HOW GREAT WOMEN LEAD

A Mother-Daughter Adventure into the Lives of Women Shaping the World

Bonnie St. John and Darcy Deane
CHAPTER 1

One Small Step for Womankind

Darcy…”

“Yeah, Mom?”

I momentarily held the undivided attention of my teenage daughter. Her thumbs, free of their ubiquitous texting keypad, quietly dangled by her side. Her computer and its omnipresent Facebook page were completely out of sight. She was even devoid of those little earbuds that seemed to constantly deliver the latest bass-thumping popular melodies directly into her brain. I had almost forgotten what she looked like without all these adolescent accoutrements. As we sat down together on the burgundy leather sofa in our living room, I realized this fleeting state of electronic dislocation was my chance to hatch a plan I had been formulating for the past several weeks. Carpe diem.

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“I hesitated. If I wanted her to commit to any extra work outside her busy schedule at school—not to mention work alongside her mother—I had to make this really great. “It would be about women as
leaders,” I continued, “a mother-daughter investigation into leadership styles and structures.”

“Leadership?” I blurted. It came out as if I had a bad taste in my mouth—which I did. I couldn’t imagine a more boring topic to write about. What is there to say about leadership anyway? When you’re in charge, you just get things done, right? Who wants to talk about that?

“We could interview CEOs, politicians like Hillary Clinton, military leaders, and other amazing women.”

The more I thought about this whole idea, the more I didn’t like it. I could tell my face showed how I felt.

Her furrowed brow told me I was losing her fast. “Um... we could find women leaders all around the world!” I said impulsively, frantically casting the ultimate bait.

“Really? Would we get to travel a lot?” I hadn’t thought about that. Heck, I’d write about the mating habits of tsetse flies if I got to go to Africa to do it!

Darcy has always been fascinated with countries and cultures outside her own. Since she was a little girl, she would, for her own entertainment, create entire civilizations from scratch. She designed their social structures and even generated fictional languages and alphabets for their communications. I hoped I was offering her a chance to explore her lifelong passions.

But this project wasn’t just about the influence it would have on Darcy. I wanted to do something that could have a potent impact on an alarming trend I had witnessed in workplaces across the country: far too many women appeared to be making a choice not to apply for top leadership positions when presented with the opportunities to do so.
Had the pendulum swung back from the newly liberated, ambitious, trailblazing women leaders of previous generations toward a more cautious view of leadership for their daughters in generations X, Y, and Z? Had their mothers paid such a high price for their achievements in terms of family life, harassment at work, and lack of recognition that many of their daughters were now ambivalent about aiming for the top and pushing wider the doors their mothers had opened?

At the same time, I still saw plenty of women who were willing to scale the heights no matter what the costs. But these “go-getters” faced a whole new set of frustrations and challenges their mothers wouldn’t have even imagined. They weren’t yet ready to throw in the towel, but they were pretty close to strangling somebody with it.

A number of books on the shelves today have made deep, scholarly investigations into these phenomena and drawn helpful intellectual conclusions. I wanted to do something different, something that would be more fun and more dedicated to showing how women today view themselves as leaders. I wanted to pull readers into the adventure of leadership. I wanted to strike at the heart—at the emotion of the quest. If I could somehow create a book that would help women of all ages and backgrounds to become more energized and, at the same time, better prepared to step up and take the lead in their communities, jobs, and homes, I knew our world would be better for it.

Ultimately, my daughter, too, would be entering the world of the workplace. By taking her on a tour to meet women who were successfully navigating their way around the rocks and hard places of leadership, perhaps we could create a call to action for her and for women everywhere to take their places at the highest levels of every sector in society.

This project, then, was a bit of a Trojan horse. On the one hand, the saga of a mother-daughter journey could seduce female readers, who might never bother to read the Harvard Business School dissertations on the subject, into a meaningful conversation about leadership. At the same time, if Darcy met a series of brilliant, accomplished women—people even a cynical teen would be in awe of—perhaps they could tell her all the things I’d like her to know—and more.
And she just might listen.

“Okay…” I told Mom. I was slowly gaining enthusiasm, but I was determined to keep this book from being a total snooze. “Do you want my opinion, though?”

“Of course.”

“Well, if you just make the book about CEOs and famous politicians, most people won’t feel like the book is for them. We should also talk to some people who are less well-known—people anyone can relate to.”

Why didn’t I think of that? She was right. I was speechless as Darcy continued.

“What’s our budget for this project?” I asked my mother. This thing sounded insanely expensive. It’s not like we’re the kind of people who vacation in the south of France, you know? How could we afford a huge, global fiesta?

Huh? Budget? “Um . . . I don’t know yet.” I wondered where she was going with this. So, to stall and gather my thoughts, I invoked the universal parental procrastination position: “It depends.”

“It depends on what?” I countered. I wasn’t going to let her get away with an evasion like that. “How are we going to travel around the country, or the world for that matter, without a budget and a plan?” My mother does, from time to time, come up with wild ideas—like when she decided to become a one-legged international ski racer from San Diego. I’ve heard all the stories about her running out of money, breaking her legs, and living out in the middle of nowhere to train on a glacier in the summer. That’s so not me. She can also be a bit disorganized—just look at her desk. I really
didn’t want to get involved in this enterprise unless I knew how it was going to work.

Who, exactly, was leading whom? Okay, I probably should have considered some more of the practical details of this endeavor prior to this discussion. For example, we were starting this project not long after the beginning of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. I certainly wasn’t in a position to name a generous sum of money for travel. “Darcy, we’ll make a budget and a plan after we get more information. I’m just trying to get an idea of your interest right now.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, still suspicious, but willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. I figured, what the heck? Against all my organizational instincts, I would give it a chance. If it did somehow manage to work, it could be the greatest opportunity of my teenage life.

Looking back, this interchange should have been my first clue that this project was not going to be “mother, paragon of leadership and role model, teaches eager, knowledge-thirsty daughter.” No. This was going to be a true learning adventure . . . for both of us.

The best expeditions start with preparation and help from others. I’m fortunate to have a great group of people who’ve signed on to my website’s “stay in touch” list and routinely give me their input on a variety of topics. This gang is a smattering of friends and acquaintances to whom I regularly turn for intelligent discourse and advice, particularly when I’m embarking on a new book project. Darcy and I crafted an e-mail asking them to recommend women leaders to include in our travelogue. We requested they keep in mind that we wanted not just the obvious choices, but their own, personally near and dear heroes.

Within minutes my inbox was flooded with replies! Not just women, but my male friends, too, regaled us with strong opinions and compelling arguments for women leaders we should hold up as role models. Each e-mail had three, four, sometimes as many as ten names. We were off and running!
“Mom, these women are really cool,” I said, surprised after I Googled a couple of the names on the list. Wow… An Iraqi woman who suffered under Saddam Hussein and single-handedly created an organization of women to fight back against dictators around the world… That Buddhist nun who helped AIDS patients in Thailand. Since I play cello in the school orchestra, I thought it would be cool to meet the only woman in the United States who conducts a major orchestra. Then there was Facebook! Right next to Mark Zuckerberg, the founder, there is a woman named Sheryl running the whole world my friends and I need to exist. Meeting her would be awesome!

After a few hours, we had over five hundred suggestions. It quickly became apparent that it would take days to weed through this material, so I sent out a brief “thank-you” e-mail letting people know we were poring through their ideas in earnest and would give them more feedback later. To my surprise, that follow-up note provoked yet another round of responses with hundreds more ideas! For weeks, people stopped me on the street, or after a speech, to say, “I meant to e-mail you back about your next book. You just have to include…”

We had really hit a nerve.

Over the next several weeks we delved excitedly into this extensive catalog of extraordinary human beings. Darcy organized the proposals into a spreadsheet to track diversity across age, nationality, ethnicity, field of expertise, and more. With so many legitimate nominations, it looked as if we could write several books. I had never before fully appreciated the depth and breadth with which women are shaping the world today—more than any time in recorded history. This exercise further strengthened our resolve to laud these amazing stories as examples of the incredible capabilities of women as leaders.

But where to start? How would we make it work? I suggested we do most of our research by phone, as I did for How Strong Women Pray. My telephone interviews with a governor, some CEOs, actors, sports figures, a college president, and others yielded great stories and in-
formation. I promised my intrepid co-author, though, that we could punctuate these conversations with a few visits in person to exciting and exotic places—all with reasonably priced airfares.

“You know, Mom, if we just interview a bunch of women over the phone and add a few side trips it will be a boring book,” I told her as I tried to stay calm. I wanted to meet these women in person, see them laugh, and get to know them. I wanted to meet Sheryl Sandberg at Facebook headquarters. I wanted to hear Marin Alsop’s orchestra play. “We need to make this into a story that will draw people in and make them want to read it,” I said as persuasively as I could. “These women are so great, everyone should get to know them and truly appreciate their lives.” I wasn’t just looking for a good time. I had become truly inspired by the women. Plus, this was my first chance to write a published book and I wanted to do it right.

Again, I acknowledged that my daughter was not only dead right, but also thinking way ahead of my curve. We discussed this notion off and on for about a week before we came to, what Darcy called, a “simple” solution:

“Why don’t we follow each subject as she goes about her daily life? That way our readers get to come along with us and get a behind-the-scenes look at what happens to them. Instead of just a boring interview, we—and our readers—get to hang around with these women, see them in their natural habitat, and even see how other people treat them.”

Although I agreed it was a wonderful approach, this idea of “job-shadowing” each featured subject didn’t seem simple to me at all. I just wasn’t sure it would work. The risks seemed huge. Would these high-powered, important women deign to allow us that kind of access? Would they be able to impart the kind of wisdom that would resonate
with our readers and truly make a difference in their lives? And, I still had no idea where we would find the financial resources to pull it off. We looked at each other, both of us hooked on a crazy idea that we weren’t sure we could pull off.

“It sounds impossible, Darcy,” I said. “We might as well get started.” And so, we stepped out... on faith.