

Female Leadership – New Leadership for Unprecedented Times

Interview with Dr. Karin Jironet conducted by Dr. Karen Longman
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KL: You bring a unique set of background experiences and education to writing what is really a multi-faceted book about leadership. And that's reflected in the book's title: *Female Leadership: Management, Jungian Psychology, Spirituality, and the Global Journey through Purgatory*. I want to talk more about these elements later, but they represent quite a mix! Would you tell us about some of the important life experiences that have contributed to the person you are today?

KJ: Thank you, Karen. I can very well imagine that at first glance it seems like a mix of disparate topics, but I think if you look a little closer you'll see that they are related in very fundamental ways and that they come together in the notion of self-awareness. So to know who you are at the core, how you express yourself in the world consciously, and how to acquire such a conscious life. And in fact, that bridge between the inner reality and outer ways of being has been a theme in my life up to now. Relatively early in life, when I was about, I think, eight or nine, I had experiences of a spiritual nature that I could not place in the context I was brought up in, which was a rather pragmatic one. So that and subsequent experiences of the same nature made me think about communication as a bridge between the inner reality, which is timeless, and the outer day-to-day world, which constantly moves. And I've come to believe that perhaps the only thing in life that we can have some influence on is this communication—how we respond to what goes on inside and outside in order to give an expression of our personality that is true to ourselves. Nobody else can do that for you, so I think it's up to the individual.

Q: So it's the expression between the inner self and the outer reality, living that out?

A: Mm-hmm. That is the responsibility one can assume as a person. And, as you might have seen, I have pursued this interest also academically. I've been consistent in my studies of communication from different perspectives, so personal and interpersonal and in relation to God.

Q: So tell us a little more about your educational background?

A: I studied linguistics and speech pathology for a paramedical education, and I have a Master of Art in Ethnology. I have my PhD in Theology and Psychology of Religion. And I'm a Jungian psychoanalyst, of course.

Q: You're uniquely prepared to write a book like this. Is there anything else you want to say on life experiences that contributed to getting you into writing this book?

A: Well, it came through work. I had been working with senior executives in Holland and they requested that I look at how to integrate personal qualities into professional performance. This prompted the work on the seven sins, which I did in retreats. I was then invited to present a series of lectures here in Amsterdam related to the theme which led to the book.

Q: It was interesting for me to read a book about female leadership written from a European perspective, and particularly from the Netherlands. When I think about the Netherlands, I think about Dutch culture being very progressive, and I'm wondering how your thinking about leadership has been shaped by living and working in that culture?

A: Yes, I think you're so right; the Dutch are very progressive in many ways. I live in Amsterdam where there is room for very rich and diverse flavors of personal expression. I've also lived and worked in Sweden, and in Italy, and in comparison to these two countries or cultures, the Dutch is by far the most open and direct—curious, honest. I suppose it can be partly explained by the fact that Holland is so densely populated. People live on top of each other. Holland also has a long history of trade and colonialism, as well as what people often mention, the necessity to cooperate to keep the sea from flooding. As I'm sure you know, part of the country is located below sea level.

I've worked for about fifteen years here with senior leaders, men and women, and it's been rewarding precisely because of their willingness to open up and to accept what they're faced with and to handle it exceptionally. I cannot say that my view on leadership is based on much else than on the experience from the Dutch because that's been my predominant professional life experience, but this view and experience has proven quite helpful when working with leaders from Japan, as well as from Russia, the UK, and other countries in which I work regularly. So I suppose what they call "progressive" about the Dutch is partially their cross-cultural versatility.

Another interesting point of the book is that it's based on casework, which is predominantly Dutch. The many examples of different, very personal experiences, related to the sins and virtues, are mainly offered by Dutch clients. It's been fascinating to receive feedback on the book from people coming from very different cultures and walks of life telling about their recognition of shared experiences and struggles. So there seems to be something universal in how we relate to envy, and greed, and anger, and the other sins.

Q: Right. You made a point early in the book that really surprised me—that the Netherlands rank 60th alongside Pakistan in terms of women in corporate leadership. I was stunned by that figure—60th. What do you think is going on in terms of that ranking?

A: Oh, I can only say what other people think because I have not researched that myself. But, of course, everyone knows that vital fact and a lot of people have put their best thinking to figure out why. One of the reasons, often mentioned, is the tax system, which does not promote women working part-time, which is what they like to do. And this is the second reason: It's seen as being quite difficult to make a real career when you work part-time. So these are two major obstacles.

Q: That's interesting.

A: And you have to ask yourself why that is, why such a system is kept in place. There are currently quite virulent conversations about the introduction of a quota system, like the Norwegian system, where you ensure that a certain gender distribution occur.

Q: Right. For women in board positions in Norway, correct?

A: Exactly.

Q: So there's some conversation about that potentially for the Netherlands?

A: Sure.

Q: Okay. Let's move on. In getting into your first chapter of this book, you start with the words: "Every woman is a leader." I was thinking about Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*—with which many people are familiar—and his opening line, "Life is difficult," which sticks. So if we thought about your choice to open your book with just five words, "Every woman is a leader," some people wouldn't necessarily resonate with that because it would suggest that everybody is a leader. Why did you choose to open the book with such a sweeping statement?

A: I think you're probably right that it won't resonate with some people, and especially people who think that being a leader is equal to being in a leadership function. But in my way of thinking, everybody's a leader of their own unique life, whether lived in a corporate setting or other surroundings. From a superficial viewpoint it may look like a sweeping statement, but reflecting on the implications, one might understand the importance of taking responsibility and leadership of one's own actions and reactions. I think it's only when you have the quality of leadership over your own life that you may hope to serve well in a leadership function. I'd like to see more leaders who have taken the notion of being a leader in that sense to heart and who act accordingly.

Q: What was your phrase? It's only when you've acquired leadership in your own life? Is that what you said?

A: When you have acquired leadership over your own life.

Q: Right!

A: And, over your own reactions, like what we talked about earlier in terms of communication.

Q: So if you were rewriting the book, you would choose that opening sentence, and then leading into your second sentence—it's about providing and taking leadership of your own life—the internal journey and then living that out into the external environment.

So that relates to the next thought I had because you define "leader" in a way that was rather nebulous, and I think that relates to my previous question. Can you elaborate on why you chose to define "leader" in this way? You write, "The word 'leader' simply means that as a person you recognize you can think, and move, and feel, and that others have the same ability. And what is key is that you interact with all this consciously while making choices in daily life." How does that equate to being a leader in your thinking?

A: Well, in my thinking, leadership is about personal engagement. And personal engagement means that you know what moves you, and it means that you know what moves others. So a man or a woman who is moved by greed, for instance, understands the dynamics of this force. And he or she can help regulate it, instead of reacting automatically, and also have some sort of right to plead, convincingly, for balancing greed with generosity. I think leadership requires that you understand your personal engagement.

Q: You have spent a lot of your adult life working with women in leadership development, personal, and professional development. What are some of the "leadership lessons" that have grown out of your life experience coaching people in leadership, either personally or professionally?

A: Yes, I have worked with personal and professional leadership development for a long time, thirty years or so. In terms of female leadership development, when I first came in contact with that, I met it very much in the spirit of a kind of equal rights movement. In the '80s, in anthropology and ethnology, women like Sherry Ortner, if you remember, spoke about how women must fight for their unique nature in society. Nature and culture—it was very much a gender debate, then it became known as feminist anthropology, social organization. Prestige in society was seen as directly linked to sexuality and gender.

But then when I started working with female leadership development within big companies, I noticed the shift from regulation of prestige towards distribution of power. So in the late '90s, women were less on the barricades. They felt the less they showed themselves or stood out, the better. They could better influence from behind the curtain, so to say. And consequently, when women in senior position were offered female leadership development programs they did not feel very attracted to that idea. They rejected it because they felt that there was nothing special in being a woman, and to be asked to follow such training was seen as stigmatizing them. Nevertheless, women did join the female development programs and then discovered that they had more in common with each other than they knew and that it was a good network to build and to share experiences in because these were different from their routine and daily feedback. It was not so much about building competencies as it was about building confidence in womanhood and what makes it special to be a woman. Many groups of women that I worked with then convene still today.

Q: And out of that almost thirty years of life experience, looking back and processing all of that, what would be some leadership lessons that you could share with people today?

A: I learned that the image of leadership over time has shifted from being defined by external attributes—position, power, hierarchies—towards one of a leader being someone creative, informal, with a cultivated personality. This development, in my observation, coincides with a more general development in the collective consciousness, which I see as marked by the rebirth, almost, of the individual human being; an acknowledgment of what it means to live fully. From my Sufi and psychoanalytical perspective I see this as a reaction against post-modern relativism. I believe it as a new form of "universalism" that is prompted by globalization—everyone is a leader—and facilitated by social media.

My work with Dante has been very interesting and a helpful trove for understanding how these universal features that are shared by all, but experienced individually in a unique way—in a person’s biography—play a role toward how a new form of leadership might evolve.

Q: Right, and it is evolving, I think. You’ve written a very provocative book. When I received the book and looked at the cover, I thought, “This will be very interesting.” It’s short; it’s shorter than I would have expected. The whole book is only 118 pages, but you mentioned above and alluded to the fact that you were combining four different perspectives on leadership that normally wouldn’t have a connection in the minds of most readers. You combine a concern for women’s leadership issues, Jungian Psychology, Sufi poetry and teachings, and the seven levels of Dante’s Purgatory. That’s a lot to cover in 118 pages! Do you want to say any more about how, in your mind, those four things came together? Were they just four threads that were part of your life experience and you could see the connections? It seems like a very creative way to offer a fresh perspective on leadership, and women’s leadership in particular.

A: Yes, as I said earlier, those four things are not as different as they might seem. Leadership and Dante, we should start there because psychoanalysis and spirituality can then be seen more as methods of those two. If you look at Dante’s work on the seven sins and virtues that are described in Purgatory, I think that shows what leadership truly means today. It means that as a person you accept what it takes to move on.

Q: And theoretically, you’re moving to something better, a better state through your leadership for your organization.

A: Yes. And in practice. I think that to know yourself you need not only to be aware of what hurts and what hinders and what helps you, but to also accept that it is like that and then not try to change the conditions, but rather, move beyond them. Moving beyond is what makes a leader. And, true leadership means that you can let go of some of the attachments of the ego and to serve a greater cause.

Q: What was your background with Sufi poetry or the Sufi teaching? How did you come to that component of what you wrote?

A: Oh, well, that’s because I’m trained as a Sufi for the past 25, 30 years. I regularly offer leadership retreats in India.

Q: And you could immediately see the linkages?

A: Of course. Sufism and psychoanalysis describe in many ways the same journey of development. One that leadership for new times, transitional times, can benefit from.

Q: It makes for a very interesting book, I would say, a book that I didn’t expect to read when I got into it, so thanks for your work in putting this together. I want to ask a little bit more about Dante’s purgatory, which is really the meat or heart of the book, and the seven vices and virtues.

A: Yes.

Q: I thought your description of how those seven vices and the comparing virtues fit with leadership and women's leadership in perspective was worth the price of the book. Probably some people have read Dante during their university years, but most likely it's not fresh on the top of most people's minds. Could you just say a little bit more about how women's leadership concerns are related, for someone that may not have read Dante for 20 or 30 years?

A: Yes. Well, very quickly, Purgatory is the middle part of Dante's divine comedy. The first part is Hell and the last part is Heaven. Hell and Heaven have a couple of things in common. One of them is that both are timeless, so it's eternal suffering and eternal bliss. But in Purgatory, there is time, so you work against time. It's night and day, sin and virtue, and it's about having to learn to balance opposing forces. Lower Purgatory consists of three sins and virtues, and Upper Purgatory of another three sins and virtues. In the middle there is the fourth, Sloth. So at the bottom, we have three sins of love that is perverted by too little love: Pride, Envy, and Anger. And at the upper part, where we have Greed, Gluttony, and Lust, there is too much love. Lust is the sin closest to Heaven because at least it involves relatedness with another person. Sloth, which is in the middle, it's laziness. It's not too much; it's not too little, but no love at all. Indifference.

Q: Right in the middle.

A: It's what we'd call a depression today. It can't get going for anything. So that's Purgatory. And as I said earlier, it's about balancing your inclinations. We all have a favorite inclination, at least for some period of time. For instance, let's take Envy as an example. It's supposed to be the least wanted sin because it seems you really don't get anything out of it. With Pride and Anger and Lust there are at least some benefits, but with Envy you are probably the only one suffering. Envy's a combination of wanting something that someone else has and wanting to see that that is taken away from that other person. The virtue that goes with envy is generosity. So let's say that there is a woman at work who would seem to have a lot of advantages that you would like to have for yourself. You can think that if you took it away from her, you could have it. And the way women with envy at work operate, here at least, is often by means of gossip and manipulation. And, by those means, they can get what they want, but they really haven't moved on. It's not certain that they will keep the advantage they just got because someone else might come and take it away from them.

Q: Right. So even being aware of the seven vices helps. I appreciated that the Jungian perspective helps women think about how they are leading. Are they satisfied? Do they want to be leading in that way, or is there a better way, in this example, through generosity?

A: Yes, exactly.

Q: This is very intriguing.

A: Yes. And you often see how the tension between envy and generosity gets played out in the form of a tension between care and competition. Women want to do both—care and compete. If you accept that and look at yourself in all honesty then ask the question, "What am I envious

of?” Then take some time to think about that. When you know the answer, you ask the second question, which would be something like, “How can I take care of myself and what I want?” If you’re envious of another woman because of her capacity to negotiate something hard, then you must ask yourself how your negotiation skills are. You might find out that the wish for having these and developing them is rooted in conflict from when you were in school or something. And then one way of taking care of yourself would be to make sure that you develop these qualities that you’re envious of. You allow yourself to wish to be competitive in this area, become what you want to be, whether it’s a good negotiator or whatever—really to want what you want.

Q: There’s a lot we could talk about, but let me ask this: You mention in the book that leadership-related insights that are gained, for example, through Dante’s Purgatory or from Jungian Psychology, are not gender specific. But you’ve written a book that’s titled *Female Leadership* and you seem to see differences between the experiences of male and female leaders. So talk to us a little more about that balance. What is gender specific and what is not?

A: Well, in response to generalizing questions, and I get them all the time; what’s gender, what’s not; what’s nature, what’s nurture, I suppose one can only offer perspectives that do not take into account all the individual differences pertaining to people in different jobs etc., so here we go: There are differences between men and women in leadership. Men are more focused on results. Women are more focused on relationships. Women tend to maintain relationships, conversations, social cohesion; it’s how women keep going. Men tend to put their own goals and short term results first and go for that.

Q: When you talk about the differences between the genders, I can see that you could have written exactly the same kind of book, but one which had different implications for the vices drawn out of the typical style of leadership that men bring. You happened to write or choose to write a book about female leadership. But the framing of your contribution to the leadership field would have worked equally well for a different book with what you know about male leadership styles as well. Would you say that’s true?

A: I would say that’s true. That leads us to another aspect of your question about what’s gender specific or not: Women function differently in leadership because they have, as a collective, not been part of the ruling leadership that built up the current economy. So, they know what it means to live and work in an inferior position.

This can be an advantage, because it is easier to view from a distance a system that you are not party of. As outsiders of a male-dominated world of Western capitalism, women have had to become innovative, seek chances, accept criticism and learn from it, balance their own needs with what is possible. A woman on a board is often the only woman in meetings. She has probably learned how to live with all what “inferiority” means and yet try to influence as much as possible. This is a humbling experience that has better prepared her to see the advantages of diversity. To be part of a rejected minority can also make you strong in the end.

Not only women but also men know this. One of the world’s most innovative management thinkers on strategy and innovation, Prahalad, had the same advantage. Coming from a family of

nine children, from the south of India, he never fit into the American mainstream. His creativity came from the tension between belonging both to the rich and to the poor world. This enabled him to tackle what he saw as intellectual sloth and one-sidedness. He showed how innovative companies in the developing world combat poverty.

Q: Related to that point, I was intrigued by the reference you made to a “patriarchal matrix” that you say has dominated the practice of leadership. That made me wonder, do you think women’s contributions to leadership will be taken seriously? You mentioned that things are changing and that the old models don’t work. On the other hand, the Netherlands is 60th in terms women in positions of corporate leadership. So to what extent do you think women’s contributions to leadership will be taken seriously or are being taken seriously from your perspective of working in so many different countries?

A: I think it’s right on the brink of shifting towards what I call female leadership being taken seriously. For instance, I’ve seen a lot of pundits saying that some of the volatility related to financial ups and downs is pure emotion—panic, fear. Well, if you have worked on yourself, you know how to count to ten before you have a reaction. I saw in the *Herald Tribune* this weekend—did you see it maybe?

Q: I did not.

A: Richard Thaler, a professor of economics and behavioral science from the University of Chicago, states the same. He says, under the heading, “To fix the budget – just grow up,” that the bottom line is that, in matters of governmental self-control there is no real substitute for willpower. Then he concludes by asking whether politicians who act like adults can win elections. I fully embrace his reasoning and questions and I still hope and believe that women and men leaders who have developed their consciousness and conscience will be much more asked for and in demand than in the past.

Q: So are you optimistic or confident that the way people view the world and the current problems, the complexities of problems, that women’s contributions will be increasingly welcomed and the models will be changing?

A: Yes, I think the models will be changing. The world is changing rapidly and something else will come in its place. But what will it be like? Well, we can’t know that. But, we have some clues regarding what it will include. It will certainly include transparency, sustainability, relationships, making sure that everyone incorporates and collaborates. These are relational qualities that have, through the centuries, been developed more by women than by men, so that could be a contribution women could offer.

That is not to say that every woman has developed leadership qualities to such an extent that she can lead a company! That’s not my point. But if you’re a woman and in senior leadership and if you invest in developing yourself, and you gain understanding for how other people function, and inspire them in their development, then I believe you have a fair chance of bringing a good, positive contribution to a world of leadership that looks different from what it has looked like up until now—another dimension.

Q: So there's an element of competence as well as compassion and connections and that kind of thing. That's helpful. Do you want to say anything else on that?

A: Yes, I don't believe it is as straightforward as that, some elements of competence and compassion and so on. That's too programmatic. It's not a matter of one question with one answer anymore. It's an almost chaotic transition with its myriad of questions and answers.

Q: Which takes heightened leadership skills.

A: Different ones. Ones in which you bring yourself into the equation. And at least know how you respond yourself to different triggers because otherwise I don't think you stand much of a chance in the next-coming period of time.

Q: Right. Let me ask one other question before wrapping up. You mentioned earlier the seven levels within Purgatory and how Dante's insights are so helpful. You balance lust, or Dante balances lust, with the virtue of chastity. And you made another bold statement—like your opening sentence—“There is no leadership without Eros.” What does that mean and what do you think the implications are for men and women in leadership today?

A: You must view Eros together with its other side, Logos. Eros and Logos is a common pair of opposites comparable, for instance, to feeling and thinking, or enchantment and disenchantment. Eros has to do with psychic relatedness and Logos has to do with objective interests, most often self-interests, that is. In the platonic sense Eros is ultimately a desire for wholeness or truth, beauty, and as I said, psychic relatedness, a desire for interconnection and interaction with others. So given what I said just earlier about the notion of new leadership, I think it's logical to say that there is no leadership without Eros.

Q: And, what would be the implications of that? We were talking about women's leadership styles and men's leadership styles. Can you say more about that?

A: Female leadership focuses on relatedness. But I don't believe it's relevant to assign this ability to gender. It's not something you as an individual can “own.” It's something you're engaged in. One implication is that leadership can no longer be seen as a permanent state of achievement.

Q: So it doesn't matter if it's men or women in leadership; the implications are the same. There isn't leadership without Eros?

A: I think so.

Q: That's the way the world is working and will work?

A: If you don't adequately relate to people, how can you suppose you will influence today? By rules from one man at the top of pyramid? In George Orwell's *1984*, from '49, you remember the part about thought-crime which prompted people to a certain behavior. A lot of the MBA literature has been written with a similar intent. There was an external image or categorization

for what you consider to be a good leadership model and then you train people to behave in that way. Seven steps to this or that. Today we see all around us how these conventional structures are rejected in favor of less hierarchical and more participatory systems, supported in many ways by social media. In certain instances modeled by it even.

Q: Well, as we close the interview, I just want to give you the chance to put an exclamation point or an asterisk alongside anything out of your life experience. As a Jungian psychoanalyst doing executive coaching with leaders in the business world, and your experience as a Sufi teacher, if you could speak to the readers of the ILA newsletter, is there anything that you would want to re-emphasize in terms of how you see the world or how you view leadership or the individual journey that people could be on and should be on?

A: Sure. I'd like to stress what I said just that it will not be business as usual in the future. I think we will look at things differently within the next two or three years. I hope to contribute to this shift to more conscious awareness on the part of **the** individual's personal responsibility for how leadership is formed and established. The other thing that I wish to bring attention to is that there is a need for renewal of the leadership development genre and literature as taught by business schools, of course, and their models of organizational behavior and leadership that have formed the image of the leader up until now. I'd like to bring attention to the forms of leadership development which are difficult to pinpoint in this manner, but which can be reached through cross-disciplinary approaches, including perspectives that take into account tacit knowledge. For instance, approaches offering symbolic, narrative, or emergent perspectives, contact with your own higher self, how you make that contact, and how you make contact with that of others.

Q: Well, you are certainly bringing fresh perspectives and fresh thinking to a really important topic, so I want to encourage people to interact with you at the London conference. And I want to say thank you for writing this book. You have these different perspectives that one would not think would be in a book on female leadership—at least I did not think that! It caused me to stop and think about the journey that I'm on and the way the vices can entangle us. All of us want to be as effective in making a contribution in our spheres of influence as we can be. So I want to say thank you for writing a book that caused me to stop and think about those journeys through purgatory and hopefully into something more constructive. Anything else you'd like to say as we close?

A: No, Karen, I truly enjoyed this interview. I was curious to learn from you what you took out of it for yourself, and you just answered that.