

Extract of remarks by Phoebe A. Wood
100 Wise Women breakfast – 9/26/07

Our personal stories all take shape in the context of three factors: **geography** (the place in which we are born), **time** (the era in which we are born), and our **DNA** (the traits we inherited) and the family environment in which we were raised.

As for geography, being American has some profound consequences for us all. We have vast resources available to us – in contrast with other women in the world who search daily for firewood or were born into a family with too many siblings and need to be married off quickly. However, we Americans don't have a history of very many women governing either.

And because the United States of America is relatively young as a nation-state, it emphasizes the next point of context for any personal story: the era into which we are born.

Being an American woman born in the last half of the 20th century has allowed me wonderful access to education. The fact that I could attend college at one of the finest academic institutions when I had brains, but no money, is remarkable. My classmates were all valedictorians, and their variety of backgrounds was tremendous. There were not as many international students as there are today, but the variety from across the US was a wonderful palette for me. (My own experience predates Title IX, which was another fantastic development for our female athletes and the educational system in the country.)

Being born in this era meant that advanced technology such as reliable birth control was available. It has given women more control to decide if and when they want to have children. Prior to the pill being widely available, a woman almost had to choose a life of professional work or a life of marriage and parenthood. It was very difficult to be married and childless – it just couldn't be very well controlled. I am of the first

generation that could make reliable timing choices for birth control. Because you could postpone childbearing, many of us did. I was just working so hard to be successful—traveling and moving often for new positions that would add responsibility and experience, that I just continued postponing any decision about children. The trade-off for me is that I am a “geriatric” parent -- I had my two children when I was 38 and then 44 years of age.

I took the time to set up the context of my life – in this place and in this era – because options available to my grandmother were different than those available to my mother and different again from what will be available to my daughters. Remember how Bill Clinton was so moved as part of Boys Nation when he met President Kennedy at the White House? Well, I represented Minnesota at Girls Nation -- but when we made our visit to the White House, we met with Mrs. Spiro Agnew, the wife of the Vice President. It hasn't been an equal road.

The third factor in understanding the context of one's life, beyond location and time, is simply the DNA with which you were born and the immediate environment around you. Your health, your energy level, and the speed of your synapses in brain functioning are just some of the items that will affect what options you have and what options you choose. So too is the environment in which you were raised. Were you encouraged to be competitive? To be an achiever? To be an observer? Do you think that I have been affected by my high-achieving brothers? I do. Do you think that it matters that I tell my children they will be the future leaders and they will have an obligation to develop and be prepared because the world will need them? I do.

So how does the context of location, time and DNA affect opportunities for women in the next decades?

Let's start with location. Demographers predict pretty large changes ahead. Globally, there is massive urbanization going on. Listen to this remark made at a Fortune magazine conference in Aspen, Colorado: “In the village, all there is for a woman is to obey her husband and family elders, pound grain, and sing. If she moves to town, she can get a job, start a business, and get education for her children.” What

is happening is the world's villages are emptying out as people seek a better life. Women around the world will be a key part of this. Some of us intersect with these women as we provide micro-finance loans that make a huge difference in their lives. Think of how much value will be added by providing access to education and health care and resources.

In the developed world it is different. Russia, Japan, Italy, Spain and Germany will have fewer people in 2050 than they do now. And to bring it home to the United States, the largest high school graduating class is 2009 and the drop off is dramatic from then on. Immigration policy aside, we will be facing the long predicted shortage of workers.

What does that mean for us in this room? Our skills and abilities based on our training and experience will become even more valuable. We baby boomers had to compete with a lot of others, but those of Gen X and Gen Y will be able to demand and receive more flexibility, more opportunities, etc. in the workplace. This is true in the corporate world and also in government. For those of you who will be working after the boomers retire, there will be abundant opportunities. It should be an excellent time for those who seek them out. Be ready. Be very well-prepared.

Here's what I tell my children. I am not raising you so that you are competing only with other students in the United States. I am raising you to compete with students in some of the fastest growing economies and populations in the world, such as China, Korea, India. I use the word compete because I expect there to always be a competition for something. I could also have used the word collaborate, for they will need to do that, too.

Now there are many practical things that we need to do. Socialization runs deep and our ideas about men and women and how they should behave and how they should dress and how they should talk are somehow subconsciously put into us. If you don't think you are socialized this way, the next time you are listening to a boring speaker, just pretend that a female speaker is male or that a male speaker is female. You will be amazed.

Then there's this difference that a male will proclaim that he can do another job when he has about 25% of the qualifications for the role. A female will wait until she has mastered about 75% of them before she would even consider the role. This is critical in factors determining the selection and placement of women. You can't go by what the men and women say unless you know this. Similarly, many women have been socialized to defer to men – if they don't speak up, we need to consciously ask the women for their opinions. Gratefully, this seems to be receding in my daughters' generation, although my heart ached the day my older daughter, who was then a freshman in high school, came home and asked why girls did all the work and boys got all the credit?! So another critical practical thing we must do is to make sure that the best women are identified. And just as men are put in positions for which they are not fully prepared, we must demand that our female colleagues get their fair shot. The best must be tested.

Finally, we should acknowledge that there are a lot of men who are in positions of power above and around us. They still make most of the rules and hire most of the people. While the metaphor of the glass ceiling for women has been pretty much supplanted, a recent article in Harvard Business Review has dubbed a new one – the labyrinth.

We need each other to help us through this labyrinth where success comes to the resourceful and well connected woman who has the DNA and the preparation.

So here we are in Louisville, KY -- in the US -- where our position in this geography and our place in time allow us to have opportunities and options that our mothers and grandmothers did not. Use your talents to their maximum – I think the world deserves that from each of us.