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*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

**WOMEN OF FAITH: WOMEN OF LEADERSHIP  
INSPIRATION FOR SOCIAL WORK WISDOM**

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**WOMEN OF FAITH: WOMEN OF LEADERSHIP  
INSPIRATION FOR SOCIAL WORK WISDOM**

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**Abstract**

*This article will discuss the life experience, passion and mission of several strong women of leadership. The article focuses primarily on Christian women, but also will represent women of leadership from the Jewish faith and the Nomadic Culture of Somali. A premise of this paper is that life experience becomes the framework for passion that forms commitment to activism and leadership. Many of our great leaders and activists fight for a cause that is representative of their own life experiences. Passion and mission go hand in hand. Strong, courageous women of leadership discussed in this article include Jane Addams, Irmgard Wessel, Immaculee Ilibagiza, Dorothy Day, Giana Beretta Molla, Mother Teresa, Waris Dirie, and Sojourner Truth. The ideals of courage, tenacity, faith, forgiveness and commitment represented within and lived by each activist will be identified. Reflection on women of leadership has the potential to speak to and challenge social work students and practitioners to identify their own life experience, passion and mission that frames their activism today.*

**Key Words:** *Women, Leadership, Passion, Mission, Vision, Activist*

**Introduction**

“Servant leadership starts with a vision and ends with a servant heart that helps people live according to that vision” (Blanchard & Hodges, 2003, p. 57). Christian woman leaders and activists often fight for a cause that is representative of their own life experience. Life

experience, passion, mission and leadership go hand in hand. This article will utilize a framework for identifying major life experiences of each activist. Within the major life experience are formative moments that develop many passions and imputes for activism. The article will identify the leader's role and its effect on others' development. The common characteristics of women in Christian leadership will be described.

Steven Covey (1990) refers to leaders as having vision, mission and principals. This vision evolves into a leadership role of service that can reflect the values and life of Christ. This paper will begin with the life story of two social work leaders, Jane Adams and Irmgard Wessel. The former has her roots in Christianity the later in the Jewish tradition. The early social work profession began with roots in Judo-Christian values and practices. A diversity of religion is included to illustrate that faith goes beyond religious doctrine yet represents the common internal characteristic and values. The paper will describe several faith filled women of leadership. The common values of courage, tenacity, commitment, service, unconditional love, faith, prayer and solitude represented within and lived by each activist is demonstrated. These ideals have the potential to speak to and challenge social work activists today.

### **Jane Adams**

Jane Addams was a visionary leader, empowering those she served to be all they could be. Addams courageously challenged the Chicago community to live a civic and moral life. She dedicated herself to commitment to community, welcoming nature, dignity of person and reducing the distance between social classes.

Jean Elshtain (2002) organizes the themes of the early developmental years of Jane Addams and ties them to her role as an activist and significant social reformer. Jane Addams vision of Hull

House evolved out of her early life experience and her reflection in her young adult years. Jane Addams was the eighth of nine children born in 1860 to John and Sarah Addams. Jane grew up in an upper middle class Quaker family in Cedarville, Illinois. Her mother died in childbirth when Jane was two years old. Jane was cared for by older sisters and later a step mother. Jane graduated from Rockford Female Seminary in 1882. One of the early memories of her early Quaker background was the family's open door. This symbolized openness to the world. This was a tradition she replicated at Hull House. Following the death of her father in 1881 Jane experienced several years (1881-1888) of self doubt and psychosomatic illness. Jane referred to these years as "The Snare of Preparation" (Addams, J; 1910; 2002; p. 113). For several months she was bed ridden, received back surgery and diagnosed with Neurasthenia (an early twentieth century syndrome representing mental and physical fatigue). During this time of physical concern, Adams attempted to define herself with inner searching. Jane spent time in Europe to recover. Summers were spent in the family home. She read classic literature avidly and enjoyed music, art and scholarship as she traveled and rested in Europe. Jane Addams was an upper middle class, well educated single woman who knew she did not want to teach, go into mission work or marry. She struggled with what she was meant to do. While traveling in Europe, Jane had a profound experience, "the pale hands at midnight," which she could not erase from her mind. On a Saturday night she witnessed the decaying vegetables and the "Myriads of hands, empty, pathetic, nerveless and work worn . . . clutching forward for food which was already unfit to eat"(Addams, 1910; 2002; p. 66-68). A theme emerged from this disturbing experience. Elstain (2002; p. 66) states Adams could not "erase from her mind the hands illumined by the moon as they reach for remnants that the world has cast off, the best of a bad lot of rotting vegetables; the bread of life, for the very poor." In this experience of the "pale hands," Jane

Addams realized she could not live life through the “prism of literature” but must respond to the human need through action. Her experiences in Europe were defining moments that evolved toward a new life vision. While visiting the Cathedrals of Winchester, Jane had a vision which she wrote about in her travel journal. This vision depicted her “hope for a Cathedral of humanity. . .” which would be “capacious enough to house a fellowship of common purpose . . .” and which would be beautiful enough to persuade men to hold fast to the vision of human solidarity” (Addams, 1910; 2002 p. 110).

It was not until her second trip to Europe that she visited Toynbee Hall. Toynbee Hall offered relief and education to the poor, engagement across class lines and cultural experiences. Jane Addams began to form a new vision for Hull House in Chicago modeled after Toynbee Hall. This vision would be allowing her philosophical ideals to be lived out in action and deeds. The seven years of inner searching brought a vision for the future along with a conversion and baptism in the Presbyterian Church. Elshtain (2002; p. 72) describes Jane Addams “form of faith without mystery” and “in favor of social action . . . Perceiving Jesus of Nazareth as a forerunner of the founding fathers . . .”

Jane Addams opened the doors of Hull House in 1889. She lived with the poor immigrants at Hull House and served their daily needs. She brought culture, music, literature, and painting to the residents. She advocated in the city of Chicago for health concerns, workers rights, legal aid, labor reform juvenile justice, garbage collection, parks, and daycare facilities. She attended Women’s International League for Peace, declared herself a pacifist during World War I and received the Nobel Peace prize in 1931.

## **Irmgard Wessel**

Berger & Segall (2003) highlight the major impact that Irmgard Wessel has had on the field of Clinical Social Work through biographical and development reflections from childhood to clinician, educator and activist. Her biographical story relays the development of her life passion beginning in childhood and the living of that passion as an extraordinary clinical social worker. The author's state, "Irm's professional persona is that of a sensitive and talented clinician, dedicated educator and determined activist" (2003, p. 81). Irmgard is a white, Jewish mother and grandmother. She is a bicultural and bilingual immigrant and refugee. She was born in Kassel, Germany and immigrated to the U. S. during World War II. Her father's courageous wisdom and activism became a role model for her life passion and commitment to community. He was the vice president of a steel mill, board member of a Jewish orphanage, president of their synagogue, and liaison between Jewish families leaving Germany and seeking refuge in other countries. Her father was eventually arrested for helping families escape the oppression of the German Regime. The Wessel family home was destroyed. During this time, Irmgard was prohibited from attending school because she was Jewish. Arrangements were made for Irma to live with a foster family in England at the age of 13 to continue her education. She traveled alone to a country that was unknown to her and the language was foreign. She was welcomed with English tea and dry biscuits. Irmgard remembers thinking: "It hit me at that moment that there must be a better way to help kids who were used to hot cocoa and freshly baked hard rolls. I think this was the start of my becoming a social worker" (2003, P. 83). She attended school, helped the foster family with chores, and taught herself English. A year and half later she was reunited with her parents in New York. Her mother supported the family with her Jewelry making skills. The family eventually resettled in a Quaker Hostel, Scattergood, in Iowa. This Hostel was designed to help

European refugees adjust to the United States. Irma's first publication, at the age of 14, was titled "Fatherland to Brother land" and described her experience at the Hostel. She writes: "This Quaker hostel is a real example of cooperative life. Many 'American Friends' do their best to make us refugees as happy as possible. . . . I myself am very happy to pass this time in Scattergood. A good fortune brought me in early years to this country of freedom and I am grateful that after this way through the hostel I can try to do my best to become a good American" (2003, 4). The authors, Berger and Segall (2003), note that at this young age, Irma knew about acceptance and rejection as well as love and hatred. The family eventually resettled in Eureka, Illinois with the Disciple of Christ Community. The family accepted this new opportunity but remained true to their faith by explaining up front that they would not become Christian but would practice their Jewish faith. A deep faith brought this family through the terror of the Holocaust, the challenge to relocate in a new country, find a new profession and adjust to a new school. When she was a senior in High School, the family learned of Irma's grandmother's death. The telegram had indicated the death was due to cancer, but Irma believed that her grandmother was gassed in a concentration camp. "Irm declared the importance of facing the atrocities and stopping the denial of them" (2003, p. 85). As time passed Irma learned the importance of denial and that the past was too painful to be discussed. This became wisdom for her future career as clinical social worker. Irma attended Eureka College and Smith College School of Social Work. Her professional work as a Clinical Social Worker is dedicated to families who have lost a love one due to homicide, a holocaust for each of these families. She has dedicated 34 years to the Homicide, Robbery and Assault Program in New Haven, Connecticut. The authors state: "Her use of self in her clinical work is illustrated both by her transmission of and dedication to values endemic to social work, and the adaptive use of her

traumatic experiences in childhood” (2003, p. 87). She is dedicated to the relief of suffering and mediating oppression. Irmgard’s service and activism includes but is not limited to: term as president of Connecticut society for Clinical Social Work, education Chair for the Clinical Social Work federation, co-chair of the first National Clinical Social Work Conference, Liaison Committee of the American Board of Examiners trustee of the Central Labor Council, Vice President of the United Way representing Labor and she was elected into the National Academy of Practice as a Distinguished Practitioner

Irmgard’s life lessons include the internalization of the value of family life, a deep faith that was not shaken by the atrocities of the holocaust, appreciation of diverse populations, personal experience with rejection and acceptance, hatred and love and a passion to eliminate oppression and fight for justice. “Irmgard Wessel believes ‘it is a priority to know oneself’ and this is essential to finding one’s place in the clinical social work profession” (2003, P. 81). The authors, Berger and Segal conclude: “Her story also conveys her value that each social worker has a unique story of his or her own that influences their professional path. Each is a story to know and understand. She believes that each is the expression of self in one’s professional life” (2003, p. 90).

### **Immaculee Ilibagiza**

Immaculee grew up in a small town in Rwanda overlooking the beauty of Lake Kivu. She remembers views of snow capped mountains, rolling hills, and cedar forests and viewed her surroundings as “the land of eternal spring.” Immaculee’s parents were college educated teachers in their small village and were well respected. Immaculee and her three brothers were encouraged to go to college bound by her parents. They believed that education was the path to

escape poverty. Immaculee describes herself as protected from and naive about the “hat mongering politics” between the Hutus and Tutsis. Her first memory of disillusionment and loss of innocence was in a classroom setting where she was forced each morning to stand and identify herself as a member of the Tutsi tribe. By the 1980’s a political movement called “Hutu Power” oppressed the Tutsi Tribe. The Hutu tribe was the majority (85% of the nation population). The Tutsi and Hutu tribes shared a similar culture but exhibited some different physical features. Immaculee Ilibagiza was a young university student when the genocide holocaust began in Rwanda. In 1994, Immaculee had traveled home from college to spend Easter with her family. The beginning of the unrest that led to the holocaust of the Tutse’s began during her visit home. Immaculee’s parents sent her to their pastor’s home where she survived by hiding in a bathroom with seven other women. Immaculee had her father’s rosary which she prayed constantly during the 91 days in the pastor’s bathroom. She begged God to spare her from rape and murder. As she prayed, she realized her heart was filled with anger and hatred toward the Hutu tribe. From within she heard God telling her she must forgive her family’s killers. At that moment, she saw a vision of Jesus on the cross forgiving his persecutors. She was filled with peace.

Immaculee’s family and friends were brutally murdered in the war. Her father was shot to death by a Hutu officer who had been a family friend. Her mother was chopped to death by former family friends. Her Brother, Damasceme, was executed by a machete. It was a Hutu minister that led the gang that hacked him limb by limb. He prayed aloud for the men who were killing him. When the war ended, Immaculee came face to face with the man that had brutally murdered her family. She had remembered him as the father of her friend and a successful businessman. As he stood before her, she recognized him. Beneath his dirty clothing was an emaciated body and bare feet covered with sores. She wept and said “I forgive you. . . . Forgiveness is all I have to offer.”

Immaculee states: “We both needed the healing power of God’s forgiveness to move forward if our country was to survive and rise from the bitterness, blood, and suffering of the holocaust” (2008, p.13). To forgive this Hutu prisoner of war put Immaculee in a dangerous position. Many could not understand her forgiveness. However, there were others realized her mere survival and honest words others, particularly her pastor, at risk.

Her prayers were answered for her own safety; but not without great suffering and courage. Following the war, she spent many months seeking solitude to discern meaning from what seemed to be a meaningless situation. Immaculee believes that God graced her with safety and life during the genocide so she could tell others how God had touched her heart and taught her to forgive. The solitude brought her a vision of helping orphaned children of Rwanda. Immaculee states “These children are the ones who will build the new Rwanda. If we don’t invest in their future we won’t have a future” (2008, p. 145).

Her story is one of courage, endurance faith, answered prayer, forgiveness that lead to activism for the orphaned children in Rwanda. Immaculee immigrated to the United States. She established the Libagiza foundation to help the children of Rwanda heal from the genocide. Volunteers from all over the world help the orphaned children in Rwanda to heal. Immaculee’s commitment to overcoming the divisions created by the Hutu’s toward the Tutsis brings hope to the orphaned children of Rwanda and forgiveness to those who led the genocide. Her selfless vision is toward a united nation.

## **Dorothy Day**

Robert Coles (1987) first met Dorothy Day when he volunteered in the Catholic Worker Movement while in medical school in the 1950’s. A friendship developed that lasted decades and

resulted in Coles studying the history of the Catholic Worker Movement. Later he compiled the notes and tape recordings of conversations with Dorothy into a book on the themes that mattered most to her regarding “How should we try to live this life.” His volume along with Day’s (1952) autobiography document her early life experiences that led to passion, mission, vision and activism.

Dorothy Day was born in 1897 in Brooklyn. Her family moved to California and later Chicago. Her father was a journalist. Dorothy voraciously read classical literature. It was Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* that gave her insight into her future vocation. This novel exposed the meat packing industry and the slum poverty of Chicago. When she walked the streets of the slaughterhouse section of Chicago, she felt like her life was linked in some way to this profound experience (Nies, 2002). During her first year at the University, she joined the Socialist party. After leaving college she moved to New York and worked as a reporter for *The Call*, a Socialist newspaper. In her early twenties she was active in Greenwich Village where she met many of the leading radicals of the time. She was also drawn to labor organizations and ideals of changing the country. In 1917 she went to jail for the first time with sixty other women after she marched with the suffragettes in Washington D. C. The National Woman’s party, a militant feminist organization, picketed President Wilson at the White House. The charge was obstructing sidewalk traffic. Dorothy was overwhelmed by the brutal treatment she experienced during 30 days in jail. The women were beaten, kicked, flung into a cell and brutally force fed after beginning a hunger strike (Nies, 2002). After being released from jail she returned to New York and worked as a reporter for the *Liberator*, a radical magazine. Her life became aimless. She became involved in an unhappy love affair, became pregnant, had an abortion, married another person on the rebound and spent a year in Europe studying. When the couple returned to the

States, they permanently separated. Day moved to Chicago and became involved with the 'International Workers of the World.' She was jailed again as the result of a "red raid" and charged as "dangerous." Day shared a cell with prostitutes and the poor. The experience of degradation by the jailers had a strong impact on her changing view of the world. Cole (1987, p. 5) writes about Dorothy's naiveté and her friendship with a prostitute in prison: "I can still hear Mary-Ann giving me my lessons in survival – how to get along with the people running the prison," she once told me. Then she spelled out Mary-Ann's teaching – a mix of ethical exhortation and practicality: 'You must hold up your head high, and give them no clue that you're afraid of them or ready to beg them for anything, any favors whatsoever. But you must see them for what they are – never forget that they're in jail, too.'" Day began reading the Bible daily, particularly the Psalms. After her release from jail, she continued her journalistic work and investigated the way the courts treated juveniles and prostitutes. Cole describes Day's work as a reporter in New Orleans for the *Item* and her continued interest in exploited women. He states she saw exploited women "as judges of the rest of us, rather than as morally flawed or suspect" Cole, 1987, p. 6). Dorothy Day moved to a cottage on Staten Island to pursue her literary ability by the water. At the age of 72 she told Coles (1987, p. 7) "If you want to think of me in my twenties, think of someone drifting – I won't deny it – but drifting on water. I hadn't asked whose water until I was in my late twenties, not seriously." Day also referred to "Bread and water – what Christ knew we all need."

By 1925, Dorothy Day was in love with Forster Batterham, a biologist, anarchist, and atheist. The couple was part of New York's radical literary world and lived happily in Stanton Island in a common law marriage. Forster was opposed to formal religion and to formal marriage. The birth of their child Tamar became a turning point and marked a crisis for Dorothy. "The entry of a new

life into the world made her (Dorothy) acutely aware of the finite limits of her own. She began to feel that it was too frightening to take responsibility for a child in a godless world” (Nies, 2002, p191). Dorothy began reading philosophical and religious books by Tolstoy, William James’s, Thomas a Kempis, St. Augustine and Dostoevsky. The new awareness along with happiness within the common law marriage brought conflict for Dorothy. She told Robert Coles (1987): “When I have felt joy and fulfillment in this world I have always wanted to say thank you. . . . I remember when I was a child, and I’d wish something would happen, and it did, I would try to find a minute to whisper thank you. . . . I was thanking the God of fate and chance, I suppose, the way children do. . . I felt thankful when I met Forster and fell in love with him, and he fell in love with me. . . . he had no sense of there being anyone to thank. That was the point of our eventual disagreement.” Coles recounts that it was the shared love and commitment with Forster that lifted her out of aimlessness; but the spiritual knowledge and passion that gradually became stronger and shifted religion as the central focus of life. The conflict became so great that Dorothy would wake at night with a great weight on her chest and could not breathe. Doctors told her it was nerves. Dorothy converted to Catholicism, had Tamar baptized and left Forster.

In 1932 Dorothy Day participated in a hunger march of the unemployed in Washington D. C. In Washington she visited the National Shrine. The visit was on the day of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. She prayed for a path in her life to work with the poor and oppressed. When she returned to New York City she met Peter Maurin. He had a vision and a plan for the poor and oppressed. In this meeting and several that followed she realized her prayer had been answered. Peter and Dorothy launched the Catholic Worker News Paper in 1933. Millions were unemployed, hungry, hopeless, and homeless during the Great Depression. Dorothy Day saw the Great Depression as a spiritual crises; each person represented the image of Christ. A soup

kitchen and shelter for the homeless known as Houses of Hospitality began their “works of Mercy.” “What you did for the least of my brothers this you did to me.” Absolute pacifism and communal living were part of this movement. Spiritual values and political activism were combined in this movement dedicated to a Christian Communism view point. The movement’s primary belief is that loving God must be transformed into action reflecting the love of others. The movement is about helping the poor and protesting the states infringement on individual liberty. Dorothy Day’s courage, dedication and moral outrage of social injustice lives on. The Catholic Workers Movement continues today. And her life never stopped emulating Jesus’ earthly ministry.

Dorothy Day’s diaries reflect a reunited friendship in 1959 with her former common law husband Forster Batterham (Ellsherg, 2008). His long-time companion, Nanettle, was dying of cancer. Nanettle ask Dorothy for help. Dorothy went to the couple’s home daily to provide household chores, companionship, prayer and her presence. Nanette asked to be baptized the day before her death. This was an ironic repetition of Dorothy’s conversion and last days with Forster in 1927.

### **Gianna Beretta Molla**

Giuliana Pelucchi (1994) documented the life of Gianna Beretta Molla. Ginna was born in Magenta Milan in 1922. She was the tenth of thirteen children. Four of her siblings died at the time of the Spanish Influenza epidemic. Another sibling had the beginning stages of tuberculosis. Her parents died before she was twenty. These early losses affected Gianna’s faith as well as her dedication to life. In her teen years she attended a retreat and began a journal documenting her prayers. Her prayers would begin: “Jesus, I promise to submit to everything that you will allow

to happen to me. Only help me to know your will” (1994, p. 30). In these early years she was beginning to form ideals that she would live throughout her life. Gianna became involved in Catholic Action in 1944. She was a delegate of the Benjamin Girls, delegate of the Aspirants and president of Young Women. Later she instituted the “Cenacle of the Aspirants” within Catholic Action. This group of girls was committed to being true apostles. The weekly meetings were organized around prayer, grace and the Eucharist. Gianna viewed work as prayer if one’s actions were to serve God’s glory. This ideal was later lived out in her career.

Gianna studied medicine in Milan and received a diploma in 1949. She viewed the field of medicine as a mission. She opened a medical clinic in Mesero in 1950 and specialized in pediatrics. She was dedicated in her practice to mothers, babies, the elderly and poor. Gianna viewed each child as God’s blessing – a priceless gift. Gianna had an active spiritual life of prayer and was dedicated to helping the poor and oppressed through the St. Vincent de Paul Society. In her personal journal she wrote: “Physicians have opportunities that a priest does not have, for our mission does not end when medicine is no longer of help. There still remains the soul that must be brought to God. Jesus says, ‘Whoever visits the sick is helping me.’ This is a priestly mission! Just as the priest can touch Jesus, so we doctors touch Jesus in the bodies of our patients: in the poor, the young, the old, children . . . May Jesus reveal himself through us; may he find many physicians who willingly offer themselves to him”(1994, p. 45-46).

Gianna had a love of the outdoors and was an avid downhill skier and mountain climber. She played the piano and enjoyed the opera. Gianna became engaged to Pietro Molla and married in 1955. She was the mother of four children. In 1961 her fourth pregnancy was complicated by a fibroma in her uterus. Doctors gave her three choices: abortion (which would save her life and allow her to continue to have children); hysterectomy (which would save her life but take the

unborn child's life); or surgery to remove the fibroma (which would put her life at risk but had the potential to save her child). Gianna requested of the surgeon to save the life of her child. "If you must decide between me and the child, do not hesitate: choose the child; I insist on it" Her medical knowledge gave her clear insight into the potential of harm to herself. She entrusted her own life to the power of prayer and Divine Providence. Catholic teaching would have allowed medical procedures to save the life of the mother. Her daughter Gianna Eanuela was born on Good Friday, April 21, 1962. Seven days later Gianna Beretta died of septic peritonitis. She was thirty-nine years old. Gianna Emanuela, became a doctor in her mother's footsteps. She speaks of her mother as an "exemplary life in the name of a love without measure. She is always with me . . . I shall never be alone" (1994, p. 126). In 2004 the Catholic Church proclaimed Gianna Beretta Molla a Saint.

### **Waris Dirie**

The story of Waris Dirie, also known as Desert Flower, is documented by Dirie and Miller (1997). The name Waris in Somalia means desert flower. Few living things can survive in the Somalia desert. The brilliant yellow-orange blooms of the desert flower are a miracle. Waris, a beautiful young woman, is also a miracle.

Waris grew up in the nomadic culture in the desert of Somalia. The family raised cattle, sheep and goats. Camels were the source of daily milk. The family home was a domed hut woven from grass. The hut provided shelter from the sun. The family slept outside under the stars. The family was a tribe of herdsman and would move every four to five weeks in search of food for the animals. Waris Dirie learned the beauty and freedom of nature especially the wild animals including giraffes, zebras, and lions. She also experienced the oppression of the Somalia

traditions. Tradition included female genital mutilation and arranged marriage. Waris Dirie describes that many believed that female genital mutilation was a holy practice demanded by the Koran, but also explains that nowhere in the Koran is there mention of this ritual. At the age of five, the gypsy woman arrived in Waris nomadic culture, to perform the ritual cutting and circumcision. Waris remembers praying to God to let it be over quickly. Many girls die from this ritual due to fever and infection. By the age of thirteen Waris Dirie's father had arranged for her marriage to an elderly man in exchange for five camels. Waris ran away in the middle of the night. She ran like a 'gazelle' for hours in red sand fearful that she would be captured when her father realized she had left. She ran through the night and the next day until the sun set. She was starving and her feet were bleeding as she fell asleep under a tree. Upon awakening she was face to face with a lion. Exhausted, thirsty, hungry and too weak to run she believed she would be eaten by the lion. "When I realized he was not going to kill me, I gave no sigh of relief, because I hadn't been afraid. I'd been ready to die. But evidently God, who was always been my best friend, had something else planned, some reason to keep me alive. I said, 'What is it? Take me – direct me,' and struggled to my feet" (1997, p. 2). Waris found her way to Mogadishu where she first lived with a sister who had also run away, then with an Aunt. She later went to London with her Uncle Mohammed, an ambassador, to work in his home as a 'Maid' and to care for the families children. Waris later became employed in modeling and eventually moved to the United States. In 1997 she was invited by the United Nations Population Fund to be an ambassador to Africa to speak against Female genital mutilation. "Working as a UN ambassador is the fulfillment of a dream so outrageous that I never dared dream it. Although I always felt I was different from my family and fellow nomads when I was growing up, I could have never foreseen a future for myself as an ambassador working for an organization that takes on solving

the problems of the world. . . . But my faith tells me to be strong, that God led me down this path for a reason. He has work for me to do. This is my mission” (1997, p. 220). Waris is a courageous, faith filled woman serving as a leader to end oppression against the women of Somalia.

## **Conclusion**

Each of these women of leadership have transcended suffering, created a new vision and lived by principals or values that were formed in their life experience. Their presences, courage, endurance inspires and motivates others to higher principals and values. The values surround service, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, unconditional love, prayer, faith and answered prayer. None of these women gave up on their dream or vision. Difficult circumstances created a new way of living and presence in the world for each woman. This new way challenged each woman to reconsider questions her life was asking. Women of leadership can challenge and guide social work activism today. Wisdom from these stories includes self reflection, solitude, understanding one’s own story, finding direction and meaning in the story that leads to service. Each woman had a vision grounded in principles necessary for leadership that led to one’s own and others transformation.

Questions for today’s social worker’s: 1) Do we have the courage and activism of Jane Addams to reduce the distance between social classes? Do we have a vision to be an activist for people of different cultures or religions? 2) Do we have the courage and belief to stand up for our own values, beliefs and be an activist to eliminate oppression as Irmgard Wessel and her family modeled? 3) Do we have the courage, faith, belief to forgive those who have committed atrocities’ and work toward a united nation as Immaculee models? 4) Do we have the radical

vision of Dorothy Day to balance “radicalism and tradition; action and contemplation; and transcendence and everyday life?” 5) Do we live our mission for the empowerment and life of others like Gianna Beretta Molla? 6) Do we speak out against crime and advocate against oppression even when it is part of tradition as Waris Dirie models?

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### Author Biography

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