

Lessons from Grandma's Room



by JIM POLING Special to Bancroft This Week

When I was growing up, any conflicts from inside or outside the home usually got resolved in Grandma's Room. For the 17 years that I knew her, Grandma was mainly bedridden and confined to her room with crippling rheumatoid arthritis. When there was a problem or a conflict you went to her room to whine about how unfair the particular situation was to you. Grandma listened patiently to your side of the story, asked you to outline honestly the other person's side, then advised a calm, quiet look at the entire picture as a start to resolving the dispute. It was in Grandma's Room that I first realized that a woman's approach to problems and conflict was different, and frequently superior to a man's. When tough situations arise, it is female intervention and management that often gets them resolved. That view got some support recently from a New York Times article by columnist Nicholas Kristof. Kristof wrote that he compiled coronavirus death rates from 21 countries. 13 led by men, eight by women. The male-led countries had an average 214 coronavirus deaths per million people. The women-led countries had an average of only 36 deaths per million, a huge difference. He also found that almost every country with a coronavirus mortality rate above 150 per million people is led by a man. Canada's COVID-19 rate is 231 deaths per million population. All this confirms what the daily news tells us; countries where coronavirus is a runaway disaster are led by egotistical authoritarians who shouldn't be allowed to manage anything bigger than a peanut stand. Look at the United Kingdom, Iran, Russia, the United States and Brazil. Then look to the countries with the most successful responses to the virus - New Zealand, Germany, Taiwan, most Nordic countries - all led by women. Their leadership through this plague has been decisive, truthful and empathetic. Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen jumped on the pandemic in January, introducing 124 measures to stop the virus' spread. Angela Merkel told Germans early on to take the virus seriously and brought in early testing. Jacinda Ardern locked down New Zealand just three weeks after the first case of the disease was reported. Iceland, led by Katrín Jakobsdóttir,

offered free virus testing for every citizen and had a thorough contact tracing system. Its death rate was an amazing 30 per million population. These female leaders managed the crisis competently, talking to their citizens truthfully, with care and compassion. There were none of the strongman tactics used by the Johnsons and Trumps ? downplaying the threat, blaming others and playing political games. Much has been written over many years about how female leadership styles are different. But there has been little acknowledgement of how those styles can benefit nations or organizations. In politics and business, there remains the attitude that to really succeed, women have to learn to behave more like men. That's 20th century thinking that is hopelessly dated and needs changing. Women leaders tend to be less self-focused than their male counterparts. They don't simply tell others what to do; they work with them. They usually are more empathetic and humbler, and in my experience, are good at identifying and motivating new talent. They are good team builders. We have seen a trend in which more women are taking up leadership positions. There's still room for many more, in fact there's a real need for more female leadership as the world's problems become more numerous and more intense. One area where female leadership would help immensely is our off-kilter capitalistic system. It needs reform, not replacement, and reform that creates more equality. Our capitalistic system is designed to provide the greatest benefits to company shareholders, directors and executives. It should be promoting achievement of the greatest benefits for everyone ? employees, suppliers and customers. They all have vital roles, yet are not treated equally. Big gains for shareholders and executives are seldom seen by others who had a direct impact on achieving the gain. Studies have shown that women are more inclusive and more likely to see others as equal parts of the team. They are better communicators in that they listen more and are more apt to allow others to talk and put forth their ideas.