

The Balancing Act: The Role of Determination and Guilt

First let me thank the Section For The Advancement of Women for this very special recognition. There sure are more deserving women, but sometimes the stars just align and the Spirit smiles and one gets an undeserved reward. So thank you for that. I especially want to recognize and thank my good friend, Dr. Melba Vasquez, because I know that it is she who thought I actually could be a woman of the year.

No good deed goes unpunished so I found out that if one receives the Woman of the Year award then she has to deliver an address the following year. So I had to write something and of course my question was what will it be? It was all so familiar as when I had to give my presidential address and had to turn the title in early. At least then I had a plan for how I would write that talk. When I looked at this title I wondered what was I thinking when it came out of my mouth or off my fingers if I sent it via email. But the deed was done and now you get to hear my musings about this topic. I shall do that by talking with you about dueling sets of feelings with in me. So the talk maybe more personal than profound, but hopefully it will provide a bit more insight about who I am. Since I didn't make up a power point I am shall ask you to use the technology of your mind. I shall ask you to imagine a scale like those portrayed when we think of justice. One set of feelings are on one side of the scale and another set are on the other side of the scale. As I talk about the feelings just imagine them flying in and landing on one side of the scale or the other. You can see that, can't you? I shall also quote from maybe ½

dozen or so prominent women to help me make my points. So let's start with sending the email.

Obviously I was in the middle of feeling overwhelmed and trying to figure out how to get it all done. So perhaps the raw truth just came forth. How do you get a job done? I've heard some people say that you just "gut it out." Perhaps that is what determination is. Once I agree to do something then I feel bound to do it and guilt is a powerful motivator. If I don't get it done I feel simply awful. The really good thing about that—I mean feeling really awful if I don't get it done is that the word "feeling" is in the statement. Being motivated to act because of a "feeling" ties me to millions of women around the world and throughout eternity. Women act when they feel.

Perhaps women are bred to feel because of some basic survival instinct to help our species to continue. After all if mothers did not feel many of us might not be sitting here today. I bet some of you have heard other women say about their children—if you cry one more minute; if you do that one more time; if I have to tell you one more time; and don't let me have to come in there. And yet we have also heard our mothers and grandmothers say that there is no greater love than the love they feel for their children and they love us in spite of what we do or say. Mary McLeod Bethune said "next to God we are indebted to women, first for life itself, and then for making it worth living."

(Lewis, 2005)

So women feel deeply and often those feelings propel ordinary women to do extraordinary things. Some of you know my family background. I am one of 12 children; 6 brothers; 5 sisters. The first 4 years of my life were spent on a plantation in Mississippi. Our parents were sharecroppers. There was no running water in our little shack of a house. No electricity. We had a fire place and a wood burning stove. Our water was delivered in big round metal barrels. Ice was carried in by the iceman and placed in an ice box when we could afford ice. At one point some of the water was contaminated so one of my brothers and I contracted typhoid fever. We ended up spending 28 days in the hospital. Of course Black people, Negroes, Colored people, in that day and time were not privy to the same facilities as our White sisters and brothers. My mother (because of her feelings for her children) needed to remain in the hospital with us day and night. Yet there was no bed for her; no chair for her; no pallet for her. So she slept standing or sitting on one of our beds. That's what a woman's feelings will do. That's what determination will do. So my mother was my very first role model for what one can do with sheer determination.

My brother and I regained our health and the family eventually escaped the dust and germs of Mississippi to arrive and greet the poverty in Memphis where my father supported us by being a garbage man and where, when my mother worked, she scrubbed the floors of her White sisters/mistresses. And my father became an alcoholic. And I became an excellent student and a goody-two shoe daughter to die for.

So over the years as I studied psychology and became a practitioner, I came to wonder if all that determination and guilt was just the result of a high need for approval and an even higher need to people please. Perhaps so. Sometimes I think of those feelings as being on one side of those justice scales ... the determination, guilt, approval seeking; people pleasing behavior. Then the question becomes what is on the other side of the scale? How do I get the scales to balance? Certainly I was out of balance when I submitted the title of this talk. For years I did not know what gave me balance and that's okay because those feelings helped to get me here today. And never in my wildest dream did I expect to be a "Woman of the Year." Those people pleasing; approval seeking; guilt-ridden determined feelings propelled me in to action.

It is not unusual for feelings to propel women into action. Sometimes those actions are deeply rooted in our family experiences. Jill Kerr Conway was the first woman president of Smith College, though Smith is an all women's college. As Conway pondered whether or not to take the job as president of Smith she said "Underneath all these questions was my sadness that my super intelligent mother had never had the chance for an education she'd have used so well. I'd had to leave her to escape her rage and frustration at life, and her anger at me for having the opportunities she'd paid so dearly for missing. But she was the reason I'd never stopped trying to expand women's opportunities, and why I wanted to make schools and colleges treat older women with genuine respect for their intellect and curiosity." (Conway, 2001) Conway viewed her work- even the invitation to Smith as a Calling.

So Conway reacted to her mother's feelings with her own feelings and made history. I suspect that part of my getting a doctorate was influenced by my mother's feelings. She always wanted to be a nurse. Nursing and teaching were the occupations that Black folk knew about. So my mom wanted to be a nurse, but she wanted something more for at least one of her children. She wanted one of us to become a medical doctor. None of us did that. I couldn't stand to cut living things (other than plants). But perhaps getting a PhD allowed her to refer to her daughter the doctor. So was getting a PhD just another people pleasing thing? What is on the other side of my balance scale?

Perhaps there are another set of feelings there. Surely anger can be a heavy weight. Wonder if that feeling could balance the scales? Anger has inspired many to action. Gail Blanke is the President and CEO of Lifedesigns, a company whose mission is to empower women worldwide. In her book, *In my Wildest Dreams* (1998), she talks about how she started that company and became her own boss. She relates the story of how she had breakfast with a woman who told her about how women had not achieved much since the 1970's. The statistics were disheartening and she stopped the woman, went back to her office and thought of women who had succeeded in over coming odds to be wildly successful. She thought of Carolyn Stradley the CEO of C & S Paving of Marietta, Georgia, the company that had paved the track for Olympic Stadium in Atlanta. She remembered Carolyn's story of overcoming living with out parents and eating berries and trapping rabbits to stay alive. Then Blanke says "I started to get mad—not at the woman who'd served as the messenger of the bad news at breakfast, but at my self for buying into the conclusions I thought those facts implied about my future" (Blanke,

1998). Anger propelled Blanke to change her life direction and she has never looked back.

I have been angry in my life. In fact when I went to Adult Children of alcoholics groups I got in touch with rage. I have told people off in anger. I have hurt people's feeling when I have been angry. I even dramatically once threw a glass and broke it into what seemed like millions of pieces when I was angry with my husband. While I had to bend over and clean up every single little shard of glass, anger has never made me overhaul my life. So anger is not the feeling on the other side of my balance scale.

Though there were things to be angered about. One of them is skin color. Some of you may have read works by Bertice Berry and Kathleen Cross. Both talk about the role of skin color in the African American communities and some of you may have read historical documents by people like Lerone Bennet. Certainly the work of Mamie and Kenneth Clark has recently aroused interest because of Kenneth Clark's recent death. You may recall that Kenneth Clark is the only Black person to have been President of the APA. Some of these individuals spoke to us about the hierarchy of slaves during the early US history. "House Niggers" were lighter skinned -close to the color of the Masters. Dark skinned slaves worked in the fields. Light skin earned you privilege and power. (Clark, 1953) Those painful beliefs and behaviors were alive and well in my childhood community as we African Americans segregated and discriminated against each other based on skin color. And so I could not be a majorette in high school because since I was so black of course I would sweat and shin and look down right ugly. We

would never be able to win a contest in front of a viewing judges stand with dark skinned girls on the team. Naturally as the adults behaved, the children imitated and we hurt each other. Those actions of my own group and the legal action of segregation helped me to develop a strong inferiority complex. Now if you couple a strong inferiority complex with a people pleasing approval seeking attitude you can cook up a lot of determination and guilt. For some that could have been a recipe for disaster. For me those feelings were ingredients for success.

Except that I felt terrible and no one knew.

I was an adult before I ever heard Eleanor Roosevelt's quote that people can't make you feel inferior without your permission. (Lewis 2005) By the time I heard this statement I was a director of a counseling center and I did not really understand it. But I did write the statement down and kept it in my desk drawer for years. I knew I felt inferior and knew that I didn't want to feel that way. So inferiority contributed to the left side of my balance scale along with that guilt and determination. But what could tilt those scales in a direction that would give me peace?

The need to show the world that I was not inferior so that "they could approve of me" motivated me to take on challenges that were sometimes down right silly. I did that in graduate school as I prepared to take my comprehensive exams. I needed to select an exam committee. In order to prove that I was not inferior and deserved to be in graduate school, I decided to put the toughest White men in the department on my committee. My

advisor asked me about my choices and asked me if I had had an incident with one of the men. I said know and remarked about how complimentary of me the faculty member had been. By the time I got home it dawned on me that I had one White man trying to tell me something about another White man. The next day I removed the questionable man from my committee. My grades reflected that the compliments from the faculty member about me may have been a little less than honest. At least he was not on my oral examining committee and so I was blessed not to flunk out of school.

Actually I had been bound and determined to pass those exams so I was willing to study with the best and the brightest. I could not face the embarrassment of failure. And I could not avoid hanging out with the brightest white guys in the class because of fear. It's really too embarrassing to me to not do something because I am afraid. I truly wish I could have sought those guys out because I was brave. On the contrary I was worried about the possibility of failure and people knowing I was afraid.

On August the 8th of this year I had an opportunity to view a documentary of a really brave woman. The film is called "Home of the Brave" and tells the story about the only white woman murdered in the civil rights movement in America and why we DON'T know who she is. Viola Liuzzo was 39 year old teamster's wife who lived in Detroit. She was the mother of 5 young children and a Unitarian Universalist. She was compelled to go to Selma, Alabama to work for voting rights for African Americans. I can just see her on the Pettis bridge on the march from Selma. Viola was killed the Klu Klux Klan. While her killers were captured a short time after the shooting they were acquitted after a

smear campaign accused her of being in Alabama to sleep with Black men. (di Florio, 2003)

When asked about why Viola did what she did, Gloria Steinem said “Empathy is the most revolutionary feeling.” (di Florio, 2003) I do hope that empathy is on the right side of my scale. I know that empathy compelled me to become a fund raiser on behalf of women and girls in Memphis, Tennessee. In the Fall of 2002 while at a training in California and after viewing a national news report regarding the execution of an Afghani woman who had been accused on killing her abusive husband I vowed to never again sit by and do nothing while women were running for their lives from men who were willing to beat and kill them simply because they could. The women had to find a way out and they needed to be economically able to leave. When I returned to Memphis from that training session I decided to learn something about the women for whom I was raising money. The very first woman that I got to know personally was a woman who had run to Memphis with her three children. She was escaping her abusive husband in Arkansas and she was participating in a job training program that would help her become economically self sufficient. I was/am willing to ask for money from each of you to help fund training programs that will help women get out of desperate situations. I have empathy for these women and children.

And yet this empathy can wax and wane. Sometimes I tire of asking for money. So what is it that tips the scale into balance? What is the heavy weight that goes on the right side of the scale?

Hilary Rodham Clinton says” Our lives are a mixture of different roles. Most of us are doing the best we can to find whatever the right balance is”... I would say it is our feelings that help us to find that balance. (Lewis, 2005)

For me the thing that really causes my scales to balance is my response to what I can label as a Calling. Maya Angelou says that “It is this belief in a power larger than myself and other than myself which allows me to venture into the unknown and even the unknowable.” (Lewis, 2005) Where as the sense of inferiority and people pleasing, is narcissistic self-focused and selfish, answering a call—responding to a higher power compels me to care and to do. To care for others –to do for others—to make a difference.

Answering that call compels me to a life of purpose. So where as the people pleasing, approval seeking, inferiority complex led me to write numerous book chapters and articles, it was the Call that led me to co-organize the National Multicultural Conference and Summit.

Where as it was the people pleasing approval seeking inferiority complex that led me to my first marriage, it was the call that compelled me to the Vice Presidency for Student Affairs at the University of Memphis.

Yet I embrace and celebrate the people pleaser; the approval seeker, the inferiority complex, the determination, and the guilt because these feelings helped me to hear the Call. Answering the Call to duty, purpose, the greater good balances my scale with love, care, energy and peace.

Answering the Call helps me to be more like Corazon Aquino who said “I would rather die a meaningful death than to live a meaningless life.” (Lewis, 2005) Answering the call helps me to be more like Golda Meir who said “It’s no accident many accuse me of conducting public affairs with my heart instead of my head. Well, what if I do? ... Those who don’t know how to weep with their whole heart don’t know how to laugh either.” (Lewis, 2005)

And answering the Call helps me to be more like Marian Wright Edelman who said “You really can change the world if you care enough.” (Lewis, 2005)

So I believe that I have been Called and that I have work to do. And every time I start to feel out of balance and I feel really determined and very guilty I check myself to see if I am answering my call. Sometimes I believe I am, but the focus is on me and my people pleasing ways. When I search for the greater good my burden gets lighter, peace flows like a river and I can get the work done. And I have joy.

So today I hope that you have the Call and that you will answer that call. I hope that you experience balance and joy. And I sure hope that you care enough to change world.

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