



THE SPIRIT WITHIN

An Interview with Frances Hesselbein

—MARY MCFARLAND

Editor's note: Mary McFarland interviewed Frances Hesselbein and wanted the words of Frances to be presented in their entirety below, without the interruption of interview questions.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM COOKIE SALES

In the 1950s little girl Girl Scouts used to bake cookies and sell them to their neighbors. People loved it so much then the Girl Scouts started [having] bakers bake them. When I left the Girl Scouts of the USA in 1990, the sale was generating a third of a billion dollars...and all of the money stayed in the Councils. It meant that little girls and young women were providing the support for their own program. It really is not just a sale; it's a way to learn marketing, and what does the customer value, and keeping your promise: "I will return with two boxes of cookies," and you do. And then comes, "asset management." What do we do with the proceeds, our share of the cookie sale?

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

[On] January 26, 2005 I went to Houston, Texas. Why did I go? Because the University of St. Thomas was going to inaugurate its new president, the first time a president who was not a priest was going to be inaugurated. And who is the new president? The remarkable General Robert Ivany, a devout Catholic, a great war hero, commandant of the U.S. Army War College at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with a Ph D in modern European history. I'm sure there were hundreds who could have moved into this position. General Ivany was chosen.



Now, I had a call from him. “Frances, I’m going to begin my legacy. And I’m going to have an Inauguration, and of course, and the Investiture, but I want an Inaugural Address. And I want you to come, and I want you to talk about leadership and ethics.”

Now, what did I decide would be the title? “Leaders of the Future: Ethics in Action.” So the Inaugural Address was all about leadership, all about the indispensable role, the power, of ethical leadership.

Now, you might say, that’s fine, in a university it’s sort of cloistered and you’re protected, it’s easier to be ethical. Wrong. At every level of this society, in every institution, right across the three sectors, the challenges are greater than ever. And I believe in this society and in countries around the world, there is a cry for ethical, principled leadership, for leaders who have a moral compass that works full-time. Leaders with values that they don’t just frame and put up on a wall. They embody the values. Their people watch. And there’s nothing more inspiring than an ethical leader who lives the values and is explicit about the ethics, about the principles we live by in this institution, this organization. And whether it is a giant corporation, the smallest community college, a large nonprofit, a small business, it doesn’t matter; ethical, principled leadership is key.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BOARDS OF DIRECTORS

In October I spent a week in New Zealand speaking to the New Zealand Institute of Management and then to a collaboration—Asia Association of Management Institute. So here are leaders from all over Asia, all over New Zealand. It was a fascinating week, and I did a lot of public relations, with the live television, 6:30 news, 6:30 in the morning, millions of people watching. What was the one question I was asked? “Mrs. Hesselbein, what is the impact of corporate scandals in the United States?” Now, they knew all my background, they knew all about that marvelous conference, yet the one thing he wanted to ask about: corporate scandals in the United States. It was simple to respond—the corporate scandals represented a small percentage of the principled corporations in the United States.

Recently I spoke to SWIM—they’re not aquatic stars, they’re Sloan Women in Management, at MIT—and they had looked at all the news of corporate scandals. They decided they should serve on boards of directors. But instead of saying, “Well, I’m so bright; I have an MBA from Sloan,” they said, “What are the questions we should ask first?” And I think that



is the answer to your question. What are the questions we ask before we go on the board, and once we are on the board, do we have the courage to ask the questions that should be asked? Because, if as part of governance, we are responsible for total transparency, total trust, we ask tough questions. Governance in this country—not everywhere, but in these conspicuous cases—they never asked the questions that we are committed to ask. So it was...maybe being overwhelmed with the honor, maybe it is director's fees, whatever the reason, it was more of a social experience than a tough, managerial governance experience for some directors. It was the opposite of what the women of SWIM would demonstrate.

GOD'S PLAN

I have this sense that God has a plan for us, and when we are called, when we listen to that spirit within—however you define it—when we listen, we're given the energy to do what we are called to do. On our Web site there's an article, "The Whispers of Our Lives," that defines what I think these three kinds of whispers are. You might want to look at that, it's too long to tell you about it now, but there are three kinds of whispers that I believe, whispers of our lives—the whispers of the body, the whispers of the mind, the whispers of the heart.

For those of us who feel we are called and are willing to share this, some people, they think it is too personal, it's very helpful to many people if we can say, "I have a sense that I'm called to do what I do." Now, I'm not talking about "Methodist Prayer Meeting." There's a spirit within that calls us, and when we listen, amazing things can happen.

THE SECRET OF LIFE

Father John Culkin, a Jesuit priest, was the great authority on Marshall McLuhan, and interpreted McLuhan to the country. And he was a great authority on the film, and wrote just remarkable articles years and years ago for the *Saturday Review*. He and my husband John were two of the first six Robert Flaherty Fellows and they were Fellows who were chosen to be part of this study of the film as an educational [tool] in honor of the father of modern documentaries, Robert Flaherty.

One time I opened the *Saturday Review* and I had never met Father Culkin, and he is writing about education and Father asks an eight-year-old, "What is



education to you?” And the little boy replied, “Oh, it’s how kids learn stuff.” But in that article Father Culkin wrote, “It took me 50 years to learn the secret of life. The secret of life is very simple. It is: doing good work, and being with good people, learning to give and receive love. That is the secret of life.”

And that was a Jesuit priest sharing a profound concept.

DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP

First we have to have our own definition of leadership. If we can’t articulate that, if it isn’t just part of us, go back, think about it. I know after much introspection—also known as agonizing—early in my career with the Girl Scouts, I finally developed my own definition. We can quote Jim Collins and Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis and John W. Gardner forever, but what is inside of us that says, “This is leadership to me”? And finally my own definition emerged: “Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do. You and I spend most of our lives learning how to do, and teaching other people how to do, yet in the end we know it is the character and quality of the leader that determines the performance, the results.”

That is my answer. We define leadership in our way, our own terms, and then we say, “And these are the values, the beliefs and values, of this institution.” Now, first we must develop a short, powerful mission statement that says why we do what we do, our reason for being. For example, the International Red Cross: “To serve the most vulnerable.” No confusion, translates into every language. Powerful mission statement is the star we steer by.

Then we have the values we live by. All of us know what they are. And we not only plaster them on everything; we live them. So, this is how leaders grow. We can’t make leaders. Peter Drucker says, “Leaders can’t be made, but leaders are developed.” Leadership is a journey. Leaders who are responsible for the development of other people, giving them opportunities to learn and grow and lead, have to be exemplary in their own behavior, in their guidance, in their leadership. If you do not have these clearly stated values, that you live them, you will fail.

THE ART OF LISTENING

We learn to be good listeners. A great thought leader, Peter Drucker, has said, “Think first, speak last.” We learn the art of listening. When there is a conflict, instead of thinking, “These are two bad people who aren’t getting along,”



we listen. Often the reason given for the conflict is not the reason. That's the surface we hear. Suppose I am not doing well in my job and I report to you, and your job is "to make my strengths effective and my weaknesses irrelevant," says Peter. Now how many of us, responsible for the work of another person, we look at that staff member—with 90 percent remarkable performance, 10 percent pretty bad. Where do we invest? In that miserable 10 percent! We're going to beat you to death until you finally are able to use a chalkboard or whatever is the 10 percent is, instead of pouring the resources into your great strengths—the 90 percent.

Now, sometimes we place a person in the wrong position and conflicts arise because of insecurity. So we listen very carefully, and if this person is failing and in conflict with other people, and we say, "This is a person of value," we "reput" them. We find another place for them instead of knocking heads. "You two are going to get along!" doesn't work. So, the most sensitive kind of appreciation of differences, and an appreciation of "Is there something in this institution that causes this, exacerbates it?" We cannot look only at the surface.

INFLUENCES UPON MY LIFE

My grandmother was a very quiet, lovely woman. She had ten children; seven lived. She lived way out in the mountains of western Pennsylvania, where her family had been since the 1830s, had a little lumber mill that made barrel staves. She attended a one-room schoolhouse that her father and grandfather had attended. Above the blackboard was this saying—it was perhaps McGuffey I don't know, it'd been there forever. She made me memorize it when I was eight years old. In that one-room schoolhouse, and up there it was: "If wisdom's ways you would wisely seek, these five things observe with care: of whom you speak, to whom you speak, how, when, and where." I memorized it as a little girl, and I realize, today, the only times I've gotten into trouble was when I forgot "wisdoms ways."

Now, Mama Wicks had fourteen grandchildren. When we visited her, I would walk in the door, and she would say, "Oh, Francie," as though I were the only person in the world. And when I talked to her, she listened, she looked into my eyes. From her I learned the power of listening, the art of listening. The messages I received from Mama Wicks made an enormous difference in my life.

My grandmother, John W. Gardner, Peter Drucker, and other remarkable friends added to this understanding they listened. Always, because my family told stories to the children, I've always had this sense of history about



the people who went before me. And from her, and my grandfather, I think early on I had this sense that we are called to do what we do, and when we are called we are given the energy to do it.

WOMEN ARE NOT A CATEGORY

I think I upset people sometimes. I go into a session and it says, “A Gathering of Women Leaders” and two days later when we leave, we’ve changed the banner: “A Gathering of Leaders who are Women.” We are not a category!

So when we describe ourselves – “Oh, I’m a woman banker” – No! You’re a banker who is a woman. When we place ourselves in categories, we encourage other people to do this. Whatever positions we are in, we’re in those positions because of what we bring to the work, not because of our gender. Now, quietly, we know that our gender adds a special dimension to whatever we do, but it’s not why we do what we do.

I’ve been on three large corporate boards, on two of them, the only woman. Now, did I see myself as “the woman of the board”? Of course not. One was Pennsylvania Power and Light, a company that was building two big nuclear power plants, and nothing is more macho than two big nuclear power plants. Now when you walk into a board room and you’re the only woman, you do not play a little recording of, “I Am Woman.” No! You know you are there because of what you bring to the table.

This is a very difficult lesson, and a lot people don’t agree with me. “No, I am a woman—” I have never heard a judge say this: “I am a woman judge.” No! You are a judge. Now, gender is important, but it’s not why we do what we do. So I think it is very important that our own language does not add to the barriers that are already there. Wherever we go, we make the greatest contribution we can make.

I’ve discarded all the old barriers. Maybe they still exist, but I ignore them, because if we keep saying, “Oh, there are these big barriers,” we give them life and energy. If we ignore the barrier, it will decline. Today, for young women believe there are opportunities greater than ever before. And we have to help build this kind of inner security: “I’m here because of what I bring to the work.”

Now, for those of us who are older, one question is, “How many younger women do you mentor?” I met twelve tenured university professors who were women, who asked me to meet with them, when I was speaking at their university. They had a concern about younger women leaving after a



year or two, leaving the faculty. And I said, “How many of you are mentoring younger faculty women?” They looked at me as though I were speaking some strange language. And I said, “Until every one of you is mentoring a younger woman, you can’t complain.”

So, not unkindly, one of the professors said, “Well, you many younger women do you mentor?,” and I said, “Three. That’s all the time I have if I’m going to do a good job.” One of them is an African American lieutenant commander in the U.S. Coast Guard. A remarkable, remarkable young leader. One is a Chinese graduate student. I met her parents in Shenzhen and after my speech they said, “You must be our daughter’s mentor.” And I said, “With e-mail, of course, I would be honored.” And I never heard from them when I went back home and I never heard from China. Then, six months later I have a call: “Frances, this is Lin. I’m ready to be mentored. I’m at Stony Brook, at the university.” So, my second is a young graduate student. And the third person that I mentor is one of the nursing fellows of a distinguished group of executive nurses.

The experience is circular. I find we learn more from them than they learn from us.

THE PRESIDENTIAL MEDAL OF FREEDOM

This is the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It’s our country’s highest civilian award. I received it in 1998 from President Clinton, and I’m still overwhelmed. In the little group that received the award that morning in the East Room of the White House, we had Admiral Zumwalt; David Rockefeller; James Farmer—the great civil rights leader who was in a wheelchair, almost reclining, but he got there; and Dr. Robert Coles of Harvard. It was interesting that all of us had done something about diversity and inclusion.

The Marine Band had played and the whole Cabinet, about two hundred people were present. Each awardee was permitted to have eight guests. We’re sitting in the front row and here is a low stage that has been built in the East Room, and there are two lecterns, one for President Clinton, one for Mrs. Clinton. It’s about as graceful as anything could be, and we each had a military aide. So the president would say, “Admiral Zumwalt, would you please come up?” and he would go up the two steps, and then Commander Huey, a young Naval Commander would read part of the citation and then the president would read the balance...it was so profound. “Mr. David Rockefeller, would you please come up?” And the citations were beautiful.



Finally it was my turn. President Clinton smiled and said, “Anyone who knows Frances Hesselbein knows she does not permit hierarchical language to be used in her presence. So, I will ask this pioneer for women, diversity, and opportunity, Frances Hesselbein, will you please come, not up, but will you please come forward?” Of course, it was the only joke of the morning, everyone thought it was very funny, and going forward I kept thinking, “How does he know that?” It was very profound...I still feel so honored, so overwhelmed.

THE INFLUENCE OF PETER DRUCKER

I had used Peter Drucker’s works, his philosophy, his books, all of my career. I had discovered him long, long ago and I thought, “He thinks he’s writing for corporations, organizations, but I think he is writing just for us.” I loved the way he distilled language.

Five years after I had come to New York and those remarkable people had transformed the organization [the Girl Scouts of the USA], I received an invitation to a reception and dinner. New York University President John Brademas invited fifty foundation presidents and some presidents of large nonprofits to the University Club, 5:30 pm.

Now if you grow up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 5:30 is 5:30. So I get to the University Club. I walk into this big, empty room and I am alone with two bartenders. I turn around. Behind me is a man. Obviously, if you grow up in Vienna, 5:30 is 5:30. And he said, “I am Peter Drucker.”

I was so stunned, because I knew in that mob I would never actually meet him, so instead of saying, “How do you do?” I looked at him and said, “Do you realize how important you are to the Girl Scouts?”

And he said, “No, tell me.”

And I replied, “Go to any one of our local 335 Girl Scout Councils. You’ll find a shelf of your books. Open our corporate planning management monographs and our strategic plan, and you’ll find yourself, your philosophy there.”

He said, “Oh, you are very daring. I would be afraid to do that. Tell me, does it work?”

And I said, “Wonderfully. And I’ve been trying to get up enough courage to call you to say, ‘May I come to Claremont and have one hour of your time because we have in place everything you say the great, effective



organization must have in place. And I would like to come to Claremont, lay this out before you, and then talk to you about how do we take the lead in this society and just blast off into the future.”

He said, “Why should both of us travel? I’ll be in New York in a month or so. I will give you a day of my time.”

Just then Dr. Brademas and his entourage arrived, they swept Peter away, and I looked at my watch and I said, “In four and a half minutes I met Peter Drucker and I have a day of his time.”

From then on, for the next eight years, he gave us two or three days of his time. Before he spent that first day with us, he studied us in a very intense way, not at 830 Third Avenue in New York, but out in the field, where our people were, and by the time he arrived in New York, he knew us very well.

So that morning I knew I couldn’t keep him to myself, of course, so we brought together our national board and national staff members, and I could tell that when I just looked at our group, I could tell they expected him to say, “You’ve transformed the organization. You’re wonderful.” He stood there, thanked us for permitting him to be there, then he looked at our national leadership group and said, “You do not see yourselves life size. You do not appreciate the significance of the work you do, for we live in a society that pretends to care about its children, and *it does not*.” Now I’m sitting beside him, and I want to rise and refute it, and I couldn’t think of anything to say. Then he said, “And for a little while you give a girl an opportunity in a society that that forces her to grow up all too soon.”

A year before he died I called Peter and said, “In 1981 you said to the Girl Scout leadership, we live in a society that pretends to care about its children and it does not. Do you still feel the same way?”

Silence, then. “Has anything changed?”

So for those marvelous eight years he was incredibly generous He taught us how to distill the language and he wrote marvelous things about us: “*New York Times*, best managed organization in the United States” and they said, “You mean nonprofit” and he said, “No. I mean any organization.” With his inspiration we were mission-focused, values-based, demographics-driven, our house was in order.

Peter Drucker had a wonderful influence upon the organization. At one point he said, “Tough, hard-working women can do anything.” That was not exactly the way we would describe ourselves, but anything Peter said about us, we were grateful.



SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

You might wonder what someone who looks like me, who will always be seen as a Girl Scout, why would someone like me be asked to speak to our two hundred generals and admirals most responsible for the national security of our country? Also the Secretary, the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army and their counterparts in the other four branches of the U.S. military. When I read my invitation—"We would like you to come and talk to us about your own experience in the transformation of a large and complex organization"—I was absolutely stunned. I don't exactly look like General Schwarzkopf, but I never had a better audience. And at one point I did say, "Everyone in this room is called to do what you do. For you it is never a job. You are called." And I got a standing ovation. And I think, not because of the example, I think they were touched because someone recognized what they believe. All of them are gifted. They could be very successful in other sectors. They choose to serve their country.

At lunchtime I sat down—with the Army you always know where you sit—so here I am, and here's General Shinseki to my right, then the chief of staff, and on my left is a very large, tall, dark man. He was wearing a strange uniform. (There were admirals and generals present from other countries.) Before I can introduce myself, he said, "Are you a Christian?"

Now, think of where we are. I said, "Yes, I'm a Methodist."

And he said, "I thought so. When you said, 'We are called,' I said to myself, 'I think she is a Christian.'" Then he told me, "I am the defense minister in a tiny island between Fiji and New Zealand, and we're 95 percent Christian. We have our king. We've never been colonized. And we are Christian."

Now, when I say we are called, I'm not thinking this is a big Methodist call. The spirit within, however we define it, is the message he heard. And I was very touched. But that's what I believe. If we are going to make speeches, we have to speak from the heart.

ABOUT FRANCES HESSELBEIN

Frances Hesselbein is the chairman of the board of governors of the Leader to Leader Institute (formerly the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management) and its founding president. Mrs. Hesselbein was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States of America's



highest civilian honor, in 1998. The award recognized her leadership as Chief Executive Officer of Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. from 1976–1990, her role as the founding president of the Drucker Foundation, and her service as “a pioneer for women, diversity and inclusion.” Her contributions were also recognized by former president Bush, who appointed her to two Presidential Commissions on National and Community Service.

ABOUT MARY MCFARLAND

Mary McFarland is the international program director for Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JCHEM), a program with a mission to bring Jesuit higher education to refugees in the poorest parts of the world through online courses provided by faculty at Jesuit institutions. Mary is the former dean of the School of Professional Studies at Gonzaga University where she led initiatives in leadership studies, international partnerships, and health sciences.