

### ***My Life on the Road***

Gloria Steinem. New York: Random House, 2015. 276 pages

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*At first I was a journalist following stories, then a sometime worker in political campaigns and movements, and most consistently an itinerant feminist organizer. I became a person whose friends and hopes were as spread out as my life. It just felt natural that the one common element in that life was the road* (Steinem, 2015, p. xvii).

When I attended a workshop for women's leadership development at the 2015 International Leadership Association Conference, Barcelona, Spain in October, one question I had to tackle in a group discussion was: What leads women to self-identify as leaders? The question has stuck with me because I have never taken my leadership development seriously.

I grew up in a traditional family in which I was expected to be a subservient daughter who should get married when the time came. In college, I was a leader in organizing workshops for gender equality. I felt as if I was a "woman warrior" (Kingston, 1976) attempting to raise a voice in the male-dominated society in South Korea in the early 1980s, when the nation was still in the hands of the military. After my brief experience as a woman warrior, I pursued my working professional career in diverse organizations, including for-profit, non-profit, and academic sectors. As I feel an urgency to revisit women's issues before too late, I have resumed research on women leaders in Korea.

So, what led me to self-identify as a leader? Due to the lack of women role models in my traditional family and society, I turned to biographies written by women leaders who have had an impact on their professional arenas. Such biographies included works by the then owner of the *Washington Post*, Katharine Graham (1998), America's first woman Secretary of State, Madeline Albright (2003), and America's first hopeful female President, Hillary Clinton (2003), to name a few. Among women leaders,

though, Gloria Steinem has been my idol since my college years. I remember reading her journalistic experience as a bunny girl to expose the Playboy Club's exploitation of waitresses (Heilbrun, 1995). I also remember reading her book on women's self-esteem (Steinem, 1992) at a time when I doubted my ability to complete my doctoral degree. Her presence at a local bookstore for a book signing in Austin, Texas was revealing as she shared personal stories about her life after resigning from the editorial position of *Ms.*, the seminal feminist magazine that she co-founded in 1972.

The leadership lessons I learned from her recent book (Steinem, 2015) include: first, it is important to experience life on the road. She lauds her life as a "road warrior" (Kramer, 2015) because it "leads us out of theory and into practice, out of caution and into action, out of statistics and into stories" (Steinem, 2015, p. xix). Her discovery of talking circles in India in the 1950s where "anyone may speak in turn, everyone must listen, and consensus is more important than time" (p. 36) stands out as formative in her career: she has practiced those very talking groups throughout the course of her personal and political life. As a result, she has so many women friends all over the world to share stories with and cherish their differing cultures – for instance, Native American and African American women leaders. In May 2015, she walked with her Korean women friends across the DMZ between North and South Korea to bring about a dialogue on peace between the two nations.

Second, she underscores the importance of balancing political and personal life. The balance between the two has been a consistent theme since the publication of her book on self-esteem (Steinem, 1992). Her message is simple and clear: If we are not happy on a personal level, we will never be satisfied with our political activities, so our political life will not be sustained. She confesses that only after the age of fifty did she begin to admit that she was suffering from her own form of imbalance between not having a home and a love of freedom. She realized that "home is a symbol of the self and caring for a home is caring for one's self" (Steinem, 2015, p. 249). As she witnesses, we all need to achieve a balance between traveling and coming home to be whole beings.

Third, at the age of 81, she finds herself to be much more forgiving of her parents. She learned from her father to choose a life that is free from any societal obligations, although he never realized his dreams. She learned from her mother to aspire to become an activist, despite her mother's be-

ing unable herself to pursue her dream. Lastly, I learned a powerful message that women's ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, & Tarule, 1997; Koller, 1981) are fundamentally different from men's in terms of caring and compassion that should be at the forefront of our identities as leaders. Her generosity and loyalty to women activists is telling compared to some militant feminists. She is very cautious about judging such a well-known feminist as Betty Friedan and states that all feminists are different and have diverse voices. Her decision to vote for Hillary Clinton over Obama in the last presidential campaign is also telling because she knew "Obama didn't need me to win" but "Hillary Clinton might need me to lose" (Steinem, 2015, p. 165).

Reading Gloria Steinem (Heilbrun, 1995; Steinem, 1992, 2015) has been a great resource for discovering my own identity and for helping me continue to grow as a leader. Particularly, in her recent book (2015), I see a more balanced perspective of life because the way she tells her stories has become funnier, richer, and more forgiving and honest. She begins her book by telling her private experience and dedicates her book to the doctor who performed an abortion, saying, "I've done the best I could with my life" (p. ii) in keeping with the promise she made with him in exchange for that abortion. The lessons learned from reading Gloria Steinem in the past several decades, which has been my approach to leadership development, can be shared with students desperately wanting to find their own identities as leaders.

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