

REFLECTION AND RESOLVE

[Speech at WBASNY Virtual Convention 2020]

Why a Women's Bar Association? I first wrote an answer to this question in an article written for the New York Law Journal in 1982 when I served as the second president of WBASNY. I thought a Women's Bar Association was necessary then and, thirty-eight years on, I think it is just as necessary but for somewhat different reasons. The aggressive curiosity with which that question was posed by the then existing bar associations - without exception all led by men - reflected the anger at the underlying premise that women wanted their own organization because their interests were not being served in the current ones. That perception was accurate.

The first women's bar associations were formed because women attorneys were excluded from membership in the existing bar associations. Later, when the male organizations allowed women attorneys to join the women never climbed the ladder into leadership positions, other than - Secretary. Not so long ago. Almost without exception, women's organizations were formed as auxiliaries of the male associations. What curious conduct it was that women traditionally formed support groups for organizations which excluded them. The phenomenon of women uniting to advance their own interests is a recent one (recent perhaps not by your standards but by mine) and one which emerged only after women had gained a measure of economic and legal independence.

In 1980, when we united five smaller women's bar associations to form the Women's Bar Association of the State of New York, our most important goal was to obtain a seat at the table. In the forty years since then we have secured our seats, now the goal must be to secure our influence. In 1980 we thought that, by having our own organization, we could offer more women the training, experience and visibility that serving in leadership positions provides. We also thought that by speaking through our own organization our voices would be heard. Both of those things are still true. But now we have a deeper responsibility - to make our voices heard not just in the public spaces but in the private ones as well for that is where the power to change the culture lies. And it is the culture that we need to work on.

The laws have been and are changing and, while we may not yet have an Equal Rights Amendment, we have made strides toward equality. But our human story has for thousands of years been "HIS" story.....it's called "history". Now is the time to change that. The final song in that wonderful musical "Hamilton" is "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story". It is the storyteller who determines your history. So let us now resolve to tell our own story and not have it told for us. We must keep a promise to all who have been excluded - to tell a story which encompasses everyone. It has never been true that those who are excluded don't have voices; it is that they are not heard.

When we first came to the table we thought we had to emulate the male model of leadership to be successful. We wore pants suits and non-frilly blouses the better to fit in. At the table we were mostly silently or in agreement, even when we didn't agree. We let the culture define who we were and what we could do. Having gotten into the boat we certainly did not want to rock it and either fall or be pushed out. We adopted the prevailing custom of top-down leadership, of one point of view -which was the male model. To be a "team" player means to follow the leader, it does not mean to make sure that everyone on the team is included.

We have been taught for centuries that the word "man" includes women. Never have we been taught that the word "woman" includes any group other than female. "Man" has become the generic for "human being". For my whole life I have read the pronoun "he", when generally used, to include me. I don't think that there is a man alive who would read the pronoun "she" and feel that it includes him.

Men and women live in different worlds. We have different life experiences; we see through different eyes, hear with different ears. My friends, now is time for us to step out of the shadows and stand firmly and with pride behind our ability to see the world in a way different from the way men may see it, and to acknowledge and make known the importance and validity of seeing it our way. There is no one model to leadership, no one way of acting that is always the best.

We have to tell our story - How many of you know that 7 of the 10 countries which have handled this pandemic best, those which acted soonest, have the fewest deaths and the best chances of economic recovery are led by women. How many of you know that in the 2008 global financial meltdown that began with Iceland in flames, the only bank to survive was one owned and managed by women. How many of you know that corporations which have greater diversity on their governing board are financially and socially healthier.

So let this be our resolve: to tell our own story, never never to rely on others to do it for us. To have pride in our differences from the prevailing model of control and confrontation, to acknowledge that strength can be manifested in the ability to listen, power in the ability to care deeply about others and show it, and ultimate value in putting societal concerns over economic, knowing that a society which values the well-being of all its citizens is healthier, more resilient to stress, and ultimately more economically viable than one in which a dominant group prospers by riding on the shoulders of others.

I am not claiming, nor will I ever claim, that women uniformly act better or with more compassion than men. The recent history of this organization has taught us that we certainly have our share of the more unattractive sides of human nature. But I do claim that a leadership style of cooperation and inclusion is a healthier model than that of confrontation and control, that negotiation and collaboration is not a sign of weakness, that it takes strength and intelligence to bring about unity among diverse groups.

Why a bar association dedicated to the advancement of women? Because law is the only long term stabilizing influence in any society. And those who are trained in law can be in positions where they make law, interpret law, and choose where the focus of a society lies. Real power is the ability to control the public purse and to use it to further one's goals. Where governmental money is spent is never an issue of resources, it is always an issue of priorities. We can shape the law to include the priorities of the unheard and the unseen.

Women trained as lawyers are an asset in business, in politics, in governance and in general. Through this organization we can give more women experience in leadership roles, we can make more women visible and visibility is the first step to power, we can provide a structure for mentoring and support, we can make sure that the doors which have opened to women do not close, and we can help to change the culture from top-down to all-in.

Before I close I want to salute our new President. Joy is taking up the reins in the midst of public turmoil and private grief. WBASNY, like the whole world, now stands at a crossroads of change. I have trust in Joy. I trust her to lead us wisely and with dignity, I trust her to find that new road which will be the right road for WBASNY.

And in ending I would like to, once again, pass on the distillation of my 90+ years of living to all of you:

Shoot for the Moon, even if you miss you will land among the stars.