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The Story of the River Birch...

“... At a particularly painful transition in my life, I planted this tree, with my young son at my side. It was a statement of promise, intentionality... and an affirmation: Here...now... this place... I live.”

At the time I had just concluded a senior executive role, as Asst. Vice President in a US Fortune 100 company, a job I loved, and also where there was some isolation, because there were only a handful of women leaders at the same level. When I had my child, it wasn't something that was talked about much at work, with the exception of very few close friends. There seemed no place to talk about the realities of having a child and being in a significant leader role. Since then, and over the years hence, as it became more common for women to enter significant professional roles, I vowed I would always be available to talk with others grappling with the choices and trade-offs.

With Anne Marie Slaughter's article three years ago... it became clear the same issues were still very alive today, twenty-five years later, and there was a visceral collective energy around having the relevant conversations... We started this group, The River Birch Project, with a core group of Leadership Tomorrow (Seattle) women and like minded others...

The River Birch Project started in response to Anne Marie Slaughter's cover article in the June 2012 Atlantic Magazine: "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>

Many things have ensued since then including a firestorm of commentary, articles and books, including Sheryl Sandberg's "Lean In", along with feminist commentary on the idea of having it all and its consumerist underpinnings, and the very real dilemma that this is a conversation of privilege and any real change in equality for women (and choices for men, too) must be accompanied by societal and cultural change, advocacy for structural and policy changes related to work, along with

social support systems to assist women and families. It is clear that we are missing something very important when we make this a conversation only about individual choice and navigating individual priorities.

For something more current, see article in Time Magazine on Women's Ambition <http://time.com/4037527/7-surprising-facts-about-women-and-ambition-from-the-time-real-simple-poll/>

that reflects some of the complexity in women's' response to multiple roles.

Why River Birch?

Gardening requires sensibility and sensitivity to natural characteristics. We (humans) are natural beings. We can draw some learning from gardening and from observing alignment in the natural world. In gardening, three key aspects are considered when selecting and locating a plant, and when these are aligned, we are rewarded with a plant that thrives:

- Right (Plant) Properties
- Right Place
- Right Time

The River Birch is a tree...

The River Birch that I refer to is a tree in my front yard and garden. This is a tree I planted as a sapling, some 25 years ago when it had four skinny branches emanating from a small root-ball, standing about 5 feet tall. Today it is sprawling, graceful and grand – a majestic tree that stands about sixty feet tall.

Lessons from the tree: I've asked myself what I've learned from that tree. It has much to teach, and when I work with women leaders (and men), the tree has lessons. It stands in its own strengths and characteristics, and the environment supports it. It flourishes because it does not expend energy to grow against its own natural state. *Awareness about who we are, about place and environments, in addition to seasons and phases can be illuminating and essential.* Awareness about change, and timing, are essential to supporting one's own creativity, growth and development as an adult.

This tree, and planting it, was an act of trusting and tapping into a life force that we can find in many ways. For me, the garden was the source. It was my way to most fully participate in and witness creating something of beauty, accompanied by and with nature. Each person has a way of accessing this. Nature is a source for remembering and informing who we are. At a particularly painful transition in my life, I planted this tree, with my young son at my side. It was *a statement of promise, and intentionality: here... now...this place, I live.*

Planting a tree is an act of hope, trust and love.

It lives (we hope) past our lifetimes. One wants to see it flourish. It is a contribution to a place, a gift to nearby beings (human and animal). The act of planting says: ““Yes, this is the place to spread your canopy and do what you do, tree. Marvelous tree!”

I see this tree every day and watch it change with the seasons, and with the years. It grows and flourishes through no effort of mine. Stark and bare in winter, it has red peeling bark, and then bright new leaves in spring, every spring. Its gossamer and wiry branches arch with the weight of golden leaves and brunt seed pods in summer, and then flex, stretch and thrash with gusty Autumn winds, releasing drifts and cascades to come back to bare again. We witness its changes, how it transforms through the seasons and involves some kind of death to what came before and a promise of renewal with spring.

So, back to the metaphor: The tree worked well where it was planted, and flourished, because its properties, (its characteristics) were aligned with nature. Knowing its properties, attention to timing and careful consideration of how the place and environment could support what this particular tree needed to grow, allowed me to plant the right tree for the right spot, a spot where it could flourish naturally and on its own. We considered:

Right properties

Right place

Right time

Properties: The River Birch tree needs plenty of room, lots of water, sun, and morning shade.

The environment (place) was right for it. The River Birch needs water... I lived on the site and knew it had a high water table, and there was a sloping grade just next to the tree, that could supply rain water during the tree’s young, early years. Now, it’s roots reach low and to the water beneath the soil.

The timing was right: We planted it in Fall... when it could begin to put roots down, rather than putting energy into foliage, at a time when the sun would not bear too bright and hot, and when it could get a good start for the following spring.

Those of us who explore gardening can point to the particular plants in the garden where these aspects don’t line up. These plants struggle. (For the gardener, it is a trial and error and learning process). We know that a plant will die when these

things are not aligned, or at best, it will struggle, and this makes the difference between surviving and thriving.

So, how does this metaphor relate to Women, Leadership (& Life!)?

We've been in the conversation of "Having it All", and... "What does that really mean?" "Is that a conversation we really want to be having?"

We will be informed if we consider: cultivating an understanding of ourselves, and environments that support us individually and collectively as a society, and our growth. Also, when we become acquainted with the notion of seasons in our own lives and natural phases, along with learning about the nature of change, we can consider new questions and opportunities. This produces inquiry and questions such as:

Who am I, and how can I understand myself best? (Strengths, interests, talents, needs.) What are my 'properties', so to speak?

What environments do I thrive in.? (Place, people, pace, what kinds of work, home-life, creative outlets.) What kinds of environments are humanized, which ones do we try to change and which do we need to change from the outside? Which ones do I participate in?

How does Timing come in? What phase of my life am I in? What roles are important now, and what is the relative importance of each? How can I think of timing and phases, as a way to support what is most natural for me? What if I learned more about how people change over lifetimes, and what's natural? How do I understand what has meaning for me at different phases? How can I understand how I am changing with time? How do I pace what I aim to do with the phase I'm in?

In all of this, we also must consider values. What am I here to do? If living my life also doesn't allow acting on the responsibility to others that accompanies privilege, then what am I doing?

Then, the question of leader effectiveness has to do with: "How am I leading my life, and what can assist me to do so in a way that is aligned and powerful?"

The metaphor of the River Birch and the garden can inform questions and reflection on what supports growth and development of adults. In the case of The River Birch Project, this translates into how Women are navigating professional and personal lives, leadership and professional roles. In doing so, we help ourselves and help others humanize our workplaces and our world.

The River Birch Project began three years ago in response to the firestorm of conversations about 'having it all'. With this project, we change the question to: "What, really, do we want? "

It is a place for learning, dialogue and sharing, and covers many topics related to Women and leading, leadership excellence, and the intersection of women's professional and personal lives.

For more on The River Birch Project see: <http://lynnhagerman.com/services/the-riverbirch-project/>

For upcoming events see: <http://lynnhagerman.com/resources/news/>

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