



by Dr. Barbara E. Riley

Leading From The Inside Out

To Help Others, We Must First Know Ourselves

African-American women share a long legacy of being “doers.” We get things done. Our legacy of leaders, from Harriet Tubman to Sojourner Truth to Dorothy Height, is one of women who accomplished against all odds. African-American women have always had to be creative in managing our anger and rage at exploitation throughout history, while delivering compassion and love to both friend and foe. Our strength and compassion are woven into our DNA.

Our legacy of slavery has ensured our place in the pantheon of doers. Taking time for ourselves is a luxury, allowed only when our obligations to care for others are completed. While we are considered the nurturers and earth mothers of the world, “world leader” is rarely listed as our attribute. Yet, if we collectively stopped doing, how much of the world would cease to function?

Our destiny as African-American women is to translate our “doing” into transformative leadership. Our path to claiming our place as transformative leaders begins with us. *Our journey as a leader is from the inside out.*

Leadership research confirms that to know one’s self, in short to be, is an essential piece of “doing” effectively. The more we know who we *be*, the more effectively we can do ... and achieve anything.

As the journey from slavery to freedom on the Underground Railroad utilized a series of safe houses/way stations where slaves could rest and plan the completion of their journey, these articles will offer way stations for gathering the power within you. These way stations will provide safe spaces for you to tap into the positive energy of our past, combine it with knowledge of the present and turn the corner into a new future ... our new future as African-American women leaders.

Importance of Gaining Consciousness

Our first way station is the Conscious Chamber. “Being” demands knowing the real you, the true self: not the one defined by others, but the self defined by you. Your true self lives in your heart ... often unknown to others. Your true self is your inner spirit, known to you through your unwavering intuition that, if listened to, is always right, even though you might ignore the message.

As African-American women we find ourselves talking to friends and bemoaning our failure to listen. Had we only listened to the

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little voice inside we would not be in the mess we are in. Do you know how accurate those messages are? And do you ignore them and make them irrelevant? We must slow down, listen, learn, value and nurture this inner voice; it is part of the code of our collective DNA.

Stop in this safe house of the Conscious Chamber. Pause for a moment and ask yourself:

Are you awake and aware?

How do you know?

The first step in becoming conscious — becoming awake and aware — is to take a deep breath. Try it now. Take a moment and take three deep breaths. Pay attention to how shallow, deep, easy or difficult your breathing is. Breathing is our life, our spirit. We need to

breathe to be alive. To know your true self you must be conscious of your breath.

Breathing provides a pathway to your true self, a heightened ability to hear your inner voice, to connect to your intuition. Pause each day at least three times and take three deep breaths, then listen and feel what happens. Breathing deeply activates all of our senses, and opens a pathway so we can hear our inner spirit speak. Reminding ourselves to simply breathe provides more oxygen to our brains and muscles, optimizing our ability to think, feel and effectively be and do. Conscious breathing improves our overall wellness, and helps us stay conscious to our inner spirit, moment to moment.

To *be* is to be aware and awake at all times. To pay attention to our stomachs churning, to our hearts racing, the melody that keeps popping into your head over and over, to the verse from a poem or book that stays on your mind for days. These are all carriers of information about you, messages asking you to slow down and reflect. These are the messages of your true self. Every message has meaning. Don’t dismiss it; allow the message to come in to you and the meaning will emerge.

The well-being of our minds, bodies and spirit depend on our ability to stay awake and aware of what’s going on inside us. We must slow down and listen; our spirits yearn to tell us all we need to know.

Transformative leadership is about helping others reach their full potential as whole human beings. As African-American women, we must be whole before we can help others. Our journey to leadership begins from the inside out. Working each day to truly know who we are is our first step. ■

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