

Thriving in the New Frontier: The Imperative of Visionary Leadership
Closing Plenary by Dr. Gayla Rogers on May 17, 2011
Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies
2011 Annual Conference May 15-17, Calgary Canada

I hope you have 'Thrived in the New Frontier' during the past few days. As I looked through program it became evident to me that you've had a rich and comprehensive line up renowned speakers with topics that have no doubt stimulated much discussion and thought. Now you get to go home and somehow translate all that learning and collective energy into action. Whether you are a volunteer, board member, service provider, helping professional or executive director; you will leave here enriched, likely exhausted, but with replenished resolve to engage, inspire and act on behalf of your agencies and for the betterment of humanity. Am I right?

A key component to thriving in today's ever-more-stressful environment is the opportunity afforded by the annual conference of the Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies to come together – to share, commiserate, celebrate, and renew your commitment to the mission of providing social services to people of all ages and to those with special needs in the Jewish and general community.

JFCS agencies can trace their roots back to the 19th century with assisting Jewish refugees and immigrants, orphans, and the poor and needy. This history is important as it shapes your organizations' legacy. We all know that you have to know where you come from in order to know where you're going. So before I talk about the 'new' frontier and the imperative of visionary leadership, I want to share a little of where I come as I can trace my roots back to the 'old' frontier.

My grandparents' families came to Calgary around 1905. They were part of a wave of Jewish immigration to southern Alberta from Eastern Europe and Russia who were escaping horrific persecution and seeking a better life. Many Jews took up homesteads, built businesses and began the task of creating a Jewish community while becoming a part of the larger community. We know the stories of courage and determination of recent immigrants and refugees; it is hard to imagine the strength and fortitude of these early settlers and first families to Calgary and surrounding area. By 1913 they had organized a welfare group so that no Jewish person in need would be a burden to the public purse.

My grandmother worked alongside her husband in the general store in a rural village not too far from Calgary. They lived upstairs and while she minded her two children, did all the cooking, and took in laundry and sewing. She also served and got to know her customers and neighbors across a wide rural region. My grandmother dreamed a different future for her daughters who were born in 1922 and 1929. As a result, my mother was sent to the 'city' to finish high school. She then went to University, got a degree and became a junior high teacher in Calgary. But once she got married in 1947, just after the War, the school board made it clear they didn't want married women teaching and the minute you were pregnant, that was it.

My mother's generation of women didn't work outside the home – so what did these educated, bright women of Calgary who were interested in issues bigger than themselves do in the fifties and sixties? They volunteered. They created and led organizations at the local, national and international levels in the Jewish and general communities that spanned the arts, human services, and social reform – things that concerned doing good. 'Do gooders' like these founded Jewish Family Services in both Calgary and Edmonton.

My mother, Clarice Chodak, was active in the National Council of Jewish Women. One of her projects involved building a coalition of local women's organizations; and, as a collective, they were activists. They took on a number of initiatives that required considerable 'fighting at City Hall' to make things happen. One of these activities led to the creation of formal training for volunteers. This was based on the realization that it takes more than a caring heart and a good soul to address social issues and get engaged in social causes in support of local and national voluntary organizations – especially those with few paid professional staff. It turns out that this School for Voluntary Participation offering a Program for Volunteerism was a precursor to the Faculty of Social Work. My mother, who died almost 24 years ago, did not live to see me become the dean, but I know she would find a certain irony in this and a lot of pride in the path I took, as she too dreamed a different dream for her daughters.

So my grandmother's generation, women of the 1920s and 30s, worked the fields, the homesteads, in the general stores alongside their husbands – they had to for survival. My mother's generation, women raising their children post-war 1940s, 50s and 60s, stayed home and made their contribution to their communities as volunteers. The feminist movement gave my generation permission to do it all – we could have a spouse, an education, career and family. But the pressure on us to be Type E – 'everything to everybody' may have taken its toll. Those of us in our 50s and 60s are now tired after 30 odd years of trying to please everyone. We've juggled multiple roles for a long time with much self-sacrifice. Barbara Moses writes: "While some of us are happy, many are struggling. We are unfulfilled at work, irritated with our partners – if we still have one, and worried about our kids as well as our aging parents."

But we also are a generation that has seen incredible breakthroughs and accomplishments by and for woman, that have had some far reaching effects, because we have raised our sons as well as our daughters to think and act in more egalitarian terms, and to understand what a true partnership means on the home front as well as the workplace. And we too dreamed a different dream for our daughters – one that was more empowered, emancipated from 'everything to everyone'. So what about the next generation? Well, they certainly aren't getting married at the age of 19 like I did. Now in my case, this has actually worked out well as our 39th anniversary approaches – mostly because we ended up raising each other, as well as our three kids.

I think the next generations, knowing they can have it all, are making choices. In fact, I heard recently that that 30 is the new 20 – so one of those options is that kids are staying 'kids' much longer. But the options for our daughters and granddaughters are both confusing and complicated. We have fashion trends that bare body parts that can be seen as liberating; or, criticized as 'pseudo-empowerment' as Ariel Levy wrote in her book about the rise of the 'raunch culture'.

And in contrast to this 'Girls Gone Wild', is the attraction to religious movements and fundamentalism by large numbers of young people. The Internet has fuelled new forms of social activism and participation in world affairs, but there is a dark and dangerous side to these technologies with Internet seduction into pornography, cyber-bullying and stalking with tragic consequences from school shootings to suicides. Consumerism is at an all time high, but so are memberships in the Green party. Awareness of the environment, climate change, and concern for the earth are priority issues for many, but we also know that Gen X, Y and millennials are more likely to communicate and connect with others through social networking devices than in-person conversations.

In addition to these paradoxes, young women and men look at us and don't necessarily like what they see – the 80 hour work weeks and lack of time to just kick back and hang out; the huge disparities in the distribution of wealth, food, shelter and opportunity across the globe; violence within families, at schools, on streets; hate crimes, jihads, wars; and graft and corruption in the very institutions we supposedly hold dear – like banks, corporations and political parties. So can we dream a different dream for our kids and our grandkids? I'm especially concerned about this as I'm expecting my first grandchild in September.

A few years ago on International Women's Day, the Toronto Star published a report card on the progress made on the advancement of women. They report that although many professions and industries have created greater balance between males and females, inequity at the very top still remains. The Globe and Mail's Report on Business published a list of the most influential Canadian business leaders – of the top 25 selected, not one was a woman.

But inequity remains at the bottom as well. Women and female-headed households are significantly poorer, have more barriers and fewer opportunities. Of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty worldwide, 70% are women; and, when mothers are in poor, so too are their children. Poor people are excluded from opportunities most take for granted and they can become isolated by their circumstances – and this is especially true for Jews who are poor. Being raised in an impoverished environment can manifest itself in a resignation to the difficulties of life, where injustice and inequity are expected, where a future is driven by low expectations and few hopes.

The Jewish philosopher Maimonides said: "Give a man a fish; you'll feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish; you'll feed him for a lifetime." This profoundly important concept remains relevant in the context of social policies and human services today. Are we giving out too many fish in the form of handouts that will leave people just as hungry tomorrow? These handouts may sustain them for the moment, temporarily putting food on their plates, but too often the cycle of dependency starts all over again because we haven't nourished their need to live a fulfilling life.

More than a handout, people on the margins of life need a helping hand – a hand up. They need assistance developing the skills that can transform them into successful, productive members of society. They need help to overcome the obstacles that life has put in their way. They need support to bridge the deficits and fill in the missing pieces in the hand that they've been dealt. This is where your agencies play their part. We know how stressed and strained your agencies are: increasingly severe and complex social problems; inhospitable economic and fund raising

environments that threaten program and organization sustainability; facilities that are substandard, unsuitable, inaccessible with exorbitant rents; human resource challenges such as hiring, retaining, upgrading and adequately compensating staff; demands for greater accountability, efficiency and social return on investment; and, an expectation to collaborate and partner with other service providers, without the supports required to do so. Sound familiar? Yet, the desire and dedication to do more, do new, do different drive us to persevere – along with the knowledge that our clients need us, depend on us and deserve the best we can be.

A sociologist, named Bronfenbrenner, noted that if we all have one person who is unconditionally supportive and involved in our life, our survival and success are almost always guaranteed. Resiliency often depends upon just one ‘someone’ who truly believes in a person and his or her possibilities. Take troubled kids – the ones who bully, the ones who won’t engage at all, the ones who lash out, the ones who don’t or won’t fit in. If we can’t make a place for these troubled children in schools, in JCCs, on hockey or soccer teams, we may as well make a place for them in our jails, hospitals, shelters, and soup lines. That is why we must take seriously the simple, yet powerful concept of ‘mattering’ to someone. Because like everyone else, people who are in need, or are vulnerable, still want to matter to someone, still want their life to be worth something.

With help in the form of a hand up, such as stable housing, counseling, training programs, or someone who’ll just ‘stick around’; people who had all but given up, can gain a new lease on life, a new chance at dignity and self-determination. And your professional staff and volunteers frequently turn out to be that someone. JFCAs provide both practical and professional assistance for children and families, immigrants and refugees, the elderly, and those with special needs. They offer a range of ‘hands up’ services that contribute to well-being, healing and hope. But is a hand up enough? With 132 members of the AJFCA in Canada and the US, it gives rise to a professional workforce to deliver services and it gives many volunteers a way to meaningfully to give back.

But I think we need to broaden our focus. How many of you have asked the questions: Why do we need food banks, homeless shelters, school breakfast programs and women’s shelters in the first place? How much attention do you pay to the root causes of homelessness, addiction, family breakdown, or child abuse? Where is our outrage at inadequate access to decent education from a very early age or parenting supports so children can grow and thrive in loving homes? Where is our will to tackle the impact of racism, anti-Semitism and rising social inequities? What is our collective responsibility to eradicate family violence, eliminate homelessness and end poverty?

So yes, ‘hand outs’ help – those hampers at Passover are wonderful and those damage deposits make a big difference. And people clearly need a hand up – it is vital to support social service organizations, like the JFCAs, that assist a broad range of children, adults and elderly experiencing psychological, social, developmental and physical or life-cycle challenges. But, we also need long term solutions that will create a better future – a hand reaching forward, if you will, beyond the individual or family that addresses the very social conditions and public policies that exclude people and keep them in the margins in the first place.

I noted with great interest on the AJFCA website that the Association advocates for enhancing the 'safety net' for the poor; for policies that promote healthy families and strengthen communities; and, engages in public policy development and legislative monitoring to improve human services and their funding. This is a good thing, as our public policies are currently not designed to help people get out of poverty. They are designed to allow them to live just a bit better in poverty. We pump an extraordinary amount of public and charitable dollars into managing the effects of poverty, like illness, addictions, crime, and illiteracy. But very little of this money improves the socio-economic conditions for low-income families when all we do is fund band-aid programs rather than implementing root cause solutions. This has to change.

There are many examples of microfinance and social entrepreneurship showing considerable results in moving people out of poverty. Expanding this type of investment model might reduce our reliance on the charity model. For Maimonides also said: "Anticipate charity by preventing poverty." And when we invest in women, the results indicate there is a multiplier effect – increasing and sustaining incomes of women lead to better educated, healthier families, followed by more prosperous communities and nations. Nelson Mandela told the Global Summit of Women in 2000 that when women are in charge, there is less corruption, more transparency and resources are better used. As a society, we can't afford to throw even one person away. That is why someone else's troubles are our troubles. That is why we have to invest in solutions that see the true human capacity in all people. The AJFCA is committed to standing up and advocating on behalf of their member organizations and they are willing to accept that this may threaten those who benefit from present arrangements of power – this the very essence of hands that reach beyond.

This is our new frontier. The landscape has shifted. Many of the conditions affecting your agencies – growing social problems, difficult economic times and accountability pressures – are similarly impacting your funders and donors. Supporters of human service organizations are inundated with funding requests from countless agencies; multiple agencies may offer seemingly similar programs, causing confusion for funders, and the impression of service duplication and fragmentation; funders must cover nonprofit agencies' escalating core infrastructure costs year after year, leaving fewer resources for direct service; funders struggle to balance the goal of high community impact with the need to achieve solid business objectives and economic imperatives; and, donors with limited resources have tough funding decisions to make. This environment has also caused donors to examine their own funding paradigms and to look for new models of supporting community organizations. Coupled with a progressive social policy vacuum, there is an imperative of visionary leadership to transform human service organizations.

What do I mean by visionary leadership? My version of leadership is shaped by my roots and limited by my context of being a woman, a social worker and a dean. Visionary leadership in a human service organization or a school of social work requires a strategic and sustained focus on creating an environment conducive for the collective to co-create its future and guide day-to-day operations. This entails having (or developing) an agreed upon vision, mission and values that inspires and motivates; as well as objectives, targets and measures that mobilizes and activates staff. Centered on the client experience, it is productive to have clear aspirations and

actions regarding programs, services, quality assurance, workplace conditions, and stakeholder relations. Leadership approaches to accomplish your mandate have to be sensitive and responsive to the rhythms, culture and stages of organizational development that shift over time.

Generally speaking, human service workplaces tend to be female dominated – yet women are not proportionately represented in leadership roles. I'm not sure how this plays out across member organizations of the AJFCA but it would be interesting to know. I was the first (and remain the only) female dean in the Faculty of Social Work's 44-year history. And, like our counterparts across disciplines, women in schools of social work are not equally represented in the full professor ranks, nor are they in the senior leadership roles. There are reasons for this in the academy. At the University career paths are referred to as atypical when there have been such things as career stop outs or slow-downs for children; job changes due to male partner relocation; women in the early stages of career 'serving the unit' at the expense of scholarship. These very normal life events for women affect what is considered a typical career progression.

One of the questions that stymied me during my interview for the dean's position was when I was asked to describe my career plan that led to me being a candidate for dean. The implication being that there had been a plan, suggesting some sort of linear progression with the right steps taken along the way. As I thought about this, I began to laugh – my career path has had more to do with synchronicity and happenstance, than a well-crafted plan. I've had a series of experiences in my life that have led me to make certain decisions and choices – but no master plan where in my younger days I aspired to one day be a Dean and then proceeded to take the necessary steps to take to get there. I'm not sure if this is reflective of a gender difference, but I would suggest that women are more likely to relate to this story.

Another struggle, that may be reflective of gender, is the decision to step up to a leadership role in the first place. There is a notion that these jobs are inherently undesirable. I consider, for example, the number of people who asked me if they should offer condolences when my appointment or re-appointment was announced. I realize that this is partly in jest but I wondered about it. For many women who might aspire to leadership or who have the capacity and interest in leadership, the jobs themselves may look less appealing to a woman than to a man. Why is that, you might ask?

They look a bit lonely. They look like you have to distance yourself from those you work with. They don't look collaborative. They look like they contain an overwhelming amount of sole responsibility. They look like you have to sacrifice a personal or family life. They look exclusive, rigid, authoritarian, linear and boundary-ridden. They look like they are all head and no heart. I believe women leaders are held to a higher standard in many subtle and implicit ways. This expectation adds to the pressure, induces guilt, and causes us to agonize over tough decisions. No wonder it is difficult attracting women to leadership roles when, in spite of the emergence of women's ways of leading and knowing as legitimate, these notions are still considered 'out there' rather than mainstream.

But, take a look at any bookshelf – the texts on leadership are compelling leaders to adopt practices that women, without over generalizing, take for granted. There is a new era of leadership practice that has moved away from the command and control tactics of the past

toward values based, emotionally intelligent, transformational leading. So what can we learn from scanning some of these texts? They are filled with talk of passion, vision, intuition, spiritual connections, meaning and mindfulness – with regard to work and work places. I would argue that what we are seeing is the feminization of leadership. Instead of the idea that women have to become male-like to take top leadership roles, men it seems, need to become more female-like in order to see the desired results in the organizations they lead. We need to accept more collaborative structures in our governance models and more inclusiveness in decision-making. We need to think of leadership in less hierarchical terms and value the leadership functions of motivating, modeling and mentoring over those of directing, deciding and doing. We need work environments that are flexible and friendly, more than work places that are rigid and rule-bound. These leadership practices are suggesting that we need leaders to be integrated and holistic, and that means not just using heads and hands but actually instructing leaders to also use their heart and soul. When the Dalai Lama's, 'Art of Happiness at Work' becomes a New York Times bestseller, the mainstream is paying attention to a wholesale shift in thinking about what is important. These aren't actually called 'women's ways of leading' but they clearly speak to practices that women relate to.

From my experience good leadership can be hard to see as it permeates the organizations. It does not reside with one person. It is reflected in the full participation of all individuals in a way that draws the best out of people, helps each person feel they belong, have a voice, be energized by the work, and derive meaning from their participation. There is a movement that is recognizing the impact of leadership approaches that attends to emotions and values relationships. However, as much as these ideas are making the best sellers list and leadership training programs on these topics are sold out, on the ground, we still have work to do. So I offer my top 5 list that might address the challenges, which face those who are capable, but reluctant to take on leadership roles – both women and men who worry their values or personality might be compromised:

#5. Having mentors and peers who will celebrate your successes and provide you with ideas and strategies to make you better at what you are already good at. Having people you trust in your life to hold up the mirror will enable you to keep on learning since ultimately leadership development is self-development.

#4. Having institutional support for a balanced life with time for work, community involvement, family and self – all in perspective. If the job is all encompassing and all consuming then you will lose perspective and perspective is an essential ingredient in successful leading.

#3. Giving up the search for the single right answer or the perfect decision, and instead concentrating on understanding the context of unique circumstances, drawing on your wisdom and the wisdom of others, and trusting the process. Don't be afraid to change your mind, admit mistakes, apologize and see and seek the humour in situations.

#2. Focusing on strengths instead of deficits – yet deal effectively with staff who procrastinate, complain, or seek to undermine change. This speaks to the need to manage (not avoid) conflict, build consensus and a sense of community, and navigate complex systems while

simultaneously keeping an eye on the big picture. To communicate effectively as a leader you must be able to listen, hear and ask.

#1. Bringing your authentic self to the workplace and to your leadership. Refusing to park your personality and individual style at the office door. Knowing yourself – what you are good at, what you care about, what pushes your buttons, and what gives meaning to your life. Being a self-reflecting leader. Using all your parts – your head, hands, heart and soul – with grace and dignity.

The world needs more women to be leaders. We need them in balance with men, the right kind of men. Women know how to right wrongs, build bridges, mend fences and bring peace. Being able to actually use that knowledge in tangible ways in organizations is the imperative of visionary leadership. The world will not change with inspiration alone. We need to balance the desire to offer a hand out and a hand up with vision of a future where root causes are addressed, inequities are reduced, and long-term solutions are found. All it takes is the collective will to reach forward to promote social inclusion; strengthen the social and economic safety net; and, respect human rights and dignity. We need hands to reach beyond, to see a bigger picture, and as the saying goes, to see that “it is possible to move a mountain, one stone at a time”.

This work is never easy; it is never ending, and may, at times, feel unattainable. That is why I’m often asked why someone would go into a profession like social work or choose to work at agencies like yours – as it is thought that those who serve humanity don’t make very much. Like others in the helping fields, what do JFCA staff and volunteers make?

- They make a child believe that he is loved and wanted, regardless of how long he lasts in the next foster home.
- They make an abused woman find the courage to finally leave her abuser.
- They make a teen father count to 10 and leave the room so he won't shake his newborn child.
- They make a dying cancer patient make peace with her past and find the strength to face a brief tomorrow.
- They make a boy with Down’s syndrome feel like the smartest kid on the bus.
- They make the old man, whose wife has Alzheimer's, cherish the good times, when she still remembered him.
- They make the refugee turn her nightmares of war, rape and destruction into dreams of a future with possibilities.

What do these caring and compassionate professionals make?

- They make forgotten people feel cherished; confused people feel understood; and broken people feel whole. They make more than most people ever will – they make a difference.
(Excerpted from a commencement address at the Mandel School of Social Services in 2006 by columnist Regina Brett)

And that's what all of us in this room are about. Making a difference in the new frontier: with a hand out, a hand up, and hands that reach beyond nourished by visionary leadership.