At the beginning of the ATS Women in Leadership initiative, I recall meeting in a hotel conference room with Michael Gilligan, Rosemary Skinner Keller, and three or four other women to conceive the first conference. We knew then and we are certain now that this is a transformational initiative that demands commitment for the long haul. Despite the consistent effort of ATS since that first meeting to promote and prepare women for leadership in theological education, today women represent only 13 percent of the 499 president and dean positions in ATS accredited schools.

But the world of theological education is not radically different from American society. In the US Congress, women represent 16.9 percent of the membership—17 percent in the Senate and 16.8 percent in the House of Representatives. In our fifty states, six governors are women; and in the 100 largest cities of the United States, only seven mayors are women. In cities with populations of more than 100,000, 14.5 percent of the mayoral positions are held by women.

We are part of the real world—the post feminist world of the “Mama Grizzlies.” This is the “GOP Year of the Woman,” and Mama Grizzlies are the marketing image. Granting that both terms are marketing tools of an antigovernment stance that lacks solutions for real problems, we do know that real mama grizzlies are aggressive, irrational, and mean. How did we get here? I ask myself.

But I can’t breathe that air too long—surfing the web can be dangerous to your sanity and sensibilities. And trying to figure it all out by rational processes seems futile. For inspiration I turn to poetry—and especially to Mary Oliver, whose “Instructions for living a life” I love:

Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

Leadership can be learned, just as virtue is acquired. Yes, gifts are given and talents are identified and developed, but leadership can be learned, and I am still learning from gifted leaders with whom I serve.

What’s the role of leadership?

Build a network of friends and colleagues, weave teams of relationships through which new ideas can be born, craft challenging questions, and offer a vision. Share responsibility with talented people and trust them.

Of foremost importance is a mentor.

You need someone who sees your gifts, knows your potential, and is willing to be your counsel. I had a great mentor when I was director of formation: a sister who was twenty years older, a great scholar, a college president, and then vicar general of the congregation. A national speaker, she would be writing a talk and ask if she could read it to me and receive suggestions for improvement. She wanted to test new ideas on me and others. She drew me into committees and events that broadened my horizons and stimulated my imagination. She was someone I trusted for advice and wisdom and great good sense.

I am now at the point where I hope I am mentoring new talent, paying attention to their gifts and telling them how astonishing they can be.

Sustained, open communication is essential.

Regular staff or cabinet meetings and weekly one-on-one conferences with those who report to you are essential. Team building is an ongoing, never-finished task. I prepare an agenda for my weekly meeting with the president, and I ask the four directors who report to me to do the same so that our conferences are focused and productive.

Master the art of the apology.

Never hesitate to heal or reconcile—or at least acknowledge and bring an issue out into the open. Gentle firmness is the best modus operandi.
**Take time to build relationships with your colleagues.**

In my last years at Aquinas, Faith Rohrbough, Martha Horne, Rosemary Skinner Keller, and I had come to know each other through ATS, and we decided that we would spend a day together each year sharing what was going on in our lives, telling our stories, seeking one another’s wisdom. I think we were only able to fulfill that promise three times, but I remember those conversations as profound and warm and wonderful. What we had in common was that we were women serving as deans and presidents in theological education.

**But you also need good friends in your immediate world.**

Our model, of course, is Jesus: “I have not called you servants, but friends.” We all need those who know us truly and accept us fully, who offer both comfort and challenge. Friendship is a school of virtue. It is a source of abundant grace and also of purification if we are faithful to the process. I love the wisdom with which Adrienne Rich writes about friendship:

> An honorable human relationship is a process, delicate, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of redefining the truths they can tell each other. It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation. It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity. It is important to do this because we can count on such few people to go that hard way with us.³

Good friends show us the way to our best selves. For that gift William Butler Yeats says it best:

> Think where man’s [woman’s] glory most begins and ends, And say my glory was I had such friends.⁴

**Be faithful to study and prayer.**

Do so despite the tsunami of work that threatens every day. In stillness there is clarity. Nurture your contemplative core. Thomas Merton wrote:

> Contemplation is [spiritual wonder]. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source.⁵

James Connor, influenced by Merton, speaks of contemplation in *Silent Fire* as “the deep glance, the awakening to a world with dimension, a world that blends with Mystery.”⁶ Thus our contemplative study is fed not just by Scriptures and theological texts but by poetry and novels, the splendor of mountains and oceans—all the truth revealed in beauty. Chicago is having a splendid autumn; the trees are ablaze against the crystalline sky, and for the

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*Forty-two women attended the Emerging Leadership Development Institute in October 2010—a new annual conference designed for female administrators and faculty with significant leadership components in their jobs. ATS hopes it will further advance the professional development of “emerging” female leaders (i.e., women transitioning into new administrative roles or considering this change) in their current and future capacities.*
moment they are holding still, waiting for me to stand still and notice.

**Commit yourself to collaboration.**

Here Donna Markham offers clarity on the benefits and demands of collaboration:

Effective leadership is about liberation, about loving, about listening, about telling the truth and taking risks, about solidifying the circle of friends for the sake of the mission.7

Mission-driven vision, conflict management, community and inner authority . . . become the spirit-links that usher in transformation . . . A deep respect for the sacred, along with an unwavering courage to manage conflict, provides the context for leaders to address resistance to global conversion.8

Inner authority, reverence, and wisdom provide a base for managing conflict and being able to withstand the high levels of frustration felt as firm, rich ground is sought.9

Borrowing words from the Irish writer John O’Donohue, I will end with a blessing “For a Leader.”•

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**ENDNOTES**

1. In an October 27, 2010, article titled “Who are the ‘Mama Grizzlies’?” Forbes.com reported Sarah Palin coined the phrase in May to mean “common-sense conservative women, banding together and rising up” to form “an emerging, conservative, feminist identity.”


8. Ibid., 132.

9. Ibid., 133.


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**Diane Kennedy, OP, is vice president for mission and ministry at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. She presented this essay at the October 2010 Women in Leadership Conference in Pittsburgh.**