



Thursday, March 21, 2002

## Googasian Award keynote address by Mary Otto

My assignment today is to talk, but not for too long, about whatever I want as long as it is about women.

I could talk about women who do too much — or women who love too much. There certainly seems to be an abundance of books on such topics so it must be interesting . . . and, yet it doesn't seem to me that all of these books or authors have been convincing, so I don't think I will tackle such difficult topics.

I am reminded of the observation Carol Tavris made about the numbers of books written about the problems that plague women. As she notes, it seems interesting that how women behave is often viewed as needing correction.

Maybe we need to concentrate through mentoring on supporting rather than changing behaviors of women. And actually much of the current literature on leadership suggests just that.

A newspaper article from the Detroit News Business section just last year described skills of women as being currently more important than traditional management skills of men.

And, a recent article from the Glass Ceiling Research Center by Roy Adler (Pepperdine University) points out that there is a high positive correlation between a strong record of promoting women into the executive suite and higher than normal profitability within an industry.

Women have made a difference in the world throughout time. Most of us don't know as much about women because their achievements have not been a major part of the "history" books we study in American schools and universities.

Eli Whitney could not have invented the cotton gin without Catherine Greene. It was at the urging of Abigail Adams that her husband, John, decided not to put unlimited power into the hands of husbands. She wrote, and I quote, "we will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."

Many women, like Sarah M. Grimke, were effective leaders and activists in the abolitionist movement.

And, we can't forget the many women who suffered to make it possible for women to vote — a right we have had in this country for less than 100 years.

I would also like to share with you that it was not in the 1960's that women became liberated enough to keep their maiden names. In 1855, Lucy Stone kept her maiden name when she was married and she refused to use the word "obey" in her marriage vows.

Women in this country can easily grow up and become educated in this culture with limited knowledge or understanding of the accomplishments and impact of women throughout history. So it is not surprising that even with all the models of successful women, that many women began their careers by modeling male behaviors to achieve success.

We are here today to acknowledge Dr. Mary Beth Snyder for her support and mentoring of women. We make this award in honor of Phyllis Googasian, former member of the Oakland University Board of Trustees, because of her commitment to mentoring women and her recognition of the important impact mentoring has for women in the university.

Why, you might ask, should we underscore mentoring of women by women? After all, we just noted many important achievements of women and if we look around us it seems that women have been doing quite well and in today's world, unlike in history, they are often acknowledged. There are many female leaders — they occupy management positions, they sit on executive boards and we certainly see more women in political positions than ever before.

The picture for women has clearly improved. Professional women often reach high salaries at the same time or in some cases even ahead of their male counterparts. But the picture for women is complicated and complex. Before we become too complacent and satisfied with the current state, I suggest a reality check.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (August 2001), the overall full-time wage and salary for women was 76 percent of the median for their male counterparts, an improvement from 63 percent in 1979, but still the lingering question — why the

difference?

What about the academic world – the university? Women full professors make 88 percent of what men full professors make. At the lower ranks, women make 93 percent of what men make. Close but still why any difference? And, women are disproportionately represented in unranked positions (50-55 percent) while they make up only about 7 percent of the full professor population.

And, it's no surprise to many of you that numbers of women are stuck in mid-level management positions with little chance of promotion.

The conditions of work for professional women and their ability to succeed are about money and about being able to advance and be appropriately recognized for their achievement.

As noted previously, women have historically been told to be more like men in order to succeed, and they had to rely for the most part on male role models and adapt the behaviors that they were able to use. In the introduction of her book, "Mismeasure of Woman," Carol Tavris presents a case of a woman executive at Price Waterhouse who was refused partnership status, even though she was a high performer, because she was described as harsh, "macho" and aggressive — the very same traits desired in male partners. She was accused of overcompensating for being a woman.

Women have been challenged to overcome the idea that masculinity is essential to leadership (Regan and Brooks, 1995). Over time, women have learned to trust themselves and have learned to manage and lead by accepting and using their personal and professional skills. Now many of the attributes considered innate or natural to women are recognized as important, even as necessary, management and leadership skills. So, who but another woman is best able to mentor and provide the necessary support and direction to help young women establish and achieve their goals.

The lives of women are different from the lives of men. Mary Catherine Bateson in her book, "Composing a Life," suggests that women do not achieve their life goals in linear fashion, moving upward in a straight line, but instead that they tend to compose their lives moving from point to point and lingering for varying amounts of time.

Bateson explains that women cannot expect life to be "normal" or "regular" because the lives of women will always require that emphasis and focus change to accommodate the daily issues of living. Rather than viewing the adaptations as set backs, she suggests we compose our lives to integrate all the aspects that are important to us.

Women often find themselves trying to achieve in several domains at one time — certainly the most common example is the professional and personal aspects of their lives.

We have moved from the 1950's stereotype of women as stay-at-home moms to the modern women of the 1960's and 70's and the birth of the first stage of the modern feminist movement.

The goals of this early stage of feminism centered on women gaining full participation, power and voice in the professional worlds of politics, business and education. Because, in spite of their historical accomplishments, women had not achieved full participation.

In the 70's, women recognized they had many choices and began to understand that it was difficult to choose.

I quote from a passage in Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" published in 1971:

"From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

"I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."

Clearly this dramatic representation of the dilemma faced by many women recognizes the need for mentorship and guidance of women by women. Women were not able to learn all that they needed to know from men, they needed guidance from other women who understood their life experiences.

Now, I believe we are at a time where we recognize that choices must be made but more like Bateson's composition model we recognize that we can come back to something and recreate or finish it — we don't have to think of the choices drying up and falling to the ground.

Mentoring continues to be a topic of much research. It is not well understood, but we recognize it when we see it.

Mentoring may be comprised of teaching, coaching, networking and role modeling, but I suggest that it is more than all of those. Perhaps the most unique aspect of mentoring is that it is designed to meet the needs of both the mentor and the protégée so it is not always the same.

Mentoring is described by Schwiebert (2000) in her book, "Mentoring: Creating connected, empowered relationships" as an intense interpersonal exchange between an experienced senior colleague and a less experienced junior colleague in which the mentor provides support, direction and feedback.

Women mentors can provide essential support to women protégées because they understand the complexity of the choices they are making. They provide support to help them recognize and cope with organizational barriers; they provide information about how to understand the work setting.

A woman mentor also helps her protégée to develop her own voice by encouraging her own insights, awarenesses and strengths. Unlike being a role model, which may not require any personal relationship, a mentor must be willing to engage in a relationship with her protégée.

The success and involvement of women is essential to the health of our society and of our university. So we celebrate and recognize today the commitment of women to each other and of one special woman's willingness to give time and energy to assisting other women.

**SUMMARY**

Mary Otto, dean of the School of Education and Human Services, delivered the keynote address at the 10th annual Phyllis Law Googasian Award Luncheon.

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