

Stick to your Knitting

Reflections on leadership, gender and misplaced metaphor

Katherine Watson, Amsterdam, October 2020

I am writing this essay after several months of “social distancing”, isolation and knitting. I like to knit – the pure simplicity of single threads looping over and into one another to create something wonderful, warm and comforting. Knitting has long been associated with other times, home crafting, and clever grandmothers. My grandmother taught me to knit and also inspired me to write, being an accomplished knitter and an aspiring writer herself. Now I knit for my own grandchildren. Knitting offers me a reflective time and space. But it has always been a humble, personal pastime and not something that was key to, or even noted as a hobby on my professional cv....never a skill worth highlighting.

There is a saying with respect to knitting that has always made me smile, and which has some relevance to the topic of gender and leadership. This is, the admonition, “stick to your knitting”. With time on my hands during lockdown, I investigated its roots and discovered where it had been used, misplaced and misunderstood. I learned that I had perhaps been wrong in my understanding and usage of it and that there has been heated debate over this particular figure of speech. In my mind the phrase was directed at women who were perceived to be treading where they were unwanted and it implied that their perspective was not valued and knitting was nothing to be proud of.

The debate regarding “stick to your knitting” had centred around whether it is a derogatory slur espousing that a woman should get back to “woman’s work”, or that a man is acting rather “woman-like”, and neither belong in the particular male context – in one example, a parliamentary arena. The male politician who had been criticized for using the phrase quipped in return that in fact it is not a gender slag but simply means - “stick to what you are good at”. With roots in the industrial revolution and manufacturing, the saying counseled that focusing on core business and expertise is key to ensuring success. The intention was not a negative criticism of the inability to handle tasks beyond the soft homely ones, but a cautionary note with respect to diversification. Admittedly, this is hardly a less offensive criticism, but in

the mind of the speaker, not a gender-biased reflection of abilities, role and value.

The root of the saying does not really matter and the debate about what it actually means distracts from the core issue of how it is perceived and understood. What is significant is that countless metaphors, couched in apparently innocent and timeless sayings are embedded in our habits of communication and representation. They fix mindsets and reinforce the perspective on what is valued, or not.

Metaphors are neither simple, nor innocent. In living with them, we have embedded them deeply in our consciousness, then passed them on, generation to generation. Metaphoric comparisons make concepts tangible – they make ideas “real”. So to minimize them by saying they are “only” metaphors, and therefore only words, is fooling ourselves because “...metaphors are never *only* anything.” Zia Haider Rahman,¹

Metaphor has been with us a very long time. First described and lauded by Aristotle in *Poetics* (350 BC), he suggested that “*the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances*”²

Over two thousand years later, metaphors remain integral to how we represent and understand the world around us. But the more we use them, the more they take on a life and meaning of their own, over time, place and context. They become woven into our systems of meaning and communication and have an uncanny ability to generate an emotional response which is too often used to manipulate perception and fix mindsets, particularly in the realm of gender politics. Millennia of reinforcing the notions and thoughts that shape our worldview are hard to shake off.

Over time and generations of social encoding we have ascribed gender specific characteristics to girls, boys, men and women. These qualities have become associated with, and intrinsic to, particular roles and

¹ Zia Haider Rahman, (2014) *In the Light of What We Know* Picador p183

² Butcher, S. H., & Aristotle. (1895). *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art: With a critical text and translation of the poetics*. London: Macmillan.

responsibilities, skills and contribution to community and society. They are embedded in our language and representation. Leaders were men, carers were women. Should one exhibit traits uncharacteristic of their apparent gender, or a leaning towards a role that was not normally associated with that gender, eyebrows and hackles would be raised. One stepped into a previously gender-specific role with trepidation, courage and determination – always ready to answer the nay-sayers and defend against the critics. One carried gender characteristics generally understood as belonging to one gender into the world of another with equal caution. Or - one nurtured characteristics not associated with their gender to make a mark and carve a place.

Gender specific traits sat comfortably where they had always been – they did not belong in the “other world” – transgression was not encouraged. Thankfully we are learning how wrong-headed this is and that we are poorer by not bringing all qualities to the fore and nurturing them in each person and in demanding them in leaders. Leaders should not be defined by gender but by their ability to harness their human qualities - qualities that over time and systems have long been associated with either men or women.

In the society in which I grew up and which shaped me, leadership has been the realm of men. Even the home, the woman’s world (such a catchy name for a tabloid magazine!), was expected to have a male “head of the household” and women were “homemakers” or “housewives”. Specific tasks related to gender and characteristics translated via metaphor – hearth and home in juxtaposition to hunter and protector. These traits were valued accordingly – the homely becoming less valuable than the hunter. In one realm we recognise gentleness and caring, in the other, toughness and strength. If you display other than the norm – “boys don’t cry” - it is shameful. If one is making a success in a “professional sphere” – how can s/he possibly be a nurturing parent? Consequently, “what a shame for the family”.

As more and more woman ventured out, participated in and contributed to the world beyond their homes, needless descriptors such as chairwoman, woman physician, woman politician, woman leader followed. It was not enough to be defined as a physician, a woman was a “woman doctor” – a new breed or peculiar hybrid. We lost fireman, postman, fisherman but strange constructs such as “male nurse” slipped

into speech. Seemingly we could not shake the gendered roles and even if a role was not specifically gendered we felt the need to add gender to the role – by way of explanation, or even apology.

For millennia, our leaders have been men and no wonder that masculine attributes were equated with admirable leadership. Most of these attributes are rooted in military – power, pride and discipline. If one wanted to lead, to be successful, to reach “the top” then be assertive, tough, strong, loyal, decisive, confident, strategic, tenacious, competitive, proud. Generations of male role models embody all of these characteristics – defining leadership, and also defining maleness. Leaders should not be caring, nurturing, compromising, gentle, open, tactful, emotional, humble or modest. There was no pride to be taken in these characteristics – only shame.

Masculine and feminine traits have long persisted as opposites – polarized rather than complementary, narrowly defined rather than open, dynamic and ambiguous. We understand the world in opposites, we build vocabulary – either in our “mother” tongue or a new language - with both antonyms and synonyms. We reference through metaphor and simile. It is a simple and comforting approach to solving problems, addressing challenges – but only if the problem is simple. Just as metaphor is never “only” metaphor, our human challenges are not simple: they are beyond complicated or difficult – they are decidedly complex. All of our humanity and our ability needs to be focused, balanced and work together to find and enact solutions.

Not only should our understanding and expectation of individual leaders evolve, so too the whole concept of leadership. We can no longer look to and hope for single heroic leaders – be they men or women. Leadership can and does come from unsuspected corners, from the fringes. More value is being placed on the “other” skills – softer skills, empathy, listening, collaborating, empowering. Along with tenacity, strength and determination, they are human qualities that we should all be proud to put forward. The full range of leadership skills can be learned and nurtured in men and in women. Leaders who aspire to and take pride in this complete and rounded set of skills are extraordinary leaders indeed.

The words proud and pride can be traced back to the Latin: *prodesse*, meaning, by some accounts, to 'be useful or of value'. Its opposite is...shame. Our humanity requires us to recognise both in ourselves and to keep these opposites in balance – pride and shame, modesty, humbleness.

This brings me back full circle to the humble act of making, the homely craft of knitting. Individual skills have translated in our usage and understanding into collective qualities. A family can be closely knit, a community cohesive and knit together in solidarity. A team is only "as strong as its weakest link". A system is a network of interdependent nodes. Metal threads when knit together produced chainmail, preparing Jeanne d'Arc for battle. A crofter's craft became industry that mechanized hands with knitting needles or weavers' looms, and revolutionized earlier times.

We need more knitters and more knitting, both literally and figuratively. During this time of isolation and distancing there has been a good deal of encouragement to keep the mind active and positive by learning a new skill – men learning to knit for instance – a beautiful image. So my thought here then wanders to another theory on the phrase "stick to your knitting" which is not to stick to, rather to "attend to your knitting". As any knitter will know, these are wise words – drop a stitch and the whole unravels. If so, then it is best to undo the project, trace back to the dropped stitch – and carefully loop it in again. See the big picture, care for each element and know that when we knit together, build together, and pull together - things will be better for everyone.