

# Legacy Leadership: The Gift of Service and Stewardship

*By Dr. Gloria Burgess*



Dr. Gloria Burgess's latest book, *Dare to Wear Your Soul on the Outside*, is hailed by Dr. Warren Bennis as "required reading for all serious students and practitioners of leadership". Gloria is Lead Faculty for Saybrook University's Leadership Institute; founder and Executive Director of The Lift Every Voice Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to

developing imaginative 21st century leaders; and CEO of Jazz, Inc., her consulting and executive coaching firm. In all areas of her life, Dr. Burgess is devoted to developing imaginative 21st century leaders—those who understand that intercultural intelligence, creativity, and legacy leadership are not a luxury... they are imperative in co-creating a just and sustainable Global Village.

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The world was not given to us by our parents. It was loaned to us by our children.

~ African Wisdom Saying

As you read this article, which includes excerpts from my latest book, *Dare to Wear Your Soul on the Outside: Live Your Legacy Now*, I invite you to consider some of the questions I have asked myself since I was a young girl coming of age in rural Mississippi and the turbulent streets of Detroit, Michigan. I have come to recognize these questions as essential for leaders, especially those who want to be mindful and intentional about their legacy: What do I stand for, and who do I stand with? Who do I include or exclude? Who and what do I celebrate? Who and what do I ignore or erase? As a leader-practitioner, parent, sibling, community steward, and global citizen—what trees have I planted and for whom? What will I leave as a shining legacy for this generation and the generations beyond?

Legacy leadership is about planting trees under which you may never sit, whose shade you may never enjoy. To plant such trees is to be a creative catalyst for social, cultural, political, and ecological change. At this unique time in history, our world desperately beckons us to look beyond ourselves and to see into the heart and humanity of others. At this unique time in our history, each of us has an unprecedented opportunity to bring forth our signature presence to be of service and make the difference only we can make.

## The Foundations of My Legacy

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When I was a little girl, I thought I lived in an all-black town. Segregation ensured that we kept to ourselves. Too young to understand the meaning of segregation, I simply believed that we lived in our very own town. Although I didn't know the meaning of the word, I certainly felt the impact of segregation. I knew it by the tightness in my stomach whenever I went into a shop in the "other town" with my parents and they politely addressed the white shopkeepers as Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So, yet the shopkeepers called my parents by their first names.

From my earliest experiences of segregation, I detested everything about it. Outraged that all the freedoms I experienced at home with my family were denied me when we were among whites, I resolved to stand up for myself and for my rights and to speak out against injustice. Even as a youngster, I knew that I wanted to make it impossible for anyone to treat my parents, my sisters, me, or anyone else differently because of the color of our skin.

Little did I know the scaffold of my legacy was already under construction.

## Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

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In our culture, most people believe that your legacy is something that occurs only after you die. Nothing could be further from the truth—especially for leaders. While you will leave a legacy upon your death, your legacy is best appreciated and understood as a process—living, organic, and always evolving. Your legacy is much more than something out there in the great beyond. Your legacy is always forming. Its materials include both who you are right now and who you are becoming. Like the currents of a mighty river, your legacy is always in motion, continuously flowing. You and your legacy are a work in progress. Indeed, your legacy is your magnum opus, your supreme and magnificent life's work.

With the blessing of hindsight on my part and foresight on yours, you can be intentional about your legacy. Inside every human being is a glorious world longing to be born. As 21st-century leaders, our chief responsibility is to be a midwife—to heat the water and bring in the towels—to help give birth to these magnificent new worlds. Once birthed, our role as leaders is to be of service as steward, caretaker, and caregiver—for our families, our workplaces, our communities, our civic institutions, and our Earth.

Service on behalf of the future is the essence of legacy. In this sense, we are obliged to serve as midwife and torchbearer, to humbly aid in the birth of new ideas, projects, compositions, inventions, schools, legislation, and other creations, as well as to faithfully tend the hearth of our own calling so we can light the way for others to do the same.

In her brilliant essay “Standing Up for Children,” Marion Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, writes about legacy as our living testament to who and what matters. A tireless champion for children, Edelman says, “The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life.”

If you envision your life as a relay race, and if the recipients of the baton are your children, and if the winner of the race can determine the future of humankind, don't you want your baton to be one of goodwill and love?

Your life *is* something of a relay race, and what you pass on is the precious baton of your values and beliefs, your principles and practices, your decisions and choices, the sum total of who you are. The baton that you pass on is your legacy, which is destined to have a lasting impact on the lives of your children, their children, and beyond. It is your responsibility, indeed it is your obligation, to keep your eyes on this, your most valued prize.

## The Dance of Life

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You have been summoned to become a person unique in all the world. Just as every snowflake and leaf is unique, so are you. No one else is like you and no one else can contribute what you were specifically designed to contribute.

Dancing visionary and pioneer Martha Graham likens dancing to the art of living. Both require years of practice and development. In her autobiography *Blood Memory*, Graham points out that we “learn to dance by practicing dancing” and we “learn to live by practicing living.” In dancing and in living, the principles are the same. Each is the performance of a dedicated, precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes the shape of achievement, the sense of one's being, the satisfaction of spirit.

For dancing and for living, we learn what we need to know through practice, which requires thousands of repetitions. To learn and master walking, talking, and feeding yourself requires several years of practice. You learned to walk by practicing the basics, first learning to crawl or scoot, then pushing and pulling into the vertical realm to grasp the eager and encouraging hands of your parents, or a table leg, chair, or anything else strong enough to give you the confidence to begin again after the inevitable triumph of gravity over your miniature yet ever aspiring body.

Practice is the act of doing something in some aspect of our lives over and over until the act becomes habit or instinct, so customary that it becomes integral in two ways—first, to your way of doing whatever you are practicing and then to your way of being, inextricably connecting what you do with who you are.

Dancers learn to dance by practicing the fundamentals of their craft over and over again until they can move on to intermediate and advanced levels; their training is designed to build, strengthen, shape, and hone their bodies' musculature, reflexes, and memory. Graham estimates that making a mature dancer takes about ten years. This span of a decade in the dancer's training is analogous to the formative years of your life when you learn the fundamental tasks and assignments of living—the basic arts of relationship, nourishment, mobility, and possibility.

As Graham reminds us, it is no small wonder that dance holds an ageless allure, for “it has been the symbol of the performance of living.” In your life's journey—or your life's performance—some of the most important questions that you ask and grapple with may be questions about your legacy.

Questions to ask include: *How do I want to be known... and remembered? What is the rhythm, or presence, of legacy in my life? What choices do I make each day to live my legacy here and now? What or who do I believe in so deeply and passionately that I will make enormous sacrifices for it?* Host these questions as you would a special guest in your home. Pay attention, but avoid hovering over them. In time, the questions will take up residence in your heart, and they will reveal their secrets to you. They will become your teacher and guide as you keep your eyes on the great prize of your life.

## Wear Your Soul on the Outside

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One of the ways I have kept my eyes on the future is by sharing stories and poetry, time-honored ways to impart wisdom and to teach what might otherwise take months or years. My stories and poems have also helped me work through the pain and anger of my past. When shared with others, stories and poems offer a lifeline or a bridge, a beacon or a candle in someone else's life. You just never know when something will awaken in others that allows them to claim and share their stories. As poet Theodore Roethke wisely reminds us, we all “learn by going where [we] have to go.”

A couple of years ago, I delivered a keynote for an International Women's Leadership Conference convened in Europe. The organizers invited me to speak about authentic leadership. They knew of my work in developing and coaching leaders and of my work as a storyteller and poet. I was one of the few speakers from the United States and was sensitive to an anti-American sentiment among some of the conference participants.

As I prepared my presentation, I contemplated how I might serve as an ambassador not only for authentic leadership but also as an instrument for reconciliation. I was reminded of Archbishop Tutu's invitational words—“God is waiting on us. He needs our help.” Reflecting on these words, I asked myself: During this particular conference, how might God need *my* help?

After my presentation, I knew the answer.

Instead of standing behind the podium, which was a considerable distance from the audience, I stepped downstage near the edge of the platform. Though I had prepared notes, I decided in the

moment not to use them. I spoke extemporaneously, from my heart, telling stories from my life and sharing my own poems to illustrate key points. I did not talk about authentic leadership; I modeled it, showing my true self, using my true voice to illuminate the most essential aspects of leadership, aspects that in Western culture are too often ignored. I represented a mirror in which participants could see a glimpse of their own reflected light, their own possibility.

As I was speaking, I saw that many in the audience were on the edge of their seat—some literally. The room was charged with enthusiasm. I mean enthusiasm in the sense of its connection to *entheos*—inspired by the gods. The audience brimmed with excitement and expectancy about their own possibilities, for what they might become. When I concluded my presentation, I received a standing ovation, which signified the potency of daring to wear your soul on the outside! By speaking from my heart without my notes, I walked my talk, modeling a legacy of authenticity and infusing its worth into the lives of the audience. I believe ovations are not only for the person with the microphone, they're also a powerful affirmation for those offering the ovation. In this case, it was the audience's recognition of what author and storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estés refers to as “standing up and showing your soul.”

During the conference, I met many wonderful women, including a woman whose legacy would intersect with mine, Konji Sebati. From the moment I met her, she felt like a sister. For the duration of the conference, I knew her only as Konji, as she had introduced herself to me. Afterward, I learned that she was a prominent physician, well known for HIV/AIDS work in South Africa and had since become the South African ambassador to Switzerland.

In the short time that I spent in her humble and remarkable presence, Dr. Sebati invited me to speak at an event that she would host the following summer, a tribute to the women whose anti-apartheid protests struck early chords in the death knell that would eventually lead to the dismantling of apartheid. Without hesitation, I accepted Dr. Sebati's invitation to speak, intuitively recognizing a deep kinship with a cause oblivious to place or time, for injury and triumph anywhere is an injury and triumph everywhere. When I asked her, “Why me?” she said, “Because you are so passionate. When you told the stories about your life in the segregated South, they were so vivid and yet there was no trace of hatred.” Then she asked only half-jokingly, “Are you sure you aren't from South Africa?” I smiled in reply, knowing instinctively that soul is no respecter of place.

## We Are the Ones: Then and Now

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On August 9, 1956, twenty thousand stouthearted South African women of all races gathered from all parts of the country to march on the Union Buildings in the capital city of Pretoria. The women staged the march to protest the atrocious pass laws, which had been in effect in South Africa for several generations. Among the many horrors of apartheid, the passes symbolized perhaps the cruelest aspect of oppression—influx control, a policy that relegated husbands into the menial role of migrant worker and made their wives into virtual widows. These unjust laws deprived children of their fathers and robbed everyone of their basic inheritance, their birthright—the right to live in a stable family unit.

The 1956 Women's March was the culmination of many years of planning and organizing, including a march on the government buildings the previous year. The women marched on the Union Buildings to present to Prime Minister Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom their petitions against the pass laws, petitions that contained more than one hundred thousand signatures from citizens of South Africa and a multitude of other nations from all over the world. As part of

their demonstration, the women sang freedom songs, including a song written especially for this particular occasion: “Now you have touched the women, Strijdom! You have struck a rock. You will be crushed!” (Wathint’ abafazi, Strijdom! Wathint’ imbokodo uzo Kafa!) The rock that had been struck was the rock of legacy.

The women rose up because of the horror and devastation that the pass laws had wreaked on the family. For several generations, women had been left in isolation to raise their families, to be the heads of their households. Season upon season, year after year, decade after decade, the family unit that had survived for millennia was detonated, destabilized, and ultimately destroyed in a mere half-century by these inhumane laws. The South African women had had enough. The disturbance was too great, and the future facing their children and their children’s children provided the catalyst to propel the women headlong into what can only be called an audacious act of salvation, an act that would intercede on the vicious legacy bestowed by the Boer government and restore a legacy of dignity and respect.

In August 2006, against this historical backdrop, I had the privilege to present the opening address at the gathering hosted by Dr. Sebati to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the South African Women’s March on the Union Buildings in Pretoria. I shared the dais with Dr. Sebati and other dignitaries, including Dr. Ruth Mompati, one of the co-organizers of the 1956 march. Now in her mid-eighties, except for a crown of snow-white hair she looked like a woman several decades younger.

I asked Dr. Mompati what gave her and her South African sisters the courage to conceive and the commitment to carry out such a subversive and dangerous mission. She looked at me in a way that I imagined she must have looked at the women whose hearts were galvanized by her great soul those many years ago.

Though I do not recall Dr. Mompati’s precise words, I recall the spirit of them. With fire in her eyes and ferocity in her voice, she said, “Courage! Courage? We didn’t need courage. We organized and sacrificed, we withstood humiliation and persecution, we went to prison and were exiled, we risked our lives and lost some of our sisters [and brothers, too,] along the way—not because we had courage. We simply did what we had to do. Why did we stand up to the white apartheid government? We did it because we were mothers!”

Dr. Mompati and her formidable phalanx of twenty thousand mothers were not theorizing about legacy as a philosophical or intellectual concept. Theirs was the brute, roiling force of legacy denied, derailed, a force as relentless and adamant as it was necessary and redemptive. In taking a stand not merely for themselves, this company of women who stood up for the sake of their children and their children’s children became Woman, Mother, True Voice for those whose voices had been systematically silenced, whose voices would have remained unheard without these benefactors of goodwill, vision, hope, and triumph.

Surely, Dr. Mompati and her companions knew that God was waiting on them, that He needed their help to transform the legacy, to change the conversation, to shift the context, to sing a new song on behalf of the present generation and the generations to follow. Not only did these midwives heat the water and bring in the towels, they severed the cord that kept them bound in apartheid’s stranglehold. These women were and continue to be exemplars of legacy living, assuming authority and therefore victory over tomorrow by acting with purpose and intention today.

When we celebrate the women who marched on the Union Buildings in 1956, we celebrate ordinary women who acted as any mother would who was hell-bent on saving her children. These women who acted as stewards, as guardians of the past and acolytes of the future. These women who were determined to create a new story, a new ethos for the sake of the current generation and the generations to come. These women who acted in an ordinary way in an extraordinary time.

Social activist and acclaimed scholar and poet June Jordan celebrates the power of the legacy and the soul of Woman in her rousing poetic tribute, which is simply and eloquently called "Poem for South African Women."

Our own shadows disappear as the feet of thousands  
by the tens of thousands pound the fallow land  
into the new dust that  
rising like a marvelous pollen will be  
fertile  
even as the first woman whispering  
imagination to the trees around her made  
for righteous fruit  
from such deliberate defense of life  
as no other still  
will claim inferior to any other safety  
in the world

The whispers too they  
intimate to the inmost ear of every spirit  
now aroused they  
carousing in ferocious affirmation  
of all peaceable and loving amplitude  
sound a certainly unbounded heat  
from a baptismal smoke where yes  
there will be fire

And the babies cease alarm as mothers  
raising arms  
and heart high as the stars so far unseen  
nevertheless hurl into the universe  
a moving force  
irreversible as light years  
traveling to the open eye

And who will join this standing up  
and the ones who stood without sweet company  
will sing and sing  
back into the mountains and  
if necessary  
even under the sea:

we are the ones we have been waiting for.

I have had the privilege of sharing this poem with many people around the globe. Throughout the world, people identify with South Africa's liberation struggle because it is at once unique and universal. People of all cultures respond to and are inspired by acts of courage, acts of righteous defiance, acts of fierce resolve. And as appalling as apartheid was for South Africans, their struggle was and continues to be very real as well as archetypal.

By looking through the lens of South Africa's struggle, we begin to recognize that this exterior confrontation is also mirrored within, for each of us is engaged in our personal, individual struggle for liberation, the struggle to free ourselves from the exile of our perceived limitations and constraints.

Whether our struggle for freedom is global or personal, in our complex, global village we all need reminders and encouragement that indeed "we are the ones we have been waiting for." These closing words of Jordan's poem offer an irresistible invitation to take off our robes of inadequacy, inferiority, and insufficiency. It is imperative that we lay these garments down on the altar of self-compassion so that we might forgive, surrender, and enter fully into the heart and soul of legacy.

As 21st century leaders, I cannot think of a higher or more noble calling.

*Notes*

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South African Women's Freedom Song

World Wisdom from Africa

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**Linkage**  
**Burlington, MA**  
781.402.5555  
info@linkageinc.com