumes non-violence. "Relational ethics" as an aspect of relational leadership seems critically important in working across differing worldviews (Gilligan, 1982). As Heidi Ross said: *"Surely one of the biggest enemies of caring is abstract thinking, which allows us to dehumanize. What allows us to see each other as human beings? Many of the scholars that I reflect on in this address argue that rationality and knowledge alone are not enough. Rather, 'moral perception and imagination necessarily involved an intertwining of emotion, cognition and action.'"* (Ross, 2002, p.408)

Gilligan's work made the case for more than one psychological model of development and challenged the existing bias in the literature towards masculine identity development that equates moral advancement with individuation and abstract thinking, with its focus on rights and rules (Gilligan, 1982). From a leadership perspective, the ethic of care suggests we respond to people as situated, embodied connections to self, rather than as a detached and objective "other" or as a means to an end. Other psychologists from the Wellesley Stone Center were also exploring a feminine psychology of self-in-relation, of individual agency in the context of community, where one's sense of effectiveness rises out of and feeds into one's emotional connections (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). According to Jordan, self esteem

for women is related to the degree of emotional sharing, openness, understanding and regard that develops in relationship. Women's sense of self can be diminished when they encounter or work within a non-relational context, one in which the value is on power, competition, task orientation and impersonal feedback (Jordan et al., 1991, p.255). We have seen an historical devaluation of women's approach to power "with", rather than acting alone, against or over others, inhibiting women's access to traditional leadership opportunities. Women who operate from this ethic of care and relatedness may experience a sense of annihilation when the care and support they provide others is not appreciated nor reciprocated (Baker Miller, 1986). It makes sense, that if one operates as a self-in-relation, traditional work or educational environments steeped in competition and hierarchy can diminish self-esteem and create stress.

Further, these kinds of environments create questions for many women regarding the meaning and contribution of their work. A recent study of top women leaders explored their constructions of leadership: leadership motives, behaviors, and expectations of others. The findings suggest that women bring an expanded sense of ethics to leadership; they consider organizational behavior and purpose within the context of social, cultural and political realities. It was found to be important to women leaders that organization's goals were ethical as well as their means and that goals be ultimately focused on contributions to the world as a whole. The study concluded women may be opting out of organizational life because they do not find the ethical center they need for making a meaningful contribution to the world (Fine, 2009).

### ***Women and Voice***

As WLC cofounders we were also asking similar questions of meaning and purpose in our work as organization leaders. We found particular resonance in the metaphor of "reclaiming the feminine" and "finding our voice" (Belenky, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Woodman, 1993). We sought to create a space for ourselves and other women where we could explore questions of the feminine and leadership through what Belenky et al described as "connected knowing", a feminine way of learning that is different from the cultural norm of "separate knowing" prevailing in our schools and workplaces today. Separate knowing is learning by abstraction, a detachment from the object to be studied and developing mastery over it; learning through quantifying, critique, evaluating and bringing systematic doubt to bear.

We longed for a place to learn through what Belenky et al called connected knowing: by engaging in questions with one another rather than having answers, by seeking understanding

through an intimacy with rather than separation from our questions and one another. Connected knowing seeks harmony and empathy through seeing the world through another's eyes. It is non-judgmental and is founded in the ethic of care. "In connected, knowing groups, people utter half-baked half-truths and ask others to nurture them." (Belenky, 1997, p.118). WLC was conceived as a space in which women could explore the feminine using feminine ways of knowing: through a prolonged engagement with subjective experience, in nature and in relationship with other women. We would come together to explore questions in relationship, with and through an ethic of caring, and where each woman's voice could be heard.

### ***Feminine as Archetype***

Our exploration of voice and the feminine was further expanded in the writings Marion Woodman and other writers exploring the feminine as an archetypal energy, one that has been diminished and needs reclaiming in modern times. The concept of archetype comes from the work of Carl Jung who identified human patterns coming from the collective unconscious. The patterns, in the form of symbol, image and myth, cross cultures and traditions. When we activate an archetype we find ourselves tapping in to what feels like an energy field bigger than ourselves to which we can align ourselves to in our thoughts, dream images and actions (Jung, 1980).

From a Jungian perspective, the feminine is an archetype that crosses cultures and traditions. It is a universal energy carried within men and women, as is the archetypal masculine. The feminine archetype is expressed in images of the virgin, the mother, the crone and often Goddess myths are pointed to as examples (Bolen, 1985). The primary archetypal feminine image is that of vessel (Jung, 1980). Other descriptors of the feminine archetype include the giving of life, nourishment, warmth, and protection, sexuality and sensuality, birthing, wisdom and spirituality. More negative images are equated to the dark or destructive forces of the feminine, death, madness and destruction.

According to Woodman, the archetypal feminine has been repressed in our psyche due to years of patriarchal neglect. Repression is different than oppression. It is not something that is being actively done to women; it is a denial of feminine energy that we are unaware of and participate in. The goal is to reclaim this archetypal feminine energy, reintegrate it with the masculine archetype so that we might experience the sacred marriage of inner wholeness. Woodman writes of the "father's daughter", describing a woman who takes on patriarchal values and

characteristics, and who, in adult life, feels cut off from herself (Woodman, 1992). For women to reclaim the feminine and achieve wholeness there is a counterpart to the Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1988); the "Heroine's Journey" must first reclaim the split off or rejected feminine aspects of self and reintegrate these. It is not so much a journey of outer conquering as it is a journey home to self (Murdock, 1990).

Woodman's work and other female Jungian writers had a strong impact on WLC adopting the language of the archetypal feminine. As women who had come of age entering the previously all male world of business and leadership, we had developed a strong, if uneasy identification with the patriarchy. We had adopted these ways to gain entrance to the ranks of leadership. This was not just about "them", but about "us"; we had become carriers of patriarchal values as well. We had learned to be disciplined and controlled leaders, driving ourselves and others, valuing task over relationship, compartmentalizing our home and work lives and shutting off our feeling nature to get through the day to day demands of our overly busy lives. We resonated with the idea of reclaiming and re-integrating feminine with masculine values.

For some in WLC the idea of archetypal energies and reclaiming the feminine archetype was deeply meaningful, while for others Jungian language and concepts remained foreign. We explored different ways to talk about the qualities of the feminine in leadership. Some found meaning in the concept of polarities, the idea of the masculine and feminine as two opposite yet interdependent poles that we need to oscillate between to create balance (Johnson, 1992). Others resonated with the concept of yin and yang from eastern philosophy. Another approach came from brain research described as left and right brain modes of functioning (Pink, 2006). Each of these frames provided a different way name the concept of the feminine and they contributed to the eclectic definition in use in WLC.

### ***The Feminine, the Body and Nature***

*I laugh now when I think back to an incident that occurred as a young mother who had just returned to my managerial job six weeks after my baby was born. I was breastfeeding and expressing my milk at work. At the first staff meeting upon my return, we had gone for more than two hours when our boss (male) finally called a break. I hurriedly left the meeting for the ladies room to relieve myself of milk which was leaking through my silk blouse and navy blue suit jacket. My boss was agitated that I was late coming back from our allotted 15 minute break and repeatedly asked the staff where I was. Finally, a female staff member, a new mother herself, blurted out "She's gone to express her milk!" My boss's face turned red, he said nothing more and from then on I took whatever breaks I needed.*

Many of us in WLC have described working in corporate environments as being cut off at the neck. There is no space for the body's needs. Worse, we seem to have lost the connection to body wisdom, to our emotional cues and to our inner voice. Our overemphasis on rationality, detachment, and objectivity cut us off from our body and feeling nature. Acker points out that our structures of work, of jobs and bosses, depends on the assumption of the worker as abstract and disembodied (Acker, 1990). We design organizations with abstracted jobs and structures into which we plug people as "human resources."

Christine Caldwell points out the connection between our loss of sensory awareness to addictions (Caldwell, 1996). In the addictive cycle, the more cut off we are from our bodies, the more deprivation we experience. The deprivation of our sensory awareness causes further desensitization and we receive less and less nurturing from our physical world. We attempt to fill the void with addictions, such as food, work, or sex. Body disconnection creates addictive patterns, not only in the individual, but also in organizations that increasingly ignore human needs over cost savings and increased efficiencies (Schaeff & Fassel, 1988).

Wendy Palmer describes a similar disconnect as "ellipted attention" (W. Palmer, 1994). Her work with conscious embodiment comes from the study of Aikido, which focuses on the balancing of energy throughout the body. When we are in balance, we are in state of open, focused attention in which we can respond with our whole selves. When our attention is ellipted, we focus more of our energy on others. We make the other more interesting or important to us than what is going on with ourselves. Ellipted energy seems common in overloaded women leaders. Palmer compares ellipted energy with the image of a turntable with a penny placed on its outer edge. As the turntable picks up speed, the penny is tossed off. If that penny is placed at the center, it can withstand a lot more speed and stay on the record (W. Palmer, 1994, p.92). Similarly, when we are not centered in our bodies, we can easily be thrown off-balance.

The eco-feminist movement (Griffin, 1984; Griffin, 1984; Plumwood, 1991; Ruether, 1975) raises awareness of the common ground between feminism and environmentalism and the link between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. The devaluing of the body is similar to the devaluing of the natural world which contributes to the subsequent environmental degradation we face. From an eco-feminist perspective, the ecological crisis cannot be addressed without changing the underlying assumption of hierarchical domination in our relationships.

### ***Hierarchy and Leadership***

Perhaps the deepest assumption held in traditional definitions of leadership is how we view authority. This assumption of the hierarchical leader runs so deep that we rarely even see how this assumption drives organization structures. It is inconceivable to most of us that we could operate organizations in any way other than hierarchy and we fail to see the deeply gendered way in which the world of work is structured.

One interesting study reviewed the evolution of feminist organizations in our community over 25 years (Remington, 1991). Minnesota is home to a number of nationally recognized women's organizations and is a place in which the women's movement has thrived. Remington's study examined the values, the challenges and the changes that these organizations experienced from the mid-1960s to 1990, a period in which many "standpoint feminist" organizations were proliferating. She found most of women's organizations that had started as collectives became hierarchical organizations. While these groups tried to reconcile their collective and feminist values with clear divisions of responsibility, the result was "an intricate set of often contradictory and confusing organizational rules and procedures" (Remington, 1991, p.64).

Egalitarian values that were pervasive in the first and second waves of the women's movement were embraced during the height of these women's organizations, but were defined mainly in opposition to traditional masculine leadership values. Early women's groups took on large social change agendas and denounced power as a negative. As these organizations grew into maturity, the ensuing changes weakened their collective values. Founders moved on, taking their visions with them. Organizations grew too large to successfully involve all members in decision-making processes. Greater diversity of incoming members fragmented organization solidarity. The need to pay people salaries challenged the notions of equality in which everyone was valued the same. And power structures formed beneath the surface, creating invisible contradictions that organizations could not acknowledge. The end result for these women's organizations by the mid-1980's was a struggle for survival. Those remaining women's organizations in our community have come to look like those of the mainstream. Women have embraced entitlement to resources and financial success and have become less interested in the cause of feminism. Few new women's organizations have emerged. Yet ongoing struggles with power and leadership issues continue for women, as leaders of women's organizations and in the culture at large. Remington suggests that this may in part be due to the lack of a common leadership definition from a woman's perspective (Remington, 1991).



## **Gender as Construction and Leadership**

*While all cultures sort people at birth by sex, how gender is assigned is socially constructed.*  
(from Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992)

Seeing both gender and leadership as socially constructed opens new ways of thinking about the “women are the same” - “women are different” argument. Gender is not so much something we “are” but something that is shaped in our language and practices over time. Our bodies and biological processes are part of a cultural history. They are embedded in context. Or put another way; “Our discourse is drenched in gender” (Holmes & Marra, 2004 p. 392). Seeing gender as socially constructed, we can begin to see how our definitions of leadership are also steeped in gender norms. In the western world, leadership has been conflated with masculine gender (A. H. Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; J. K. Fletcher, 2004; P. Y. Martin, 2003). For leaders, gender lies between what a leader does and how he or she is received. Leaders who navigate across different gender norms and values must be granted legitimacy in order to be accepted as a leader. It can be more difficult to gain that legitimacy if one is a member of an outsider group.

Eagly points out that when a group identifies with paternalistic or masculine forms of leadership, women in the group have more difficulty being accepted as a leader, regardless of the gender of the group because they do not conform to the group’s norms of what good leadership is. This may help explain why there are more women working in the field of education and yet males still hold more positions of leadership. Even when women’s behavior conforms to the style valued by the group, they are often judged based on gender norms in which certain behaviors are reserved for men (A. H. Eagly, 2005; P. Y. Martin, 2006). Women who operate from a different set of values, such as the ethic of care described previously, may have more difficulty navigating a culture with different norms (A. H. Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; A. H. Eagly, 2005). And when women hold different values around using power (such power with others rather than power over) further difficulties emerge. Joyce Fletcher’s research describes how this creates a double bind for women leaders.

### ***The Double Bind for Women***

According to Fletcher, when women enact relational practices at work, gender dynamics kick in. Women who lead using traditional “feminine” behaviors, such as caring, connection and “power with”, are not seen by others as leaders, because their approach is overlaid with gender expectations that see their actions as ‘what women do’. When women adopt a more masculine

leadership style, these run counter to what is considered appropriate gender behavior for women. They get labeled as aggressive or “bitchy” because their actions run counter to gender expectations for women (J. K. Fletcher, 1999). This creates a double bind in which women get “disappeared” and are not seen as leaders, even when they get results, because what they do is overlaid with gender norms that don’t allow women “in” as leaders.

Gendering practices are subtle, and can create social walls that consciously or unconsciously oppress women. Even when women go along with social norms, they may gain approval from men but they do not gain equal status. Women who fail to practice feminine gender norms lose approval and end up with even lower status. (Jackman, 1994). “Gender practices at work routinely make women feel incompetent, exhausted and devalued” (P. Y. Martin, 2006, p.255). The double bind impacts not only women’s career progression, but her sense of self-worth and competence, as well as women’s choice to opt out of higher levels of leadership.

The dominant leadership message seduces men and women to masculinize leadership practices in a heroically male world (Binns, 2008). A result is that many women, even those who have received substantial recognition in their work as leaders, fail to see themselves as leaders. This seems especially true of women who do not use traditional leadership behaviors or do not have traditional hierarchical leadership roles (Carter et al., 2005). Fletcher suggests that women need to do several things to escape the double bind. First, they need to recognize the gender assumptions that underlie organization and leadership norms. Then, they need to develop strategies to resist the heroic norms and structures of leadership without getting disappeared. She names four strategies: 1) naming relational practice as leadership, 2) questioning masculinized leadership norms, 3) negotiating for leadership recognition and 4) forming networks of support that encourages and fosters relational practice. She suggests a strong support group can help women learn to trust their instincts even when the organizational system gives “error messages” for doing so. (J. K. Fletcher, 1999) WLC offers women exactly this kind of network of encouragement to trust themselves, name their own experience and see relational practice as a form of leadership.

### ***Post Heroic Leadership***

Post-heroic leadership is a term coined by Fletcher to describe relational leadership traits associated with feminine socialization. This is a redefinition of leadership effectiveness that depends less on the heroic actions of the few individuals at the top and more on collaborative

leadership practices distributed throughout an organization. Similar to other definitions of relational leadership, post-heroic leadership is a relationally focused approach emphasizing dynamic interactive processes of influence and learning that are intended to transform organization structures, norms and work practices (J. K. Fletcher, 2004). The attributes of post heroic leadership fit the description of relational leadership; it is a practice that is shared and distributed by people across all levels; it is a social process of multi-directional and collective interactions; it is built upon a way of being that is “self-in- relation”. Post-heroic or relational leadership is, at its core, a learning process. It is developing collective understanding across differences that involve the development of self-awareness, vulnerability, empathy, openness to learning from others, and the ability to operate with fluid power dynamics (Binns, 2008).

Fletcher is a vocal feminist who advocates for the importance of recognizing gender, power and leadership as a set of intertwined social interactions. Mainstream leadership literature still operates within an assumption of gender neutrality that masks masculinity. Her argument is that women will continue to be “disappeared” if we do not recognize gender as a part of the dialogue.

### **Social Construction and the Third Wave of Feminism**

*“While feminist perspectives do not disturb the academic paradigm as they used to, relational theories do.” (Ross, 2002 p.410)*

While second wave feminism challenges the assumptions of power and privilege that favor the masculine, a third wave of feminism has arrived to challenge second wave's singular definition of the feminine. These mostly women of color and diverse ethnic backgrounds challenge the largely white, middle and upper class second wave feminists for not acknowledging the differences among women: marital status, sexual preference, ethnicity, age or race that offer different routes to female identity (Diamond, 2009). The third wave of feminism recognizes the diversity of women's voices and sets the stage for a constructionist perspective.

The feminist constructionist approach does not replace one “truth” with another, but instead seeks to understand the discursive processes by which human beings gain understanding of their common world. Social constructionist feminist researchers challenge the fixed, immutable definitions of gender prescribed by standpoint feminists and their claims to a superior feminine alternative (M. Gergen, 2001; Hekman, 1995). Both constructionist thought and feminism have

challenged the idea that there is just one way to formulate knowledge, one universal truth abstracted from social context or one “meta-narrative”.

Hekman sees feminism from its inception as a critique of the discourses of male domination that constitute women as inferior. That critique has three aspects: 1) understanding how the feminine has been constituted as inferior 2) exploring the limits of those discourses and what lies beyond them and 3) formulation of a feminist discourse that constitutes the feminine, the masculine and sexuality in a different way (Hekman, 1995). Citing Foucault’s work, she challenges the feminist appeal to universal concepts of masculine domination and advocates exploring how the feminine is socially constructed in particular places, how patriarchal structures evolve and how to address incidents of domination at the local level. She sees this as a feminist approach that displaces the “discourse of domination” (Hekman, 1995, p. 187). Third wave and constructionist feminist views illuminated the challenges of the WLC community in attracting a more diverse group of women; how our assumptions, norms and language may be excluding women whose experience of the feminine was very different from ours.

I found an example of third wave feminism strongly in a recent podcast from an online women and leadership program. One of the presenters responded to a question of what women’s leadership looks like by saying: “The new story is not one story, its each woman’s story”. She went on to suggest that women need to support one another in ways that do not limit us to a victim story. Instead, women need to encourage, “stand with”, and “see, hear and feel” each other. She further said we need to challenge each other to act courageously in the face of injustice and oppression and to become trustworthy to each other again (Thomas & Zammit, 2010).

## **An Emerging Fourth Wave of Feminism**

There are a few published articles speaking to an emerging fourth wave of feminism that seems to embrace a relational view. This new wave opposes patriarchy while supporting individual expression, equality and the interdependence between men and women (Singh, 2006). It is bringing together the cultural politics of difference and the social politics of equality beyond the individual to address the wider global issues we face today (Bolen, 1999; Peay, 2005, note that Shinoda-Bolen calls this third wave feminism). It addresses the use of power that is in service to something greater rather than power as conquest. This movement reflects eco-spiritual views

that stress the interconnectedness of all life, although not adopting the belief that women are closer to nature.

The women's circle movement may be seen as an organizing mechanism of this new wave (Baldwin, 1998; Bolen, 1999; Steinem, 1992). The circle is a form of gathering that harkens back to indigenous and pre-patriarchal forms of organizing. Shinoda-Bolen describes circle as "what equality is like. This is how culture behaves when it listens and learns from everyone in it." (Bolen, 1999 p. 14). Circles are not limited to women only; they are a form of convening that is spreading throughout the globe. As an organizing form, the circle structures a form of participation that moves leadership into the circle through three principles: 1) positions of leadership are rotated to help in the movement of the group; 2) the circle is the shared responsibility of the whole group; and 3) in a circle there is a reliance on the whole, that is, everyone places themselves on the rim and the center houses the collective (C. Baldwin & Linnea, 2010).

### **Summary: Feminism and Relational Leadership**

Feminism's contribution to redefining leadership can be found at every wave, and each wave can still be seen in organizational life. The first wave demands women equal access to previously denied opportunities for leadership. The second wave challenges patriarchy in leadership and organizing, legitimating a definition of leadership that includes feminine values of care, collaboration, and wholeness. This wave led to the deconstruction of gender norms and definitions of leadership that privilege the masculine and create a double bind for women leaders who must navigate both gender and leadership constructs. The third wave of feminism challenges a singular definition of the feminine that is oriented only to white women of privilege, and invites the voices of women of other races and cultures into the discourse.

Similarly, social constructionist feminists challenge us not to replace patriarchal definitions of leadership with a feminist epistemology that essentializes what it means to be a woman, or a leader. Instead we might consider the impact of local, cultural and historical context that shape and form how we see leadership and open up the possibility of new, more effective future constructions. An emerging fourth wave of feminism points to a possibility we might work together across gender as well as all forms of difference through relational awareness of our interconnectedness with one another and all of life.

The Women's Leadership Community experience is rooted in 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism yet with an undercurrent of emerging constructionist/relational thought that has allowed space for differing perspectives to exist. Our definition of mission related to the "archetypal feminine" is an area in which difference has been expressed and where we have struggled with language. IN adopting the term "archetypal feminine" we claimed a 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist stance. Yet we continue to be in dialogue about what that means, to change how we language this. My own journey through the literature in this dissertation has brought me to new understanding about feminist thought. My research is being invited into the community conversation. Through my literature search and my work with more diverse groups, I found myself moving beyond 2<sup>nd</sup> wave definitions of the feminine. Third wave and constructionist/relational thought helped me describe a way of seeing myself and others as multi-beings and the importance of thinking contextually.

Feminist relational theories have raised the awareness of the link between power and knowledge and how abstraction and rationality are privileged over care and connection. They have challenged the dualism and absolutist ontology at the heart of Western thought. How we think about leadership may be one of the final frontiers of this challenge. To move beyond patriarchal approaches to organization life, can we let go of seeing leadership only as an individual, competency based, heroic and masculinized activity? Instead, might we see leadership as a relational act, one that happens in the "in-between" of people at all levels and between people and the environment in which we live?

Jennifer Binns points out that if we are to enact these new forms of leadership, it will require us to learn together in new ways. Rather than approaching learning as an individualized activity, with a focus on knowledge transfer and self-mastery, she advocates for the "embodied reflexivity required for self-transformation" (Binns, 2008 p. 604). My next section will explore this new kind of learning and its connection to relational leadership.

## ***Community of Inquiry***

*“In more ways than one, women talk in circles: conversations take a spiral shape in its subjective exploration of every subject. Listening, witnessing, role-modeling, reacting, deepening, mirroring, laughing, crying, grieving, drawing upon experience, and sharing the wisdom of experience, women in circles support each other and discover themselves, through talk.”* (Bolen, 1999, p.14)

Leadership development practice, especially in the private sector, has continued to emphasize individual skills and competencies. The focus of learning is at the individual level: through individual assessment, training classes separate from work groups and contexts, one-on-one coaching and mentoring. Alternative ways of thinking about leadership development are emerging, mostly in the non-profit sector, where there is a recognized need for networked and community leadership in addressing the challenges of social change. In a report on best leadership development practices, the authors cite how their awareness of collective leadership development grew and described the challenge of shifting their mindset from an individualistic approach to seeing *“the importance of cultivating collective leadership that is capable of detecting and addressing the most fundamental tensions and contradictions in our social institutions, our values, and the very mental models that determine how we see and shape the world in which we live.”* (McGonagill & Pruyn, 2009, p.53).

When leadership definitions shift from individually focused qualities and abilities to a relational view, learning and development also must shift. Kenneth Gergen in his discussion of a relational conception of knowledge identifies “the goal to replenish and enrich the free-flow of meaning” (K. J. Gergen, 2009, p. 214). He goes on to describe learning as not focused on producing effective individuals, but on furthering the potentials of relationship and the mutual creation of meaning, reason and value through dialogic practices. This is development that increases our capacity to transform and change. It requires a redefinition of traditional views of power imbedded in traditional models of education: from control or mastery over fixed content to discovery in relationship with one another.

This is a familiar learning model in feminist consciousness raising and social activism which raises self-awareness through collective inquiry and joint action ( Friedan, 1963; Freire, 1970). Learning occurs through the development of mutually empowering relationships in which we

create “power with/together” rather than “power over”. Women’s groups and circles exemplify collective inquiry and reflection. Women’s consciousness raising groups in the 1960’s brought women into awareness of the ways in which women were experiencing overt and covert oppression. Gloria Steinem describes the shift in the women’s movement from consciousness-raising for external power to learning circles supporting an “internal revolution” to develop self-awareness (Steinem, 1992). Because of the historical subordination of women and the feminine, there has been a need among women to come together in mutually empathic and empowering relationships; to have a place where women’s relational needs are validated and their voices heard (Bolen M.D., 1999; Jordan et al., 1991; Steinem, 1992).

Also from feminist thought is the concept of connected, whole self learning in which fragile, emerging thoughts and practical application are nurtured (C. Baldwin & Linnea, 2010; Belenky, 1997). Rather than receiving knowledge “deposits” from an expert, it is closer to midwifery in which wisdom emerges through the collective.

## **Inquiry in Community**

An early advocate for inquiry within a group was Mary Parker Follett. Her writings in the early 1900’s stressed relationships over the mechanistic approach advocated by Frederick Taylor, whose “work engineering” approach still is at play in organizational theory today (Follett, 1918; Taylor, 1967). Follett stressed the application of collaborative versus coercive power and the importance of relationship in organizational life. Her writings are prophetic for relational theory and its belief in “multi-being” rather than an essential self. She wrote *“One group creates me; another group brings into appearance the multiple sides of me.”* Regarding learning, she said: *“Revelation, if we want it to be continuous, must be through the community bond. No individual can change the disorder and iniquity of this world. No chaotic mass of men and women can do it. Conscious group creation is to be the social and political force of the future.”* (Follett & Graham, 1996, p. 292)

Mary Parker Follett’s writing resurfaced in literature on the “learning organization”, a body of work within organization development that shaped our early thinking about learning in community. Learning organization literature sees learning, inquiry and knowledge creation as an essential purpose within organizations. It moved helped us move beyond mechanistic approaches to organization development that emphasized systems and structural design to



seeing the capacity for collective learning and transformation. Emphasized in this literature was the importance of dialogue, reflexivity and meaning-making in community (Senge, 1990). Etienne Wenger's concept of the "community of practice" adds another perspective to the concept of collective learning. A community of practice is a group with a shared domain and a common practice that learns together over time (Wenger, 1998). The community of practice concept resonated with members of the Women's Leadership Community when we had grown beyond a couple of cohort groups and were beginning to think of ourselves as an ongoing community of inquirers. Our principles were providing a shared identity and we were engaged in a common practice of reflection, inquiry, and meaning making. Although Wenger's description is oriented more to the transfer of expert knowledge, our application of practice starts with a stance of "not knowing" and a desire to transform our thinking and being through deeper inquiry. Thus, the term "community of inquiry" emerged as a better descriptor for our experience. In the next section I offer an emerging definition of this term and expand the description from a variety of authors who have developed this concept in their writings.

## **An Emerging Definition**

The common denominators in descriptions of groups that do collective inquiry is that learning is relational, reflexive, dialogic, holistic and embodied; it is learning aimed at transformational change. Different from communities of practice, community inquiry is not focused on acquiring, transferring or building mastery over expert knowledge. Instead, its purpose is to develop individual and collective awareness. Using a dialogic approach, members examine their assumptions and beliefs. Relationships are central to the learning. Through relationships of trust and openness, members are encouraged to expose assumptions, explore differences, and develop the capacity for new ways of acting and being. Learning happens not only through verbal communication, but can also occur through movement, writing, drawing, acting, and other forms of creative play.

Examples of groups that might be called communities of inquiry include reflecting teams that come together to deepen their therapeutic practice (Andersen, 1987); cooperative inquiry groups that focus on understanding a shared issue (Reason & Torbert, 2001; Reason, 2001; Reason, 1996), renewal groups such as the circles of trust developed by Parker Palmer to renew, sustain and inspire public school teachers and now other professional groups (Palmer, 2004); and women's circles of all types that engage in inquiry and reflective practice (Bolen, 1999). A group described in the literature that might also be considered a community of inquiry

is a group of 200 teachers in Ontario who engaged over time in collective reflection to gain insights into their teaching practices (Allard et al., 2007). Another is a group of women health practitioners who came together around peer education services for breastfeeding. They engaged in sharing stories, dialogue and building trust across ethnic groups that resulted in new practices for helping breastfeeding mothers in their community (Smith, 2002).

I have been a part of other groups in addition to the Women's Leadership Community that I would also call communities of inquiry. The Dialogue Learning Group was a small group with whom I met monthly for more than 10 years to learn and practice dialogue methods and engage inquiry around dialogic work methods. The group also sponsored public dialogues with different practices and venues to further develop our learning. I have been part of a women's circle that has met for over 15 years to provide a place for expression of voice, friendship, and spiritual expression. What makes these groups communities of inquiry for me is the nature of the learning: it is relational; the groups engaged in reflective and reflexive practices; and the learning practices focused on inquiry and dialogue rather than on expert learning.

From a variety of sources across a range of disciplines, I looked for descriptions of what communities of inquiry might look like and what enabled their creation. I organized these into seven aspects of relationship that support collective inquiry: Building Trust, Connecting Reflexivity and Reflection, Revising the Story, Being in Dialogue, Managing Tension, Making Whole and Sense making as Structure.

## **Building Trust**

How we enter into relationship with one another, the way we relate, can either invite us into greater reflection or set up defensive routines that keep us from learning. Parker Palmer uses the imagery of the soul as a wild animal to describe how we need to create the space between us that is inviting and trustworthy: *"If we walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently, wait, fade into the scenery and the animal/soul might make an appearance. A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to 'sit quietly in the woods' with one another and wait for the shy soul to turn up"* (Palmer, 2000, p. 59). Relationships like this provide a container of support that helps us speak our own experience and keep our hearts open to the experiences of others. This is a relationship that safeguards and encourages self-reflection.

Similar to the feminist ethic of care, relationships need a space for feelings, friendship, empathy, care and concern (Dachler et al., 1995; McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming; P. Palmer, 2005; Reason & Torbert, 2001). This is not the “care” that rushes in to smother someone with well-intentioned advice or rescuing them from their feelings or trying to save them from making a mistake (Block, 2008; P. Palmer, 2000). Instead, I name what is present for me, rather than telling others what they should do. In a trust relationship we neither force a single perspective (“the right way to do it”), nor avoid naming differences. *“Our truths impinge on each other, therefore, differences matter to us both. A circle honors our differences and our connections.”* (P. Palmer, 2000, p. 128).

A relationship of trust is also invitational, which speaks to the hospitality with which we invite others in, especially how open and welcoming we are of diversity. It is also about allowing people to freely choose, to say no as well as yes. Free choice creates greater commitment and dispels resignation (Block, 2008). When relationships are governed by respect, choice and openness to other, we let go of judging. Trust relationships are also reciprocal. They model partnership rather than dominance and subordination.

### **Connecting Reflexivity and Reflection**

Self-awareness is commonly cited as important in the leadership literature (McGonagill & Pruyn, 2009). From research in emotional intelligence, to the literature on authenticity and leadership, there is a growing value on leaders’ ability to self-reflect. Authentic leadership is being described not as a destination, but as an ongoing process whereby leaders come to understand themselves and to self-regulate their behavior in alignment with core values and intentions. (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Goleman, 2006; Haidt, 2006; Seligman, 1990; Yukl, 2008; Yukl, 2008). However, leadership self-awareness is usually defined the context of a bounded individual, emphasizing individual determinants and ignoring the relational aspects of self- reflection.

For example, we fail to fully consider the contexts that influence one’s view of self (Holmberg, 2000) as well as the relational aspect of how leadership happens. A critique of individual authenticity specific to women leaders points out that leaders who act transparently from their values may not be seen as acting “authentically” by group outsiders (in this case women in male dominated cultures) who do not give them the legitimacy to promote their values, whether those values are the same or different from the group values (A. H. Eagly, 2005). In addition, Avolio makes a strong link between the characteristics of organization culture and the development of

“authentic” leaders, suggesting that authenticity may be a product of a group culture rather than of an individual leader (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

From a relational perspective, self is constructed continuously in relationship. Rather than seeing self as fixed traits to be discovered, relational theory offers an image of multiple possible selves that can be pulled forward depending on the context. Rather than trying to find one’s “true, authentic self” as a leader, we recognize the multiple selves developed in an ongoing network of interaction and connection that exist and continue to develop, each “authentic” in different contexts (K. J. Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming).

Relationships are reflexive. That is, I am in continuous movement or feedback with my relationships to not only individuals, but to the groups, cultures and systems to which I am connected. We engage in mutual influence. My reflections impact others and their reflections impact mine. In every relationship, in every context we are negotiating which “self” is brought forward and who is left behind. The work of developing self-awareness becomes the development of self-in-relation.

Reflexivity is encouraged through community inquiry, as groups uncover new meanings that alter how the past is seen. Both past and present are changed and new futures become possible (Bruner, 1990; K. J. Gergen, 1982). Through community inquiry a group explores how and why they see things the way we do. This has been called double loop learning (Argyris, 1977) and premise learning (Raelin, 2001). It goes beyond learning about the content of something, and even beyond the process or assumptions by which we are examining the issue to look more fundamentally at the questions we are asking and the beliefs that structure our inquiry. Over time we have more opportunity to integrate these new insights into changes in our actions.

For communities to maintain inquiry in the midst of action they need to attend to practical knowing, participation, experiential learning and the orientation to what is timely now for the future good of the community (Reason & Torbert, 2001). For their inquiry to be transformative, Reason recommends three broad strategies: 1) individual reflection to see one’s patterns and purpose and to create congruence between beliefs and actions; 2) face-to-face group reflection in which groups undertake a cycle of reflection and action to congruently develop knowing that is grounded in their experience, expressed through their stories and images, understood

through their theories and expressed in worthwhile action (P. Reason & Bradbury, 2001); and 3) wider community inquiry to pull out the group's "knowing in action" and raise awareness on a broader level (Torbert & Reason, 2001).

## **Revising the Story**

Narrative exploration of the self is important in helping leaders develop authenticity and self-concept (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). When story is seen as a relational act, emphasis shifts from the individual narrative to the interactive and collective. How "my story listens to your story" (WLC archives) shapes both the individual and the collective. . In circle when we tell our story, I simultaneously experience both a sense of my individual uniqueness and my similarities with other's stories. I recognize aspects of other's stories that connect to my own. At the same time, I also experience how my own story is different, unique. Cynthia Bourgeault describes this feeling as revealing "my irreplaceable uniqueness and my inescapable belonging" (Bourgeault, 2003, p. 79).

Reflection that involves this form of opening to other's experiences helps me see more possibilities for my own life, aspects of myself that I may have forgotten or that have been dormant in my current situation can come forward. I develop greater choice in my capacity for action and also come to see how these actions may impact others. Christina Baldwin describes in depth the "storying" process in her book "Storycatcher". She explains that "Revising the "self-story" provides the foundation for doing our life work, for seeing our lives, whatever we choose to do, as a never-ending story" (C. Baldwin, 2005, p. 134). Sharing our story with others over time offers an invitation to continuously reorganize a sense of self. "We blow a new invitation into each other's lives on the winds of a story." (C. Baldwin, 2005, p. 167).

## **Being in Dialogue**

The word "dialogue" comes from the Greek root words "dia" and "logos", roughly translated to "meaning passing between". Dialogue might be thought of as the means by which we shape meaning in relationship (K. J. Gergen, 1994). All communication can be defined as dialogue. In our community, we adopted an approach to dialogue that encourages suspension of defensive reactions and exploration of the underlying assumptions these trigger (Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Senge, 1990). The intent of this practice is to allow for expression of different perspectives, beliefs and assumptions without critique and debate. There is no expectation that there be one right answer (generally our own) that we must either discover or others must adopt.

In a Bohmian practice of dialogue it is recommended to slow the pace of conversation, to allow moments of silence in which people can get in touch with how they're feeling and thinking. The playing field is equalized by setting aside differences in roles or status, allowing each person equal opportunity to speak. Instead of speaking for others, people are encouraged to speak to their own experience, to speak into the center of the group and to speak from the heart. When a comment triggers an emotional reaction, the practice encourages reflection on and sharing of the assumption or belief that is being challenged rather than to argue, defend or advocate for that belief. This practice encourages groups to develop skills in listening & self-reflection, to manage the discomfort of being in inquiry, in a place of not knowing and not having answers (Belden-Charles, 2009).

Dialogue is a practice that can help us peacefully coordinate conflicting moralities between diverse and contradictory worldviews. MacNamee asks "*What if our vision of winning was reframed as an opportunity to be in extended conversation with the other in which new understanding – not agreement, validation or consensus – could be constructed? This is the difference of dialogue.*" And "*Can we imagine – and more important, can we create – a social order that is not ordered by similarity but is ordered by difference?*" (McNamee, 2007, p. 9).

Dialogue invites us to enter into the tension. It encourages a willingness to dwell in "not knowing" and enter into a space of questioning in which there may be no quick or even ultimate answers. Dialogue calls us to hold tension creatively so that we might be changed; something might emerge differently; or we might find ways to go on together with our differences (K. J. Gergen, 2009; Hosking & McNamee, forthcoming).

## **Managing Tension**

Feminist literature has exposed how our Western cultural drive for a unified identity can lead to differences being denied or suppressed (Young, 1995). Philosophers such as Derrida and Foucault have raised awareness of the dualistic thinking patterns that try to define an identity as a closed totality. "Unification" thinking always excludes some elements and creates a hierarchy of value in which one side is valued more highly than the other i.e. subject/object, mind/body, culture/nature (Hekman, 1995; Young, 1995). Yet groups, organizations and communities engage in identity construction to make sense of their world (Weick, 1995). So a challenge in creating collective inquiry in a group over time is how to manage the group's identity

construction without creating domination of a singular set of beliefs, values or experts that occurs in a closed totality.

Hosking and Pluut describe relational construction as centering processes, self, other and relationships as the center of human inquiry. In this way, identities and relations are ongoing relational realities (Hosking & Pluut, 2010). We are engaged in an ongoing process of reconstructing self, other and relationships. The more we recognize or function from that perspective, that is, the more open, participative and interconnected we want to be, the more we need to engage in reflective practice or what Weick calls sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Shared reflection becomes the container that provides group coherence and direction, versus fixed beliefs and structures. We make retrospective sense of our experiences and manage the overload of information and possible meanings to clarify what is meaningful and important to us. Through ongoing reflective practice and other group patterns and rituals, a group ultimately creates coherence in a particular place and time (Hosking & McNamee, forthcoming). This approach challenges the belief that groups need a singular set of “shared vision” or “shared values”. Relational constructionists use terms such as “coordinate” “coherence” and “how we go on together” as an alternative to the idea of creating consensus or a fixed meaning. They argue that meaning is always temporal and we ourselves are not singularly knowable, but have multiple possibilities of self available to us. By assuming we have “shared meaning” we preference some meanings over others. Rather if we make no assumption of truth, instead we may see that things “might be a certain way but could be otherwise” (K. J. Gergen, 2009; K. R. Gergen, 1999; Hosking & McNamee, forthcoming). This view seeks to understand the relational practices that may open up or close down possible actions, possible selves, possible worlds (Hosking & McNamee, forthcoming).

Martin Buber’s philosophy of the “narrow ridge” describes the nature of relationships that can hold the tension of difference. Buber emphasized the “sphere of the between” which is located not in either partner, but in the interchange that happens between persons. He defines this space from an ethic of care in his development of the I-Thou relationship, a relationship in which we must walk the “narrow ridge” of simultaneous concern for self and concern for other (empathy). He sees this as the true space of community, and as a philosophical stance for a way of relating in which differences can be explored in an atmosphere of openness, mutual

respect, honesty and willingness to be persuaded by others; to be able to admit error (Buber, 1958; Arnett, 1986).

Rather than collapsing our differences into an artificial commonality, we remain in the tension, recognizing that our understandings, and other's understandings, are always partial and changing. This is not a vision of a harmonious utopian community. We will have differences. We may experience deep challenges with each other. But implicit in Buber's definition is an understanding that we can hold the tension of our differences. Similarly, Parker Palmer' describes "standing in the tragic gap" where we hold the tension "even as our hearts break" between what is and the possibility of our vision (P. Palmer, 2004).

An important practice across spiritual traditions is to engage in both intention; that is a commitment to growth and transformation, and attention; or the ongoing commitment to introspection and the breaking of habitual patterns (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007). These practices help us stay "in tension"; to be able to handle increasing sensitivity to the experience of others balanced with wisdom and equanimity; to tolerate uncertainty without rushing to habitual beliefs; to stay curious and open balanced with discernment; to look inward while continuing to take action and deal with the issues of the world.

## **Making Whole**

Participation in collective inquiry can be broadened to consider living in an awareness of ourselves as part of an interconnected whole. This way of being repairs the splits that separates humans from the rest of life, and begins to open the possibility of inquiry as a co-creation with all of life. This is a view of relationship with the broadest aspects of life, whether environmental, spiritual or cosmological. Inquiry taken to this level requires us to see ourselves as part of an interconnected whole and to see human experience as not only differentiated, but as imbedded in the world. From this view, we may experience another form of inquiry, one that attends to the emergence of what is life-giving and a sense of ourselves as participants in the emergence, the "self-disclosure" of the world (Reason, 2005; Scharmer, 2009; Senge et al., 2004).

For our collective inquiry to be transformational, it needs to be more than intellectual or rational. It requires the involvement of the whole self: those voices "without words", such as the world of our emotions, our bodily sensations, the natural world, and our spiritual experiences. In our western world these have been split off from rational learning, devalued and relegated to separate spheres. Brain neuroscientists are supporting learning as a holistic process in which



we no longer think of the brain as a repository of knowledge, but instead learning is distributed throughout the whole body with the brain acting more like a “connector” (Johnson, 2001; Pink, 2006).

When we value wholeness, we re-engage these voices in our learning and allow for an ecological learning process that is embodied, sensual, enchanted (Hosking, 2010; Reason, 2005). Reason describes participative consciousness as a fundamental tenet of Action Science in which we understand the world (and ourselves) as *whole*. He says “*making whole necessarily implies participation. One characteristic of a participative worldview is that the individual person is restored to the circle of community and the human community to the context of the wider world.*” (Reason, 1994, p.10). Hosking also describes the importance of participation that is inclusive of other relations beyond human to human (Hosking, 2000).

### **Sense making as Structure**

In a world that is seen as continuous and dynamic, we make sense of things through ongoing cycles of action and reflection. In our reflection, we name things in ways that allow us to act, to move forward, to go on together. It is in our collective and continual sense making that we determine workable relations, extract the cues that create our future context and create an interpretation that provides coherence. Sense making is not merely an interpretation, it is a creative act done relationally, the joint creation of shared meaning. It is a process, not a product. When we engage in sense making, we are making commitments around specific actions; we are imposing value on information (Weick, 1995).

Through sense making we are able to change the way we view organizational structure. Weick describes the new structure as “organized anarchy”. These are flexible, informal and ephemeral organizations in which structure unfolds and changes (Weick, 1995). Organizational constructions are local, both historically and culturally (Hosking & Pluut, 2010), that is, we do not seek to establish a singular way that can be imposed on other groups (such as the way “best practices” are often lifted from one business and instituted unilaterally in another). From an organizational perspective, when we recognize that a particular construction could be otherwise, we take responsibility for making choices, and continuously reflecting on those choices. We become open to change as our perspective of context changes. Our actions invite processes, practices and rituals to emerge and these define the community. These both open up and close down future possibilities. ( Hosking & McNamee, forthcoming).

## **Community Sustainability and Emergence**

There is not a lot of research on how communities of practice or learning collaboratives sustain over time. What was found suggests several areas of attention. First is the importance of relationship and relational integrity (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008; Vestal, 2006; Wenger, 1998). Included in this was the importance of face-to-face connections, creating relationships of trust and genuine liking of one another and accountability to each other's growth as well as one's own. Several describe the importance of the network and its web of connections as important support for the continuity of a learning community or collaborative. At the center of the network of relationships is respect and trust for one another. As one article cited, sharing mistakes, admitting failure and seeking answers collaboratively creates a climate of trust and learning (Bonnell & Koontz, 2007). Several sources mentioned the need to continuously review a group's working norms and charter with active participation of members (Bonnell & Koontz, 2007; Vestal, 2006).

But relationships need balance with challenge and the ability of the group to respond to move beyond the purely social or collegial. Growth depends on the investment of core members and their willingness to take significant risk as well as set high standards for the community (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004). As Wenger points out, communities of practice are different from business or functional groups in that it is the shared learning and interest of its members that keep it together. It is defined by knowledge rather than task and its value is determined by members, not by an institutional evaluation (Wenger, 1998). It is the collective practice of learning together that must have sufficient pull for members to voluntarily contribute their time and resources.

Participation is highly valued in the leadership of communities of practice (Bonnell & Koontz, 2007; Capra, 2002; Hipp et al., June, 2008; Nelson et al., 2008; Vestal, 2006; Wenger, 1998a). Wenger identifies six different kinds of distributed leadership in communities of practice. There are thought leaders who provide inspiration, day-to-day leaders who do the organizing, classificatory leaders who collect and organize information, interpersonal leaders who weave the social fabric, boundary and institutional leaders who maintain links to organizational and outside constituencies, and cutting edge leaders who shepherd out-of-the box thinking and projects (Wenger, 1998). Capra identifies a tension between two different kinds of leadership work in communities: holding a vision, which provides form and identity, and facilitating

emergence, which is creating the conditions and empowering others versus giving direction. He also points out the importance of facilitating an active network of communications with multiple feedback loops and being open to new ideas and new knowledge (Capra, 2002). This requires a community develop strong norms and skills in group processes that support collaboration, such as listening, assuming good intentions, emotional resilience and acknowledgment, and use of dialogue (Capra, 2002; Hipp et al., June, 2008; Nelson et al., 2008).

My experience with WLC confirms these findings. It takes a lot of commitment and time on the part of core members of a community to develop the norms, the awareness and the skills that enable members to participate fully. The skills to do this are often invisible to the members unless they are called out and named. A learning collaborative or community of practice offers an opportunity to develop and name these skills, to make the invisible visible and thus, redefine what leadership is in practice as well as in theory.

## Reflections on the Literature

When I stepped back to consider the literature I read, three insights stood out and continue to influence how I approach my life and work. First, I am filled with gratitude for the women, our grandmothers, mothers and sisters, who stepped forward to challenge the power and privilege imbedded in modernist thought that kept women from being seen as fully human until only a hundred years ago. Their sacrifices and hard work gave me the opportunity for an education, a leadership career and choices they could never dream of. Their work paved the way for the inclusion of relational values.

Second, the readings both deepened and challenged my understanding of the WLC principles and practices. WLC's embracing of relationship, dialogue, story, wholeness, ritual and action learning still seem very relevant. What I am letting go of is the questions of "essence" in relation to identity and authentic self. Through a relational lens I've come to see myself not as a fixed "essence" but rather as a "multi-being", myself in continuous creation. Who I am has transitioned, from "doing, to being to becoming". In the "doing" orientation it was my achievements and how I was perceived that defined me. When I shifted to a "being" orientation, I embarked on a deeper search for my true, authentic self, beyond the external definitions and judgments that defined who I was. Now my orientation is one of "becoming", embracing the multiple possibilities of who I am and can become. My questions shift to those of choice: Where am I (with whom/what) and what does that evoke in me? What is most generative in this situation? What do I want to contribute to? What do we want to create together?

Third, I am encouraged by the movement in both organizational theory and relational theory to recognize a relational stance that encompasses the whole web of life, seen and unseen. To the extent we recognize this larger interconnection in organizations and communities, the more functional, creative and generative I believe we will become.

Finishing the literature search, I headed into yet another round of the spiral, the WLC research. In the next chapter I describe the methodology I developed to conduct the research and the components of that inquiry.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

My methodology is an eclectic mix of qualitative research approaches. As a feminist qualitative research project it provides a subjective, rather than an objective account of our organization's experience. I have participated in the dialogues and events written here. It is an autoethnographic tale, written in both an "I" and "we" voice. It is also part narrative research. I told the "story" of the community's founding and evolution. The story comes from our collective memory, which is based in our shared assumption of what happened. At another level, the WLC community itself is a living action research project. For twenty years the community has engaged in an ongoing cycle of reflection and action as its most fundamental approach to inquiry. Below is a more detailed description of how these methods relate to the project and how I applied our own community's process of meaning making to form my methods.

### *Considerations from Feminist Research*

In developing my methodology, I started with a review of feminist research practice. Feminist research strives to give voice to the underrepresented voices of women in a broad range of academic disciplines. Arising from the second wave or standpoint feminist movement, this is activist research which has sought not to just abstractly "study" women but also to empower them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Feminist research methods cover both quantitative and qualitative methodology, but all seek holistic approaches that link theory, epistemology and method (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Consistent with feminist theory, this research seeks to build knowledge by engaging multiple voices. Postmodern feminist research acknowledges that research "subjects" are not constituted, that as such, they do not have innate and fixed truths that must be uncovered. Instead, they (we) are products of a culture, of a set of discourses. In this view, we are not fixed entities, but rather "subjects in process" who have agency and potential for change (Kristeva, 1980). Therefore in feminist postmodern research, women's experience becomes part of the discursive field to be explored, encompassing both how we are formed and transformed (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

Feminist, qualitative research is based on several challenges to traditional quantitative research methods. Mary Gergen describes five of these challenges ((M. Gergen, 2001). Below is my reflection on how the challenges she identifies relate to my research:

1. For feminist researchers, all knowledge is situated. What we know is from a particular perspective or context and is located in time and space. WLC is a community of mostly

white, middle aged and mid-career, educated women, although we represent some diversity in socio-economic level, religion and sexual orientation, and involved women from both Canada and the U.S. As a part of the same demographic, I also bring the limitations and opportunities of a white woman of privilege to this research project.

2. Feminist research is values based. WLC is an organization with a set of principles and practices that were generated from the cofounder's experience and further developed through community dialogue. It was important to me as a member of the community to incorporate as well as question these principles and practices in my study.
3. All research is relational. In feminist research there is a desire to equalize power relationships and an obligation to balance scholarship and friendship. In the course of completing this research, I continued to be connected through work and friendship with members of WLC. These relationships are not static, and they changed over the course of my dissertation in ways I could not have predicted when I began. Starting from a central role in the board circle, the facilitator circle, and the alumnae circle, I moved to the periphery and allowed the community to move forward without a founder in a central leadership role. During this time I also worked through the ending of a 20 year work partnership with one of my cofounders. The research process helped me find a balance between my relationship with the community and my relationship with myself, seeing more clearly my own story within the community's story.
4. Feminist research challenges the "right" of a researcher to represent others. As both a cofounder and community member I am an "insider" on this research project. I cannot be unbiased as I have been part of shaping the organization that I am studying. I did not want this project to be only my story. It is an organizational story I wanted to tell. It was important to me that I give voice to not only my own story, but to the collective, "shared" story that we had documented in our community archives.
5. Reflexivity is important to feminist research. It is making explicit one's biases and assumptions. It is being clear about what one is addressing and what is left out. I chose to address the organizational story; how we formed a community using relational leadership practices and principles. I am interested in how we used these practices to form and sustain a network organization over time, and what emerged as structures, practices, and rituals that engage members and sustain the community's growth. What is left out is much of my own personal leadership story and the personal stories of others. What is also left out is an in-depth review of the stories of those who did not remain engaged in the community. For this research, I was more interested in those

who chose to stay engaged and what we jointly created as organizational practice. I did however include the results of a 2009 member survey and also had interviews with three members and one founder who are no longer engaged in the community to bring forward some perspective of those who chose to disengage.

### ***Autoethnography***

Autoethnography as a research methodology is an important part of my approach to this project. A major proponent of this viewpoint, Carolyn Ellis, describes autoethnography as “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal with the cultural, social and political.” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). I am writing my story and employ self-reflection throughout the paper. However, as an organizational story, I found myself writing the story from a collective voice. Because our community records its collective meaning in an extensive archive, I had the opportunity to peer into an unfolding story that had been created in relationship over time. As such, the story has less of a personal, emotional quality. Instead, it surfaces the highs and lows of the group, the tensions and the turning points we have faced along the way. I have included pictures to provide a flavor of what happens in a WLC gathering, but this experience does not lend itself well to a two-dimensional written format.

In that sense, if autoethnography applies, it is both my story and our story, a “collective autoethnography”. As our story, I involved both the community records and others within the community to tell a shared story, one that has already been told within the community and that constitutes our collective memory. As my story, it is told in my voice. Other community members would surely have told a different story than mine. The findings are mine and reflect how I made sense of the story, the readings and the community dialogues and events. As a cofounder, my story has had a strong influence in the community. The two stories, mine and ours, are intertwined. Each influences the one another. It is difficult to separate the two. They dance together in relationship, in dialogue over time.

### ***Narrative Research***

The WLC story is like a memoir. It is the telling of a memory. The “truth” in a memoir is not an objective truth. Narrative truth is found in our answers to the questions: “is it plausible; does it make sense; is it coherent (Polkinghorne, 1988) It is not so important whether the facts are all correct. This is truth that is based on how the experience is endowed with meaning (Bruner, 1990). The WLC story is a representation, the story constructs itself in the telling. Narrative research recognizes that our life stories have three aspects: there is life as lived, life as we

experience it and life as it is told. There will always be discrepancies among these (Antaki, 1988).

Similarly, organizational sense making occurs as narrative rather than as “objective truth”. Karl Weick describes seven properties of group sense making: 1) it is grounded in identity construction. We select what goes on around us based on the implications for who we know ourselves to be and wish to become. 2) Meaning is created retrospectively. 3) It is an enactment in ongoing co-determination. We create and find what we expect to find. 4) It is a social process in which we are not just reaching shared understanding, but we are engaging one another towards workable actions, towards finding a way forward together. 5) It happens in a moment in time within a continuous flow in which we are somehow interrupted, surprised or thrown; our emotional reaction influences our sense making. 6) It is within context, based on abstracted cues. 7) It is driven more by plausibility than by accuracy. We seek a way forward, a way to act and this continuous emergence drives our sense making (Weick, 1995).

As a narrative study, this paper takes a look at a process of organizational sense-making, or as we prefer to call it, meaning making. While originally seeing these two words, sense making and meaning making, as interchangeable, I have come to make a distinction between them. What makes sense is not necessarily the same as what is meaningful. Sense making evokes logic, pragmatism, practicality. Meaning making speaks to me of values, significance, care. It is the language of the feminine.

### ***Community as Action Research***

At another level, The Women’s Leadership Community itself is an ongoing participatory action research project. From the early gatherings of the founders to the present, the community has applied the principles of action research. We are a community of inquiry. We have an ongoing practice of reflection on our community’s experience, meaning making and application of our learning to inform where we go next. We have sustained an inquiry into women and leadership for more than fifteen years, applying what we learned to ourselves and our organizational practices. Our community might be seen as a practice field for feminist action research. Our practices include narrative and story, embodiment, performative expression (including work with image and metaphor as well as theater), memory and restorying activities as well as dialogue on feminist relational values. These are practices that are being used more and more in qualitative research (M. Gergen, 2001).



Although we are outside of an academic institution, there is a blurring of the lines between academic research and action research done outside academia (P. Reason, 1996). Some WLC members work in academia and have influenced the community with academic theory and research. This research has been transparent to the WLC community. At each step of the process, the board has invited me in to share my learning. I have shared working drafts and “white papers” with the board and facilitator circles along the way. I believe this has been informative in my analysis and helpful in bringing new ideas to the community.

## ***Methods***

What follows is a description of the methods I used for this study. I engaged in five steps that follow the practice for meaning making that we use within the WLC community.

- 1) *Naming the context.* This step was an iterative process in which the overall focus question and methodology emerged. As part of this context I identified three domains for completing a literature search. This step took a significant amount of upfront time during which I read, reflected and engaged in dialogues with community members, Taos Institute advisors and colleagues. The theoretical context for the study is social construction and relational theory.
- 2) *Telling the past/current story.* In this step I gathered and re-read the community archives. The archives included meeting notes, journal entries, retreat summaries, reference materials, a master’s dissertation completed on the community in 2001 that used an appreciative inquiry process with the community, three different surveys conducted with alums over 13 years, as well as images, artifacts, poems, stories, journals, scrapbooks and other visual artifacts that the community has produced over the past 19 years. (See appendix A for a complete list of what is included in the archives). Maintaining a community archive is a valued practice within the community. Steeping myself in this rich archive led me to write the “collective” story.
- 3) *Deepening the story through reflection.* In this step I involved the community in the three semi-structured group dialogues to gain insight from community members on their experience of the community. I provided a set of questions for reflection in advance of each dialogue. I acted as facilitator and interviewer in the dialogues. We covered all my questions, but in an unstructured way. To this data I added a review of four events that transpired during the time of my research and that had particular relevance to my research question. I also included the data from a survey that the board circle conducted during this time with alumnae. This information added a small, but important “quantitative” component to the research.

During the time of my research (3 years) I also engaged in many conversations with individual community members, including cofounders, board members, members of the facilitator circle and alumnae. Before I wrote my findings, I went into my own internal dialogue at which time I stopped conversations with the community and took time to personally sift and sort through what I had heard.

4) *Reflecting on patterns and themes.* Finding patterns and themes was an iterative process that occurred in each event and dialogue, in my reflection on the story and ultimately in a summary of the overall themes in response to the research question.

5) *Application of the learning to the future or to other contexts.* Finally I discuss the usefulness of our experience sustaining relational leadership to other situations, groups or organizations, what might be missing and provide my speculations on where the next round of community inquiry might go.

## **The Collective Story**

Since the start we have kept records of our gatherings. Our dialogues involved not only exploring our differing perspectives, but also articulating our places of agreement and how we would move things forward. Our notes contain the records of these conversations and decisions. I found myself wanting to describe the community's experience using these words, our words. This felt most true to our community's practice of meaning-making and culture. What emerged was an organizational story, a story of how the community formed and changed, from its founding roots in 1991 to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 2007. It was this story that I felt to be the warp and weave of how we developed and sustained relational leadership.

The next step was to get feedback on the story from others in the community. The two other cofounders and two alumnae who had been part of both the facilitator circle and the board circle reviewed the story for accuracy on both the facts and the feel. I then worked with one of the cofounders to review the story in greater depth and pull out the key themes of the story for my literature search.

## **Group Dialogues**

In addition to writing the story, I facilitated and recorded three group dialogues. The purpose of the dialogues was to gather current data on community members' experiences. I selected the three circles of our organization structure to engage in the dialogue: the board, of which all but

one member was present, the facilitator circle (all present), and a group of active alumnae. I used the same set of questions as thought starters for each dialogue. The questions are listed below. The bolded questions I shared in advance with dialogue participants. The sub-questions were those I had developed for myself to help expand the dialogue.

1. PARTICIPATION: **How did you first become drawn to WLC? What drew you in? What keeps you coming back?** *What drew you to become a member of the board/a facilitator? Why have you stayed engaged on the board/as a facilitator? (explore any turning points or aha moments here)*
2. PRACTICES: **What is an example of a WLC practice that has had an impact in your life? When/How did you first experience this practice? What was the impact?** *Are there any practices that you have continued to do on your own? What impact have these had in your life?*
3. IDENTITY: **Can you describe a time, moment or an event when you began to identify yourself as a member of WIL/WLC?** *(get individual experiences out first, then move to collective description of the community)*
4. **How would you describe the identity of this community? What is the significance of our principles? Our practices? Our mission? Key topics like women, leadership, the archetypal feminine, etc.?** *What do we talk about when we come together? What do you recall as significant in the conversations and dialogues in which you have participated? What about leadership? The archetypal feminine? How do our principles inform/guide us? (Do they?) How have these impacted your life? Where have we had significant differences? How have we resolved these? How are we different from other women's groups?*
5. SUSTAINABILITY: **What have we learned about building and sustaining this community over the past decade? What have been some of our key lessons and "turning points"?** *What kept us going? What have we learned about governance? What about our financial sustainability? How would we name the chapters of our community's life?*
6. **What would you say is the story worth sharing with others about what we have learned/gained from our journey together?**

I transcribed the tapes of these dialogues. From the transcriptions I wrote up each dialogue, including my initial reflections on each. During the course of the research I participated in four community events I felt to be significant for my research. The events provide a bit of continuation of the current story and I felt they added additional insights into my research question. The events are described below.

## Meeting with Parker Palmer

In 2008 Marcia made a connection with Parker Palmer. His writings have been read and valued by a number of community members. They have been influential in our development of WLC principles and practices. Marcia invited Parker to join a group of board members and facilitators to a dialogue on the north shore. This event was significant in that we were inviting a well known male author to engage with us in a dialogue circle. It was also a time in which all three cofounders were coming back together for a learning experience in WLC. What made this event significant for my research was the way in which we handled a situation with a group member that, to me, demonstrated clearly how the WLC practices enable a group to hold a container in a way that allows emotions to be present and handled gracefully and relationally. I will provide a summary of what happened at this event and why I found it to be significant in understanding the relational practices of WLC.

### **“Facilitation, the WLC Way” Retreat**

Another event in my research write-up was a retreat I co-facilitated at the request of the board called “Facilitation, the WLC Way”. The purpose was to provide board members a better understanding of what made our gatherings and events unique to us, that is, what was our way of gathering? The request was an outgrowth of board discussions in which they expressed a desire to deepen their knowledge of the WLC Principles and Practices. I wrote a paper on my reflections of the “WLC Way” as a thought starter for the 17 retreat participants. The retreat was designed by myself and two other facilitators and co-hosted by the WLC facilitator circle, following our customary practice for hosting retreats. The pre-reading also included these “thought starter” questions as pre-work:

- What do you remember most about what we do when we gather?
- What parts of a WLC gathering have felt most powerful or significant for you?
- How do you see the principles and practices in action?
- What makes “the magic happen” for you?
- What questions do you have about WLC facilitation?

In addition to a dialogue, we participated in an Image Theater exercise in which we explored two further questions: What has been your experience of the “WLC Way”? What has been your challenge with the “WLC Way”? At the retreat we collectively “discovered” an image that has continued to be significant for the question of sustainability for the community.

### **Launching the “WhoNose” Group**

At the same time board members were expressing a desire to deepen their knowledge of the practices, a small group of six alums expressed an interest in forming a self-facilitated group that would meet for one year to “go deeper” as a cohort. The group’s request created a conflict between the alums and the facilitator circle. I have included a summary of the resulting dialogue that occurred between the facilitators and the alums to reach a decision to go forward with the group and the group’s summary of learning one year later.

### **Board-Facilitator Re-envisioning Retreat**

A fourth event within the community was a strategic planning meeting that involved the board and facilitator circles. The purpose of the event was to establish future direction for the community. I co-designed and facilitated this retreat with three board members. The agenda was organized using our four part story frame: 1) the current story, 2) the deeper story, 3) the emerging story and 4) intentions for the future (living into the emerging story). In addition to providing me a current perspective on the board focus following my departure from the board three years earlier, two topics that emerged during the meeting offered insights from the community on my research question: 1) a list of questions that the community was interested in exploring together and 2) an “essence of WLC” conversation in which participants shared what they believed to be unique about the WLC community.

### **2008 Alumnae Survey**

A final collective data source for my research was an alumnae survey conducted by a small project team of alumnae in 2008. The survey was sent to 90 alumnae and received a 40% return rate, including over 90 written comments from respondents. I included the results of the survey as part of my research because it offered a perspective from the broader alumnae community about what draws women to continue their involvement with WLC. Survey questions can be found in Appendix G.

In the next chapter I will provide a discussion of each dialogue, event and the survey included in my research. I have included a personal reflection at the end of each piece. In chapter six I did further interpretation to identify seven ongoing organization deliberations and five organizational themes that I believe have contributed to our sustainability as an organization.

## Chapter Four: Research Summary

### *Three Dialogues*

I facilitated three dialogues with three circles that make up the structure of the WLC community. The first dialogue invitation was to WLC alumnae, the women who make up the first ring community membership by having participated in a cohort group that went through the entry retreat series. I sent an invitation to all alums on the mailing list; the women who have indicated a desire to remain active or who stay in touch via community communications. The second dialogue I held was with the WLC board, responsible for community governance, including annual planning, fiduciary responsibilities and overseeing the community's events and programs. The participants of these two circles included a mix of members who have been actively engaged in the community, newer members and alums that have not been actively engaged since their participation in the entry retreat series. The third dialogue invitation was sent to the facilitator circle, the "inner ring" of founders and alums that have the responsibility for facilitating the WLC retreat series. These women also meet as a circle to define the WLC principles and practices and how we teach and model these in our retreats. The facilitators are also asked to facilitate community retreats and events and are invited to participate in annual planning retreats of the board.

I proposed my plan to host the three dialogues to the board, which is the circle that makes decisions on new events or projects and on what gets communicated to the alumnae. The response from board members was enthusiastic. They were interested in participating and were also interested in how the community might learn from my research. I wrote a background introduction to provide a context for the dialogues. The pre-read was sent to everyone who agreed to participate in a dialogue. In it I gave a brief review of our founding story, our mission, principles and practices, and an overview of WLC projects and activities. I also shared the communities of practice framework the board had recently adopted and that I was using to frame my questions.

In the next sections I will provide a detailed account of the three dialogues and my reflections two years later. I will compare the dialogues within the three groups and, I will also provide a description of the other community events, individual conversations and the survey that made up the rest of my research. In the next chapter, I will identify the patterns and themes from the

dialogues and events and provide an analysis of what I found most important in developing and sustaining relational leadership in a community of practice.

## **Alumnae Dialogue**

My first invitation went out to the alumnae community. In the invitation I explained that I had embarked on a PhD program and that the Women's Leadership Community would be the focus of my dissertation. I sent the invitation via email to all WLC alumnae who were on our mailing list and asked that those who were interested please reply and indicate evenings in May and June they would be available to participate. The invitation went out to 72 alums. Out of those who received an invitation, I received responses from 13 indicating that they were interested in participating. I then set a date for the dialogue that matched the highest number of respondents and sent out a second invitation with the details of day, time and place plus the pre-reading. Out of this list, 10 responded that they would attend. I also had responses from 4 others that, although they were unable to attend, they would be happy to talk to me or participate in some other way. Several women who live outside MN offered to have telephone conversations with me on their experiences. Ultimately, six alums attended the dialogue. They represented five different WLC cohorts and a range of years and experience within the community. Here is a brief profile of each attendee:

- AM participated in the WLC retreat series twice, first in 1997 and again in 2005. She is a past board member and has since become a WLC facilitator. Prior to her retirement in 2009, she was a plant manager, a technical leader and a global project leader in a long term career with a fortune 100 manufacturing company.
- GW participated in the 1997 WLC cohort at the time that she was an acting college dean at a local university. She served as a board member from 1998 to 2001. She has not actively participated in the WLC community since her retirement in 2002.
- KM participated in the 2000 retreat series. She is the head administrator for a college within a local University. She has been an active participant in the monthly alumnae circles and joined the board in 2009.
- KS participated in the 2002 retreat series. She worked in Human Resources management at the time of her participation. Following WLC, she left her job to stay home with her young children and now works on a project basis as a consultant. She participates occasionally in community activities, including help with the website development in 2004.

- SW is a Claims Manager in a large insurance company who also participated in the 2002 retreat series. She had not been a participant in WLC alum events, but attended the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration and has since joined the WLC alumnae planning circle.
- LT participated in the 2004 retreat series. At that time she was launching a start-up jewelry business importing pearls from China. She has since taken a full time job as concierge for a large local hotel. She infrequently participates in other WLC alumnae activities.

I hosted the dialogue in my home. I had prepared a centerpiece on the coffee table using one of my own circle candles, flowers and a few artifacts gathered over the years of participating in the WLC circles. I provided appetizers and beverages. When everyone arrived, we gathered in a circle in my living room. I began the evening with a welcome, introductions and an overview of the purpose of the dialogue and the process. I described the questioning process as informal and although I had prepared questions, we might move in other directions. As is customary in WLC gatherings, we spent almost 30 minutes at the beginning of the gathering on welcoming and context setting before I began with the first question: *What drew you to participate in WLC?* For all of the participants, it was a relationship with someone they knew in the group that attracted them. They described the relationship connections bringing them to WLC:

GW: "I had had experiences with [the three co-founders] and had a lot of respect for them and anything they did I thought would be wonderful."

AM: "I heard from Ginny about this partnership she had with Marcia and Deb. I was fascinated by that – how three women in different places could work together and create together. I was clear I wanted to be part of it... When I listened to Ginny talk about the support they had with each other I was just craving that that."

KM: "I got involved because of JH, a close friend [who] had gotten a nudge from GW to consider the program"

SW: "I had been on a year's sabbatical, I'd been laid off, and a great shift occurred for me – a comfort in my own skin. So when I went back to work I was a different person. I acted and reacted differently. [Another alum] picked up on that and suggested I go."

LT: "I had been in a dialogue learning group with Ginny for years and heard about what she was developing and found it fascinating."



Beyond the initial relationship connections, the participants discussed the desire for a deeper professional development experience that either attracted them to the group or kept them coming back. They described personal growth experiences in which they found a strong sense of connection within themselves and an increased ability or courage to be more 'themselves' in their work settings. They described it this way:

GW: "The second reason [I attended] was I needed something more deeply challenging in professional development. That's what started me. As for continuing, there's something I heard from others – being in the courage to change/reconfigure something. My active years in WIL were turbulent years. I needed to have someplace to get centered again, remind myself what was important, be myself, courage to keep sticking to a path that often felt hard, not getting encouragement or help elsewhere. It was a lifeline."

KM: "I was at a management place where I was making things up all the time, I was in a place where I wanted to bounce things around and get more support. The very first session was overwhelming for me in that I hadn't done my art for a long time. I spent a lot of time drawing. That has taken on a larger role in my life since I've been in WLC. There was this shift in me going through the program, using my sketchbook. Any time we have a circle it brings me right back to those things that are important to me. Also WLC is part of deepening the friendship with JH (another member). We had a lot of our assumptions blown up as we did this."

LT: "I thought I was doing this because I was starting a business and thought it would help me as an entrepreneur. What I discovered is that for me it was the inner journey I was there for. I could finally say what was stirring in my soul. Before, I'd only thought my value was to bring something I was doing, something successful, an accomplishment. At WLC I finally could say 'this is what is stirring in my soul'. The group provided a container that could deal with that. The real tool I received is that I can name what's going on in me. I don't have to say the same thing as others; I can say what's true for me. It's been extremely valuable."

KS: "This was a different model for how I wanted to grow.... So it helped me to do this program – it helped me look with different eyes at all of my work. I structured my work differently. Focusing more on the questions than feeling like we had to have the answers was a real shift in how I approached things and everything I had learned in the past. It launched me personally."

GW went on to summarize what they were saying in relation to leadership development: "What struck me [in your responses] that really resonated with me is how much this experience was about coming to know myself and trusting that –how important that was back in my work. So

self-knowledge and self-recognition, no one ever thinks of that as leadership training, being comfortable with who you are.”

Beyond the importance of becoming centered, they describe WLC as a place where they can know and trust themselves, a place to deepen friendships with other women, to learn from the examples of other women and a place of inquiry where they could acknowledge their questions and doubts:

SW: “Moving forward in spite of your self-doubts. It validates that everyone has doubts.”

K M: “If you’re so comfortable with yourself you’re not playing games, you are presenting yourself in a very different way. WLC has helped build that in me. I need to be who I am, to be authentic.”

SW: It’s okay to lead without having all the answers. That’s what the experience did for me. I don’t have to be like the guys. I don’t have to have the answers, or make them up. I can just trust in that.”

I then asked the group which of the WLC practices had been most helpful to them. They described those that were most helpful to them: story, image, dialogue, body work, and reflection:

AM: “For me it was stories. You talked about your art, for me, I reclaimed my writing. That has been driven inside me now. I use that image of story all the time now. We have big reviews in our work on new products. I said ‘We’re going to tell our story. We’re going tell them what we did, why it is cool, the things we overcame.’ Someone challenged me and I said, ‘No, we’re going to tell the story.’ It made the whole presentation go easier. The idea of story is powerful in how you perpetuate the culture by the stories you tell. I was asked to speak to a new engineers group about leadership. One of the questions they asked is how you tell people about the culture. I said ‘We tell our stories’.

KS: “For me it was dialogue. Coming from theater, dialogue meant a script. That was a shift for me, finding much more comfort in listening, not interrupting. I think it made a shift in my parenting, my management style – a real tool.”

SW: “It was the image cards; they were really powerful for me. The imagery, I still have my image wheel from 2003... An image I still keep is an ostrich coming out of an old shed with a green door. The green door was a significant image to our group. Its’ very odd looking and I thought...that’s me!”

KS: “For me the body work was very powerful. It has been so long since I had purposefully connected with my body. To link intentions with movement helped me do that. And just the slowing down – I’d come to the retreat center and there was this big ‘sigh’ - just stopping, slowing down, being present. I have learned to keep that piece with me. When things get hectic I can slow down, breathe.”

I next asked the group how these practices related to leadership and how they were thinking about the feminine and leadership after participating in WLC. KM responded first by describing her realization that she could ‘love’ the people she worked with: “For me it was all about love. It was either during or shortly after that I could say out loud, “I love people I work with”. I realized that I really did love them and before I went to WLC that was like – oh, weird, that’s not good – too weird.”

Others described the value of asking questions versus having the answer: SW said: “I ask questions. I came to understand the value of this as feminine leadership. A VP recently said to me ‘I like you because you ask layers of questions’. Even if you have the answer you don’t always have to say it – you can lead better with questions.” AM added: “To be okay with not knowing the answers, the realization is that there can be more than one answer, a number of possibilities and it’s really what works best for the group; That’s how I had done things in the past, but I can now articulate it.”

They talked about the value of naming this as “feminine leadership”.

KS asked: “I wondered how the group would be different if men were there? Maybe that is part of what the archetypal feminine is. Can we nurture this in men, too, or do we need to meet just as women?”

GW responded: “Seeing the words ‘archetypal feminine’ was immense for me. It really gets at those ways of providing leadership that are not necessarily gender. That makes sense for me because most work places are so male dominant that the feminine doesn’t get nurtured or encouraged. Having someplace where we just focus predominantly on the feminine aspects made a huge difference for me.” She went on to describe the importance of nurturing leadership in others as a feminine leadership approach: “The idea is that you’re nurturing leadership in others at all times and that is just as important. That was a big piece of what I took away. This would affirm me when I was not providing the answer or stepping back not doing anything at all to see what would happen. Without that experience at WIL I wouldn’t have

trusted to do that. In my case, when I did those things, thinking about my last three years, there were often times when people would say that I wasn't exerting leadership when I was being very deliberate about how I was providing leadership." LT agreed and described feminine leadership for her was to be comfortable in an emergent process without having the answers; to be comfortable in the unknown. KS added: "The image of being in control is believed to be strength. Not showing your weaknesses, showing only strength, it's hard to be really effective."

The dialogue moved on to the topic of whether the feminine in leadership was valued. GW described her changed belief that a tension that will always be there between masculine and feminine leadership: "What strikes me is how ageless this was. It will be with us for a long time, the tension, the Yin and yang, always when I say "it" I mean the archetypal feminine, how it's transformational to see it. When I was going through the program I thought, this is going to change someday. I don't think that anymore. I don't mean that as a negative. This is a part of who we are and there will always be tension." AM described it more as an integration for her: "For me it's bringing those together, there are times you definitely need the masculine archetype to move things forward. It's about having these in balance. You need to integrate these, the wholeness piece. Both are needed."

We then went on to discuss whether the feminine archetype in leadership is valued. While most said that the outcome, what people see as a result, is valued, they did not believe people saw, understood or valued the process they were using. They also described difficulty in describing what they were doing and were reluctant to share what they were trying to do with others: KS: "The challenge is how to communicate [this] value in a society that values outcomes and measureable, tangible outcomes. If that's all you're thinking about, it's hard to step back and appreciate the value of the process. As you learn and understand this value, it changes. How do we go back and talk to our bosses about what we are doing here? There was no language for how to talk about this... it's not understood how it relates to outcomes and what we value."

After more discussion on trying to describe this and the difficulty doing that, KM said: "A lot of this is 'deep magic'. You can't describe it, you can feel it, but can't describe it." SW added: "You can see it but have no idea how it's done – people say that to me – I see it but have no idea how you did that." AM responded: "I'm going to use that. Women's leadership is like magic – you can see it but you have no idea how it was done. I've had people say that – 'I don't know how you do that'." Other words were used to describe the experience: AM said: "It was

alchemy.” KS added: “ It was a sacred journey, we did things like ritual, brought things associated with spirituality, and even though we didn’t talk about religion and we each had our own differing beliefs, for each of us it was a sacred journey.” KM responded: “And many of the practices as well. It felt like coming into ceremony with each other.” AM talked about it as a feeling of community: “That sense of belonging is what people are looking for in the workplace, men and women. We might not call it community, but it is what we are looking for.”

In further discussion the group talked about the importance of experiencing this before you can understand conceptually what it is. GW said: “The word ‘paradox’ fits this –we talk about magic and how to describe it. There’s so much that seems like the opposite of what you would do if you wanted to teach leadership. The traditional assumptions – you turned almost every one of those assumptions about leadership from the archetypal male perspective on its ears. It can’t be learned or taught except through experiencing it.” KM added: “Paradox is a key concept. If you can sit comfortably with paradox you can see more clearly what things really are. So much of the practice is to help us be comfortable in paradox.”

Several mentioned the importance of the group in developing this. AM asked: “Is it easier to explore paradox in community? I think for me the answer is yes. Alone, I get all tangled up. When I sit in this group, it makes sense and it seems okay.” They also talked about WLC as a place to tap back in, not only with those in their retreat series, but they found they can do this across cohort groups. The rituals and the practices cross from group to group. Again, AM said: “It’s the rituals and other retreats we’ve done. When we come back together I get reconnected and renewed. I remember when we first came together with people from different classes. It was amazing, like we all had this shared, common experience. I found myself wanting to search out women from other sessions. I didn’t want to just stay with others from my class. This is unique in this group that we can come together across groups in any event and feel a sense of connection.” SW added: “You don’t lose it if you’re distant for a long time. It’s the power of this. The 10 year reunion inspired me and coming here is extremely powerful, feels like coming home. If I don’t do this again for another 3 years I can come back and it will feel like I hadn’t left.”

Finally, I asked them what had changed for them through their experience with WLC. They mentioned having more balance, being able to let go of a prescribed outcome, getting in touch with what was right for oneself, letting go of the “shoulds”, learning about how to build safety

and trust in a group. We talked about the value of having a safe container at work, a place where you can be vulnerable. They talked about the tension that this creates in traditional workplaces where security is based on power and control. I asked if that tension impacted women staying in leadership roles. The group responded affirmatively and acknowledged the tension they experienced serving in traditional leadership roles and its impact on their career choices:

AM: “I don’t know the answer to that but it is part of my wanting to retire... I get energized working with my teams but it’s all the other bureaucracy that is pushing me to retire. I don’t want that tension and that struggle anymore.”

SW: “: I’m less inclined to want to stay. I play the “I won the lottery” game, be a risk-taker and do what comes naturally, that doesn’t make me feel that conflict and tension. It seems to be working, and that will sustain me if I can stay in that kind of environment. And my boss’s willingness to support me is key.

KS: “If your goals are to be fulfilled, than your eye is not necessarily on your next strategic career move. Instead it’s creating your career to fit who you are and be happy where you are.”

KM: “: Everyone who works in administration looks very unhappy. It’s an oppressive environment. My decision not to move into that group was really informed by WLC.”

GW: “I couldn’t be in that job any longer than I was – there was such tension. I think that was my personality, I retired because I knew I couldn’t stay in that job, it was eating me up.”

I ended the dialogue with a poem, “Please Come Home” by Jane Hooper in *Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* by C Bourgeault (2003), Jossey-Bass. I also had wrapped up stones purchased at a local shop that came with a printed card of their associated qualities. Each woman chose a stone to take with her and we talked about two new parts of the retreat series; the focus on basic centering practice and the work with setting intentions for qualities we wish to experience more of in our lives.

## **Reflection**

Reflecting on this dialogue, I am struck by how the WLC experience impacted not only the participants personally, but how they described the way they approached their leadership work. All of them were able to articulate how their WLC experience had translated into their work, how it enabled them to act in ways that were more true to their values and beliefs. Both AM and GW did not get external reinforcement for their approach, but I was aware, through my work contacts with others who worked with them that they were viewed as exceptional leaders achieving

excellent results. I was also struck by how many had found supportive relationships in their work, whether a boss or a colleague, to provide further encouragement in their approach to leadership.

The description of WLC as “magic” is a common description alums use to describe their experience. Clare Zammit and Katherine Woodward Thomas, founders of the New Feminine Power webcast series also use the term “magic” to describe the feminine. They claim there is no word in the English language for a feminine version of power, which values being, relatedness, the soft, the receptive, and the intuitive. They said the closest word is “magic”: defined as the ability to harness energy. They describe feminine power as “the ability to consciously co-create and bring forth unmanifested potentials of life – learning to harness the power of relatedness”(Thomas & Zammit, 2010). Participants said they experienced the magic even when they came together with women they didn’t know from other cohorts. Clearly we were doing something to create a quality of experience that was not just about a certain type of chemistry between a particular group of women. While they had difficulty articulating what this magic was or how it was created, even when they, themselves, were creating it, they were able to identify some aspects of the experience that were important.

One was the time they spent in self-reflection. Through a variety of reflective practices (story writing, image cards, drawing, body movement) they described how they were able to listen more deeply to their own inner voices; their values, feelings and desires. Another was the importance of dialogue and having others listen without interruption, judgment or advice. An outcome cited was the strengthening of their ability to handle the unknown without jumping prematurely to conclusions. Along this same line, they cited greater courage in responding to situations with their own best judgment, rather than feeling a need to please or imitate others.

When speaking of the feminine and leadership, the group cited a number of attributes that defined this concept for them: 1) being comfortable with inquiry, 2) focus on developing leadership in others, even holding back so that others could step forward and lead, 3) the ability to be comfortable in the unknown and 4) seeing vulnerability as a strength of leadership rather than as a liability, and 5) the importance of safety and trust to one’s ability to be vulnerable. This conversation also covered similar territory to many earlier WLC conversations regarding whether the archetypal feminine could be experienced with men as well. They discussed the importance of balancing and integrating archetypal feminine and masculine leadership

approaches for men as well as women. However, they spoke of the importance of having a place for just women to come together to focus on developing feminine leadership attributes. Participation in a supportive community was important in their being able to stay in the discomfort and hold the tension of the paradoxes they faced at work, a finding supported by other feminist writers (Belenky, 1997; J. K. Fletcher, 1999; Steinem, 1992).

## **Board Dialogue**

The next dialogue involved the WLC board. It was held in the fall of 2008 at a community meeting site the board frequently uses for monthly board meetings. The dialogue was scheduled to be a major part of this board meeting, with board business shortened to allow 2 hours for the dialogue. As a start up, a board member shared a reading, a common practice for beginning board meetings. I provided a shorter context on the purpose of the dialogue as the board members were aware of my research. All board members except one were present at this dialogue. Here is a brief description of those who participated:

- CL participated in the 2004 cohort. She has been a board member since 2005 and is currently serving as the community “herstoryian”. She has also been an active participant in monthly alum circles and a regular co-facilitator of WLC alum events, including an annual retreat of the WLC 2004 cohort. At the time she was legal counsel for a retail company and since its closure she has started work in the field of education, completing a graduate degree in educational design.
- MN was a participant in the 2004 cohort and has been on the board since 2008. She is also a member of the facilitator circle and facilitated the entry retreat series from 2005 to 2009. She is currently studying to be a homoeopathist, building on her career as a message therapist and instructor of message therapy. She is active in theater, both in the U.S. and in France, where she was at one time a member of Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed.
- MS has served on the WLC board since its inception. She was the first apprentice facilitator and has been actively engaged in WLC activities since she participated in the first cohort in 1997. She is a member of the facilitator circle and currently serves as the organization’s Executive Director. She is a leadership and organization consultant with an MBA degree and a background as a manager in Human Resources (leadership development and training) in several corporations.



- LK was the board's chair at the time of the dialogue, having served on the board since 2002. She participated in the 2000 cohort and has also been actively involved in several large WLC projects, including the 2005 conference and the revision of the website in 2004. She is a marketing communications manager and a trained six sigma black belt, working for a large agribusiness company in their six sigma efforts.
- LS participated in the 2002 cohort and served on the board beginning in 2006. As a web designer and communications consultant, she was involved in the layout and printing of the WLC anthology and also redesigned the WLC logo and website in 2007.
- NO participated in the 2004 cohort and has been a board member since 2007. She is the co-publisher of a women's magazine and was the WLC member who led the effort to establish the monthly circle meetings for which she has served as primary "point" since 2005.
- MK participated in the 2007 cohort. She is a marketing manager for a large manufacturing company and began serving on the board in 2008. She is also a jewelry maker and worked on a recent project to design and produce a necklace with the WLC logo. She participates in a WLC workplace circle organized and self-facilitated by WLC alums at her company.

The board dialogue had an impromptu start with a few reactions to the pre-reading and a discussion on community growth and sustainability. This topic was on the minds of board members given the recent economic downturn and that there were not enough candidates to launch a new cohort that year. Here is the beginning conversation:

CL: "As we live the community of practice framework I can feel it more. It seems so true. It's a great framework."

MN: "The pre-read provided a clear description of the defining elements of WLC, what makes us unique: four retreats over time, a natural and nurturing environment, a focus on reflection and dialogic practices, the trio facilitator model and our experimenting 'at the edges' of our field and how the board and alumnae hold that leading edge versus us being a 'feel good' club."

LA: "A distinction for me is 'essence versus form'. If we can understand the essence, not so much what we do as what women take from it, then can we change the delivery and still come away with the essence?"

MS: "The growth model I think of is plants and seeds. If you plant the seed, provide warmth, dirt, the plant will do its own thing. How do we create the nurturing soil?"

LA: "Is there a hydroponic option? Are there different ways to get there?"

MS: "Can we separate the two? Do we need to?"

LA: "I think there is a bigger role for alumnae. As the community grows we've got a true community based on the work of the alumnae circle. If we keep them engaged it gives us different options for sustaining the community. This is a clear difference from even three years ago. Now we have a community formed and there is something there we can tap into more."

MS: The shift in our name is a touchstone that recognizes that. Could that continue if a new group doesn't come in?"

LA: "If we stopped groups today, we would fragment."

MN: [The WLC entry retreat series] is your buy-in, your training, not just the process but the real value is it brings you into this sustaining community. I took that from the name change. What matters is the community, not the program."

MS: "Not that one is important and one isn't, it's more a both/and. One enters the community in this way." NO agreed. MN added "At the end of your year you are not finished, it is just the beginning. We are building the container through the moments of personal growth. This becomes the larger container that we [board] and the alumnae hold."

[As a side note, the topic of community growth is a recurring discussion theme in WLC. Tension exists between those who would like to be able to offer a different format to bring in new community members. Similar to LA's comments, they believe the commitment required for the four part entry retreat series is a barrier to community growth and they want to find an easier way to bring in new members without losing the essence of the experience. Others believe that the retreat series is an essential aspect of the experience that is WLC. The tension between these two positions was strong at the time of this dialogue when the recession was impacting recruiting efforts. Eventually in this year the board would focus efforts on the alumnae community and made the decision to postpone launching a cohort until economic times improved. The alumnae efforts included the survey (described later in this chapter) and hosting more alumnae events including several events for which alums were encouraged to bring guests. This strategy seemed effective as the community was able to recruit and launch a new cohort the next year.]

I then introduced the first question: *How did you first become drawn to WLC? What drew you I and what keeps you coming back?* The responses were similar to those in the alumnae dialogue. In all cases knowing someone in the community was part of what brought women to

WLC initially. Many board members came based on the recommendation of an alum or, in one case from the husband of a community member. A recurring theme for this group was entering during a period of transition in their lives. Another theme was the sense of surprise they found at the depth of trust and support that developed in their cohorts.

MK: "I was in a time of deep questions, everything was in disarray. I was unsure of my base, my experience, my way of acting and being. Was that all going to sustain me into the future? I went to the WLC conference. It was a wonderful experience, but I was daunted by the cost [of the WLC retreat series]. I got a call from MS who nudged me to take a risk. My management bought it and said 'let's do it'. What I learned was the sense of community, the instant trust. It's hard to imagine a period of time that I didn't trust those women....you knew you were in a good place. Partly it was the facilitation, also the right people. It was a bit of grace. It has sustained me since. I crave the time with "my peeps". There is something special about this community, like a cool drink of water you want to keep sipping."

LS: I was invited to participate by my boss, a man, who positioned it as 'my wife is a part of this community about women in transition. If you're interested I could give you the brochure and we would be willing to send you to this.' It was a huge gift. I remember what caught my eye was something about the archetypal feminine. What is this? The instant I went there I knew this was - I had an automatic trust -it just felt safe to me."

CL: "I came having asked a friend for a good personal coach. I wanted to find clarity around my new work endeavor. She said 'there's this other thing you might want to consider'. Being shy the idea of being in a group experience felt scary to me but it turned out to be the same thing. Within an hour you just cut through everything and got to the essence. Somehow the process enabled you to feel like you just knew these women - the trust and support was there and while work clarity is still in process four years later, it changed everything about how I am in the world. The community and connection with this larger group gives me a confidence, a trust that extends to everything, and it's just an addiction - you want this as often as you can find it. It makes it easier to connect at a deeper level with everybody you come in contact with."

Two others, NO and LK, described that they didn't know what they were getting into in the beginning. For NO, she was referred by her business partner and also knew me through my consulting work with her company. NO: "I felt I could trust this. I remember feeling that within a short time. This was my "posse". It was great finding out, strengthening parts of myself I didn't know I had, but the community was equally valuable. I felt a reinvention of myself going through this group." LK talked about a job and personal transition she was going through. She said she

signed up on the promises in the brochure. She said; “there was trust but I was also skeptical at first because it is so hard to switch from the corporate world to this. ..The reason I come back is because it is such a balance to what we have to do in the corporate world. It is my touchstone that grounds me.”

LK went on to describe an interaction she had with her boss in which he expressed frustration that she wasn’t ‘fighting enough’. She said: “I came back to him and said I was concerned because there were other ways to get results without fighting. Once we got into the dialogue he agreed and then I told him that if he thought fighting was the only way, then I didn’t think I could do it. I needed to do this my own way. Without this, I could not have gone back to him in that way. We came to an understanding. I was teaching him, too.”

MN commented that “if the WLC process is indeed about transformation then I must be in continual transformation...the process has reinforced how I am with myself. I hold a different learning container for myself. I hold the image of holding the ‘sail of myself’ more steadily. I have a different image of how this can be whereas even 10 years ago I was more confrontational, more raw feminist. I now have a steadiness to see how we are going to bring the archetypal feminine out into the world. WLC gives that grounding, steadying, reaffirming presence. I am becoming my own ally.”

I then commented on how many of them had started either not knowing what to expect or surprised when they got here and asked what caused them to stay with it. CL described it as “grace”, a blessing in which she got so much beyond her expectations she just felt lucky. Others talked about a willingness they had to “trust the process” and be open to the experience. In response to my question of what keeps you coming back, for example what caused them to join the board, MK replied that it was a “pay it forward” concept in which she wanted others to have the same opportunity that she had been given. MN responded to say that for her the motivation was more selfish, as a way to continue to put herself with others and in environments that are “life-affirming” for her. CL added that for her the fear was that once her cohort experience had ended that she wouldn’t be part of this kind of group. She wanted to connect with more women who had been through the retreat series and keep learning from them. She said: “It is a continual learning process for me. I enjoy it so much. At a certain point when I feel I need to step back to give someone else a shot at this, it will be difficult to step away.”

LK added that for her it was also more selfish. She joined the board before there were organized alumnae activities and she needed more of this. She then said: “Now I think it is the combination of what I can bring to help the organization and that it strengthens me to bring it back out. It’s really about women taking care of the ‘people’ side of things.” LS described how she got involved in the anthology publication and “just became immersed in everything WLC. For the first time I had a working experience that was so rich and accepting. This total acceptance of me offered a freedom – it was so huge to me it was the biggest transition of my life. It started to give me clarity and here I am in publishing work today. Now I can’t get away because I’m addicted.”

I then moved on to ask about the practices that have had an impact on their lives. The board members described a range of practices in this discussion, similar to the alumnae; centering, image, bodywork, dialogue, listening, the rituals and artifacts. Here are their responses.

CL: The biggest one I carry into my life on a daily basis is centering. I have gotten so comfortable doing that that even in the midst of chaos at work I feel centered, grounded, and calm. At my workplace right now that makes me stick out...It also causes people to gravitate to me. It helps me feel better working through intense times at work. It’s both an internal well-being and an external way of being. It’s huge for me.”

LA: “Image is really important and useful for me. It helps people get past something by creating an image...when I hit the right image for my audience, it’s powerful.”

NO: Aspects of the five elements (a tai ji practice) I find incredibly important. There will be months that go by without this, but then other times I get up at 6 a.m. and do this for months.”

MK: “For me it’s centering, in the midst of confusion, challenges and pressure to settle on a direction, to be open, listening but not swaying with the wind; not to be stubborn but challenge what’s in front of you.”

MN: “Conscious embodiment practice, the underlying philosophy, helps me be more compassionate with myself. Instead of trying to stay in center, I understand that centering is about getting off center and then coming back – how you find your way back. I am much more compassionate with myself when I get off-center rather than being judgmental. Also the intentions work in the same way – hearing different stories over the years and how holding an intention has shifted something in someone. I get it more deeply now, getting it in my gut how this works, the difference between a genuine intention and a ‘should’.”

MS: The candle, I will light a candle at home....that reminds me of women, leadership and learning.”

MN: “Also for me the concepts of dialogue and checking in...”

CL: “The dialogue is where so much of my learning happens - all the women, the parts of their stories, their wisdom. You can just see the ‘ahas’. Learning about different ways to approach things...”

LK: “That’s something I’ve brought into the corporate world, the check-in. At a team meeting I ask, what’s going on, what’s on your mind, what’s in your face right now? Anything is fair game. We knew we had made a shift when one of the men said, ‘There’s a sale at Nordstrom’s this week!’. It gets all that out and then we talk about what we do. I call it a check-in but I often start with a question. It’s such a great practice. The other practice I was thinking about was being comfortable with silence. This is exactly what I need – there is never that space to sit in silence.”

LS: “All of those have been important to me. Another one that’s important to me is the listening, not feeling we have to fix anyone, the acceptance to say what you have to say. It’s very accepting, you can say what you have to say, be accepted without getting advice.”

MN: “I get irritated now with people who do that – try to fix me or problem-solve – I want to say stop – just witness me.”

LK: “That’s the thing, its witnessing...”

MN: “Not the female caretaking thing.”

CL summed it up this way: “I was thinking about this last night, the question of picking a practice. I think the thing for me is the combination of all of these practices – the full menu and the ability to move from one into the next; to use the dialogue to explore the image or the story. It’s amazing what comes out of the full process that includes all of these practices. I like how it all gelled and became something bigger than each piece.”

MN added: “ The artifacts, the candle, to me the ritual of the circle the check-in, the reflective dialogue, the centering movements; these are key forms we use that when those are called back it reinforces the neural pathways. Those have specific meaning. I sometimes wonder about the material aspects of these. But the forms of what we do are the rituals I want to heighten.”

I added to the conversation here: “Rituals evoke the experience; those forms are part of the culture that groups create.”

LK said: “These get you out of your head. They are a big part that makes this unique, all things that tap into something different than the left brain.”

NO added: "There are certain phrases associated with a particular group or a movement. Each group has its own rituals, too. And some groups make artifacts, like the bracelets, that we associate with WLC."

MS: The rituals emerge and should continue to emerge from each group. This is their ownership, development and creativity; a sharing of talents in each group."

I asked the board if they could describe a time a moment or an event in which they first began to identify themselves as a member of the WLC community. MS mentioned that it was when she completed her entry retreat series, she really wanted to continue. She said: "I needed to keep claiming that, stepping into that and that's where I think I started to get it in my bones, I'm part of it. I'm it." Another mentioned it was also for her at the end of the retreat series. She said: "I remember feeling a part of my class community. I remember going to bed the very first night and thinking, 'this is amazing'. I would never have thought it was possible to just meet people and 3-4 hours later just love every one of those women and know you'd be connected on some level forever. When our year ended, I thought, that was a miracle and just can't keep happening. But then I thought, 'I never thought this was possible' so maybe you could keep meeting more and experiencing more of this. Then I met the board members and I thought, this is how it can work, then I felt part of the larger community. That is why I continue to have energy around the alumnae work; I want to make sure that other alums realize it's possible to have that strong connection outside your own class." LK added: "The alumnae retreats are where you get to this place fast. We also saw it at the Conference and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration."

I next asked the group how they would describe our identity, the quest we've been on to develop language to describe WLC. They described this as a community of seekers, as women on a journey that never ends. They describe this as more about "being" how we are with one another, than about what we do. Here is a sampling of the dialogue:

CL: "One commonality of WLC is all the women are on a journey and recognize they are on a journey, seeking to become as authentic and whole as they can be. I sometimes look at other people I know who are entirely wrapped up in their busy rush for success as defined by society and they aren't even looking for a deeper meaning, but this group is definitely on that journey."

MS: Another part of our identity is our willingness to hold both – a search for identity and the fact that what we seek is bigger than one identity can hold. It's not a destination but a journey."

LK: "It's not the end-point, it's the journey."

MN: "The silence, the check-in, it's a way of being with each other where we relax into that moment, a quality of how you are with yourself and others...We are learning how to be comfortable with how we are, with the way we show up in the world, with silence together, with crying, we all develop that skill even more and teach it to each other."

LK: "That is a topic we gather around, how we will be, not what we will do. And acceptance. When the group is accepting you learn to accept yourself. That is what is interesting to us, witnessing ourselves learning to witness each other. And that is what we gather to talk about. That is the practice."

CL: "That has been one of the most rewarding things for me – experiencing and being part of other women who really accept themselves for who they are for the first time in their lives – listening to how they have perceived themselves and the talking about how they can see themselves through the eyes of others in the circle and it's a great picture."

NO: "It's also a reinvention of yourself, listening to other women's stories and having this reflected back to you for how others see you – having a different picture of yourself and saying 'I do want to be that person they see'. Throughout my year I worked with the intention of voice. Before that year I was very quiet and rarely spoke out or shared much. This group told me they loved the sound of my voice. No one had ever told me that before. This group helped me explore finding my voice. You have enough people telling you 'talk more' and they aren't bored, you hear it and it changes your perspective of yourself. It helps to take that leap to reinvent."

LS: "There are all different ways to learn, too. All senses are incorporated. There's a balance of introversion and extroversion. There's a lot of respect for all the different ways we learn."

CL added: "Another thing that came up for me was the exploration of the archetypal feminine. I've struggled with what that is. I have no idea what that is, but realizing there were lots of aspects of myself I had ignored or buried to be successful in my professional life and being willing to look at these; reclaiming aspects of myself that were buried. For me the archetypal feminine exploration was and still is an important part of the journey."

I asked the group about leadership and if their definition of leadership had changed through their experience in WLC. They described ways in which their view of leadership had changed.

MS: "My definition of leadership has totally shifted from before WLC. I view leadership now as doing or being what is need in the moment. I'm reminded that this isn't necessarily the way the world looks at leadership. I'm pretty adamant about that, I will argue with people about leadership now because a leader can be one who chooses to be silent as well as the one who says 'this is what we need to do'. I saw this in my mother. She was in the background but



definitely a force of leadership. WLC helped me to put language around this. It honors her and honors how I choose to be as well.”

CL: “My view of leadership has shifted, too. Working in the corporate setting for so long, I looked at leadership as the typical masculine form, it’s all very hierarchical, it’s about individual leadership qualities. I’ve shifted to a much more open, collaborative view. If you can be your most authentic self, decide what you truly feel or believe in about what should be happening and do what you can to facilitate that in a collaborative way, that’s what I think of as leadership now.”

I asked how this changed view shows up in their work. CL responded: “Instead of trying to follow the hierarchy and push an agenda with the right people, which often felt like beating my head against a brick wall, I found it to be much more successful to find the people who feel the same way about the issue, working collaboratively to develop the idea, then floating our idea to other people. Suddenly it’s their idea and then things happen. We’re behind the scenes, influencing. It just works better than standing up in a meeting and trying to persuade others.”

LK: “There is strength in vulnerability, admitting that. It makes you a stronger leader. WLC gives me the self-acceptance to do this, to not beat yourself up, but to say ‘I’m going to share my vulnerabilities so you can help me be accountable’.”

MK: “How different things would be if instead of identifying our developmental opportunities, the concentration was looking at strengths and building on them. This process concentrated on strengths and it taught you how you react in moments of stress, you recognize it and can then move back into a position of strength. I am doing this in my work now. People can work well together by feeding off their strengths. That’s exactly what we’re trying to do in my team. Let people feel that can contribute rather than feeling frustrated they aren’t good at something and may never be. We are recognizing that the way we worked in the past is not sufficient for upcoming generations to excite and retain them. We need to shift this to focus on strengths and leverage these. This is now being accepted on my team.”

MN: “I have learned to come around from behind, sit back and listen, see something from someone else’s point of view. Holding a space, balancing, listening, thinking more strategically how I can understand the others’ point of view. It’s an interesting balance, because I’m also trying to challenge people in a more constructive way. I used to be too accepting. How do you challenge in a way that respects, honors, guides others?”

I then asked: “Are there any other practices we haven’t mentioned that are important for you?”

CL: "Memory is one of my favorite things...remembering some of the stories, the progression through insightful moments, seeing the changes. In addition to all the individual stories, we have a collective history which adds to the richness of interactions every time we get together. We don't talk about it much, but it is important. MN added: "When I think of memory, the writing we did that connected the mythological, bringing in the goddess work in 2006. I'll be curious to see where we all go with that as we have more of a collective memory within this family. Are there greater depths to go with memory and the archetypal feminine? Feels like an interesting edge."

I asked the group what they have learned about building and sustaining this community over time. What have been some key lessons and turning points for the community? The conversation turned to financial sustainability.

LK: "We are sustained now on a lot of heart, not a lot of money."

MS: "We've actually had more funds when we've had more heart. We have more contributions where there's a special event or project. I've wondered about money following heart energy."

MK: "What do we want? Do we want to sustain 1-2 cohorts a year? More than that? Do we want to go to other environments? That changes the support structure. Which follows what? Do we want to grow more alums? Does it get beyond driven by the heart, love, memory of alums? Does it become more of a business? That's the discussion we've been having. How far do we want to take this? How fast do we want to go? The environment is changing significantly. There are financial difficulties. At least half of our membership comes from corporate sponsorship. As corporations are tightening their belts, it puts a stream of resources at risk. It's beyond friends saying to friends 'do this'. We could go a number of ways. How do we measure the success of those choices could also be debatable. Every organism grows and at some time stops. We need to work through this thoughtfully."

CL: "My feeling is the core of WLC, what differentiates this organization from others is the retreat series, the principles and practices, that program and how it has been created by facilitators. Can you produce the same results by doing it differently? Really important to focus on ensuring that we can continue to have WLC cohorts at level of participation that provide a profit and that pay a reasonable amount to the facilitators; and that we have the facilitators trained and available to allow that to happen. If that can be done, then we will continue to grow the community, we will have more people interested in making financial contributions, sharing stories, working at the edges. If we have to focus our energies toward something, that's what I would see as most important."

LK: "Capacity is the constraint, our financial capacity, facilitator capacity, the capacity of us as members to volunteer. Do we get more out of the same people or engage more people? We have to keep that in mind as we think about sustaining and growing."

CL: "For me it's trying to become more comfortable with the emergence model vs. setting goals and pushing for results. There have been things like the Conference or the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration that seemed were not possible to happen. And yet, that cautionary voice in my head said 'you do what you can do and let everyone else do what they can do and that emergence thing will happen'. And it did, both times. That is something I'm learning- to trust the process."

MS: "I am learning about how we do our board differently – its an emerging learning. I have noticed there is more permission here to follow our energy, so when there isn't enough energy we have decided not to do certain things. In other boards I have served on it is more like 'this is what we are going to make happen'. That stake in the ground is OK if you have the energy behind it."

MK: "Is it harder here? What is it we have to deliver? What's the compelling output we have to do?"

MS: "Some of you said it is allowing other women to have the same experience, to continue the learning."

MN: "That is what the board does in the name of the board. But then, what values and rewards as a board do we receive? In what ways do we do the board in a 'WLC way'? IN what ways do we work as a board to give us the space to learn all the things we described as our identity? Certainly through dialogues like this. It is seeing the value in each moment rather than doing this as a 'chore'. Keeping in mind that as we do our work."

I then spoke to the group about the tension point I see between 'holding a vision' versus 'emergence'. The question is when do you put that stake in the ground and drive for a goal versus when do you go with the flow and with the emergent energy? I had experienced both of these in the founding of WLC. And it is an ongoing debate among community members, of which some believe you need to put that stake in the ground and others believe in going with the flow, seeing what emerges. I don't see this as either or, rather as a polarity to be managed. I also realized in the past year that I had held a vision for the community, and my vision had been realized. I believed it was time for me to step away, to let other visions emerge. MK then responded with a concern about the impact of founders no longer being on the board and the impact that would have on sustainability. About MS she said "MS is close to being a founder and is the Executive Director. What would happen if she decided to pull back? Then what?"

We ended by talking about a key turning point was when we saw ourselves as a community. We had started as three friends on a learning journey. We then became a program, the entry retreat series cohorts. Now we were a community. Seeing ourselves as a community has shifted the questions for us.

## **Reflection**

What was similar in both the alumnae and the board dialogues was the sense of their experience of WLC as an ongoing learning journey, one in which the community provided support and a place to tap back into to be reminded of what was important. Both groups also found value in the variety of reflective practices presented that gave them a range to choose from in their daily lives. When talking about changes in their concept of leadership, the board circle spoke in a similar way to the Alumnae Circle. They described leadership as collaborative, as inquiry, as defined by what you don't do as much as what you do and the importance of developing leadership in others. Both groups also spoke about the importance of authenticity and vulnerability in leadership versus the need to have an answer.

I am struck by the differences in language used between this group and the alumnae group to describe their experience. Instead of magic, the board used words like safety, trust, the community as a touchstone, grounding, centering, suspending disbelief, trusting the process, self-acceptance and self-reinvention. The board had little to say about the concept of the archetypal feminine compared to the alumnae circle although I suspect this may have been because of two participants in the alumnae circle who had been part of the board when those words were selected for the mission. The board circle spent more of their dialogue discussing the identity, culture and sustainability of the WLC community which may have been because of the role they play related to community governance. Where the alumnae group's dialogue focused more on the individual benefits of participation, the board's dialogue spoke more to their collective experience as a community and how they experienced themselves within the community context. They also identified challenges related to the community's growth and survival: when to set a vision versus letting things emerge, financial and capacity issues and how to attract new members.

## **Facilitator Dialogue**

The facilitator circle was the last of the three group dialogues. All of the members of this circle were present, including three who do not live locally. The dialogue was held in my home after a weekend training that four of the facilitators had come into town to attend. We met mid-day, at my dining room table, over a light lunch I provided for the group. I participated in a more integrated way in this dialogue and have noted my comments in the dialogue. The facilitator circle included the following women:

- MH is a cofounder of WLC, a developer of the original WLC retreat series and a facilitator since the first cohort group in 1997. She is currently involved in the facilitation of WLC virtual circles, conducted by conference call on various topics. With a background in theater, she has created a theater piece on women's leadership issues that has been presented both publicly and inside corporations. She works as an executive coach and consults on women's leadership issues.
- JH was a friend of the cofounders from its inception. As a Tai Ji instructor, she participated in the first WLC cohorts to introduce body awareness and movement. In 2000 she participated as an apprentice facilitator and began facilitating the WLC series in 2001. She has helped integrate body work practices and refine the design of the retreat series. She is a past board member and has participated in a number of WLC projects, including the recent launch of virtual circles.
- DY is a personal friend of mine who knew about WLC from the beginning. She participated in the retreat series in 2001, partnered on the development of the WLC anthology in 2002 and joined the board in 2003. She became an apprentice facilitator in 2005 and joined the facilitator circle. She decided to stop facilitating the program in 2007, but is still considered a part of the facilitator circle if/when she chooses to participate. She has recently joined the "Who Nose" group in their second year of meeting as a cohort. DY has an eclectic career that includes work as a Distribution Manager in a chemical company, a therapist in counseling psychology and a librarian. She is currently devoting her time to her writing.
- MS and MN were also present as the other two members of the facilitator circle. Their backgrounds were described previously in the board circle dialogue.

Following the serving of lunch and debrief of a workshop recently attended by four of the group, I started the dialogue with the question: "What drew you to WLC?" Again, for this group the responses included both a connecting relationship and the opportunity for a deeper learning experience. As JH summarized: "In one word, relationships. And the ongoing learning." DY

agreed and added: “There was a time when it wasn’t right for me yet. Your invitation was open and gave me the freedom to spend time until it was right for me. It was a combination of my relationship with you (Ginny) and watching over time what was happening with LC and what was happening with me internally until it was the right time for connection.”

When I asked what kept them coming back, especially given the significant time commitment this group has made over the years towards sustaining the community, the responses described the type of relationships and learning that were important to them. JH said: “I had resistance. I was attracted because of friendship, both drawn to and resisting community. I was not trusting because of past experience of losing myself in community. I was suspicious of what would happen in this group. What’s kept me coming to this community are the principles, the practices and an incredible respect we hold for each person; creating space to hold each person with where you’re at and allowing you to do your own process yet creating a supportive community. There is a sense of honoring each person’s voice and that really impressed me over time. That has grown over the years.”

MS added: “What keeps me coming back is relationship and being in community. Learning how I am and who I am through women’s leadership. There’s a piece of me that continues to want growth, challenge and I get that through WLC in a way I don’t anywhere else. WLC helps me show up in other places in ways the I want to show up. I believe in small ways, my showing up helps other women in the community to do the same.” DY responded: “The first thing that popped into my head was ‘the women, the women, the women’. But the other part that is really important is the learning.” MA said: “I would second that, it’s the women. But it’s also the way the women are with each other because we’re not the same in other places – there are deliberate choices [we make here] for how to be with each other. With every day of my life this becomes more core to where I’m willing to invest my time and energy – that kind of relating, those kinds of values, accepting other as she is, its again that ‘quality of being’ where I want to put my life – opportunities for learning, being held and accepted, learning about self, being non-judgmental as best we can. When I found theater it was the best thing I could find to push me to grow. And body work pushed me to grow. This pushes me to grow.”

MH added: “For me it’s very similar. I could envision not being part of the group – I don’t have to be here. But it gives me enough space to meander. I took off a few years of facilitation because I knew I wanted to do theater. There’s spaciousness in participation, facilitation, board – to

come in and out, like breath. That keeps it vital. And of course the learning and relationships, support, growth - three things that have been significant for my current development. This community is a big one of those three. I wouldn't die if it weren't there, but it's just very nice to have it." Marcia went on to describe an ongoing tension between the commitment to keeping the community going versus letting it die: "There's been a couple critical times we questioned 'should we let this go?'. Like the second year when we couldn't get participants. At that time it would have died if we had let it go. I thought No, No! It's got to happen! Always we have had that question: allowing it to emerge versus making a commitment. When do you put a stake in and say this is my stand, versus letting it emerge? That's always been a question for us. Ginny took the stand with the board with DA when she was questioning the creation of the non-profit, the whole organization thing and Ginny said 'no – this is what we need'." JH then added: "And there is also commitment in letting it emerge."

I then asked the group what separates us from other groups. How would we describe our identity? MH responded first: "We love each other into fully being who we are – that container. We want that for each other, even if it means sometimes we go away for each other." DY added: "The commitment to emerge is what came to me, the courage, the willingness to risk – that's what we're doing that's different; being willing to risk not knowing what is going to emerge, either for yourself or for the group – that's a different experience than I have had in other groups or organizations. We do have an agreement to do that."

MS: "And it seems we also have an agreement that in order to be able to do that we want people to have this common experience, a basic introduction. We need some common ground here. We don't just open this up to anyone." I added that we have worked to define that commonality through our principles and practices. MH commented on how different the quality of how we are together is compared to the workshop experience they had just attended. I asked how they would describe that difference.

MN: "In our group there is respect for each person's internal authority whereas the other group had an external authority. We've worked at that - the 'non-expert' model. Also really believing in and holding space for and actively working to solicit each person's internal authority and ability." MH added: "And hospitality, warmth, I don't know how to say this..." JH: "It's not what you do it's how you do it. The principles and practice are not that unique to this group – it's how we do it – a way of fostering each person's internal process within a group. The group supports the individual; the individual supports the group in a very respectful way."

DY: “For me it’s a quality of being held – the hospitality – that fosters the willingness to risk – it is a sense of being held and that gives you freedom or ability to risk. If you try something that doesn’t work, it doesn’t matter, you’re still being held. That’s different to me from other experiences I’ve had.”

MS: “The mission statement is coming to me – ‘life affirming journeys of wholeness’. We’ve tried to describe this in our mission statement. It’s hard because it is how we do things, not what we do.” JH: “We’re all walking side by side on our journeys. We’re called participants even as

facilitators – that sister image – not leader-follower.” MS added: “The other phrase is the archetypal feminine. Similar to the way they talked about ‘holding shape’ in the workshop this weekend. This is harder to describe because we don’t have a common clarity of words for it.”

DY agreed: “Yes, that’s what I was trying to say – it’s the archetypal feminine.” I added that this is a phrase that we have struggled to define. MH: “All the principles and practices reflect the archetypal feminine.” JH added: “It’s both and – the archetypal feminine is not prevalent in our culture – it’s about being in balance.”

MA then shared a new insight she was having about the archetypal feminine: “I’m hearing something different about the archetypal feminine for the first time in this conversation. I always thought it was to increase the feminine aspects of the participants because usually we are out of balance the other way. But we are also IN a more archetypal way – holding space is an archetypal feminine approach. We’re not pushing an agenda, we’re choosing to function and support community and others with aspects that are more feminine. It’s back to that quality of being.”

I interjected: “We’ve tried to articulate and replicate what we’re doing, to name it, give it an identity. Do we struggle to do that because so much of the archetypal feminine is unnamed in our culture?” MS responded: “By its very nature it’s unnamed – it’s like the wind, it’s that which can’t be seen.” MH added: “But there are representative forms, like the circle.” DY questioned: “Is it unnamed and unsaid because it is, or because it’s not recognized?” MH responded: “I think it’s both.”

MN brought us back to the comparison with the other workshop and raised a question about our beliefs and practices. This part of the dialogue highlighted an ongoing challenge we have had in creating a community that has a point of view, but that tries to stay open to differing beliefs.



JH: "Do we allow differences? We definitely have a worldview."

MH: "We talk about a view of the cosmos, higher power, fields, space...How do we open up that possibility without doing it as 'here's a world view you have to believe'? How do we hold the space without stating here's a worldview you have to take on? How do we hold the space for people to do their own exploration and not make it another dominant belief?"

I commented: "It's a paradox to put out a belief, but still letting people choose their own. Our belief system is that we allow multiple beliefs."

MH: "But we don't allow multiple practices. Like we don't allow debate. There are people who have black and white beliefs and strongly advocate for their beliefs. Can they still be part of the circle?"

JH: "I think there are beliefs that are outside of what's appropriate in WLC."

MH: "An intolerance of intolerance. I once had a friend who wore a T-Shirt that said that – 'intolerant of intolerance'. Someone responded to it by saying to her 'that's bullshit, just a way around what's right. That comment probably wouldn't fit here [group laughter].

MS: "I think it's subtle. I think at times we are intolerant, times I am intolerant. That's why I want to be in this group because I think there is more opportunity to learn tolerance here than any place else. For example, I think we tend to be more liberal in our political leanings. When we've had people not of that persuasion they have not felt comfortable bringing those beliefs up."

MH then inquired: "So what couldn't be held here?"

I mentioned the blow up in the 1998 retreat series when individuals were engaging in flaming emails that were full of judgmental comments about others in the circle. We asked the group to stop and tried to bring in ground rules. We asked them to examine their own thinking rather than attack others. This resulted in three women choosing to leave. This was a turning point for us in developing our principles and practices and putting in another kind of stake in the ground for the type of group we wanted to create. We did not tolerate personal attacks. The conversation continued on trying to define what our 'boundaries' are as a group and what we tolerate and don't tolerate. The group's examination of our assumption of holding multiple perspectives was tested to clarify where we hit our limits and boundaries.

MS commented: "I haven't heard any real anger in our dialogue and I wonder why not." I noted that we did in several dialogues in the 1997 group.

MH: "And crying – there have been strong feelings about women crying or not crying." JH said: "That fits into the category that there is a right way – relates to advice giving, that someone knows better than another. That doesn't fit with our approach."

I asked: "What else is outside our boundary?"

JH: "What beliefs are really embedded in our principles and practices?"

I responded: "We have had Peter Block's new rule, no advice giving. He walks around and if he hears advice he hits them on the head. Kind of a male approach." (laughter)

JH: "That fits in with intolerance of intolerance."

I added: "We have some boundaries – if you don't have any, you don't have an identity – I'm wondering what else beside personal attacks, advice giving, intolerance, what else?"

DY: "The archetypal feminine. It's a challenge to define, but my sense is that if anyone came in with a more archetypal masculine view and said 'this is what we have to do', how would that work?"

JH: "That's what happened in 1999."

MH: "It's happened many times – I can't think of a cohort where that hasn't happened."

DY: "But what if that stayed, how would the group go forward?"

MH: "It would depend on how tolerant they were of difference in others."

DY: "Are we tolerant of that? Would we be?"

MH: "I think there are people who have a more masculine approach."

I added that I didn't think we spit people out because of that, that I think we invite people to stay engaged. But, we have less tolerance of this in the facilitator circle because we are responsible for teaching new participants and creating the experience of the feminine.

DY: "I'm not talking about giving it up; I'm talking about a worldview that says this is the way it is."

JH: "They have to be open to this other point of view – if they aren't open to that, they wouldn't fit in here."

MS: "I don't think they would get through that first screening."

MN offered a clarification: "This program is about bringing consciousness to these other ways, attitudes and assumptions and working with them in a different way. That is what the process is about. We are all subject to the prevailing ideology. Here you have to be willing to embark on that process (archetypal feminine) but you wouldn't have to come to the same conclusions."

MS added that we also don't allow men to participate, which shifted the conversation to the topic of why we have chosen to remain a group for women. We discussed this as another one of our ongoing questions and our decision to stay with women, because it is what we know, as women, and because we believe that women need a place where they can be with just other women for support and inquiry together. MH quipped: "It may be possible to have men if participants were carefully screened, but there's the question of men and air time. I'd want men to write an essay on the archetypal feminine as a prerequisite [laughter]. No really, even men who are aware often have a more masculine approach that would impact the group."

The topic then shifted to the expectations for facilitators.

MH: "Boundaries for facilitator are a lot tighter: are you doing your own personal growth, do you have some awareness of the principles and practices and do you play well with others? Some people fit some of these, but may not collaborate well."

MN: "Collaboration is very key for facilitators. I realize that is one of the main reasons I want to stay with this. I so believe in collaboration. What keeps me here is opportunity to function in a truly collaborative way and be at a learning edge of what that means."

I then asked the group about how their perception of leadership had changed. This led to a conversation in which we explored not only how we defined leadership, but whether we saw ourselves as leaders.

JH: "For me leadership is fostering the person to be more authentically themselves in how they show up, the internal process in a group. That is my understanding of our definition of leadership. Instead of a following a particular model of how you are suppose to lead, to be internally connected with what you have to bring into the world, your gifts, and how you want to make a difference. "

MN: "To me a lot of leadership is my own ability to find and come back to center; as a leader for others facilitating and allowing, supporting, encouraging their ability to connect and develop ways to come back to center – center being that core inner voice."

MH: "I had an experience [in Barry Oshry's Power Lab] where my agenda was to empower others. After the coup happened [in which I was thrown out of power] it was a powerful awareness for me. I'd had enough about what to do for others. Instead I focused on what do I want. I wanted to volunteer at that point and it was surprising on how many others wanted to come with me. It was much more about following our hearts, our center and allowing others to bring their leadership gifts. We've created that here."

DY: “I have come to a different place with this. I have come to some peace with the realization that I am not a leader. What I am is a catalyst, a sounding board, a witness. I know that’s who I am. The problem I have, coming clear for me, I have a hard time reconciling the archetypal feminine and leadership. Those two concepts don’t connect well for me. Some is semantics. I do agree with what you are saying. Leadership comes from inside oneself. But for me the work leader implies follower. So, I’m clear, myself, that’s not who I am or where I am. I’ve held the question about do I still fit here? If we’re not women who see ourselves as leaders, do we fit in this circle? I don’t know the answer to that. But I have felt peace coming to that realization. Even when you first invited me in I struggled with that word and the realization that many women coming in are in strong leadership roles. I now feel that my choices are just as courageous. I didn’t used to feel that way but I do now. My choices are different and just as difficult in some ways. Coming to this point in this time since I’ve taken off [from facilitating WLC} this is what I kept bumping into. Doesn’t mean that I’m not powerful or that I don’t bring gifts.”

MH: The image I see is that of the pebble in the water. When I am following my path, with courage, speaking my voice, it is the drop, the ripple. We touch lives; we touch whatever is our work to do.

MS: “We chose the term leadership as much for marketing in the beginning...”

I added that I was against the term leadership when we started. I had rejected the traditional definition of leadership.

MH then added: “I want to reclaim it. I’m so tired of the male dominant beliefs about leadership. There are all these mothers who are not seen as leaders.”

JH: “For me following means that you have been inspired by someone else and what they’ve done to try something out. For example, your stepping back to do this writing has had a rippling effect on me to really claim my space to do that, too. For me that still fits with my understanding of being a leader by just being who you are.”

MH: “And you don’t have to hit the eject button because it also perfectly fine to not have that word work for you. What would be a harder fit is if you were asking “how do I get others to follow me?”

MN: “What is followership? My son never wanted to be a winner because it would require someone else to be a loser. He would not compete. If there’s a leader does that imply there’s a follower? The way you said that made me wonder, what is a follower?”

DY: “Internally for me that is a dilemma. But it also doesn’t fit well for me with the program. We’re not creating followership. We’re encouraging people to each be their own leader, there

are not followers. I appreciate the semantics, but it is such a loaded word. I love the word “leaderful.” JH asked: “Could you say more of what the word “leaderful” does for you?” DY: “Leaderful means everyone’s full of leadership. And leaderful doesn’t seem like “follower”. No one is a follower, everyone is a leader.”

MH: “I would say that I am more of a follower now, more receptive to others and learning because of our experience. My defenses aren’t as activated – I’m more open and less afraid of following.”

MS: “It depends on your definition of follower. For example there’s the image of a dog wagging its tail. While I love dogs, if you’re looking at someone who gives up their being – that’s not what we’re talking about. I’ve come to some peace about this. I don’t know why we wouldn’t call this Women’s Learning Community other than for marketing. I think the word leadership plays to get more people to pay attention and get involved. The words serve that purpose. I hold a similar view about the word leaderful. And I’ve started to describe leadership as a piece of all of us that we can bring out in each of us. A lot of people can bring that and feel fulfilled.”

JH: “My experience in conscious embodiment with leader-follower exercises has helped me see that inside; I am both leading and following myself. And so, I’m doing that internally and being more flexible within to be and do both.”

MH: “I would feel sad if we lost that word (leadership) because I think it’s a provocation for conversation. Even though it’s not tidy, you can learn and still not accept it into your life. I would say originally it was a word for marketing but for me it now has potency as I think about leadership from the inside out.”

The conversation then shifted to marketing. Are we using the term leadership for marketing purposes, and, if so, why and who are we trying to market to? Some women who don’t see themselves as leaders are put off by the term. And our definition is quite different than the traditional use of the term, it can be confusing.

MS: “We are a personal growth program in “leadership program” clothing [laughter].”

MH: “I don’t think we’re faking people that we are a leadership development program because of our different definition of leadership, if the conversation goes long enough to talk through our broader definition of leadership.”

JH asked about whether our strategy could be marketing to women leaders to expand their view of leadership. This led to a further discussion of what our marketing strategy is. MN said that our strategy was very emergent, and not deliberate.

MS: "I look at how we market and would say it is quite intentional. We work with the statements in our brochure. If someone calls they have been attracted to those hooks. I am clear to say to women there's some definition of leadership that would say leadership is the person who makes the decision, stands up, etc. and we define leadership as being whole in your life. Right up front I put that description out there. I'm interested in marketing to those women who are interested in those questions."

MH: "But I want to invite in people who've made very different life choices so we have a broader landscape of what's real and possible sitting in the circle."

This led to a conversation about the diversity of the community with JH asking if there were any boundaries around that diversity. MH responded by building off what MS had said that the boundaries are created by the questions that we are exploring.

MH: "The contradiction is when I had people working for me I was less a leader. I wasn't a leader. I had a position and I was bossing people around. I still like bossing people around, but it doesn't work as well for them anymore [laughter].

JH responded: "For the sake of pushing the edges a bit, I agree it is the people who want to pursue these questions. My friend challenged me that we don't have enough diversity in our group to really help us to deal with the realities of life that we experience outside the circle."

MS: "That is exactly what I've been thinking. Others look at us and see "white women". Why aren't our questions attracting women of color?"

MH: "It's also that we don't have a person of color on our team. This was an issue in [another group she is part of] too. There we would get people of color, but they didn't want to give their life away to do the volunteer work to staff it. Their issues were different than what we were looking at. We've invited in women of color, we've had Hispanic women, and diversity of sexual preference. If you don't have that diversity on the facilitation team you're not going to attract people of color. The question is how do we get there from here?"

JH: "Let's say the facilitation team would foster questions that people of color might be interested in, but we can only do what comes out of our experience to be authentic for ourselves. So it seems like it would be a different program if we would go that route, we'd need to have that intention that we would focus on that otherwise it wouldn't be authentic."

I responded: "I believed it's possible to focus on these questions in a diverse group with women of color because I have experienced that in my work."

JH: "We've talked about this over the years. If you really want to go deeper into your own experience, than that's what we're fostering. If you want to go towards diversity, than that is a different experience. It would be good to have a gathering of woman [of color] to ask 'what is

your process for going deeper' and learn from each other. But we'd have to develop the trust – what's our reason for doing this?"

The conversation drifted to whether this was an action we could have a sub-group look into and I shifted the conversation to another question: "What are examples of a WLC practice that has had an impact in your life? What do you continue to practice on your own?" MH and JH both responded that they used every one of them. The conversation went to whether they used the practices before WLC or since they had become involved here. MH said she had used none of them before her work with the cofounders. MS said that she had learned dialogue and ritual before WLC and that she also uses all of them in her life, but does dialogue more with WLC than anywhere else. They spoke of using dialogue in their families and with their children.

DY: "I did all of these to some extent before WLC but they definitely deepened a lot going through WLC. The two that stand out most strongly for me are Intention and Centering. I may not have done centering consciously before. But that has gotten much more impactful for me. Intention I was probably doing all along, but not consciously. Being able to see that was great. And reflection, too. I am still in awe of how I keep learning from that. Even though I think I've come pretty far in an issue, like being able to say 'No', I've had to do that often again in the last few months. Recently I had to say no and had someone challenge me on 'not caring'. I went right into just beating myself up and it dawned on me – that is the trigger that takes me out of myself. By just reflecting on the question 'Am I not a caring person?' I was able to say 'Yes I am and I am saying no'. That has come from the work in WLC – coming back to whole, staying in relationships, WOW!"

MN: "I'm still unclear about ritual; maybe because in Theater of the Oppressed we had different ways to think about that."

I asked her: "How do you see the differences?"

This led to a longer conversation about what is ritual, what ours are and the purpose of ritual as a practice.

MN: "We (in Theater of the Oppressed) looked at ritual as habitual ways of interacting in an unthinking way. We had practices to reveal those rituals to help people realize how they had been caught in them and how they got in their way or kept them from seeing something. It was almost a bad thing versus a good thing as we define it. To be honest I've seen in the retreat

process repetition of processes that have meaning for a few of us but not necessarily for the other participants. It's not something I've really connected with."

MS: "Say more about that? I continue to bring roses, it has meaning for me but possibly not for others. Is that an example?"

MN: "Like we bring candles, we put them in the bathroom; we don't necessarily even burn them, in the name of something in the past. It has meaning as you go to the alumnae events, but we don't necessarily name or embrace these. To me there are other rituals, even more than lighting the candles (which may be more an empty gesture). There is the ritual of the check-in. I think we could be more deliberate in our use of ritual – sometimes they take and sometimes they don't."

JH: "What's tricky is that rituals are going to be short-lived [in the retreat series]. There are just four sessions. We put some things out there and see what sticks. For example the candle, when is it about hospitality and when is it a ritual?"

MH: "At home, most days when I start work I light a candle to remind me of a different way I want to work. It's something that holds an intention, has meaning, hopefully coming from the group. There are ancestor rituals that are part of the WLC legacy; when you do them you're carrying some of the group's energy."

MN: "I think it's that we need to bring attention to it or do it every time so it becomes a presence."

I commented: "With alum retreats those rituals have stuck with a lot of people and they feel important. The interesting challenge is when groups have different rituals. There is the question of which rituals hold the community together. At the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary we had an example of a beautiful outpouring of rituals from all the different cohort groups."

MH: "For example the candle in the center is an acknowledgment of something bigger - whatever landscape you use – those who've gone before, or a higher power – there's a sacred quality if it sticks, the group quiets down, there's a different energy and feel."

MN: Do we consider these the rituals but in fact they are more tools to establish and mark the ritual? The settling into the circle is the ritual and we use the candle to mark that."

MS: "I would say the ritual is lighting the candle and the result is the settling in – it's semantics. It's a practice."

I commented: "For me communities need a sense of ritual."

MN: "But they have to be significant to the community..."

JH: "And have meaning, shared meaning."

MH: "That's right, some are brought but a lot are co-created, like how we close the group."



I added the example of how speaking our intention has become a ritual for retreat closings and MS added that the retreat center also has a ritual closing blessing they do. Others mentioned other rituals from different cohort groups.

JH: "Is ritual where we bring in the ascendant? I think there is a spiritual component to so much of what we do. We don't speak of it but I wonder if that is what we are doing."

MH: "We don't speak of it because there are so many different lenses [on spirituality]. I was one of the more resistant ones. Talking about spirituality would have scared the shit out of me. But saying that it was about an intention or honoring would have worked. I don't want to be preached to. This conversation is decades old. Even though that's not in my vocabulary anymore I have a lot of sensitivity for those who that would exclude."

MN shifted the topic: "We're finding as we prepped for WLC facilitation that the correlation between the conscious embodiment practices and things like dialogue are the same space holding, same way of being. I would highlight that in terms of practices, how they seem to be different forms for a same essence – different portals into a same essence of supportive space-holding and acceptance that we offer."

MH offered an example of a ritual around intention JH had brought to their group and this ritual was described to the group.

MN added: "In George Leonard's book, when they talk about intentions they say you only need to write it once. Just set it and let it go, which to my excessive doing, anxiety driven approach is...well, I think how simple it could be. Not thinking you have to work it, but allow it. Just pop that pebble one time."

I then shifted to the topic of dialogue and asked what our observations were about what we do in dialogue in WLC. Responses included putting ideas and thoughts into the center of the circle and noticing what is coming up for us personally in the conversation. JH made a distinction between our practice of check-in and dialogue.

JH: "Check-in is more the emphasis on really creating the space for each person in the circle. When that goes to the dialogue which is more of an interaction we each have our space and now we are going to interact. The check-in and dialogue go together."

I asked how that was different from the practice of story.

MS: "Story is about the speaker whereas in dialogue the conversation is more about the center."

DY: "Dialogue for me is about listening in a different way. Becoming a blank slate as a listener

to what is being spoken to the center; speaking from my center to the center and washing clear in the listening. To me it is story.”

MS: “I tend to see the check-in as being brief. I tend to see the reconnecting stories as some questions that help you reflect from previous sessions, help us check-in when we’ve been apart for awhile. I tend to see story as pretty much one way and I put a little more of a framework around it – more crafting to it. I see dialogue as the stew where there could be some stories, people say what things are being brought up for them. But I don’t see it is reacting to what someone says like in a debate or discussion. That is so common in our conversations – I separate dialogue from that.”

MN: “Absolutely. For me, it’s a great relief to my internal patterns that not only I don’t have to react, but I CAN’T react. It forces those brain connections. It holds a space to allow that reactive pattern to happen. I sit with it, I witness my reactive pattern and not have the slimmest chance to follow it so I get that space in between to become more conscious.”

JH: “Witnessing yourself as well as witnessing the whole group?”

MN: “Yes. Knowing that I will have reactions but the rules of the game are that I don’t let myself get caught up in them so I can witness them. There’s a neurological moment too when you catch up with yourself and you can filter things in a different way because you didn’t do the immediate reaction. So it really sets thinking and feeling processes out so you can reach more complex levels by its very definition.”

DY: “There’s a communication aspect about this – it’s not about fixing, advice or rescuing. Allowing whatever it is to just be.” I added: “That creates incredible respect.”

MH: “The discipline brings you back to yourself. When a cohort group spends their time working on each other, they let themselves off the hook.”

JH: “It’s about listening with our whole being, rather than just our heads, trying to feel with every part of ourselves, the highest good – allowing what comes through from that wholeness into the circle.”

DY: “It really calls presence, that’s what I’ve experienced, a really full presence, everyone fully there without agendas, it’s your whole being present. It’s a whole new way of being present to yourself.”

MN: “It’s potentially life changing, interrupting old habits and creating new patterns.”

JH: “The Rippling out. Like with story – someone puts a story out, I resonate with that and that changes and inspires me.”

MH: “Another thing this group says, it’s like falling in love, that deep respect for other that’s cultivated, that can get cultivated.”

DY: “I’ve experienced the falling in love with other, but also the falling in love with self – catching the awe and reverence.”

MH: “I think I missed that one – that’s why I keep coming back.” (laughter)

JH: “I’m not sure if this needs to be spoken, I don’t know if it’s directly related to dialogue, but the responses of people feeling like they don’t fit. And then somehow through the process of making peace with that - something that happens in the process – if we are going to be an individual we’re not always going to fit, and that’s ok.”

DY: “I don’t want to make this too personal but that’s what came to me when I said what I said about leadership and that’s what I felt in this group. In our dialogue I could make that statement, be heard and it was ok. I didn’t need to be the same and everyone else had their opinion. I just got goosebumps...”

Ginny: “We had a chance to model our own practice.”

MH: “Sounds like we’re authentic but wouldn’t go that far yet.”[laughter]

MS: “I see that the quote on my journal page says “I have the responsibility of restoring myself to wholeness and that will restore the world.” MH added: “That’s why we keep showing up as learners.” And DY added: “I love that.”

MS: “This is early afternoon, it could be a real snooze and it’s not – it’s a great dialogue. I want more dialogues like this.”

I shifted the topic to a last question regarding what we had learned about sustainability. I asked the group: “What keeps us going?” MH noted that it was an interesting time to ask that question given that three of the facilitators in our circle of six were not available or ready to facilitate at this time. MS commented that this was scary for her. MH added that we needed a conversation on the question of adding apprentice facilitators soon. JH added that sustainability has many levels, such as financial, having participants.

MN: “One of the ones the current facilitators struggle with is how much investment do we need in prep time, the quality of time invested. Last year’s group spent so much time but reaped so much benefit. I was noticing at the last prep time I thought, this is great, wouldn’t it be great if we were paid. As we grow and have the initial things we’ve gotten from the program, how does it sustain sufficient value for us that we’re willing to invest in that – aside from the fact that it is our work to do?”

DY: “What I’ve witnessed is holding up the emergent nature of the way we have grown – that is truly what has sustained us – there hasn’t been a holding on to “it has to be this way, or these

people”. The emergence has helped the sustainability. When you do that you risk what it’s going to look like two years from now.”

The group noted that we have increased facilitator pay and also added more volunteer energy through the alumnae circle. But JH added that the marketing work takes time.

MN: “I don’t want to be the money grubbing one, but it is about having the onerous work more supported.”

MS: “There’s a huge level of trust and that helps our sustainability. For example, we don’t have a founder on the board right now and there are interesting things happening. The board is trying to focus on the more tangible stuff to the point where there is a development plan being written with some very creative ideas. For example challenge grants have been set up (matching funds).”

Other ideas were shared about raising funds. Then MH brought up another issue.

MH: “There’s a question about inviting others in or those who participate replicating this and calling it their own. Where’s our boundary on this? What question do we have to ask? What do we do with those we take what we do?”

I said: “I think that others who try to do what we do don’t see how difficult it really is – they try to replicate our model and make it more lucrative and have struggled to do that.”

MS: “The board is really working on sustainability. I am amazed. It’s such a commitment. People working on tax forms, yuck – there’s something there and it’s very precious.” MN said: “The feeling on the board is they want to give back and keep it going.”

JH: “People describe it as “life-giving” and that draws them in to work. When does it not work? Can we talk about that, too?”

At this point we were out of time and people had to leave. I ended the dialogue by asking for final comment: “If you were going to summarize what the story is we are sharing with others, what would you say it is?”

MH: “The fractal – the facilitator community embodies the work we’re bringing. If you don’t have the integrity of that dialogue, you don’t have the same precious program. Facilitator selection is so huge. We’ve been very lucky to have this group sitting around the table. It’s what makes or breaks the program.”

I responded: “I’ve had to learn the importance of the care with which we bring people into leadership roles, how we make those choices, and not to assume that just anyone can do this. My fundamental belief has been that anyone can do this, but there is a skill issue. And not let go too early without the right people in place. Seems like we’ve found when the time is right to let the new people step forward. I think at times I have assumed that you can just let go without spending that time to prepare.”

MS: “I appreciated the trust – being involved in that decision. I would add to the phrase “life-changing” – it has been that for me.”

DY: “To me it’s been a validation of what I need.”

MN: “I keep coming back to the list of strengths of what we have – patience and tolerance. One of the biggest parts I have embraced is the time for process – that makes me so much more tolerant of myself and other people. I feel it has made it easy for me to be much more integrated in heart, mind, ‘hara’ (center) within myself and with others.”

JH: “These are good words. I resonated with all of them. What’s coming to me is ‘being the change you want to see’ that incorporates a lot of what’s been shared – that we do our own process. That’s what comes to me after years of questioning the essence of WLC – the words I would use is that its helped me to accept myself more fully and when I can accept myself more fully because of the process I can accept others more fully and be the change I want to see. And I’m proud of that. It’s sustainable.”

MN: “It’s sustainable because it’s never done.”

## **Reflection**

While the same reasons attracted the facilitator circle to WLC as in the other two circles, there also was a desire in this circle to understand and describe the practices. They expressed many of the same phrases in relation to what kept them coming back: the quality of the relationships, the importance of centering, the acceptance of self, the inquiry and the ongoing learning. I noticed that this dialogue seemed more alive and a bit edgier than the other two. Being an intact group working together over a number of years would likely contribute to a willingness to disagree more openly.

What I also noticed was the group’s ability to express different opinions while inquiring into one another’s perspectives. This was modeled throughout the dialogue and palpable in the conversation about the definition of leadership. Women are accepted for having a different perspective and there is an acceptance of differences in how we define and describe the

group's identity. In this we place greater value on the relationships and the quality of the dialogue than on sharing unifying language. This dialogue did a deeper inquiry into the boundaries that define the community's identity. The participants were challenging themselves to understand what was not accepted or tolerated in the community. Their description of the boundary resonated with a social constructionist perspective. The community values a tolerance for inquiry, for having multiple perspectives and for engaging in dialogue around differences rather than in debating to reach a singular perspective.

The sustainability issue in both the facilitator circle was focused on the amount of energy and time it takes to market and facilitate the entry retreat series, an ongoing concern within the community. The entry retreat series is still viewed as a core mechanism for growing and sustaining the community. While sustainability at other times has been more concerned with having enough retreat participants, and this was a concern within the board circle, the facilitator circle is currently concerned with having enough skilled facilitators willing and able to facilitate each year. The issue of having sufficient operating funds is also an ongoing concern for the community which operates with donations and small profits from a handful of events annually. There is a growing issue in the community that those who have sustained the community are pulling away and there aren't others to step in and take their place. As founders have pulled away to focus on other interests the board has discussed the need for a deeper knowledge of the community's principles and practices among board members. This idea has continued to grow as the board set a priority to strengthen the existing community in the year following this dialogue.

### ***Meeting with Parker Palmer***

In August of 2008 cofounder Marcia arranged to have board members participate in a dialogue with Parker Palmer. Parker's books are well-known to the WLC community. He and his wife spend time in the summer on the north shore of Lake Superior near Marcia's home. She had an opportunity to meet him and share our work in WLC. He expressed an interest in her suggestion to have him join us in a circle gathering when he was in town. Marcia invited the board and facilitators to participate as a gesture of appreciation for the volunteer work they had contributed. The date was set and 17 women from WLC came to the north shore to participate in the dialogue.

In the exchange of emails regarding what we would do, Parker suggested that he could open the circle with "a few words of context". This raised a red flag for Marcia who had concerns

about how we would hold our circle with a man, particularly one who holds a position of public authority as a well known author, and one whose words had been important to many of us in the community. Marcia's intention was to create a WLC circle *with* Parker, rather than creating a teaching type gathering. Our experience has been that in situations in which there is a perceived "expert" or authority in the room, groups can "ellipt" onto him, resulting in an expert monologue rather than a true dialogue. Yet she wanted to honor his contribution to our circle. She and I talked over the situation and discussed possible ways to go, but reached no decision. Marcia did not know how she would open the circle until the start of the dialogue. But the night before the event she had a dream. What she remembered from this dream was the phrase "the preciousness of the circle".

Several of us came early to set up and create a welcoming space. We set up a circle of chairs in a smaller room, a centerpiece with a woven cloth, flowers and a candle. We set out beverages and snacks. We greeted those arriving over the next half hour and began to gather in the circle around our scheduled start time. It is common practice for us to wait until everyone has arrived or been accounted for before we begin. One of the expected participants had not arrived. We waited about 20 minutes. Then Marcia called her and learned she was still about 5-10 minutes away, so we decided to go ahead and begin. Marcia was not sure how she was going to open the circle up to the moment we began. In that moment, it came to her that she needed to somehow share a message that had come to her in her dream the night before about the preciousness of a circle. She put it in question to the group: "How do honor the sacredness of the circle this afternoon?" And she added, "particularly how do we do that having someone with us that we so admire, who has taught us and changed us through his words?" I don't remember what others said, but Parker said "I guess it's up to me not to hog the air time."

As we were going around the group doing introductions, the late participant hurried into the room, visibly upset and sat down in the open chair we had left for her. We continued with introductions, allowing her to settle in. When it came her turn to introduce herself she burst into tears and began to share a difficult situation that had made her late. Several possible group responses quickly flitted through my mind as I watched the scene unfold. Each would have created a different group dynamic. We might have felt frustrated, seeing this as an interruption that was drawing attention away from our dialogue (and perhaps our 'expert guest') and suggest she perhaps take a moment outside the group to calm herself. We might have felt concerned, rushing in, comfort her and advise her on the situation. We might have ignored her completely

and gone on with the introductions. When someone expresses strong feelings in a WLC circle, we usually remain quiet, witnessing the person without jumping in to fix, advise or offer comfort (outside a box of tissues). But typically later, when we are on a break, members may offer a hug or other expression of support. The question was whether we would we handle this in the same way we typically would when we are meeting as WLC members, or would we alter our response given the presence of Parker?

In that moment of choice, the group remained quiet and attentive; we listened until she was finished. Someone brought her a box of tissues. When she was finished, Marcia asked her if she wanted a hug. Marcia gave her a hug and then others around the circle offered her a hug. Marcia remembers wondering if she had jumped in inappropriately with the hug question, but also felt that if we just moved on it would have felt like we were denying her feelings. After the round of hugs was completed, we went on with the dialogue. Several in the circle mentioned the importance of circle as a different way of being together, one which allows our feelings.

Parker described it this way: "We need to stand in the tragic gap. We know this way (circle) is possible. We need to live in reality without flipping either into corrosive cynicism or irrelevant idealism. The gap will never be closed; this is the illusion of reaching perfection. My experience at Pendle Hill (11 years living in community) was transformative, yet created the illusion of the need for extreme counter-culture structures to sustain community. Yet this experience resulted in reprogramming deep structures within me to move from entitlement to equality...Community is fundamentally about the sense of connectedness. We can carry this as a seed within. We are all seed planters. First we need to understand what is going on inside of ourselves. What are the elements of structural wisdom? We need to learn how to be alone together, being communal and relational yet respectful of one's needs to be alone."

He also spoke of the challenge of the word "community" as being too big, encompassing too many meanings. He is starting to use the word "citizenship", an old, musty word that conjures up images of high school civics classes. He also spoke about organization life having a subtext of isolation which breeds fear and creates the conditions for us to be controlled. We need to be aware of that subtext and help rescue people from it.

The dialogue moved to a discussion of the ways participants have found to be able to stand in the gap Parker described. One participant spoke to the importance of understanding where one has power and where not, and then making a conscious commitment to act. Another spoke of



the reality of fear as just being part of it, and accepting it, without capitulating is an importance capacity to develop. Another described how she empties herself each day, like a dehumidifier, dumping the toxins out that have leached into her from her work environment. Parker said he is vigilant in his work to talk about what's inside of us that we can reach, rather than complaining about what we can't control. He believes that a key question is how to deal with the fear and the importance of how we frame things that helps us do that. He used the example that had been given about reframing fear as something that just is, which allows one to let go of the heroic myth of fearlessness. We can asked what other emotions are we also feeling beside the fear, or even what we have learned through our survival up to this point. We talked also about having the ability to inquire, rather than to react from a fixed position. This inspired Parker to share a Rilke poem at the end of our dialogue:

*"Ah, not to be cut off,  
not through the slightest partition  
shut out from the law of the stars.  
The inner -- what is it?  
if not the intensified sky,  
hurled through with birds and deep  
with the winds of homecoming."*

What stood out for me in this event was an example of the community's practice of holding a circle in which each participant could express themselves and in which we could model shared power, even with a member who arrived crying and one who was a respected teacher, a male authority figure who could have easily taken over a position of dominance in the group. One community member has coined the phrase "emotional incontinence" to describe her propensity for crying when she feels emotional. 'Women, leadership and crying' is a controversial topic discussed many times in WLC. Some members are adamant that when women cry in public it reinforced stereotypes of women as weak and too emotional to be effective leaders. Some see crying as manipulative, a way for a woman to get what she wants from others. Others believe that women should be able to express their emotions as leaders, that it makes them approachable, human. Others see limitations on women and their expressions of emotion, with happiness and tears being acceptable emotions, but expressing anger being unacceptable. Some women have said that they express all of their strong emotions with tears.

In WLC, expressing feelings, including tears, is accepted and not seen as a sign of weakness. Being able to express vulnerability in the group without feeling judged is something community members value. In our retreat series we have discovered that if someone expresses their

emotions early on, it seems to pave the way for others to feel free to share their feelings as well. Several others shared their emotions in our dialogue that afternoon. This circle felt similar to other WLC circles, even with Parker's presence. A comment was made later by one of the participants that we had modeled our principle of wholeness in that situation and that our ability, as a group, to handle the expression of feelings is part of what helps community members feel valued as they are. Our vulnerabilities are accepted as well as our strengths. The ability of a group to hold space for emotional expression is part of the WLC identity.

### ***WLC Alumnae Survey***

The intention of the Board in launching an alumnae survey was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of our alumnae, both from their time in the entry retreat series and also by gathering input on where WLC could best meet alumnae today in their leadership and learning journeys. An electronic survey was developed and conducted with alumnae of the Women's Leadership Community (WLC) in November and December of 2008. An alum led this work group with input from the Alumnae Liaison Committee (CL & NO from the board and three other alums), facilitators and members of the Board. The survey was sent to the 90 alumnae on our email mailing list. They received a 40% response rate. Below is a summary of the questions and answers:

- 1) **Question: What do you consider your most meaningful and enduring factors of initial WLC experience** (essay question):

**Answer:** 26 heartfelt comments were offered revolving around this trusting, safe, collaborative, supportive community where feeling heard and inviting authenticity radiates outward.

**A sample of the comments:**

"The experience being with a collection of women from different backgrounds, work experiences, and places, was very rich, on many levels."

"The safe environment created to share our stories. Sharing and hearing each other's stories and acceptance of each other wherever we happened to be on our life's journey."

"Learning about myself ...that's what I got out of my WIL experience, that and also learning ways that I can use myself to continue the learning experience."

"In WLC I had the very real experience of feeling heard...there was space for each of us to speak our truth without judgment...this enables me to hear myself better."

"I felt that I had found a family of like-minded women yet with enough diversity to challenge and stretch my thinking."

“Experiences that reinforce that include: - place/space to re-center and reflect – opportunity to connect or re-connect with other women on a similar journey.”

“Time away from distractions allowed me to reflect and learn.”

“Hard to put into words or a list—I learned to reflect, to use my whole body and creative side not just my head. I learned to trust the process, I experienced dialogue. I went deeper into myself than I knew how to do on my own.”

**2) Q: What do you consider as the best environments to create new meaningful experiences:**

A: Over two thirds indicated they would be “Very Likely” to participate in an alumnae learning activity. Comments indicated a “desire to go deeper” with WLC Principles and Practices.

**An example of comments:**

“I would like more opportunities to replicate the initial experience. I can network, socialize, etc. many places, but this is one of the very few places I can learn to know and grow myself.”

**3) Q. What are the elements sparking future interest?**

A: Top “Very Important” responses:

**Learning Opportunities** (82%)

**Deepening WLC Principles and Practices** (79%)

**Rejuvenation** (69%)

**Community** (65%)

**Comments** centered on interest in what WLC offers unique from other sources, and adjunct learning opportunities with similarly principled organizations.

An example of comments:

“Approaching questions/challenges/experience in new ways...thinking/living “out of the box”, book circle as an idea to dig deeper on a subject.”

**4) Q What are the factors affecting participation in monthly alumnae circles?**

A: Scheduling, location and traffic all were rated by a majority (about two thirds each) as “Very Important” when determining involvement in the monthly alumnae circles.

**Comments** centered on the difficulty travel distance plays and consequently interest in teleconferencing. The power of connection was commented on by more than one person irrespective of gathering structure.

Examples of the comments:

“It is often the driving in bad traffic that discourages me from attending. Yet when I make the effort, the result is always rewarding.”

“Given the power of the experience, I really hunger for further connection. I have lots of trust that the gatherings will be meaningful for me regardless of the details.”

**5) Q: What ways should we consider in expanding our learning about leadership?**

A: All of the survey options scored a majority of responses in the “Very Interested” categories. Top spots indicated:

**Developing your authentic leadership style (82%)**

**Leadership in tough times (77%)**

**Collaborative leadership (71%), and**

**Dialogue in the workplace (68%)**

**Comments** included wishes for further exploration to follow a WLC approach dialoging effectively through conflict and overcoming obstacles, interest in stories of effective women leaders, and team building and fostering leadership at all levels. Several comments indicated self-employment or retirement status making personal development more important than leadership topics.

**A snippet of intriguing comments:**

“I would also be interested in learning about how to overcome obstacles to effective leadership and how to measure our effectiveness as leaders. I would also be interested in the stories of effective women leaders, whether through workshop, forums or online learning.”

“Dialogue when there is conflict, or when conflicts are not being spoken. WLC focuses a lot on individual expression in the container of the group, but seems to restrict or not know how to “allow” conversation when there might be discomfort or disagreement so as I carry this learning out into my world, I am still a bit at a loss when I need to engage with someone or explore a discomfort. With the principles of CEL I would think some reflection and experimentation on this could be very helpful.”

**6) Q: What ways would you be interested in contributing your energy to Alumnae community building?**

A: Majority of all responses were in the “Somewhat Interested” category with the largest response of about two thirds to **Create/lead WLC activity**.

**Comments** ranged from already on the Board or already overwhelmed by responsibilities.

The survey committee put forth the following ideas they developed after discussion of the survey results:

- 2009 is a year embracing change both within our greater communities and within WLC. Many alumnae seemed a bit tentative in contributing leadership to a WLC activity. However, we suspect there are many specific seeds germinating for potential activities. An action would be to put a call out to the WLC community to let the Alumnae Liaison Committee know about ideas and see if there are others who are interested in collaborating and creating an opportunity.

- Discussion during Board and Alumnae Liaison Committee meetings indicate energy in establishing a template or “recipe” to incorporate WLC Principles and Practices into non-facilitated activities. By creating a template, we hope to offer more energy and generate more confidence and interest in creation and leading of WLC Alumnae activities.

**7) Q: How are we using the Website?**

“Once or twice a year” website usage was largest response group (about half of alumnae).

**A: Comments** indicated a lack of frequent updates, new information, or email invitations to more frequently draw Alumnae back.

**Emerging Ideas:**

As WLC grows and shifts to develop more Alumnae resources and opportunities, the WLC website will gain importance in communication and offering of opportunities to come together.

**8) Q: What are the factors that would draw more frequent web visits?**

A: Alumnae Directory: Largest response was about two thirds “Very Interested” in an Alumnae Directory. Second largest response at 61% was rated “Somewhat Interested” in Alumnae Stories.

**Comments** included interest in an online learning forum; concern for security for any kind of online member-only or blog format; interest in links to adjunct resources of like-minded organizations and stories; and stories of examples of how WLC women are incorporating WLC principles and practices into their work and their lives.

**Thoughts shared:**

“I like the potential for networking in all its dimensions. And, I would like to send other interested people to visit the site. Links to other members’ activities or related thought might be interesting, a featured article on something/someone related to our practices and/or principles/things that would expand my awareness of the kinds of experiences I had in WLC. Reference writings, poems from alums, and ideally, an email each time to inform me something new has been posted.”

“Would be nice to see other opportunities, lectures, presentations, info, etc. not specifically WLC offered, but of interest to Alumnae.”

The Alumnae Liaison Committee discussed bringing these two together, women’s stories and an Alumnae directory, in self-edited individual Alumnae profiles on the website. So far this idea has not captured the interest or energy sufficient to be implemented. However, several other ideas from the survey have been implemented:

- The committee developed a simple “recipe card” to describe the elements of a WLC event (appendix C). The intention behind this was to help make it easier for alums to develop and host WLC events.
- Virtual circles were launched in 2009, providing a monthly conference call dialogue structured around topics that emerge from the group, similar to the monthly alumnae circle gatherings that are held in the Twin Cities.
- A retreat to explore WLC facilitation was held in 2009 for board members as a first step in deepening the alumnae understanding of the principles and practices (see below for a detailed description of this event).
- A small group of board members stepped forward to launch a self-facilitated retreat series for a select group of alumnae from different cohorts who wanted to form their own cohort (see below for a detailed description of this project).

- The annual all-cohort retreat topic for 2011 is on dealing with conflict using the WLC principles and practices.

### ***Launching the “WhoNose” Cohort***

As a part of the community’s interest in deepening the experience of board and alumnae in the WLC principles and practices, three board members put forward their interest in forming a cohort group with several other alums to “go deeper”. I was invited to join them one evening for an exploratory conversation on what this might look like. We discussed options that included having the series hosted by facilitators. The facilitator circle had talked about offering a “WLC II” at some point in which alums would be invited to participate in a retreat series designed to more deeply explore the principles and practices. The planning group had all been active in WLC as board members and as head of other projects for several years. We explored the idea of the group self-facilitating. MS, a WLC facilitator also serving as our Executive Director, was at the planning meeting. She expressed an interest in being part of the group. I said I would communicate with the facilitator circle and we set a follow-up meeting to further develop the plan.

I emailed the facilitator circle about the group’s desire to create a cohort group and series of retreats, asking whether there was anyone in the circle interested in being part of developing it. Their responses indicated no facilitator was interested or available to develop and offer a WLC II program at this time. The planners were also interested in keeping the group small and the costs down. At the second meeting of the planners, we further discussed the option of the group self-facilitating their own retreat process. We talked about some of the facilitator challenges in learning how to be “participant—facilitators” in a group process and the amount of work it took us to develop, plan and host the circle. The group was interested in learning this. It seemed to be an ideal solution from my perspective. We cofounders had done this when we met for our retreats as a learning trio. This group had a lot of experience with WLC practices. MS (facilitator and executive director) decided that she wanted to participate, not as a facilitator, but as a part of the group. We also offered to provide the group with copies of agendas and notes from the entry retreat series to help them get started.

I emailed the facilitator group about the plan. Shortly after, an email was sent by cofounder MH to the planners and facilitators with a number of questions that she and another facilitator wanted to raise regarding the decision that had been made to move forward with this cohort. The questions posed in the email were:

- *What are your intentions? What is it about a 2nd WLC-like experience that you are wanting? For example?*
- *What are the core learnings you're looking for? The lens, or frame for this project? How do they relate to the P&Ps?*
- *When does a CEL group need a facilitator and when not? Why? (When do designers/facilitators add value and when not.)*
- *What could be the facilitator group connection/support on this?*
- *What about the "embodied" piece - what need/value is there for body work "expertise" in deepening the learning?*
- *What are the implications of calling it a pilot: what if other alums less grounded in WLC/CEL than you gals are wanted to start the same kind of non-facilitated group? What are our parameters in order for someone to offer/create an experience in the CEL frame?*
- *What is the connection with the apprentice program? If we say participating in WLC is not enough background to facilitate, how does this differ? And, could your idea be a bridge/training potential for apprentice facilitators?*
- *When does a program need board involvement? What guides the board in overseeing experiences? Or when/why a CEL program?*

I found myself reacting to the email and decided to call MH directly to talk about it. I felt the facilitator circle was putting a wet blanket on their fire for a new experience. These were some of our most actively engaged members. I also felt that I had been blindsided by the email being sent to everyone. I thought I was in the role of liaison from the facilitator circle and should have been communicated with first. In the conversation with MH, I raised these issues. In our conversation I realized that we had not had clarity regarding the decision-making on this proposal and the concerns raised regarding the project needed more dialogue.

We decided that the next step would be to have a conference call with the group planners and the entire facilitator circle to talk through the questions that had been raised in the email. When I followed up with the planners, I sensed I had been correct in my anticipation of their reaction to the email. I invited them to participate in the call with facilitators and spoke of the need to stay in dialogue until something emerged that felt acceptable to all. We talked for 90 minutes on the call. I facilitated the call, inviting MH to begin. She expressed her desire that the planners not see these questions as in any way a reflection about their ability to self-facilitate as a WLC group, but instead to address implications for the community as a whole.

I had asked the group to review the questions and think about which ones we could be discussed now, at the onset of the project and which might be questions that could only be answered at a future time. We focused on three concerns: 1) the precedent this might set in the community if others decided to also self-facilitate their own cohort. MH noted that not everyone in the alumnae group had an understanding of the distinctions of the WLC process, particularly



around the “non-expert” model and our practices of self-awareness. 2) The knowledge of what it means to facilitate “the WLC way”. 3) The contribution the group would give back to the community if WLC sponsored the project.

In this conversation I was aware of the ongoing dialogue in WLC about maintaining the organizational identity while also supporting new energy and projects. This group, in particular, represented the emerging new leaders of the community. I felt we would be blocking their desire to deepen their practice, which would ultimately be a setback for the whole community. MH pointed out that on a couple of past occasions alums have taken elements of our approach creating competitive programs without contributing back to the community. The tension stemmed from two different images of WLC: as a program or as a community of inquiry.

We addressed the issue of setting a precedent by asking if it was necessary to have this group’s experience be considered a “program”. Couldn’t this be a learning experiment for the community? The fact that MS, a facilitator, was going to participate also seemed to mitigate the concern that the group would somehow not adequately follow the principles and practices. At the end of the call, everyone agreed that the group should go forward with this, considering it a one year experiment. The group also agreed to provide a summary of what they learned back to the board and facilitators after completing their first year. The questions about WLC facilitation was further addressed by a follow-up conversation to hold a retreat for board members at which we would make our facilitation approach more transparent. This event was scheduled several months later and was attended by almost all board members and all facilitators.

The group’s name, “Who Nose”, was adopted partly as a result of this conversation. As a start-up project, they didn’t have answers to many of the questions being posed. And one of the group members had recently given members of this group red clown noses as fun gift, so the name stuck. The group has since begun a second year, with some of the original members leaving and a few new alums joining. Below is a summary of their learning after their first year.

### **Summary Learning**

The group began their reflection with the agreement they had reached in starting their group; that they were committed to honoring the Principles and Practices in this self-facilitated WLC Alumnae group; that they would share their learnings and that they would each make a financial contribution to CEL for the use of their learning from the initial series of WLC retreats. They

summarized by saying they had worked to embody the Principles and Practices, had each contributed financially, hoped that they would have a dialogue on their learning with facilitators in the future, and provided a documentation of their learning. They considered this experience to have been a huge success in that each of them as individuals had grown immensely and they believed their communities had been enriched as a result. Here are the questions and answers from their learning reflection:

***What do you need to be willing to do and to be to make this work?***

- Realize that self-facilitation of a group is a very different experience than other-facilitation and shared leadership is different than individual leadership.
- Self facilitation has tradeoffs. Know that there are ups and downs of guiding our own experience as a collective.
- Participants must be willing to learn collectively from each session and be willing to look at our own individual “buttons.” (i.e., what pushes your buttons?) If there is tension or conflict in the group, there must be a willingness and a level of patience and skill to work through this. This includes the willingness to step away from a point, consider its opposite and hold different perspectives.
- Participants must have a high level of commitment and be prepared to be diligent about planning.
- Realize the time commitment with each retreat that includes the retreats themselves, a group planning session and debrief session with each retreat, time gathering readings, materials for activities, etc., and a commitment to show up for all agreed-to meetings despite busy schedules; only emergencies kept anyone from participating.
- Realize that during the retreat it is also a different experience. That is, you don’t just show up. At an R and R things are taken care of for you. We are all responsible for holding the container and participating in a different way.
- The more experience and maturity we had as a group, the less we needed to stick to a pre-determined schedule and plan. The more we went along, the more comfortable we were with customizing our personal time.
- This was not all magic and peace and relaxation. Some of the work is hard and messy and frustrating. The individuals and the group need patience.
- My story listens to your story was some of the most powerful work we did.

***Why we think our chemistry worked***

- Critical pieces are maturity of the individuals and comfort and experience with the WLC way. We were willing to look at ourselves openly in the context of the group. An example is our shared learning about pushing buttons. We had a willingness to ask, “What is my part in this situation, in this discomfort or conflict?”
- We had a willingness to be authentic and to be vulnerable to ourselves and the group.
- A small group like this is needed for self facilitation – not larger or much larger.
- We knew each other quite well before we began (4 were in WLC '04, 3 were in WLC '02) and we took several months to prepare and be sure that all who were participating really wanted to. In other words, we carefully set the container.
- All had extensive experience with WLC Alumnae events – co-facilitating many experiences over the course of 4 years.
- The group was very conscious of asking Michele as a WLC Facilitator to not take on a facilitation role for the group – any more than anyone else did -- and then all following through on helping with process.

### ***Some final comments:***

“12 days out of the madness to refocus, rethink my values, what is important. Holding that container around me was so enormously wonderful to me.”

“My learning was not as fast, but deeper. It allowed me to keep pursuing my learning with more patience.”

“Knowing yourself is not a learning experience. It is a remembering experience.”

“I can’t compare the WLC class retreat year to this. The original year gave me principles and practices to continue life-long learning in community.”

“...both the alone and the sharing time. The activities did not matter. It is the being here, not the doing. The in and out, alone and in dialogue and in the world and back here. “

### **My Reflection**

The experience of this group supports the differences I was seeing in the dialogues between alumnae, board and facilitators. Facilitators expressed more differences and more openly disagreed with one another. The Who Nose group alluded to a similar situation as they described this not being “all magic”. Facilitating a group of this type over time brings up differences, discomforts, hot buttons and conflict. The “WhoKnows” identified the level of personal maturity they felt this required of them to be able to reflect on one’s own contribution to

an issue while working through conflicts with others. It also required a significant investment in time, not just for planning an agenda, logistics and materials, but for the considerable relationship preparation that is part of creating a trust environment for a group to be willing to be more vulnerable and open with one another. The payback for the time they spent was worth it according to their summary report and also given that all but one member decided to continue meeting together for another year.

### ***Facilitation the WLC Way***

A number of events and factors were pointing to an emerging theme in WLC. The alumnae survey indicated a desire of alums to go deeper with the principles and practices. Board members were also feeling the need for a deeper understanding, which may have been precipitated by my leaving the board and by other facilitators choosing to step back from facilitating. Not having a cohort group this year further encouraged the board to focus more energy on the alumnae community. The Who Nose group has also raised a question about the connection of the facilitator circle and the board. These groups were not meeting regularly together and there were new board members who did not know several of the facilitators. It seemed that the Who Nose group had triggered differences between the two groups that, if left unattended, might divide the community.

A decision was made to hold a retreat for board members and the facilitator circle to explore, together, the “WCL Way” of facilitation. We questioned whether this would be a WLC retreat in which we would all be exploring the questions together, using our non-expert facilitation approach. Or, would this be more of a teaching that I would present, especially given the research I was doing. We agreed that the approach we wanted was to facilitate a dialogue, as co-learners. We adopted our usual trio facilitator approach but all the facilitators weighed in on the agenda we drafted. I prepared a reflection paper I titled “Inviting the Magic” as a pre-read for the retreat participants which facilitators reviewed and edited. The reflection paper invited participants to ponder these questions:

- What do you remember most about what we do when we gather?
- What parts of a WLC gathering have felt most powerful or significant for you?
- How do you see the principles and practices in action?
- What makes “the magic happen” for you?
- What questions do have about WLC facilitation?

The 17 participants arrived for the two-day retreat on a Sunday afternoon around 3:00 p.m. We spent the remainder of the afternoon before dinner with a check-in question on what it was in their life/work that brought them to the “WLC Way” and their desire to participate in this retreat. Group members shared stories of the value of the practices in their lives. They also expressed a desire to continue deepening their learning as a reason for coming to the workshop. Following dinner, we engaged in a series of Image theater exercises to explore in a physical way the question of what the WLC Way is. In the exercises, we formed small groups who made physical “shapes” by moving into different positional configurations in response to the question: What is the WLC Way and what are your challenges with the WLC way? The intent was not to have a discussion on these that evening, but simply to experience what got created physically and visually.

One image created that evening proved to be compelling for the whole group. It started this way:

*We're standing in a circle. We each begin to rub our hands together, creating a warm sensation of energy between our hands. We begin to pull our hands slightly apart, feeling the warm expand into a bubble of energy that expands and contracts as we move our hands in and out. Someone begins to move their energy ball towards another in the circle. Soon we are connecting our bubbles into one large energy ball. Our hands move together as we play with the energy ball, making it bigger, smaller, creating different shapes. One of us walks away with a piece of the bubble and plays off by herself for awhile. Others do the same, moving in and out, as we continue to maintain the collective ball of energy between us.*

In the dialogue that followed the next morning, the image of the energy ball had captured the imaginations of the participants as a metaphor for the WLC way. They talked about the combination of how the collective energy nurtured and provided energy that each could take away and back into her own life. Conversely, the group discussed the importance of having individuals maintaining the community energy ball. Individuals were able to reflect on what it felt like for them to hold the communal energy, to step away and to return. We talked about one aspect of the WLC Way is the freedom that we have given each other to focus on what we individually need as a priority. We also talked about the value of those who hold the community energy so that it is there for women to tap into when it's right for them, and also how this energy feeds those who are doing that holding.

This image became a symbol over the next months for the community. At different gatherings and meetings the group would physically “play” with the energy ball. It gave the community a way to talk about the how the community balances individual and collective energy, and to talk about when and how the community energy needed to be strengthened. Other aspects of the WLC facilitation way were discussed at the retreat as the metaphor of the energy ball was further developed: the challenge of holding the space for a group while also engaging in one’s own learning, the invisibility of many aspects that WLC facilitators attend to, and the quality of the relationships that must be developed to create a strong “field” for others to enter. The energy ball image had been useful in describing relational leadership. We have a relationship within and to ourselves that generates energy. That energy can grow and expand as we bring our energies together relationally. The interactions we have can build that energy up, diminish it; we can pull our energy away or bring it in closer, magnify it, grow it in relationship.

### ***Board – Facilitator Re-envisioning Retreat***

The last event I included in my research was a two day retreat for board and facilitators held in the fall of 2009. The retreat would fulfill the annual meeting of the board to reflect on the past year and set intentions for the coming year. An additional intention was set for this meeting to shape a future vision for the community and the board felt it was important to invited facilitators to participate in the retreat. As part of the preparation, board members spent part of a board meeting sharing their hopes and fears for the future of WLC and the facilitator circles was invited to share there’s as well. Here is a summary:

#### **Board Hopes**

- We will create a vision of CEL/WLC that sparks more active learning – exploration of and experimentation with new frameworks for learning, for both alumnae and non-alumnae as appropriate depending on the framework – e.g., alumnae-initiated learning trios and groups (“WhoNose”, non-violent communication trio), workshops (collaborative leadership, leadership development topics, etc.), study groups (any number of topics), practice groups (groups working with particular forms/concepts of leadership).
- We will create new revenue streams through work that supports our mission and vision.
- We will engage more alumnae through learning opportunities and activities, resulting in an increase in the number of active alumnae.

- The Board and Facilitators will collaborate to ensure an optimal balance of focus and energy between governance and activities that advance the mission of CEL/WLC. (programs and activities that promote the organization's mission and vision will be the primary focus of the Board and Facilitators, and governance will be given appropriate attention to ensure organizational viability)
- We will create an organizational structure and methodology that is an effective "WLC-like" blend of collaborative "circle" leadership and management "tools" from traditional corporate settings.

### **Facilitator Hopes**

- Articulation of what WLC is, its relevance in the world and build/deepen our capacity together so we can take this out into the world.
- Capture a vision to grow alternative forms and new concepts (ie. Expanding geographically, strategic repositioning) and find ways to support that growth.
- Capacity to follow the energy for growth, aliveness, for facilitators to also have freedom to explore creative processes

### **Board & Facilitator Fears**

- The Board and Facilitators may not have energy to engage in creation of new frameworks for learning and new revenue streams, and there may not be enough new life blood coming in to take up where they leave off.
- The WLC program may not be sustainable, given economic conditions, facilitator burnout, program elements that take too long, are too costly to sustain
- We may fail to capture a vision
- We may be afraid to change, and find ourselves becoming more insular, rigid and bureaucratic, not allowing new forms to emerge.

The planning team met several times over three months to prepare the agenda for the retreat. We used our four story framework, we began with a brief reflection of our history and where we are today (Our Current Story). Then we reflected on our current condition, both internally and the trends in non-profit communities. We discussed what resonated for us in the current story, what was missing and what we each had energy to do (The Deeper Story). Then we used a variation of scenario planning to see what new stories could be emerging for us and whether a shared collective vision was present (The New Story). Finally we identified the actions needed to move forward together (Living Out the New Story). In addition to finding a location and

organizing the logistics, we sent the agenda to the group in advance of the meeting with questions we would be exploring and the processes we planned to use (The complete agenda is located in appendix D). Eighteen women participated in part or all of the retreat, including all of the facilitators except MH who planned to phone in for an update the evening of the first day. The retreat was opened with the reading of a poem written by cofounder DA and a reading by Don W. Mendenhall brought by one of the planning committee members:

*The ebb and flow in life is constant*

*Our placement at any given moment, while connecting with others, creates an ever changing pattern observable by community.*

*As we are in mutual relationship, our individuality becomes multi-dimensional and electric with possibility.*

We began by reviewing a chart of community accomplishments from prior years, adding milestones and highlights from the past year:

- Alumnae Events:
  - Alumnae R&R, Theme: Reflective Practices
  - Labyrinth Walk
  - Autumn Meal Making
- Re-engaged alums
  - Generated revenue from events
- “Recipe Card” for conducting a WLC alum event
- Facilitator / Facilitation Retreat “Facilitation the WLC Way”: Birth of Energy Ball
- Alumnae Survey and analysis
- 13 Members on the Board, representing growth in the board size
- Monthly alumnae circles: High attendance and travel to “distant” locations
- Work begun on publication of a new Journal
- (Corporate) Monthly WLC Circles
- “WhoNose” conceived and launched
- Board Tea Party social event
- Postponed WLC Retreat Series: Set goals and stuck to financial thresholds, intentional, positive
- Ginny presented WLC work at 2008 Taos Conference
- Facilitator retreat
- Conducted Integrated Facilitators / Board circles to speak of differences



A conversation about the current story ensued. The group felt they had focused on deepening and growing what we have, connecting in news and learning to trust the process again. The tensions between the masculine and feminine ways of working felt more transparent and they felt they had worked more consciously with these, especially in becoming more intentional about generating revenue from alumnae events. When asked to provide a “name” for the year, the group chose “Intentional deepening expansiveness”.

Before going on break the group recognized two board members. Both had served many years on the board and had been board chairs. They were leaving the board and moving out of a community governance role. We spoke about the things they had accomplished and gave them each a gift, an artist’s “scrapbook” of the community’s founding story. After the break, we invited in the image of a labyrinth walk where we went on silent “walkabout” to reflect on their energy, places of resonance, and new emergence in their relationship with WLC. Several common themes emerged out of the subsequent conversation. These included raising funds, expanding and enriching the community, exploring new ways and new layers of learning, being intentional and deliberate, including the power of saying “no”, balancing and integrating masculine/feminine, yin/yang, more learning on structure and more fluid boundaries, like the energy ball, in order to create more entry points into the community.

Next, a board member shared information about five emerging trends in the non-profit and social sectors (Gowdy, Hildebrand, & LaPiana, Mendes-Campos, 2009) that we thought were relevant for us. These trends included:

- 1) Greater diversity in age and culture, requiring more inclusivity in leadership styles.
- 2) Blurring of sectors as organizational structures become more innovative and technology continues to shape how people engage, including the rise of network organizations.
- 3) Greater engagement of supporter bases beyond funding to tap into diverse ways that supporters can further the mission.
- 4) Rising volunteerism in a wider variety of forms along with increased competition for volunteers.
- 5) Leadership becoming less hierarchical, more adaptive and more collaborative.

Our discussion concluded that many of our core competencies are in line with these current trends. We questioned how we could articulate what it is that we have learned to enable others to effectively use it. We also wondered if it was possible to package what we do for a broader audience, and if so, would we lose the depth experience that we currently have? We recognized the value of strengthening our engagement with alumnae and agreed to explore options for activities that might feed both community building and revenue building. We then had a discussion to further explore our hopes and fears. Talking about these brought out a new layer of understanding. We discussed the differences in a corporate model, a non-profit model and the WLC way. Particularly, the issue of “content control” was raised and when do we tighten the control of our content/brand, versus a more “open source” model in which we encourage people to take this and do what they want with it. We also wondered how we could broaden our distribution channel, if we could take what we do to a bigger scale.

The conversation shifted to our concerns related to handling conflicts. We agreed that we name it and deal with it vs. ignoring it, but as a volunteer organization we lack the time to work through the tensions. There was a fear expressed that if we focus too much on our conflicts and tensions it would take away from maintaining a positive energy container for volunteering. We talk about the need to learn healthy ways to work through conflict and cited this as a potential area of focus for a retreat. Another person questioned if thinking “vs.” instead of “and”, limits our options, and is our assumption that we think it needs to be one or the other? Instead, she suggested we can view the identification of two opposing views as the starting point for creating new ideas and options, the 3<sup>rd</sup> solution and to view conflict as dynamic tension vs. pulling/opposing tensions.

Following this discussion we broke into small groups to identify the strategic questions facing us now. We identified questions in these six areas:

- 1) **Distinctive essence of WLC experience (Identity):** How do we define what truly is a WLC experience? What is our distinctive competency and how do we preserve it?
- 2) **WLC way of conflict resolution (Learning):** What is our way of conflict resolution, staying in relationship, embracing tensions and differences?
- 3) **Expansion and growth (Vision):** How big do we want WLC to be? What is our vision of WLC for the future? In what area and to whom? Do we want to focus for expansion?

- 4) **Financial assumptions and innovative revenue streams (Strategies and Resources):** What are our financial assumptions about the programs we offer? How can we challenge these? What else could we create as revenue streams?
- 5) **Sustainable capacity aligned with energy and resources (Strategies and Resources):** How do we continue to engage alumnae to expand our capacity? What is the process that respects the capacity in a sustainable way? What is needed to support R&D initiated by facilitators and/or alumnae? What level of facilitation do we need to sustain/protect, and grow who we are and let meaningful emergence happen?
- 6) **Community Structures and Forms (Operations):** what is the board structure we need right now?

A closing conversation again raised the issue of conflict. A comment was made: “We ‘play nice’, we decide the issues are not big enough to bother with so we let them go, but the issue lingers since we aren’t skilled in working through it.” Someone responded to suggest that our principles and practices provide us with excellent tools for working through conflict and we needed to learn and practice these. The issue of conflict would come again in a ‘live issue’ the next morning when we came back on our second day. We closed the day with a few logistics, a reading and a “ball toss” in which we asked each to share one word on how they were feeling at this point in the retreat.

The facilitators gathered at my home after the meeting to have a debrief call with MH and the conversation about WLC continued with me and the two facilitators who were staying at my home that evening. The next morning, after we covered the day’s plan we did a check in to see how people were feeling about what we had done after the night’s break. We shared MH’s thoughts from our debrief call, which included her support for addressing conflict resolution, and her energy to support the development of virtual circles and to create a theater performance event as a fund-raiser for WLC.

As we were sharing further thoughts we had from our evening’s conversation among facilitators, an issue arose in the group. One of the participants said given our discussions on conflict, she was going to take a risk and raise a concern with the group. She was concerned that the facilitators had gotten together as a sub-group and had an experience that others in the group had not shared. She questioned the impact of that on the group and also expressed her personal feelings of having been left out of what sounded like a rich and deep dialogue. I

responded that the conversation had not been planned, outside of the debrief with MH, who we all had wanted to keep engaged despite her not being able to attend. I also acknowledged that often it is these deeper conversations that happen at night, a kind of “sleepover effect” that do bring us new insights and these had been some of my most rewarding experiences in WLC. We talked about how that could affect others in the community and what we need to do differently, perhaps having our retreats be residential so that others can be engaged.

We acknowledged the risk and value to the group of bringing this concern forward and reflected on the way we had respectfully explored our assumptions and intentions in working it through.

We took a short break. When we came back, we brainstormed a list of elements that describe the WLC “identity”. Here is the list the group generated:

- Grounding WLC values: staying in relationship and owning our parts.
- Learning about being aware
- Paying attention
- Examples of discovering new perspectives from others’ stories
- Essence of WLC: allows women to come together as strangers, discover the essence of each woman, and truly love each woman, and to connect on an incredibly deep level
- The magic of each retreat group bonding, can’t be codified
- Life Giving
- Unconditional acceptance and unconditional love – wants this for the world! Wants everyone to experience WLC, and yet doesn’t want to lose the intimacy
- You take what you need and you give who you are
- It learns and grows with me, changes over time, new insights continue to evolve
- It depends: you hear what you need
- Experiencing ease and support
- Becomes my standard for how I want to work with people and groups
- Develops capacity of curious observer and ability to take wise action
- Creates space for each to have their own experience and their own voice
- Learning your own wisdom
- Getting out of comfort zone, doing body and right brain things, and develop new insights
- Learn new reflective techniques (image card, journaling, walking meditation, etc.)
- Grounding / centering / self strength to be authentic
- Developing body / mind awareness and connections

- o Space and permission for individualism, “doing it my way”, and being able to practice this
- o Continual practice and learning the art of dialogue
- o Role modeling from facilitators: huge, quiet, that create magic
- o Learning about inquiry and wonder
- o Creating a container of safety
- o Affirm us as women as a gender, appreciation for and strength of what women are and do
- o The concept of intention, , learning how to set intentions
- o Sense of community - You belong, you just do!
- o Learning community... for a lifetime... We help each other learn about ourselves
- o Power, importance of stories
- o Relationship of being and doing
- o Rituals, beginnings, endings, process
- o Framework for the container; Framework for learning and growth... a few basic elements
- o Image, metaphor, symbolism
- o Naming things; articulate, find language, the principles and practices, working with emergence
- o Pre-verbal... insights/learnings that are present even before they can be named
- o Moving in and embracing wholeness
- o Trust
- o Experiential learning

Next we reviewed all the work we had done so far (posted on three walls) and I asked the group to select elements to be further developed as scenarios. These are the visionary elements we identified:

1. Expand the learning community for younger women
2. Grow our community by 100 more women in 5 years
3. Going Global: grass roots / mass customization
4. “Robuster” alumnae association
5. External learning experiences – curriculum of WLC Way offerings that are offered beyond WLC members

For the rest of the morning we broke into small groups based on what was most attractive as a vision to each of us. All of the elements were selected except #4, so we let that go. The exercise was to create future stories for each Visionary Element, with the following questions:

- o Paint a picture of what would it look like 5 years from now
- o How would it be resourced: people and dollars
- o Structure needed to support this
- o What capability do we need to grow
- o Obstacles, what needs to be overcome
- o How can alliances and partnerships help

Each group spent 30 minutes creating a beginning picture of what it would look like if the scenario were to become the primary focus of WLC. Each group briefly shared their vision and we agreed to the following next steps:

1. Groups will summarize future stories and send to WLC board secretary
2. Secretary will complete minutes and send to all
3. Vision groups will further play and develop the visions over the next 8 weeks, providing updates at the January Board meeting:
  - A. Point person from each group is a board member
  - B. Stories need to include answers to the key questions
4. 3 participants agreed to follow up with 3 people who were not present at the meeting
5. The board will hold the key questions for 2010 planning

We closed with another round of the Ball Toss, asking “How are you feeling – in one word?” the energy was very high in the group. One member coined the term “Energy Ball bubble bath” to describe the feelings that were shared. Following the retreat, scenarios were further developed. The one that took on the most energy in 2010 was the development of external learning experiences, which resulted in a theater event fund-raiser later in 2010 as well as the offering of more WLC events open to guests of alumnae. The board focus continued to be on the alumnae community and a decision was made to maintain a “slow growth” approach and not adopt a goal for rapid growth or scale up at this time.

## Reflection

The Re-envisioning retreat seemed most significant in heightening the issue of managing conflict. It was interesting to see the topic come up several times on the first day, and then actually have a real-time conflict emerge to be addressed on the second day. Talking about conflict seemed to create the conditions in which conflict could be raised openly in the group. While there was a lot of concern about bringing conflict forward, when an issue was actually raised in the group, it seemed we were able to practice a number of our principles in the moment. We were able to share differing assumptions about the situation, listen respectfully and discuss alternative ways forward.

One issue that seems to get raised repeatedly in the community is whether to find alternative ways to bring more women into the community and less resource-intensive ways of doing that. As a volunteer organization the group has yet to find an alternative to the cohort group process as an entry point to the organization. The year-long cohort is a big commitment in terms of time and resources (\$3500). From a sustainability perspective, the process requires a strong facilitator pool with the availability, skills and interest in facilitating. And because the women most actively involved in governance came in through the cohort process, they believed that you can't experience the power of the community without first being involved in a cohort.

## Chapter Five: Interpreting the Collection: The Story, Conversations, Events and Surveys

The purpose of this study was to better understand how relational practice has evolved and sustained a women's leadership community of inquiry over two decades. Gergen describes three challenges organizations face in sustaining relational practice as they grow: 1) the natural relational energy present at the start of an organizational enterprise is hard to maintain over time; 2) as an organization takes shape, the shared meaning that develops in creating its identity tends to suppress the potentials of different voices; 3) insiders and outsiders get created and meaningful connection with the outside world may get lost (K. J. Gergen, 2009). To be able to continuously transform, organizations must balance the need for order and shared meaning with the need to maintain vitality through engaging all voices (K. J. Gergen, 2009). WLC experiences this dance between coherent, collective identity and polyvocal relational practice. Ongoing deliberations around several recurring topics demonstrate how this tension manifests in WLC.

### *Ongoing Deliberations*

**Defining the “essence” of WLC:** Shared meaning around the organizational identity (i.e. mission, vision, distinctive competence) of WLC has been difficult to achieve. The founders sought to find language that could articulate the organization's purpose in a way that was inclusive of different theories and disciplines. When interpretational conflicts arose, we continued the dialogue and expanded, bringing in other frameworks and engaging other women. The expansion encouraged the sustaining of multiple interpretations rather than narrowing to a singular voice/meaning system. The challenge to create a common language continues as new members are continually brought into the meaning-making process. Different circles within WLC describe the difficulty in naming the WLC experience in different ways:

- *“A lot of this is deep magic. You can't describe it, you can feel it, but can't describe it.” Alumnae Dialogue*
- *Another part of our identity is our willingness to hold both a search for identity and the fact that what we seek is bigger than one identity can hold. It's not a destination but a journey.” Board Dialogue*
- *“We talk about a view of the cosmos, higher power, fields, space...how do we open up that possibility without stating here's a worldview you have to take on?*



*How do we hold the space for people to do their own exploration and not make it another dominant belief?” Facilitator Dialogue*

**Determining the Target Group and Growth Rate for Membership:** Members ask questions regarding membership, such as whether the community should be limited to women, whether or how to seek greater diversity, especially racial and cultural, whether our current focus on women at mid-life and mid-career could be extended to bring in younger women and whether WLC groups could be developed in different geographic areas outside Minnesota. They also continue to question how fast to grow the community, whether to stay small and local or find a way to take this to scale in a bigger way:

- *“What do we want? Do we want to sustain 1-2 cohorts a year? Does it get beyond driven by the heart, love, memory of alums? Does it become more of a business?” Board Dialogue*
- *“I want to invite in people who’ve made very different life choices so we have a broader landscape of what’s real and possible sitting in the circle.” Facilitator Dialogue*

**Developing the Format by which We Bring Members Into WLC:** Members question whether the entry retreat series is the only way for women to become members of the community. Some believe that the entry retreat series is necessary despite the entry barriers of time and financial commitment. Others question how the community might package what it does in a way that could provide more rapid growth or scale what we do to other communities. These questions continue to animate the question of “form vs. essence” in our entry retreat series design.

- *“A distinction for me is ‘essence versus form’. If we can understand the essence, not so much what we do as what women take from it, then can we change the delivery and still come away with the essence?” Board Dialogue*
- *“I would highlight that in terms of practices, they seem to be different forms for a same essence – different portals into a same essence of supportive space holding and acceptance that we offer.” Facilitator Dialogue*

**Describing “The Feminine” to Both Insiders and Outsiders:** Finding language to describe the feminine to a mass audience has been challenging. Marketing an organization

to women only, while less difficult today, often lands us in a feminine “leadership ghetto” that marginalizes what we do. Getting funding from corporations for women leaders to attend a women’s only leadership program is challenging. Feminism itself is subject to multiple interpretations and tenuous support among women leaders. Added to this is the challenge of redefining traditional definitions of leadership from bounded individualism to the collective and relational.

- *“The challenge is how to communicate this value [feminine leadership] in a society that values outcomes and measureable, tangible results. If that’s all you’re thinking about, it’s hard to step back and appreciate the value of the process.” Alumnae Dialogue*
- *“My view of leadership has shifted, too. Working in the corporate setting for so long, I looked at leadership as the typical masculine form. It’s all very hierarchical; it’s about individual leadership qualities. I’ve shifted to a much more open, collaborative view.” Board Dialogue*
- *“I have a hard time reconciling the archetypal feminine and leadership. Those two concepts don’t connect well for me.” Facilitator Dialogue*

### **Deciding When to “Put a Stake in the Ground” and When to “Go with the**

**Flow”:** We frequently hold different perspectives about when to push or hold on to a particular form versus when to wait or let go and let the form emerge. This issue often shows up around questions of timing and resourcing of events and projects, but also is raised regarding conformance to current ways of operating, such as the tension that occurred between the “WhoKnows” group and the Facilitator circle.

- *“I have noticed there is more permission here to follow our energy, so when there isn’t enough energy we have decided not to do certain things. In other boards I have served on it is more like ‘this is what we are going to make happen’. That stake in the ground is OK if you have the energy behind it.” Board Dialogue*
- *“When do you put a stake in the ground and say this is my stand, versus letting it emerge? That’s always been a question for us.” Facilitator Dialogue*

**Addressing Resource Allocation and Paying Fairly for Contributions:** WLC has had continual deliberations on how to compensate volunteers for their contributions. While projects and events must submit budgets demonstrating how they will break-even

financially, there is a strong tendency for those in facilitation roles to cut their own pay in order to keep costs down, enable more women to attend and provide more operational funds to the organization. Also, the structure of shared leadership makes it difficult to determine how to allocate funds individually and stretches limited funds across more people. When the organization shifted to a working board and to the concept of a community of practice, the volunteer work was dispersed from the founders to the members. However, some community work (i.e. facilitation, administration) continues to require significant time commitment from especially the most senior individuals. The community faces an ongoing challenge of how to retain these members and to develop others in the community to take on more senior roles.

- *“As we grow and have [received] the initial things we have gotten from the program, how does it sustain sufficient value for us that we’re willing to invest in that? I don’t want to be the money grubbing one, but it is about having the onerous work more supported.” Facilitator Dialogue*
- *“Capacity is the constraint, our financial capacity, facilitator capacity, the capacity of us as members to volunteer. Do we get more out of the same people or engage more people? We have to keep that in mind as we think about sustaining and growing.” Board Dialogue*

### **Balancing Influence, Power and Authority in Decision and Meaning Making:**

A tension exists between the desire for sharing power among all members and the reality that certain members carry more influence by virtue of their knowledge, experience or position within the community. As the community has grown, this has surfaced in dialogues regarding the role of the founders, and in recent years on the role of the facilitator and board circles. The issue of conflict has been raised several times as an issue for the community to address. I observed three different conflicts in the events of this research; 1) launching the WhoKnows group, 2) the “meeting outside the meeting” at the “Re-envisioning Retreat”, and 3) the differing views on leadership in the Facilitator dialogue. Growing disconnection between facilitators and the board was recognized by the executive director and motivated her to promote joint participation of both circles in the “Facilitation the WLC Way” retreat and the “Re-envisioning Retreat”. At this point the community is still small enough that people can come together in dialogue when tension surfaces. However, it raises the question how this practice can be sustained in a larger, more complex organization.

From the data and my reflections I see five organizational themes that support WLC to evolve and sustain relational leadership in the face of these tensions:

- Making Room for One Another: The Ethic of Love as a Relational Stance
- Engaging Hestia Energy: A Safe Container through Hospitality, Beauty, Rituals and Symbols
- Weaving the Webs of Connection: Structures, Principles and Practices for Organizing and Sharing Power
- Walking the Rainbow Path: Transformational Learning through Inquiry and Dialogue
- Feeding the Energy Ball: Rhythms, Cycles, and Emergence in Sustaining Community

What follows is a discussion of these themes, how we have incorporated each into community practice and how it has helped us to address the ongoing tensions we face in sustaining relational leadership practice.

## ***Organizational Themes***

### **Making Room for One Another: The Ethic of Love as a Relational Stance**

*“How might your life have been different if there had been a place for you to go when your life was difficult and you felt utterly alone...a place of safety and comfort? If a woman whom you trusted had been there to receive you...had listened silently, as you spoke your discouragement? And then she had covered you warmly as you curled up for a rest. And if she briefly went out...and returned with an armload of wood...and quietly built up the fire and sat down nearby to tend it...How might your life be different?  
(Duerck, J. 1993, p. 18)*

At the center of the WLC experience is a quality of relationship based in friendship and personal growth. bell hooks describes loving friendships as “a space to experience the joy of community



in a relationship where we learn to process all our issues, to cope with differences and conflict while staying connected”(Hooks, 2000, p. 134). She goes on to describe friendship as a place where many of us have our first experience of redemptive love and caring community. The distortions of relationship that stem from patriarchal systems minimize women’s needs, often rendering their

contributions invisible. Over a lifetime, these distortions affect women’s self-image and can interfere with healthy interpersonal development. In hierarchical, competitive work structures

we often adopt self-protective strategies, afraid to express doubts, uncertainties and fears. In isolation from one another, we can think we are alone in our feelings and reactions. The more alone we feel, the more isolated we can become, even in the midst of professional and personal relationships. WLC members describe the challenges they have felt, from the dehumidifier metaphor that described one member's need to empty herself of the toxins that leach into her in her work environment each day (Parker Palmer Event) to the conversation about the tensions that are driving alums to retire or leave their work environments (Alumnae Dialogue).

Hierarchical organization structures centralize power into the hands of a few. This works negatively in two directions: those who are not in power become disengaged and disaffected; those who are over-privileged in power, such as those with wealth, status and in leadership, are expected to be omnipotent, and, as studies show, this expectation frequently results in those in power believing in their own privilege (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). "It is this dependency that became, and is, the breeding ground for abuses of power." (Hooks, 2000) For those people who are part of non-dominant groups, such as women and minority groups, power and privilege is not assumed.

Gender roles in leadership offer an example of this distortion. Even when women leaders achieve results, they are frequently not considered effective leaders because of gender stereotypes. In the WLC dialogues, this was pointed out by several women who talked about the different approaches they were criticized for using in their leadership work, or not seen as leadership work, even when these produced effective results. An example from the dialogues is the community member whose boss criticized her for not "fighting" enough. Another was described as too focused on "process". Another heard she wasn't exerting enough "leadership" when she was being very deliberate in setting the conditions for others to take on more responsibility.

As women have recently been admitted into the ranks of leadership privilege, these forces contribute to the messages women receive about our performance and our worth. We are only as good as our last performance. We must keep dancing, when often harboring inner doubts about ourselves and our work as leaders. The WLC community "magic" may be related to the experience of letting down one's veneer and feeling a sense of authenticity. WLC members describe this as wholeness, authenticity and trust:

- *“I don’t have to be like the guys. I don’t have to have the answers, or make them up. I can just trust in that.” Alumnae dialogue*
- *“Moving forward, in spite of your self-doubts. It [WLC] validates that everyone has doubts.” Alumnae Dialogue*
- *What really resonated with me is how much this experience [WLC] was about coming to know myself and trusting that.” Alumnae Dialogue*
- *“The community and connection with this larger group gives me a confidence, a trust that extends to everything.” Board Dialogue*
- *“For me, leadership is fostering people to be more authentically themselves in how they show up.”: Facilitator Dialogue*
- *“It’s your whole being present.” Facilitator Dialogue*

The friendships that develop in WLC connect women in relationships of care and, might I use the word “love”? Love is a word that is so saturated with multiple meanings that it bears some discussion about how it fits with women and relational leadership. bell hooks describes the cynicism in today’s culture about love. When she speaks about the place of love in social justice, she is met with agitation and cynicism. Love is not seen as a transformative force; instead it is seen as a weakness (Hooks, 2000). The third wave of feminism, while legitimately challenging the limitations of white women’s experience of the feminine, may have thrown the baby out with the bathwater in embracing feminism’s inner “bad girl” (Shalit, 2008). This is what a fourth wave of feminism seems to be seeking; an extension of the feminist values of care and connection with all of life.

“As a society, we are embarrassed by love” (Ackerman, 1994). The meaning of the word love is romanticized, sexualized or shrouded in mystery (Hooks, 2000). Love is further confused in our families, communities, churches and organizations in which parents and leaders proclaim they love or value others, when at the same time acting out patterns of patriarchal domination, abuse and dysfunction. The definition of love by M. Scott Peck as a conscious choice could be a description of WLC’s purpose: “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (Peck, 1979, p.84). Love is something we do, rather than feel. It is an intention, a choice, an act of will that shapes our feelings, versus the other way around. hooks definition of love as “the will to nurture one’s own or another’s spiritual growth, revealed through acts of care, respect, knowing, and assuming responsibility” (Hooks, 2000, p. 136) describes an active process, a ‘love ethic’ that guides relational behavior.

Adam Kahane brings the idea of will to love, which he describes as a tension to be managed in organizational change. His definition of love is “the drive to connect, to make whole that which has become, or appears fragmented” which he contrasts with “power”, a drive that is in tension with love that is the will to “achieve one’s purpose, to grow, to get the job done” (Kahane, 2010, p.2). Kahane says love is what makes power generative rather than manipulative, and power keeps love from becoming sentimental or creating a fusion with other that denies self-realization (Kahane, 2010) The empowering aspects of marrying these two forces, agency and communion, is what creates and sustains social change.

Words used by WLC community members to describe why they keep coming back are similar to those hooks uses to define love: “care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment and trust, as well as honest and open communication” (Hooks, 2000, p. 5). The challenge to describe the WLC experience parallels the same challenge hooks describes in defining what love is. In the WLC dialogues, several women used the term love, the ability to claim love for their coworkers, as a coming to know and trust oneself, to see that one is not alone in having self-doubts or in not having answers, and in extending oneself to nurture other’s growth.

- *“I can network, socialize, etc. many places, but this is one of the very few places I can learn to know and grow myself.” Survey*
- *“For me it was all about love. It was either during or shortly after that I could say out loud, ‘I love people I work with’.” Alumnae Dialogue*
- *“It’s like falling in love, that deep respect for others that’s cultivated.” Facilitator Dialogue*
- *“The idea is that you are nurturing leadership in others at all times...” Alumnae Dialogue*
- *“It’s the women, but it’s also the way the women are with each other...there are deliberate choices we make here for how to be with each other. With every day of my life this becomes more core to where I’m willing to invest my time and energy – that kind of relating, those kinds of values, accepting other as she is...opportunities for learning, being held and accepted, learning about self...This pushes me to grow.” Facilitator Dialogue.*

Within a context of connectedness, it becomes safe to be vulnerable with one another, to disclose fears, doubts, and disappointments. In WLC, we support responses that honor individual responsibility for having feelings and for finding one’s own answers. We discourage

responses that seek to give advice, fix, or rescue others from their feelings or problems. The ability to express a range of feelings is part of our principle of Wholeness. Kenneth Gergen notes this is also a factor in strengthening relational bonding (K. J. Gergen, 2009).

The norms for how we respond to one another are also important in developing “second order morality”: “[in second order morality] individual responsibility is replaced with relational responsibility, a collective responsibility for sustaining the potentials of coordinated action and...above all to sustain the process of co-creating meaning.” (K. J. Gergen, 2009, p.364). Second order morality challenges us to shift our emphasis from care of self and other, to care for the relationship and for the continuity of meaning making in relationship. Later in this chapter I will describe how WLC has approached conflict which builds on Gergen’s concept of second order morality.

Participation throughout WLC is “invitational”. From the entry retreat series to participation in project committees or governing circles, participation is an individual choice that strengthens personal responsibility. As Block notes, we cannot say “yes” without the power to say “no” (Block, 2008b). With invitation comes an attitude of celebration with and for those who step forward to participate rather than the use of coercion and guilt to get people to give more than they can or want.

The relational stand for an ethic of love is described by poet Johan Wolfgang Goethe who wrote: “If you treat a person as she appears to be, you make her worse than she is. But if you treat a person as if she already were what she potentially could be, you make her what she should be.” ( p. 84, Fox, 1983). A WLC facilitator circle member said something similar about WLC: “We love each other into fully being who we are.” If we adopt the construct of humans as socially constructed “multi-beings” (K. J. Gergen, 2009), then how we choose to treat one another can and does impact what selves we are able to bring forth. If we treat one another as ever expanding possibilities versus fixed entities, we create room for others to change. If we create a discourse of valuing what is best in each other, we create room for people to live into their best selves. As we expand that valuing to the entire community and beyond, we create transcendent value for the relationship, the magic, or as Gergen describes, “enchantment” (K. J. Gergen, 2009). The magic has power to extend from how we see ourselves, to how we see each other and our community as a whole, to even how we view the world around us.



## Engaging Hestia Energy: Hospitality, Beauty, Rituals and Symbols



*Hestia, the goddess of hearth and home, was the invisible Greek goddess. She was never depicted in physical form. Instead, her symbol was the flame, the fire of the hearth. The Hestia archetype is one of inner focusing and centering, of providing clarity in the midst of confusion. As an inner presence, Hestia is unattached to outcomes. She is whole as she is. Hestia's hearth fire represents an invisible feminine presence or energy that permeates a situation or space, transforming it into sacred space. (adapted from Bolen, 2002)*

The Hestia archetype symbolizes order, beauty, and harmony. At one level, Hestia energy speaks to the care with which we animate the space around us. Our environments today are filled with artificially lit buildings, cell phones, computer screens, road traffic. We are often running from task to task on autopilot. Taking time to be in stillness, in nature, and in a place of beauty helps us shift into a more conscious, reflective way of being. Tending to the environment also helps us more intentionally create our relationships: with ourselves, one another and the world around us.

At the artifact level, Peter Block notes several things we can do to shape the meeting space, including seats in a circle, finding rooms with natural light, bringing in music, art and the aesthetic (Block, 2008b). Christina Baldwin calls the center of the circle “a symbol of inclusive replenishment” (C. Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p.109). It establishes a focal point that supports us to come into relational connection with one another. Symbolic objects can be used as centerpieces to create a visual context for what is meaningful to the circle. In WLC we use a candleholder centerpiece for most WLC gatherings as a symbol of the circle of friends at the heart of our community. We add other artifacts; a colorful cloth, stones, a vessel of water, flowers. We choose items that represent themes for the gathering or invite members to bring an artifact to place on the centerpiece.

Beyond the physical space, we are conscious of welcoming one another with kindness and generosity. Peter Block states: “We usually associate hospitality with a culture, a social practice, a more personal quality to be admired. In western culture where individualism and security seem to be priorities, we need to be more thoughtful about how to bring the welcoming of strangers into our daily way of being together.” (Block, 2008, p. 145). Block points out several aspects of hospitality that we have woven into our community's practice: personal greeting of one other upon arrival, making relationship connections before moving into task

work, intentionality in creating the gathering space, and acknowledging those who come late or leave early without humiliation (Block, 2008).

There is a further level of engagement that can be described symbolically through the story of the Greek goddess, Hestia. As the Greek goddess of hearth and temple, Hestia imagery speaks to a sacred way of being together. A personal story describes how I experienced the sense of the sacred with Hestia energy. I was preparing to host a WLC circle in my home and gave myself the better part of a day to prepare. Initially as I looked around, that inner voice of judgment surfaced, bringing into focus my aging furniture, the clutter on my bookshelves, the walls that needed paint. But as I held the intention of the circle of women that were coming and continued my clean-up I noticed a shift occurring. I put on some favorite music and began to enjoy the process of being in relationship with my own space. I kept going, beginning to feel a sense of creative energy flowing into my space. I laid out some scarves to create a table setting, brought in fresh flowers, lit candles around the room. As more order and beauty emerged in the space I found that I was feeling a sense of harmony and calm within me. When I was finished, I looked around and saw my home transformed *as it was*, through the care and connection I had given it. That same sense of beauty was also mirrored within me, a sense of wholeness and acceptance of myself as *I am*.

When Hestia energy is present, we feel her sacred presence inviting us into a place of warmth, trust and acceptance. Within her sacred circle, we experience a sense of wholeness. Parker Palmer describes this as a community in which we are safe to be alone together; a community of solitudes helping each other to listen within. Palmer describes this as an important polarity in which we are fully present to ourselves while never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other (Palmer, 2004). Hestia energy is created when we invoke her meditative presence in all we do to prepare the space and come into relationship with one another. It is creating warmth, generosity and acceptance of self and others, an invitation to others into “being” versus “doing”. Hestia hospitality contributes to the creation of open-heartedness that supports the ethic of love.

## Weaving the Webs of Connection: Structures for Sharing Power



*A spider web is a metaphor for how the WLC community structures itself. A common garden spider forms a web by first throwing out a line of silk. If the thread catches on something, she will then pull the thread tight and anchor it to her starting point. She uses this line to crawl out and send out another parallel thread loosely below it. She then crawls to the middle of this looser thread, sending a line down to anchor a triangular frame which forms the core support for the web. The radius threads are sent out from the center of the triangle to the frame, and the web is finished with a spiral of circular threads woven between the radius threads. (adapted from Harris, 2002).*

A stance for an ethic of love in relationship calls for an approach to power that is in direct opposition to relationships of dominance. Organizations, large and small, are built on hierarchical structures that place power in individual positions. Dominance is imbedded in our individual, heroic models of leadership. In WLC we have challenged ourselves to recognize both the obvious and subtle forms of dominance pervasive in organization life. Our goal has been to share power and leadership, to create an organization that is “leaderful”. The facilitators of WLC described this in their dialogue:

- *“In our group there is respect for each person’s internal authority...we’ve worked at the ‘non-expert’ model...holding space for and actively working to solicit each person’s internal authority and ability.”*
- *“We’re all walking side by side on our journeys. We’re called participants even as facilitators – that sister image – not leader follower.”*
- *“That someone knows better than another, that doesn’t fit with our approach.”*
- *“What keeps me here is opportunity to function in a truly collaborative way and be at the learning edge of what that means.”*
- *I love the word leaderful...Leaderful means everyone’s full of leadership. And leaderful doesn’t seem like follower. No one is a follower, everyone is a leader.”*

However, redefining leadership as a collaborative or collective act is formidable. Shared leadership models are still few and have been mostly ignored in the leadership literature (O’Toole, Galbraith, & Lawler, March, 2002). The strength of the individual heroic leader construct makes it hard to believe that a shared leadership model can work. From a feminist perspective, shared power and shared leadership are valued, at least in theory, although

studies suggest feminist organizations struggle to maintain this in practice and usually revert to more traditional hierarchical structures over time (Remington, 1991). WLC also struggles in trying to share power across membership. Seeking co-action without dominance we try to find ways to move forward together while allowing differing, even opposing beliefs to exist side by side.

The discussion on leadership that took place in the facilitator dialogue demonstrates how we explored our differences. One facilitator was very uncomfortable with combining the feminine with the word leadership. Another described how she had reclaimed the word leadership, but with an “inside-out” focus. Another talked about her acceptance of the idea of followership along with leadership. Another described WLC as a “personal growth program” in “leadership program clothing”. A key statement in the dialogue was when MH said: “You don’t have to hit the eject button because it’s also perfectly fine to not have that word work for you. What would be a harder fit is if you were asking ‘how do I get others to follow me?’.” That statement created both an opening for diverse voices and a boundary on the limits of what is acceptable practice within the community. Later in the dialogue, the conversation circled back around to the interchange on leadership when DY said; “In our dialogue I could make that statement, be heard, and it was ok. I didn’t need to be the same and everyone else had their opinion.”

## **Principles and Practices**

Rather than order created through hierarchy or rules, WLC engages in an ongoing process of dialogue guided by our principles and practices. Meaning-making within WLC is constrained by our principles and practices. They have been written up in a variety of ways over time for the website, event brochures, in the WLC workbook and in the anthology. Beyond their written descriptions, they are brought into our dialogue as guides to help shape what we do and how we do it.

The six principles: Respect, Awareness, Wholeness, Authenticity, Memory, Emergence; describe the values that this community embraces. They are drawn from a wide range of theoretical disciplines, including complex systems theory, spiritual studies, and the feminine. The way we describe these principles continues to evolve as we engage them in our dialogues. Our practice shapes our principles and the principles guide our practice. They are the mechanism by which we filter and determine what is and is not WLC. As such, they define the nature of the relationship we are developing within the community.

The practices: Story/Image/Myth, Reflection, Centering, Dialogue, Intention, Ritual; have also emerged in connection with the Principles. They are more descriptive of what we do when we come together. We have gathered these practices also from a variety of sources. Exploring them is part of our “edge” work. We continue to bring in new experiential activities in support of the practices. In the dialogues, community members expressed value in all of the practices. They offer an array of options that members may pick and choose from in creating their own reflective practice.

In a ten year study sponsored by the Institute of Noetic Sciences, researchers sought common elements across religious and humanist traditions for spiritual transformation. Having a practice was a core element. Transformational change may happen instantly in a new awareness, but it is anchored into our lives through practice. The elements of an effective practice they described were 1) intention (making an ongoing choice while letting go of striving for a particular goal or outcome), 2) attention (mindfulness, awareness), 3) repetition (done over time) and 4) guidance (either from external sources or internal, within oneself) (Schlitz et al., 2007).

These elements support the approach WLC has taken. The community meets over time to learn and practice together. Our practices are not aligned with nor do they espouse a particular religious tradition. The researchers also found that equal numbers of people felt that a formal spiritual practice was essential to transformation as felt it was not. Equal numbers felt having a teacher was important as not having a teacher. For WLC, we support women adopting a practice that works for her, but we emphasize inner guidance.

A core part of the entry retreat series is to introduce women to these principles and practices. They are the “knowledge expertise” of our community of practice. The principles and practices continue to evolve as the community grows and develops. They have been revised several times over the years of the community’s formation. While they provide the “glue” for community identity, they are also open to new interpretations. A challenge is to continue a dialogic process around the principles and practices; to see these as flexible guides rather than as dogmatic rules which cannot change. In addition to the principles and practices is a flexible, emergent organization structure to support ongoing dialogue. We connect and organize the community using three elements that mimic a spider’s web: triangles, circles, and points.

## **Triangles: A Trio Leadership Model**

Similar to the spider web, the community was built around a founding triangle. In the trio decisions were made by consensus. When the trio was in conflict, the approach was to find the place of common ground in which all three could move forward, rather than trying to force agreement. As a learning trio, projects moved forward only when it made sense to the learning of all three. If not, each individual had the freedom to create other learning and work outside the trio. In the areas where there was common interest, we collaborated. The explicit agreement we had was to support each individual's growth, over and above the achievement of collective projects. Where collective projects supported all of our growth individually, shared commitment was strong and we moved forward.

We continue to use a trio leadership model for facilitating the entry retreats and many other events. This approach helps to balance the workload demands among individuals. It also supports community relational practice. Different friendships are developed as new trios come together to co-work. With the principles and practices as guides, these relationships continue to expand the relational "ethic" within the community. Trio leaders create the initial framework of the relationship in which others are invited to join. The trio spends time establishing their relationship so that others can enter a retreat or project within a field of positive regard. Trios have to work through group dynamics in ways one or two leaders do not. There are multiple communication trajectories to manage, alliances to recognize and minimize, roles to clarify and manage. Working these through in a caring and loving way helps establish this as community practice in each gathering.

Leadership in a trio helps balance the projection of power that often occurs with retreat leaders or facilitators. This projection seems to work two ways with participants looking to the leader for answers, advice and direction, and the leader assuming responsibility for having the answers (Block, 1987). By shifting the point of leadership around the trio, shared leadership is modeled for the rest of the group. It makes it more possible for group members to see leadership as a shared process, rather than imbedded in one individual. Members of a trio bring different strengths to the group, helping demonstrate different ways to express leadership. The trio models the relational nature of leadership in how the work is planned and carried out. Beyond the trio, everyone in the group is encouraged to participate in leadership work.

## **Circles**

In WLC, the supporting frame of the triangle has evolved into three circles of organizational governance: the alumnae, the board and the facilitators. Each circle has a different function within the community and operates with a different leadership structure.

The alumnae circle consists of anyone who has been through the entry retreat series and wishes to stay on an active mailing list for community activities. Leadership within this circle happens through an alumnae committee and chair person, who also serves on the board circle. The committee has responsibility for organizing the monthly circles, other alumnae events and retreats and communications to the alumnae community. The alumnae circle is periodically surveyed to better understand the interests and needs of members. By keeping this broader group engaged in alum events they become a feeder source for participation in time-bound projects, such as planning an alumnae event. Positive experience in these events will lead some to move into longer term work as board members or facilitators.

A second leadership circle is the board. This is the group charged with organization governance. They hold primary responsibility for maintaining the health and well-being of the organization. The board has fiduciary responsibility for managing organization and activity budgets, the scholarship budget, fundraising and taxes. They oversee and provide guidance on community activities. They also have responsibility for determining where the energy of the community is and which new projects will be undertaken.

The facilitators form the third circle in our structure. This circle is seen by the board as primary holders of the community's knowledge regarding the principles and practices. Facilitators are required to apprentice with other facilitators before they are accepted into the facilitator circle. The responsibility for selecting facilitators and making the decisions on who will facilitate each year's cohort has shifted from the cofounders to the facilitator circle itself. The facilitator circle typically meets for an annual retreat to discuss issues related to the retreat series, such as choosing the facilitator trio, discussing the principles and practices and reviewing and developing the entry retreat series design.

## **Points: Anchoring Individual Accountability**

Within the trios and circles (and sometimes pairs or quads) that form to guide projects and events, work must be divided up among individuals. Individual responsibility and accountability

create the “points” in the web metaphor. Work gets defined and distributed, according to skills, interest and the commitment level of those involved. Having individuals “point” different work supports a level of interdependence in which no single individual holds all the responsibility, power or answers.

Point work is based on individual choice. When there is nothing to coerce someone to do more than she wants, community projects become scaled to match the level of commitment that everyone is willing to bring. I am continually amazed at the amount of activity that we generate given this simple guideline. We have conducted annual cohort groups in all but one year of the last 14, held monthly gatherings for the last 5 years, conducted several alumnae retreats and events annually, published a book, a journal, put on a conference and engaged a board and a facilitator circle in regular meetings and retreats. All of this is fueled by volunteer energy. In some cases a small amount of compensation is provided to certain individuals who contribute substantially more work or expertise on a project. Compensation decisions for points are made on a case by case basis and depend on the budget and fiscal health of the organization. For example, in the publication of the anthology, a stipend was provided to the person who provided layout and editing. Another paid point “position” has emerged in the last four years, the Executive Director. This position was created to recognize and compensate the work that is provided by an individual who plays a pivotal connecting, support and recruiting role with all three circles.

The system of trios, circles and points enables a fluid structure in which members can enter for a period of time, and then step back if they desire. The structure has changed as the organization has grown. We have made it easy for alums to step forward and propose new events by providing guidelines on how to put one together (see appendix E for the WLC Event “Recipe Card”) and by board processes in which members can submit a simple proposal and budget to put forward something they want to do. Beyond the question of organizational fit, the board explores with these alums whether the community has the energy and momentum to carry out their idea. Proposers learn they need to take personal responsibility and engage the interest from other alums to make something happen, rather than offering ideas for someone else to do. In this way, small trios and groups are being continually formed around new initiatives. The structure encourages sharing power, strengthening relationships and building accountability among members.



## Walking the Rainbow Path: Practices for Collective Reflection and Inquiry



*As the story was told, in Navajo tradition there is a healing community process depicted in the sand painting tradition. The one who seeks healing must walk two paths, the Rainbow Path and the Lightning Bolt Path. One enters the healing process by first walking the Rainbow Path. Imagine moving into a rainbow, a shimmering of light in which colors, shapes and forms are in transition. Walking the Rainbow Path is a time to let go, to wander in “not knowing”. Waiting, listening, questioning; these are the teachers of the Rainbow Path. This is a time of*

*reflection, of examining assumptions and of simply letting go and waiting for new insights to emerge. When you have spent enough time on this path, you begin to see with new eyes. Like a vision quest, you cannot force the answers to come. Instead you wait for signs, insights and small bits of clarity. When these come, you know you are ready to move to the Lightning Bolt Path, where decisions are made, action is taken and movement to restored wholeness occurs. (adapted from a story in McWhinney, 1992)*

The intertwining of the Rainbow Path and Lightning Bolt Path could be another metaphor for engaging feminine and masculine polarity. Much of leadership in the west favors the Lightning Bolt: the perpetual drive for decisive action. The Rainbow Path is the leadership road less traveled. It invites us to a place which seems, on the outside, like inactivity. We are unaccustomed in our organizations to times of stillness and rest, fearing that we will be lost if we step off the action treadmill. From a feminine perspective, the Rainbow Path might also be compared to the time of gestation. All life requires this period of inner growth, time in the egg when life is organizing itself into form. One of our WLC alums describes this as the intentional speed bump, a time in which we slow down, reflect and wait to receive new insight and inner direction.

Asking questions, versus giving feedback or advice, is a key WLC practice. WLC members frequently mentioned inquiry and reflection as an important aspect of why they keep coming back:

- “I ask questions. I came to understand the value of this as feminine leadership.”  
Alumnae Dialogue
- “Another one [practice] that is important to me is the listening, not feeling we have to fix anyone, the acceptance to say what you have to say...be accepted without getting

advice.” “I get irritated now with people who do that – try to fix me or problem-solve – I want to say stop – just witness me.” Board Dialogue

- “For me it’s a great relief to my internal patterns that not only I don’t have to react, but I CAN’T react. It forces those brain connections. It holds a space to allow that reactive pattern to happen. I sit with it; I witness my reactive pattern and not have the slimmest change to follow it so I get that space in between to become more conscious.” Facilitator Dialogue.
- “The discipline brings you back to yourself. When a cohort group spends time working on each other, they let themselves off the hook.” “It’s about listening with our whole being, rather than just our heads, trying to feel every part of ourselves, the highest good, allowing what comes through from that wholeness in to the circle.” Facilitator Dialogue

Facilitators have noticed that the cohorts in which members give each other advice do not experience the same kind of transformational experiences as those cohorts who stay with inquiry. Block states, “transformation and restoration occur through the power of language and how we speak and listen to one another...holding them [conversations] in a restorative context – one of possibility, generosity and gifts, in relationship with others – is as much the transformation as any place that those conversations might lead you. ...Questions are more transformative than answers and are the essential tools of engagement.” (Block, 2008, pp. 101 - 103). Questioning not only creates engagement, it strengthens community bonds. When we move together into the place of not knowing, and stop assuming someone else has the answer for us, we become explorers who are now able to co-sense and co-create together (Scharmer, 2009).

In the alumnae dialogue, one member described this as learning to be comfortable in an emergent process without having the answers, to be comfortable in the unknown. Another said: “To be okay with not knowing the answers, the realization is that there can be more than one answer, a number of possibilities and it’s really what works best for the group.”

Indigenous wisdom recognized the importance of community support for reflection. In the story of the Rainbow Path, the community provided a safe container for the individual to take this potentially perilous journey towards wholeness. Similarly, on a Native American vision quest, a community of supporters and guides hold the perimeter, sending someone on their quest and receiving them when they return. Reflecting silently together is also a part of many reflective

spiritual practices. In WLC, we offer space, silence, reflective and artistic activities, time in nature, and questions as community practices for exploring the Rainbow Path. The community is valued in this exploration. As one alum said about exploring paradox in community: “Alone I get all tangled up. When I sit in this group, it makes sense and it seems okay.” Over time those who stay engaged discover that it can be a lifelong journey to examine current beliefs and structures and gain new insights for action. Regularly walking the Rainbow Path in community supports us to choose a generative approach to our lives in which we embrace ourselves as multi-beings in a continual process of “becoming”.

At the group level, WLC also engages in reflective inquiry for the purposes of discerning collective meaning and co-action. The theory of “presencing” (Scharmer, 2009; Senge et al., 2004) describes how a group, through silence and deep reflection can begin to see its participation within a collective field. In the act of presencing, our knowledge shifts from tacit, embodied knowledge that we perceive “after the fact, to self-transcending knowledge, in which perception of subject and object are united in process and action” (Scharmer, 2009, p.257). Presencing occurs when a group moves beyond recognizing, debating or even dialoguing about differences to attend to the larger system in which they are engaged and ask “what is trying to emerge here?” Similar to the idea of co-action, it is not an analytical process but rather a sensing of the energy within the collective for what is trying to emerge or where the group can successfully move forward.

In WLC’s collective reflection process, we use the metaphor of Story. Our use of story reflects the intersection of the principle of Memory, in which we recognize our rootedness in a historical context, and Emergence, in which we also recognize our participation in an unfolding future. Our reflective process starts with clarifying *the current/past story*. As described in the Re-envisioning Retreat, we began with a reflection on our history, created visually as a spiral map that lists key events, projects and turning points in the community. The last year’s activities are added to this map, followed by a reflection on what was meaningful and significance in the last year. From this starting place, the group moved into an exploration of *the deeper story* that might be unfolding. The group did individual and collective reflection on where our energy was and what questions were emerging for us. From there we moved to the exploration of *the emerging story*, where we played with various scenarios. We cycled between these three: current story, the deeper story and the emerging story, until the next day when we began to identify the next steps for how we would live out *the new story*.

Another way to see this collective reflection process in action is by applying it to the emergence of the “WhoKnows” group. The current story was how facilitators were seen in their role as “keepers” of the principles and practices. The alums who desired to form their own circle were exploring a deeper story: how to move more community knowledge to board members, how to deepen their own practice and how to strengthen participation of the alumnae community. The formation of the “WhoKnows” group raised these issues and their needs were brought into tension with the role facilitators had played as keepers of community knowledge. The emerging story seemed to be one of further dispersion of expertise among board members, not only through the “WhoKnows” group, but also through a decision to offer the “Facilitation the WLC Way” retreat. This retreat strengthened relationships between board members and facilitators and helped transfer knowledge from facilitators to alumnae, paving the way for stronger engagement by alums. The outcome was a more conscious movement into the new story, in which a broader membership could hold the knowledge of the principles and practices. It has raised a discussion about whether a new form of entry into the community might happen through smaller self-facilitated trios or circles.

The process of collective inquiry also speaks to the WLC approach to conflict. Within the loosely held container of a volunteer learning community, it takes courage and commitment to raise conflict. It could be easier to avoid it. Sometimes we may believe avoidance will preserve the relationship. We may not feel we have the skills to raise a conflict without damaging the relationships. As a virtual community, we may not feel we have enough time together to raise a conflict and reach resolution. But avoidance weakens connections and the energy between us dissipates.

While some in the community would suggest that we are conflict-avoidant, and I believe that at times we do avoid conflict in favor of maintaining our relational bonds, our principles can offer guidance for a more transformative approach to conflict. The common steps of conflict resolution approaches are to determine the positions, hear them, explore the places of difference and of commonality, and then work through a process to reach agreement or compromise in order to get to action (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991) . This is an approach that seeks to resolve difference within the same frame of reference in which it was created, namely, to find solutions that satisfy each party’s interests. This approach does not disrupt or shift our individually held beliefs and assumptions. An alternative approach to conflict is to engage in

transformative dialogue “that attempt to cross the boundaries of meaning, that locate fissures in the taken-for-granted realities of the disputants, that restore the potentials for multi-being, and most importantly, that enables participants to generate a new and more promising domain of shared meaning.” (K. J. Gergen, 2009, p. 193).

WLC has sought to resolve conflict in this transformative way. When naming a conflict, we recognize that it is important for each person to acknowledge responsibility for how she is framing the situation. This is an important step in acknowledging the different “stories” we may each have developed regarding the issue. The responsibility also extends to owning one’s own feelings. Dialogue requires us to observe our reactions and judgments and to recognize how our feelings are connected to the stories we are holding. In dialogue, we practice allowing individuals to have their feelings without assuming others are responsible for them. This is demonstrated when we can hear another’s feelings without seeking to convince her that she shouldn’t feel that way. It’s also demonstrated when we refrain from becoming defensive, or at least name our defensiveness and seek to recognize our own feelings that are giving rise to our reaction. When each person involved in a conflict owns both their perceptions and their feelings, we create an equal ground devoid of villains or victims. As noted in the “WhoKnows” learning summary, this takes a high level of maturity.

We are then able to seek solutions in a way that helps us potentially find new meaning. We may reach a solution we can all support. If a solution is not readily seen, we at least may see where we agree and disagree. If action is not essential, we may agree to disagree and move away from the issue altogether. Or one person may agree to move forward and others stand aside to allow them room to move. Some issues may be best left unresolved, especially if the alternative is the violence of silenced voices and the domination of one person or group over others. Or we may enter into a longer period of reflection together in order to discern the way for us to move forward. Sometimes engaging in a ritual together can help. For example, when the community entity was taking shape, the cofounders created a collage as a symbol of the ending of the old form of their relationship and as symbol for their entering an unknown relational future. This way of addressing conflict helps us find the place of joint action that can be contained within the relationship.

## Sustaining the Energy: Rhythms, Cycles, and Emergence in Community



*“...building real community can help solve situations that fall outside the influence of active will, and real community can only be generated through patience. If proper attention is paid to creating the right atmosphere, the important thing can happen on its own. This is the part of life that is mysterious to us, which controls and guides us rather than the other way around. This is the part of life that the feminine holds in loving and patient hands.” (Frenier, 1997, p. 46).*

Sustaining a learning community, over time, is a practice in managing group energy. Our energy ball metaphor struck a chord among the board and facilitators. It addressed our community’s primary resource: relational energy. With no building, hierarchy, famous leader, high profile product or large endowment, the WLC community functions on the basis of the energy created between those who become engaged. Paying attention to this energy is a key to keeping the community vibrant. The energy ball image helped us visualize the strength of our energy and the mutual way in which individual energy and collective energy feed each other. The image also described how individuals are able to move in and out of the collective, taking what they receive into their own lives and bringing energy back to strengthen and support the community.

The energy ball metaphor also helps demonstrate the cycles and rhythms that occur within the community. Another metaphor we use to describe this is that of “breathing in and out”. There are some years in which WLC has launched many new activities and events; a large breathing out of energy occurs during these times. Rather than continue to push more activity out after these times, we stop and take an “in breath”. We might spend several months doing nothing or reflecting on the past activities to see what we have learned. It takes courage to not jump to the conclusion that the organization is withering. These are key times for meaning-making within the community; times that replenish our energy and allow for new ideas to gestate. Similar to the Rainbow Path and the Lightning Bolt Path, we sense into when the energy is shifting and are able to make a shift between times of activity and times of rest.

As in nature, these cycles are important in showing us how life and creation works. Making art also teaches us this. We need fallow time, time to wander, to rest and restore ourselves. A

common piece of advice to those who are unclear is to act first. I believe this to be an overuse of the collective masculine approach to do something, anything, rather than to sit still and wait for insight. The feminine dimension of stillness and waiting can also be overused, but it seems to be much less of a problem in the Western leadership world. When groups are able to collectively integrate these energies and discern when it is time to shift, they build their capability for co-creation.

One outcome of developing this capability is that we learn to anticipate what is happening under the surface, to sense when energy is waxing and waning and to support what is needed for the community, whether it be to get behind and resource a new project or to rest, reflect or to let something go that is no longer serving the community. To do this, we also need to accept death as well as birth. As Carol Frenier writes, life is difficult, it has a process of its own, we cannot predict the outcome and it takes energy to manage the effort. Life is continually being born, maturing and dying all around us and within us. When it is time for something around us or within us to die, we cannot always see far enough ahead to know what new life we might be carrying (Frenier, 1997).

There are times when we cannot push action through without creating more death and destruction. In today's times of economic and environmental disruption we are learning this over and over. We do not control complex systems, we can only nudge them. By accepting death as a part of the cycle of life, we can be even more conscious of the preciousness of what we have. We can learn to grieve when things change and when it's time to let go. And we can allow the fallow time to return, again and again, like the cycles of the seasons, so that new life can emerge. When we see organizational life as embodying cycles and rhythms, we are more able to let go of structures and forms that are no longer contributing to group energy. We can let forms die and allow life to re-organize itself into new forms. One way to see this process is to seek the essence that is behind the form. Another way is to see that we are in a relational process, working with energy and form in a continuous process of co-creation.

Wheatley describes this as life emerging order out of chaos (Wheatley, 2007). We do not need to force or control this. Our propensity for control seems more likely an interference with the way life organizes itself. We are part of a vast universe beyond our ability to fathom. To create organizations that are life-affirming, we engage in a practice that honors all that we cannot know or see. Engaging in relational practice can be seen as a sacred act (K. J. Gergen, 2009). We

can begin to view organizational work as sacred practice, present in all that we are and do. As one alum put it, “It [WLC] was a sacred journey, for each of us it was a sacred journey.” And another who said: “I think there is a spiritual component to so much of what we do.”

A final thought on sustainability came in the facilitator dialogue as “being the change you want to see in the world.” Said one facilitator: “We do our own process. That is what has come to me after years of questioning the essence of WLC – the words I would use is that it has helped me to accept myself more fully, and when I can accept myself more fully, I can accept others more fully and be the change I want to see in the world. And I’m proud of that. It’s sustainable.” To which another replied: It’s sustainable because it is never done.”





## Chapter Six: Applications and Concluding Thoughts

Every good story has a lesson, a “so what” that makes it stick with us and helps us bring something applicable forward. In my concluding chapter, I will discuss what may be applicable from the WLC experience for others, for leadership in any organizational setting and also for women leaders. In conclusion, I will consider what may be next for the WLC community going forward. But first, a reflection on what did not get included in the study and what questions this may raise for further research.

### ***What Was Not Included***

In creating an organization, we engage in collective sense making that select some things and ignore a multitude of other possibilities (Weick, 1995). There were voices left out of this study: community members that have moved away or moved on to other things in their lives, women who came and left the retreat series because it didn’t feel like the right fit for them, women who participated in the entry retreat series but didn’t have interest in engaging in ongoing community inquiry. These women may have provided a very different picture of what WLC is. The study might have looked more closely at why some women chose to disengage and what that could tell us about our community’s practices. It might have explored the stories of individual women more carefully, learning more about whether/how their experience in WLC changed them and perhaps seeing if anyone else around them noticed this change. It might have been a study that compared organizational models to understand areas of similarity and difference.

For example, a new organization for women has some interesting parallels to WLC. Feminine Power was started by two women; Claire Zammit and Katherine Woodward Thomas (Thomas & Zammit, 2010) to also help women develop a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. They approach the feminine in terms of a feminine awakening, cultivating and co-creating relational power. Their organization is program focused, attracting women through short, free or inexpensive tele-seminars with well-known women authors. Participating in one of their virtual programs I found a similar flavor to WLC in their approach to relational dialogue. Their programmatic model, judging from a recent email recruiting new staff positions to add to their current 40 member staff, seems to be fueling rapid growth.

Another community of practice that I am now part of, the Art of Hosting (AoH) community, also has interesting parallels with WLC. We are a relational network of highly diverse, globally

distributed practitioners. Our purpose is to develop practitioners' ability to host and harvest conversations that matter through collaborative development and mastery of an emerging set of practices. The AoH seems to have a worldview that is similar to WLC's principles and practices. AoH values relationships, diversity, maximizing participation, civility and collective intelligence, and working to transform conflict into creative cooperation. AoH practices come from many of the same authors that informed the development of WLC practices. This organization has no formal organization. It is a network of practitioners who self-organize through an active list serve and through co-working to provide trainings for communities and organizations. There is an outward focus towards social change in the community. The organizing image of the AoH organization is one of a martial arts "dojo."

These examples demonstrate just two of many potential models for organizing that offer different images of scalability, globalization, financial models and use of technology.

### ***Applications for the Workplace***

While the WLC experience may seem "unreal" from a traditional business perspective, there are aspects of what we do that can be applied in any workplace. I will discuss five ways that organizations might apply practices from WLC: make time for relationship building; practice collective inquiry and reflection; create meaning through image, metaphor and story; see and value collaboration as leadership; and attend to the cycles and rhythms of life.

### **Make Time for Relationship Building**

Task is the focus in most workplaces today. As the resources that built current systems become scarce, we try to do more with less. Work systems like Six Sigma and Lean seek to eliminate anything that does not add value. While this is effective in streamlining existing operations, it doesn't address the value of relationships for managing our emergence into the unknown. This is where we most need each other. Relationships of trust and safety are critical to navigating unknown territory. When we squeeze out all the non-task time, we lose the web of connection that is our safety net through times of change. In some organizations, leaders separate relationship building from doing the work, relegating the relationship side of things to "team building" activities that might be done once or twice a year outside the work setting. While these activities do help people connect, they don't help build the ongoing, daily relationship norms of trust and care that become part of the work life of the team.

Relationship building doesn't have to take a lot of time. When it becomes a regular practice, people become aligned and the task work actually goes faster. One simple practice to start building relationships is to have a check-in at the beginning of team meetings. This is a time in which everyone is given a chance to briefly share on a question or topic before the team launches into the main part of the meeting. The check-in question could be to simply ask how people are doing personally. If someone has something challenging going on, it is helpful for others to know that, rather than making assumptions if they see that a team member is distracted or upset. It opens the possibility for people to become more open with and to provide more support to one another. The check-in question could also be related to the topic of the meeting, with questions such as: what are team members most challenged by or most excited about?

Another benefit of starting meetings with a check-in is the engagement of all voices from the beginning. When everyone in a meeting has a chance to briefly speak at the beginning of a meeting, there is greater chance that everyone will feel free to speak up throughout the meeting. This mitigates the tendency for the dominant voices in the group to take over and helps encourage balanced participation from the whole team.

## **Practice Collective Inquiry and Reflection**

Organizations need to find ways to deal with increasingly complex challenges and be able to make rapid, continuous change involving the letting go of structures, systems, policies, and even philosophies that are no longer working. Margaret Wheatley says, "There is sufficient information right here to help us find our way out. But we have to be willing to stop, to listen, to admit we don't know." (Wheatley, 2010 p. 39). Not knowing is the first step to finding resources that are often all around us, as well as within us, but we can't see them. Our individualistic and compartmentalized thinking combined with a belief that there is 'one right way', becomes a kind of tyranny in which voices all around us get silenced. When we can stay in the tension of not knowing long enough, we find that the way forward can and does emerge. What is needed is the ability to stay compassionately together; to keep learning together. This is the lesson of the Rainbow Path in WLC: staying together in the unknown, we learn to discern the way forward. We are able to find new knowledge and to let go of old forms that no longer energize or serve us.

As organizations continue to feel the squeeze of tight resources and global competition, the practice of reflection, both collectively as well as independently, gets cut. In the drive for results,

leaders and teams sacrifice time together to review and make sense of what is happening. The drive is to achieve prescribed measures (often short term) around effectiveness and efficiencies while the deeper assumptions related to the “what” and “why” of the work go unchallenged. As a consequence, people continue to do things that may not make sense as conditions change around them. To get at the deeper assumptions driving organizational choices requires a collective ability to ask powerful questions that open up thinking.

The growth of leadership coaching in organizations attests to the value organizations are finding in providing a personal, trust relationship and skilled inquiry for leaders to become more effective. The one-on-one coaching approach is helpful, but doesn’t build relationships within the organization. Our ability in organizations to go into the “not knowing” together requires that we build trust and safety. For most of us, the unknown is a scary place. We would rather have certainty, even if it is wrong, than to be untethered in a free fall of emergence. When we have a sense of connection to each other and to the larger world, we experience a safer journey. We have allies, mates and friends to call for help.

Another result of collective inquiry is the ability to manage difference and accept paradox. When leaders learn to inquire rather than jumping to judgment, advice or advocacy, they gain more perspective on the whole, on what others are facing in their worlds. They begin to see the tensions that exist in the whole, the polarities that must be managed in complexity, rather than seeing everything as simply problems to solve. Leaders develop a tolerance for staying in the tension of conflict longer. They learn to act with greater discernment and wisdom. WLC members have described practicing inquiry in a community as “coaching on steroids”. It expands one’s perspective more quickly and it also enables quicker translation of the learning into action.

One approach to community inquiry many organizations are now using is peer coaching. In peer coaching, leaders meet in small groups, either within existing functions or across functions, to coach one another on real work issues (Hyatt, Belden-Charles & Stacy, 2007). As a relational approach to inquiry, peer coaching builds competence in questioning skills while also developing relationships of trust and support within the organization. Peer coaching works to create trust and support between people while also developing their ability to ask powerful questions. It is well received because at the same time, leaders are getting answers to the difficult challenges in their work.

## **Create Meaning through Image, Metaphor and Story**

Inquiry is an act of questioning that elicits meaning making. When we engage in reflective activity, we are in a sense “restorying” what has happened or what we are seeing. The symbolic is a powerful tool that helps a group create new meaning, which is necessary for organization change to sustain. The images we hold determine the story we live out. And the story is like the operating system for what then becomes the reality we shape. WLC members have used metaphor to help people understand changes in their team’s purpose, goals or roles. One WLC member working in new product development scrapped the traditional product presentations and required her team to “tell their story”. This approach not only was powerful in getting support for their project, but it required the team to have a coherent story to tell about the product and why it was important to produce. Many organizations are using story as a way to create strategic plans. They are finding it is more engaging to create a future story than to give people a set of numbers on a power point slide.

When the symbolic is combined with inquiry and reflection, deeper beliefs and assumptions are easier to access and examine. The symbolic helps people connect what they already know to the unknown. As an example, in working with a conflict in a school between two groups of teachers, I asked each group to draw a picture (no words) that would depict symbolically how they thought the other group saw them. The two pictures offered great exaggerations of the assumptions they had each latched onto about the other and the subsequent laughter helped loosen the hold of their perceptions about each other so that we could begin to unpack the conflict and reach resolution. The conflict that had been in place since the school formed got untangled in a couple of hours. The group created a new image together at the end of the meeting that depicted how they wanted to move forward and the conflict has not reappeared two years later.

## **See and Value Collaboration as Leadership**

Despite all the research on the importance of participative and collaborative leadership to gain employee engagement and improve outcomes, the model of tough, heroic, command and control leadership continues to hold the power. Our unconscious conflation of leadership with masculinized gender and power norms keeps not only women but also men with relational leadership styles from rising to the highest levels of leadership. Empowering others, pushing

decision-making down and building leadership capability throughout the team and organization need to be named and valued as leadership.

One place to begin changing the expectations around leadership norms is to review competency models to ensure that language around relational competence is added. But to make this a cultural norm, it must also be reinforced in what is recognized and who is promoted in the organization. Organizations that continue to just reward measurable short term results will get leaders who will defer relational practices to the demands of the task. It takes courage for leaders to engage relational practice, especially when under fire. We need to recognize and reward leaders who believe in the long term ability of their people to face challenges more effectively when they are connected. And recognition needs to expand beyond individual leaders to recognize the collective efforts of peers and teams who work well together.

The way work is assigned can draw from the WLC's learnings about relational leadership practice. Holding people jointly accountable for results across functional disciplines can drive cooperation rather than internal competition. Assigning project leadership to trios (or even pairs) can encourage shared leadership. Councils around important organization issues that use circle practices can provide governance across hierarchies and even cross organizations in those areas where a holistic approach is needed.

## **Attend to Life Cycles and Rhythms**

For many people today, organizational life is moving at a pace that feels unhealthy. Research in health is helping us understand the connection of stress to health. Particularly for leaders, the pace of work today is extreme. Many leaders are working more than 50 or 60 hours a week. This leaves little time for healthy practices for the body, much less the relational time we need to create healthy communities. Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* (2000) describes the negative impact of this pace of work in the U.S., and the impact of the weakening bonds of community on civic participation, philanthropy, reciprocity and public trust.

If organizations are to continue to survive, they need to pay attention to their own limits. I spoke recently with someone in a smaller city in Minnesota who said that most of the people he knows no longer feel they can take even a lunch break at work for fear that this will be seen as slacking and put them at jeopardy for being laid off. I wonder how effective these organizations are, much less how much they can be learning, when their people operate without breaks and with

so much fear. To work with the cycles of life, we need to first attend to people's basic physical needs; for rest, nourishment, movement. Beyond that, if we want people to be innovative and creative, we need enriching environments: natural light, color, space, beauty (Block, 2008).

A community organization in our community that is over 100 years old recently decided to close their doors. I asked the past president about her reaction to this unanimous decision made by the board and the past presidents. She said that one of her learnings is that everything in the living world has its limits. When we fail to realize those limits, when we refuse to adjust our course, life can cease to exist. Organizations can go out of business. In the case of this organization, members and leaders were not willing to make the changes needed to transform their organization. So, perhaps, as part of the cycle of life, this organization's time to exist was over. It is hard for all of us to let go, whether to make the transformational changes that may be needed to stay alive or to let something go whose life has ended. To work with the natural rhythms of life and life cycles includes recognizing when projects, systems, processes are over and allowing them to end. This means that stop trying to do everything while just adding on more and more. When we honor and ritualize endings we create a space for new life to emerge (Bridges, 1991). Life also needs fallow time to gestate new growth. Fallow times, "breathing in" times are important for long term sustainability.

### ***Applications for Women Leaders***

An ongoing women's group can be of real value for women who are seeking to find their voice and power in leadership systems still oriented towards masculine gender norms (Fletcher, 2003). By exploring and claiming values associated with the feminine, women leaders can help shape new definitions of power and leadership that are more collective, relational and democratic. Using an inquiry approach can help women remain open to multiple views of what "the feminine" means and avoid the pitfalls inherent in any one interpretation of women's leadership. Paradoxically, we have found that when women have a place to explore the collective feminine with other women, they can find greater ease and self-confidence in being themselves in their leadership roles while also developing recognition that there is more than one way to be an effective woman leader. They can begin to name those situations in which gender norms may be limiting how they or others are being seen as leaders.

Creating that intentional “speed bump” for reflection seems particularly important for women leaders. The rush and pace of organization life, added to the responsibilities women still carry for family and community make it difficult for women to find the time reflect on their lives or the contexts in which they work. Many women in leadership also want time to engage in authentic conversations with others on the broader issues and needs of women’s full lives (Carter et al., 2005). A learning community for women can provide this. Providing organizational support for women to participate in learning groups with other women leaders, whether inside or outside the organization, would help open the glass ceiling and retain more women leaders.

Another application from the WLC experience to sustaining women’s groups is in our approach to relationships. Women’s groups are more typically relational in nature, but the shadow side can be unhealthy relational norms that create caretaking rather than caring. Jumping in prematurely with unsought advice or criticism, rescuing others from their feelings, and avoiding difficult conversations (perhaps in conjunction with talking about someone behind their back) are behaviors that diminish rather than strengthen relationships. Group norms that encourage ownership of one’s own feelings and growth as well as respectful dialogue can prevent these kinds of behaviors. Our experience with discouraging advice giving, acknowledging feelings and the importance of making one’s assumptions explicit are all useful norms for women’s groups and other relationally oriented groups to sustain over time.

### ***Future Questions for WLC***

Over the last year, WLC has expanded to invite women outside of the alumnae community to events. The board has endorsed the value of the trio leadership model in organizing events and projects. Alumnae participation is strong and continues to grow. The e-circle format is growing and offers the potential to engage those alums living outside MN. The community’s financials are strong with income from product sales and programs exceeding expectations.

WLC will likely continue to deliberate on questions of membership, growth, finances and formats as it heads into its fifteenth year. Currently the alumnae group has organized a retreat on the topic of conflict within the WLC container. With the issue of conflict having been raised several times over the past year, the retreat will give those who want to explore more deeply a chance to consider how they respond in conflict situations as well as what conflicts they feel may have been left unspoken or unresolved within WLC.



Facilitators have planned a meeting with the “WhoKnows” group to explore some of the questions that were initially raised about the formation of this group. Facilitators will also meet to continue examining the ongoing needs for facilitation and how to best meet these into the future. The question of our form continues to be alive as we ask how we want to grow the community. Will our practices and structure resonate with the next generation of women reaching mid-life and mid-career? Will our current model of facilitation give way to small, self-facilitated communities? Is there is a way to grow the community more widely without losing the “magic”?

The spiral comes full circle back to the question of magic. Perhaps that is the ultimate question regarding sustaining this community. It is the magic that brings us back. The magic we have learned to create with one another.

## **Appendix A: Listing of the Community Archives**

- Notes from the meetings and retreats of the founders; 1991-2008
- Journal entries from founders faxed to one another; 1994-1995
- Notes and resources used in the Study Circle; 1998
- Meeting notes from board meetings, including the board launch, work group plans, annual strategic review meetings, bylaws and documentation for incorporation of 501C3 non-profit; 1998-2010
- Workbooks of resources and original writings on the principles and practices developed and used in the annual cohorts: 1999-2010
- Journal entries and documentation of agendas planned and enacted for all WIL/WLC retreats, 1997-2006)
- Notes from facilitator work group and facilitator circle meetings and retreats; 2000-2009
- Development notes and documentation from community projects: development of WLC journal first edition (2000), development of writing circles and book publication (2003), E-circle Launch (2003), Workshop with Wendy Palmer (2004), WLC women's leadership conference (2005), WLC 10 year alumnae reunion and Radical Leadership Conference (2007)
- Brochures for WLC and CEL (1998-2010)
- Master's Thesis written on CEL/WIL using an appreciative inquiry study to explore feminine leadership; 2001-2002 (citation needed)
- Website development for two website launches, including research on "competitor" organizations, language drafts, documentation on challenges with language choices, and final copy, launched in 2004 and in 2007
- Monthly notes from alumnae circles; 2004-2010
- "Herstorian" scrapbook created and presented to the community as a parting gift from Co-founder Debbie Ackley, our first Herstorian; 2001
- Alumnae surveys: 1998, 2008
- External marketing plan developed by consultant Clyde Hanson: 1998
- Pictures, photo books, art created by community members; 1991-2009
- E-circle newsletters, 2004 - 2010

## Appendix B: Study Circle Articles

### Articles of Interest and Readings for Study Circle (1999)

- 1) Feminist Epistemology: A Reconstruction and Integration of Women's Knowledge and Experiences.  
By: Joanne Ardovini-Brooker, Ph.D. 2000  
From: Advancing Women in Leadership Journal
- 2) Walking the Labyrinth – A Journey on a Sacred Path  
By: Elyn Aviva 1998  
From: The Quest
- 3) Women's Ways of Knowing – The Development of Self, Voice and Mind  
By: Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, et al. 1986
- 4) Trading Your Kingdom for a Horse  
By: Peter Block 1993  
From: Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest
- 5) David Bohm on Dialogue  
transcription from seminar dialogue 1989
- 6) Power as Dynamic Tension and its Implications for Radical Organizational Change  
By: Patricia Bradshaw 1998  
From: European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology
- 7) Bohm's Dialogue and Action Science: Two Different Approaches  
By: Mario Cayer, Ph.D. 1997  
From: Journal of Humanistic Psychology
- 8) Changing Our Minds about Leadership  
By: Wilfred H. Drath 1996  
From: Center for Creative Leadership – Issues and Observations
- 9) Making Common Sense – Leadership as Meaning-making in a Community of Practice  
By: Wilfred H. Drath and Charles J. Palus  
From: Center for Creative Leadership
- 10) The Mythic Path – Discovering the Guiding Stories of Your Past; Creating a Vision for Your Future  
By: David Feinstein, Ph.D. and Stanley Krippner, Ph.D. 1997
- 11) Strategy, Organizational Culture and Symbolism  
By: Sebastian Green 1998  
From: Long Range Planning

## Articles of Interest and Readings for Study Circle (1999)

- 12) Of Story and Myth  
By: Jean Houston, Ph.D.  
From: The Search for the Beloved
  
- 13) Rethinking Organizational Design  
By: Robert W. Keidel 1994  
From: Academy of Management Executive
  
- 14) Communities of Commitment: The Heart of Learning Organizations  
By: Fred Kofman and Peter M. Senge 1993  
From: Organizational Dynamics
  
- 15) Redeeming Power: Women in Church and Society  
By: Mary Jo Leddy, Ph.D.
  
- 16) Second-Order Planned Change: Definition and Conceptualization  
By: Amir Levy 1986  
From: Organizational Dynamics
  
- 17) Working It Out: Women leaders recreate work through storytelling  
By: Melanie Lundheim  
from:
  
- 18) Saint Sophia  
By: Caitlin Matthews 1991  
From: Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom
  
- 19) Knowing and the Knower  
By: Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela 1992  
From: The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding
  
- 20) Key Theoretical Concepts  
By: Barbara McManus 2001  
From: Feminist Theoretical Concepts
  
- 21) Four Games (Chapter 3),  
The Paths of Change (Chapter 4)  
By: Will McWhinney, Eleanor S. McCulley et al. 1993  
From: Creating Paths of Change
  
- 22) Women as Leaders: The Paradox of Success  
By: Deborah Merrill-Sands and Deborah M. Kolb 2001  
From: CGO Insights (Center for Gender in Organizations)

## Articles of Interest and Readings for Study Circle (1999)

- 23) The Power of Mythmaking (Part 1)  
By: Patricia Montgomery 1994  
From: Mythmaking: Heal Your Past; Claim Your Future
  
- 24) Strategic Termites (Chapter 3)  
By: Gareth Morgan  
From: Imaginization – The Art of Creative Management
  
- 25) The Case for Qualitative Research  
By: Gareth Morgan and Linda Smircich 1980  
From: Academy of Management Review
  
- 26) Introduction: A Woman's Quest for Wholeness,  
Healing the Mother/Daughter Split (Chapter 8)  
By: Maureen Murdock  
From: The Heroine's Journey
  
- 27) Girls just want to have a place to talk without boys.  
By: Kim Ode 2001  
From: Mpls. Star-Tribune
  
- 28) Dominant/Dominated (Chapter 30),  
The Terrible Dance of Power (Chapter 31),  
The Sound of the Old Dance Shaking (Chapter 32),  
Seeing the Dance (Chapter 33)  
By: Barry Oshry 1995  
From: Seeing Systems
  
- 29) About Spirit (Chapter 1),  
Mythos – The Image of Spirit (Chapter 2)  
By: Harrison Owen 1987  
From: Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations
  
- 30) Leadership, Cognitive Complexity, and Gender  
By: Rebecca A. Proehl and Kathleen Taylor 1997  
From: A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership
  
- 31) The Most Human Art – 10 reasons why we'll always need a good story  
By: Scott Russell Sanders 1997  
From: The Utne Reader
  
- 32) Peanut Butter Principles – Storytelling offers us vital continuity  
By: Charles Simpkinson 1994  
From: The Utne Reader

# **Articles of Interest and Readings for Study Circle (1999)**

- 33) Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis  
By: Linda Smircich  
From: Administrative Science Quarterly  
1983
  
- 34) Leadership: The Management of Meaning  
By: Linda Smircich and Gareth Morgan  
From: Journal of Applied Behavioral Science  
1982
  
- 35) Strategic Management in an Enacted World  
By: Linda Smircich and Charles Stubbart  
From: Academy of Management Review  
1985
  
- 36) Cracks in the Glass Ceiling  
By: Charlene Marmer Solomon  
From: Workforce  
2000
  
- 37) Healing Through Metaphor (Chapter 5),  
The Conscious Feminine (Chapter 8)  
interviews with Marion Woodman  
From: Conscious Femininity  
1993
  
- 38) Chaos and Creativity  
By: Marion Woodman and Elinor Dickson  
From: Dancing in the Flames
  
- 39) Introduction  
By: unknown  
From: Leaving my Father's House
  
- 40) Leading the Way  
Advertisement for CEL  
Women Focus  
2001
  
- 41)
  
- 42)

## Appendix C: The WLC Recipe Card

### Recipe for a WLC Sponsored Event

- 1. Begin by imagining and capturing the event's intention.
- 2. Sprinkle in the CEL principles and practices that support the intention.
- 3. Stir in dialogue with a WLC facilitator for ideas to deepen the learning.
- 4. Pour in intentional ways to gather in circle.
- 5. Measure and note expenses that will be incurred.
- 6. Sift through event's intent with alumnae liaison group.
- 7. Cook up a written invitation and share with alumnae through the bi-monthly e-letter.
- 8. Set the table for all to enjoy!

Gather in circle

Light the candle

Breathe

Review event's intent

Poem or reading

Check in

Activity/Dialogue

Return to circle

Reflect through dialogue

Extinguish candle

### Principles of CEL

Our work focuses on the integration of theory and practice and is based on the following principles:

**Respect:** Both the individual and the group are equally honorable. We hold a stance of deep respect for all people and a place where our most authentic selves can be present. We "make room for one another" opening new possibilities for learning.

**Awareness:** As we illuminate the assumptions, beliefs and feelings that root our actions, we learn how these either help or limit us in creating what we want. We strive to create greater consciousness within ourselves as individuals and within the communities in which we live.

**Wholeness:** Wisdom encompasses more than the intellect. Balancing heart, body and mind with tasks and relationships is key to creating healthy environments. The journey toward wholeness is a healing process, integrating all parts of ourselves, the archetypal feminine and masculine, and connecting us to one another.

**Authenticity:** We support and encourage development of authentic expression; to peel away the layers that cover our true gifts and bring greater power to our leadership work.

**Memory:** We seek to remember the past, our journeys as individuals and the collective story. We explore our mythology and claim the truth of our own experience.

**Emergence:** We explore a generative approach to leadership and how we participate in the unfolding future. We tap into and participate with the flow of energy and resources all around us. We look for what is trying to emerge in our own lives, our organizations, and our communities.

### Practices of CEL

Within our learning communities we have found key practices that enable us to learn about and from others and ourselves:

**Story/Image/Myth:** We use storytelling to understand ourselves, our organizations and our communities. We view culture as an unseen organizing force that conveys patterns of meaning. Myths, images and stories are the carriers of this meaning system.

**Action Learning Reflection:** To become more fully aware and conscious, we must become observers of ourselves as individuals and as organizations. The more we are able to surface and examine our embodied assumptions the more we can learn and change. We follow a spiral, learning path that moves from reflection to action. The path spirals back on itself, allowing the "learner" to hear and see with ever-deeper perspective.

**Centering:** Grounding and centering in our wholeness – mind, body, spirit – helps us integrate all parts of ourselves. We return to center again and again when we find ourselves pushed off-center by the realities of daily life.










**Dialogue:** We practice open inquiry where participants speak authentically, listen deeply and pay attention to what has heart and meaning.

**Intention:** Choosing a focus sets energy in motion, creating a powerful image that attracts resources and support and moves us to new growth and creativity. In working with our intentions, we look for what is emerging, attend to the next steps and let go of predetermined outcomes.

**Ritual:** Our co-created rituals help us maintain and pass on the traditions of CEL and create continuity of experience together. Rituals help us build and sustain the CEL community as we grow.






## Appendix D: Agenda for Re-Envisioning Retreat

Friday, November 20

	8:00	Gather, bagels, coffee, tea and informal reconnection
	8:15	Centering – the Energy Ball If your energy ball had a color/a shape/a name/a message for us today, what would it be?
	8:45	What is our Current Story Where have we been? Herstorical look at WIL/CEL/WLC Strategic Streams and Directions (2008) Accomplishments for 2009
	9:15	The Deeper Story: A labyrinth reflection..... Where is our individual energy? What part of our “herstory” resonates most deeply? What’s missing?
	10:30	Identifying the Questions: What hopes/fears themes are emerging? Where is our energy waxing and waning? What big questions do we want to explore? Is a “core” question emerging?
	12:00 noon	Break for lunch Possibly get into small “eating groups” to discuss different questions or launch different future scenarios
	1:30	The New/Deeper Story What are possible future scenarios? Small groups work 2-4 “what-if” scenarios, including structure, funding implications. Full group debrief. What would be included in the new, emerging story? Is a strategic direction emerging?
	3:30	Reflection on the day and plan for Saturday Where are we most clear? Where are we fuzzy? On what do we agree? Where do have differences? What is most significant for you?
	4:00	Adjourn



**Saturday, November 21**

	<b>8:30</b>	<b>Gather, reconnect, coffee &amp; tea</b>
	<b>9:00</b>	<b>Check-in</b> <b>Questions, reflections from Friday's meeting</b>
	<b>9:30</b>	<b>Living Out the New Story</b> <b>What action steps would move us in our direction?</b> <b>What do we need to move forward?</b> <b>How can we best organize ourselves in this direction?</b> <b>How will we know we are successful? What indicators will we watch for?</b>
	<b>11:30</b>	<b>Final reflection</b> <b>What are we leaving having accomplished?</b> <b>What questions/feelings were raised for you?</b> <b>What was most significant for us in what we did?</b> <b>What is/our our collective intentions going forward?</b> <b>How will you be different/what will you do differently as a result?</b>
	<b>12:00</b>	<b>Adjourn – And the next chapter of the WLC story begins.....</b>

## Appendix E: The 2008 WLC Alumnae Survey

1. The WLC experience is a doorway to the greater WLC Alumnae Learning Community and we are inviting your ideas to nurture both you and the Womens Leadership Community to help both thrive.

We want to reach out to more members, support and encourage greater participation in the larger WLC community and look for more ways to do that which would fit and respond to more WLC Alumnae interests.

So, please reflect for a moment and articulate for us those meaningful and enduring factors of your initial WLC experience that were especially valuable to you and consider what kinds of experiences would be worth your while to participate in the future to build on that initial foundation.

2. Thinking back on your initial experience with WLC, what environments below represent the best way to create new meaningful WLC experiences? If not represented here, please indicate ideas or comments you have for the future in the comment box below.

	Very Likely to Participate in the Future	Somewhat Likely to Participate in the Future	Not Likely to Participate in the Future
Learning Activities (monthly Circles, retreats, classes/workshops, book club)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Establishing or incorporating a telecommunication option to Circles or other elements for Alumnae residing outside of the Twin City geographical region.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Social - Structured (crafts work such as doll or drum-making, cooking, etc. incorporating WLC Principles and Practices)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social - Unstructured (monthly happy hour, monthly dinner)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Networking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Very Likely to Participate in the Future	Somewhat Likely to Participate in the Future	Not Likely to Participate in the Future
(business, social or both)			
Service Projects (volunteer activities, one-time or ongoing)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Activism (women/children advocacy)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify) and/or comments			

3. When considering participating in WLC activities, which if any, of the following elements spark your interest? If you have any additional ideas, please note them in the comments box below.

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Deepening WLC Practices and Principles	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Volunteer Service Projects	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Networking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Business Networking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning Opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rejuvenation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Outlet - Fun and Play	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Activism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify) and/or comments			

4. Women's Leadership Community has, for the past three years, held monthly Alumnae Circles on the fourth Thursday of the month, January through October. Based on Alumnae feedback, to try to draw more alumnae, we've changed to the fourth Tuesday of each month for 2009, January through October. When participating or considering participation in the WLC Alumnae Circles, what factors are important to you? Please include any additional comments you may have in the comment box provided below.

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Location/Geography/Traffic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scheduling (duration, day of the week, time of day)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Subject Matter (topics of dialogue)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Structure of the Monthly Circles (dinner followed by dialogue)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comfort Level (who else will be there, dialogue format/topics)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> Important
Other (please specify) and/or comments			

5. As a learning community, Womens Leadership Community seeks to engage its alumnae in continued learning about leadership. Please designate specific topics you are interested in exploring further by indicating your level of interest in each of the following:

	Very interested	Somewhat interested	Not interested
Developing your authentic leadership style	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Creating community in your workplace	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Collaborative leadership	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leadership in tough times	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dialogue in the workplace	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify)			

6. Please consider what might emerge for you personally and the larger WLC Community by offering your unique gifts and talents toward realizing our intention of building a vibrant, enduring learning community. Or, if you have another idea that you have energy around, or would like us to consider, please share that below.

	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested	Not Interested
Volunteering to help create/lead an Alumnae activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating with one of the WLC committees (Membership, Herstory, Special Projects/Video, Marketing, Alumnae Programs, Communications/Web Site,	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested	Not Interested
Financial)			
Serving on the Board of CEL (Center for Emerging Leadership)/WLC	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify) and/or comments. Please provide contact information if you are interested in volunteering. Or, you may contact a WLC Alumnae Liaison committee member directly to express your interest or for questions.

7. Please help us understand how often you visit [www.womensleadershipcommunity.org](http://www.womensleadershipcommunity.org), the new Women's Leadership Community website (choose one), and note any comments or questions in the comment box below.

- ☐ 12 times per year or more
- ☐ 6 - 12 times per year
- ☐ 3 - 6 times per year
- ☐ Once or twice
- ☐ Never

Other (please specify) and/or comments

8. Which factors would draw you to the WLC website more often? Feel free to use the comment box below to provide additional ideas we have not considered.

	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested	Not Interested
Alumnae stories	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Alumnae directory	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Alumnae business networking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Alumnae web-based discussion group	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Members-only log- in for directory and/or networking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify) and/or comments

9. We welcome your input and the health of WLC depends on it! If you would prefer to speak with a member of the WLC Alumnae Liaison committee to provide additional feedback on Alumnae activities or any other feedback regarding CEL and/or WLC, please provide your contact information in the space

provided and one of us will get back to you.

Alternatively you may contact one of us at our email addresses below to maintain your survey anonymity.

10. Is there anything else you would like us to know or that you have to share?

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this survey! We will provide feedback through a later email to all Alumnae. We look forward to seeing you at future WLC Alumnae activities!

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