

The True Livelihood Series



Reflections from...

Denise Bissonnette



Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

The Call to Citizen-Based Leadership

I wish to gather with you in a spirit of solidarity and camaraderie as we look out together towards the horizon of a new year, to a world that sorely needs us to step up with great courage, and deep heart, and mindful attention. I don't think you need for me to relay the long laundry list of ills and challenges confronting our communities, our, nations, our democracy, let alone the planet, but suffice to say, we are at a crossroads, and there is a lot at stake in how we proceed from here into the future.

Many today complain of fatigue and being "freaked out" by what's happening on the world stage, wanting to create some distance, or a buffer between their personal reality and the larger realities effecting the world. It's like burnout is the new black. Is the fatigue real, is there reason to freak out? Ah, Yah. And I would say that anyone who isn't experiencing that to some extent, obviously isn't paying attention. But I would suggest that rather than buffer ourselves, it is time to draw close in, build bridges, and break down the walls that would separate us from believing for even a second that we are not part and parcel of the problem if we are not willing to be part of the solution.

If we look at where we are now, and where we next hope to be, let's say 3 months, 6 months, a year down the line, the question is who would we have to do, who would we need to become, to make that distance? Because one thing is crystal clear - we are not going to get where we need to be by remaining where we are.

It is in that spirit that I would like to suggest that we as a community take up the call to arms, not in the military sense, but in the sense of standing arm and arm, and claim 2018 as the year of Citizen-Based Leadership. What I mean by that is that we consciously participate in our workplaces, our

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neighborhoods, our communities, and in the larger world as thoughtful, and engaged citizens, undertaking a commitment to practice personal leadership in big and little ways, using our personal influence to bring forth truth, justice and beauty for the greater good as we see and understand it.

While that sounds great in the abstract, what this means is that surrender the comfort of our warm and comfy seats on the sidelines as mere spectators, innocent bystanders, or armchair philosophers. What I am suggesting is that from whatever circles we live and work in, and whatever roles we play, we engage as citizens, take a leadership stance, bring a leadership view, and make the leadership choice.

What Does It Mean to Be a Citizen?

For most people the term “citizen” invokes a sense of rights and privileges – among them being the democratic ideals that 1) all people are created equal; 2) that all people are entitled to equal opportunity to reach their highest potential and purpose; and 3) which is typically ignored, but more to the subject at hand, that all people have the birthright and responsibility to work toward the greater good. In other words, our role as citizens we are not simply to here to take and receive, but to give back.

A sense of citizenship brings with it this great feeling of belonging to something bigger -whether it is a community, a state, a province or a country. It's like this grand table at which there is a chair pulled up just for us. But we are not just to be guests at the feast, we are meant to be makers of the feast. What of our obligation to that larger belonging? Who of us would be exempt from sharing the responsibility of how the workplace, the community, or the world unfolds? Whether we experience it as a burden or a blessing, are we not obligated by our very presence in the web, to help preserve, restore and honor it? All of us complicit in the ongoing creation and unfolding of the world.

Rethinking Leadership and the Question of Initiative

If you are with me so far, I think that obligation requires us to step up as leaders – in the simplest terms, to bring our vision, to speak our truth, and, to make choices for the highest good of all. Most people view leadership as a question of the position or power that one holds in relation to other people. What if we thought if it, instead, as the position or the power what one takes within any given context? For example. the teacher who speaks up on behalf of families who are not being fairly represented in a meeting is practicing leadership, even if she's not leading the meeting. The employee who sends suggested edits to the CEO for more inclusive

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language, reflecting the whole of the workplace, is practicing leadership. Even the eight-year old who reports an act of bullying on the playground to an adult, is practicing leadership. From this perspective, it is mind-boggling how many opportunities we are afforded in the course of a day, a week, or a month, to make a leadership choice, if even in a small way.

I purposely use the word “choice” because we always get to choose the level of initiative with which we will respond to the questions that arise in any given situation:

- What role shall I play here?
- What responsibility am I willing/unwilling to take?
- What is at stake for me and for those I care about in this situation?
- What concern of this is mine?
- What level of influence do I care to have at this time and place?

There will always be areas of our lives where we decide to take a passive, reflexive role. These are places and spaces in which we are happy to let others take the lead, where we can just show up, go along with the program, not worry about rocking the boat, or taking any real responsibility beyond our presence in the room. Sometimes it feels good to be invisible and play it safe.

There are other areas of our lives where we are motivated to play a more active, engaged role, wanting to capitalize on opportunity, or go the extra mile because it is in our self-interest to do so. We bring a sense of creativity and empowerment, wanting to make the best out of the situation and put our best foot forward. The desire here is to be seen, heard, appreciated or recognized as an individual.

But there is a third place on the continuum of initiative where we act not out of safety or self-interest, but on a matter of principle. We have the big picture in mind and the betterment of others at heart. This rarely feels safe, and it is not always in your best self-interest in the immediate situation, but you find yourself acting out of your own sense of conviction.

Surely, I am not suggesting that we take that third level of initiative in every aspect of our lives. What I am saying, however, is that there needs to be some area in each of our lives where we are willing to be vulnerable and brave, and act as an engaged citizen. For while there is a time for sitting back and a time for entering the arena, the respective worlds we live in and the larger world we belong to, are only going to get better if a good number of us decide to actually care – to make

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other people's welfare a matter of our own welfare - to be participants rather than spectators, to speak up rather than remain silent.

A different world cannot be made by indifferent people. Social justice will only come about when we learn to live in a community that works for every member of that community. A culture of tolerance will come about from the practice of tolerance. It's this simple, and it's this challenging: We become what we practice. The quality of our communities reflects the quality of our presence and participation in those communities. Complacent, cynical citizens create a community that feeds on fear and cynicism. Empowered, active citizens create a community that feeds on hope and action. It's our choice.

What flag are you waving?

We can embrace or resist the idea of leadership for ourselves, but make no mistake, you can't avoid it. Let me tell you about a training exercise I use that is super simple to execute, but it drives home a very powerful lesson. This exercise will work with 20, 200 or 2000 people. Ask everyone to stand, look around the room, and choose two people who they have decided to "follow" for the sake of the exercise. No one lets anyone know who have they have chosen as their "leaders", they just make a silent choice. I then explain that I will ask them to move about the room slowly, but at some point, I will walk up to one person and place my hand on his or her shoulder. Whomever I touch, must sit down or go to the ground. I then explain to the group that if either of the two people they are following sits down, they too must sit. The exercise ensues, and as people begin to move about the room, I choose someone towards the center of the room, and place my hand on their shoulder. That person sits down. And then another, followed by a few more, followed by one by one, the entire room is seated within about 60 seconds. It gives me chills just writing about it, even after the multitude of times I have seen it in action. I always open it up to the group and ask what lesson(s) they take from the exercise. I always hear words like "interdependence" and "we're all connected". My favorite takeaway is that there is no avoiding leadership.

Someone is always watching us, listening to us, following us, just as we are following others who may or may not know that they have the slightest influence in our lives. When Mahatma Gandhi stated that "My life is my message", he wasn't just stating an intention, but a fact of life. Our lives are our message, by design or default. We are all ambassadors for something. We are voices for change, or for business as usual. We are agents of peace or of conflict. We are ambassadors to open, honest conversations, or to protecting a culture of silence and collusion. We must ask ourselves - by my actions and inactions, my words, and my deeds, what is the message I am promoting in the circles I live and work in? What am I an

ambassador for? What flag am I waving?

Three pieces of advice and a personal wish for those taking this challenge seriously.

1. Don't wait to be ready.

Too many the idea of “engaged citizenship” seems like a luxury that only those whose lives are simple and uncomplicated can afford. A lack of readiness translates into a thousand and one excuses for not stepping up: I'll get involved when the kids are older. I'll participate politically when I go half-time. I'll begin to care about the poor in my community once I'm less financially stretched.

The truth is that we are all facing different kinds of challenges, be they physical, financial, emotional, vocational, or all the above. However, focusing on our personal challenges to the point of denying or ignoring the larger issues in the world, does not only fail to serve the world, it doesn't serve us! It deepens our pain, and decrease our sense of power. I'll speak for myself. Many of you know that I am struggling with cancer, and I will be facing a stem cell transplant in the next 6 to 8 weeks. When I let myself go down the rabbit hole of fear and worry, it is like falling face first into despair, and doubt and dread. The questions arise: What will it be like? How will I respond? What will it feel like to lose my hair? How long will it take me to recover? Will I ever feel like my old self again? If I persevere in asking these questions, I lose my spark and I lose my sparkle. I let loose the thread of hope.

The antidote for me, isn't going around and around in circles of concern for myself, but stepping outside my own small bubble, and looking to the larger things at play in the world. This brings our own problems into proper perspective. It takes us from the pinpoint of our own misery, and places us in the larger circle of the humanity, where everything we can imagine, from the very best to the very worst, is happening for people around the world, right now. It is incredibly humbling, and it is incredibly empowering. We are not alone. Nothing we experience is new in the world. Whatever you are facing, generations of people have faced before you, are facing it now, or will face it in the future? So, the question becomes: how will we respond in a way that adds to the competency, the confidence, and the capacity to cope with whatever challenge or issue we share with others in the human family?

If we wait for our lives to be perfect before we rally the energy and the care to be thoughtful and engaged citizens, we are in deep trouble because that day clearly is not coming. Don't wait for readiness. Let your devotion and your loyalty to your ideals set you in motion. Don't wait until you feel empowered, or have enough self-

respect or self-esteem. Just do something that you can respect, something you deem estimable, something that puts you in your power.

2. Be forthright and audacious, while remaining humble and willing to feel ineffectual.

Even with our best efforts, sometimes we feel so ineffectual. That's because there is a big difference between "giving input" and "having influence". If you're married, or you have kids, you know what I'm talking about. You can give input all day, but that doesn't guarantee that you've had any real influence. Having the right message doesn't always translate into being the right messenger. (You know how you've been giving the same advice to your loved one for God knows how long, and then, out of the blue, they get the same advice from a perfect stranger, and Voila – it's like they hit a stroke of genius. And you're like "Hello? What do you think I've been saying?")

Sometimes it's the nature of the relationship, it's the context, or it's how we are communicating. We need to communicate in a way that does not make others listen defensively, as if readying themselves for battle. We need to take the war out of words, and aggression and judgment out of our tone. Here's what we each know in our heart of hearts: It is possible to be strong without being rude, or obnoxious or sarcastic. It is possible to be kind without being weak, or wishy-washy. It is possible to be humble without being timid. It is possible to be proud without being arrogant.

Here's the deal: People size up the messenger before deciding to chew on the message. If you haven't earned the trust and confidence as a messenger, ditch your plan and make a new one. And sometimes the most effective messenger is not a person, but a strategy – like holding an event, showing a film, doing a survey, or assigning a book. Don't make your message an ego-trip, because it's not about you.

I'd like to share a story from my long-ago – it was in the 1980's and I worked at Catholic Charities in San Jose, CA as a job developer with refugees. My mother-in-law, Felicia Lamendella, was visiting us from Chicago. She was a woman of huge heart and I loved her fiercely, but she was of the school of thought that our country had enough of "our own" to worry about without bringing in all these "aliens". I assured her that they were from this planet, and were not "aliens" at all. I would remind her of the immigrant roots of her own family from Sicily, Felicia being first generation in Chicago. In the end, we only succeeded in locking horns.

Then, one night, my husband I invited an Ethiopian family for dinner. Over bowls of spaghetti and a bottle of wine, they shared their story of heroism and courage

and resilience – of escaping their country on foot, being separated in different refugee camps, and finally reuniting as a family in California. Felicia was completely mesmerized. She wasn't merely charmed, she was changed. At the end of the evening she asked me if there was a Catholic Charities in Chicago, and if she could invite "a nice family like that" to her home and to meet her friends. I suppose you can only think of someone as "alien" or "other" if you haven't heard them laugh, or cry, or shaken hands, broken bread, shared stories. And not only did she welcome that change into her own heart and mind, she was on fire to bring her friends into the loop. That was huge lesson for me to get off my soap box, and find more natural and organic ways of getting my message across.

3. Don't get stuck in overwhelm, just act on your values and ideals.

I think we fail to put the first foot forward because we sense the enormity of the need before us, and feeling powerless in the wake of that enormity, we are stopped in our proverbial tracks. Benjamin Franklin cut to the very heart of that fear when he advised: "Be not afraid of growing too slowly. Be afraid only of standing still." We don't think ourselves into new ways of acting, we act or take steps that bring into new ways of thinking and being. You can't summon inspiration, you can only summon yourself. So, where do we start? Start at the place that honors your ideals and values.

As engaged citizens, we must preserve our own values and ideals before we can go defend those of our country. We must treat our convictions like treasure, because they are. I love the story of the man who during the Vietnam War stood in front of the White House night after night, week after week, with one small, lit candle. One rainy night a reporter asked him, "Sir, do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here alone at night with a candle?" No, he replied, "I don't do it to change the country, I do it, so the country won't change me."

In addition to the question of how much change we are affecting around us we must ask ourselves:

- How we are being changed in the process?
- Are we becoming more loyal or less loyal to our principles?
- Are our dreams for the world growing dimmer or brighter?
- Are we growing bitter or are we remaining hopeful?

Whatever we need to do to restore our own sense of purpose, and of being engaged citizens of our inner worlds, that is the next right place to start!

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A personal wish – that this make it past your “to-do list” to your “to-be list”.

It is my sincere hope that this challenge does not get whittled down to an item on your to-do list, like something to be checked off a weekly goal sheet. I am hoping that being an engaged citizen and acting from a place of personal leadership springs from something deeper - a commitment that is sourced from our essence, something organic to and from our way of being in the world. So that the call to that everyday leadership becomes a knee-jerk Yes, a reflexive willingness, and an immediate, inclination. And when we are connected and committed as engaged citizens, I believe that we will begin to hear and recognize ways to step up from every direction – and the invitation will fall on us not as obligation, but as sacred opportunities to serve.

- Will you contribute to this fund? To this auction?
- Will you make some calls on behalf of this campaign?
- Do you have the time to volunteer this weekend?
- Will you sign this petition? Will you help garner other names?
- Do you know anyone who could help us out with...?”
- Will you share this post on your social media?
- Will you mentor this student with a disability?
- Will you attend a gathering for LGBT rights?

“You got it!” “I’m in!” “Sign me up!” “I’m all over that!”

“That’s got my name on it!” “Let’s do this already!” “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

That’s what the world is asking us for in 2018 – a wholehearted YES!

I ask you to take in now the wise words of an unnamed Hopi Elder who came from the Hopi Nation in Arizona. The following piece has been circulating for at least the last twenty years, but its message is so fresh and relevant for us today. I hear in it both a blessing and wake-up call. It is my honor and privilege to share these words with you.

POETIC REFLECTION

A Hopi Elder Speaks

You have been telling us that this is the Eleventh Hour.
Now you must go back and tell people that this *is* the hour.
And there are things to be considered:
Where are you living? What are you doing?
What are your relationships? Are you in right relation?
Where is your water? Know your garden.
It is time to speak your Truth.
Create your community.
Be good to each other.
Do not look outside yourself for the leader.

Then he clasped his hands together, smiled, and said,
"This could be a good time!"
There is a river flowing now very fast.
It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid.
They will try to hold on to the shore.
They will feel they are being torn apart and will suffer greatly.

Know the river has its destinations.
The elders say we must let go of the shore.
Push off into the middle of the river,
Keep our eyes open and our heads above the water.
See who is in there with you and celebrate.

At this time in history we are to take nothing personally,
least of all, ourselves, for the moment we do,
our spiritual growth comes to a halt.
The time of the lone wolf is over.
Gather yourselves!
Banish the word struggle from your attitude and vocabulary.
All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.
We are the ones we have been waiting for.

- Unnamed Hopi Elder from the Hopi Nation of Arizona