

Look for Me in the Whirlwind: A New Perspective on the Leadership of Joycelyn Elders in Medicine and Healthcare

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Author Note

This article was originally prepared for the author's doctoral program. The contents of this manuscript do not reflect the policy or opinions of the author's university or the agencies which the author serves. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

Abstract

This article explores former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders' decision to use nominally colloquial metaphors, imagery, and language to frame the discourse in public health, policy and the political context in which she worked. It also considers the impact of effective stakeholder analysis and engagement in terms of the dichotomy of results she experienced in Arkansas versus at the federal level. The decision to continue to leverage colloquial metaphor and imagery when engaging in public discourse on healthcare policy had manageable consequences up until Elders ignored the value of stakeholder analysis and mitigation planning, at the national level. Neglecting to appreciate the importance of building relationships with Donna Shalala (HHS), Leon Panetta (President Clinton's Chief of Staff), and others loomed critically over her potential for success on the national stage. It also indicates a diminished appreciation for the opposition's power to create constant and intense pressure. A useful paradigm from which to view leadership is complexity theory. Complexity theory represents anything but an elementary reduction of environmental, human and other factors impacting leadership outcomes generally and specifically in this case. The article considers the idea that more effective stakeholder engagement impacted the dynamics around Dr. Elders' tenure as Surgeon General. In some way this dynamic helped to facilitate the cultural pathologies of race and gender to overcome the inertia of her support, which was mitigating resignation from the Clinton Administration. This blip on the radar screen of her contributions and career represents just that, a blip. She remains a powerful illustration of African-American leadership. She is a strong and principled leader in the model of Nzinga of Angola, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Haller Jones (Elders' mother).

Keywords: medicine, politics, gender, race, public policy, leadership

General Introduction

Joycelyn Elders, the 15th Surgeon General of the United States, the second woman to hold the post, and the first African American, was appointed to the post by President William Jefferson Clinton in January 1993. She was described as “forthright” and “plain spoken” by Senator Dave Durenberger during the confirmation hearing (United States, 1993, p. 53). Elders represents a dynamic example of competence empowered by passion and fueled by lived experience. Her authenticity emanates from her lived experience and gives her moral authority. It fortifies her professional gravitas and leadership vision. Her impermanent tenure of 479 days is a record for any Surgeon General. Her tenure, marked by rancor and controversy, represents the volatility often linked to the interplay of science, politics and religion.



Admiral Joycelyn Elders

Elders took on a range of controversial, albeit salient and relevant, public health care policy issues. For example, she debated and discussed policy issues related to government dispersal of condoms to mitigate AIDS and teen pregnancy, advocacy for sex education in public schools, gun violence and gun control. The discourse she engaged in, at times decidedly colloquial rather than technical, drew rhetorical fire. This article explores Elders’ decision to use nominally colloquial metaphors, imagery, and language to frame the discourse in public health, policy and the political context in which she worked. It also considers the impact of effective stakeholder engagement in terms of the dichotomy of results experienced in Arkansas as opposed to the federal level. Leadership dynamics are a human endeavor and are multivariant and complex. The Elders’ case can be viewed from a variety of interpretive lenses, here the main consideration examines the potential a more effective stakeholder engagement process might have contributed to her experience as Surgeon General.

According to her autobiography, she first engaged in this kind of discourse at a press conference subsequent to the governors’ association meeting (a conference on at risk youth) in 1987, during her tenure as Arkansas’s Director of Public Health. Elders (1996) describes her initial foray into this kind of discourse.

Then somebody asked me what the health department was going to do for youth, and I said, “We’re going to reduce teen pregnancy.” When they heard that, some of the reporters perked up. “Dr. Elders,” one asked, “how are you going to do that?” “Well,” I said, we’re going to have comprehensive health education and school-based clinics.” Now they were all wide-awake. Somebody said, “School-based clinics? Does that mean you’re going to distribute condoms in schools?” I said, “Yes, it does. We aren’t going to put them on lunch trays. But yes, we intend to distribute condoms.” (p.433)

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Elders (1996) continues to describe the punctum that would characterize her engagement style in the public domain going forward:

That was an important press conference for me. In some ways it set the tone for the rest of my public career. Almost right off the people of Arkansas started hearing from conservative religious groups that if I wasn't stopped, their sons and daughters were going to be served condoms on their school lunch trays right along with their lunches. (p.434)

Based on her autobiography, from her early high school and college experience one does not get a sense of the genesis of her later posture. She possessed a strong sense of confidence and determination to have a higher socioeconomic outcome than she experienced growing up. Moreover, she aspired to a more empowered gender role than her mother, grandmother, and other women she encountered. She resonated with her paternal grandmother Minnie Jones. Elders (1996) describes her grandmother and Elders' motivation for the name change - her name in college from Minnie Lee to Minnie Joycelyn.

It wasn't until college that I changed my name from Minnie Lee to Minnie Joycelyn, then just Joycelyn, which I took from a peppermint candy I was fond of. Mainly I wanted to be my own person. Before that I was Minnie or little Min (my grandmother being Big Min), or Mint which is what my father called me. (p. 63)

As she describes the character of her grandmother, one gets a sense of the alignment with a later characterization, namely "forthright" and "plain spoken." Additionally, one can see the inclination to migrate from the life she grew up with for what she considered better.

Minnie Jones was a character, a slim beautiful, feisty woman, always upbeat, always positive, which is probably one of the reasons she and Mama got on so well.... Unlike mama, though, grandma Minnie never spent much time working in the field. She didn't like field work at all and went to great lengths to avoid it. (Elders, 1996, p. 63)

Elders' tenure as Director of the Arkansas Department of Public Health constitutes the genesis for her pointed engagement style around controversial issues related to public health policy, that style emerged in full force during her tenure as Surgeon General. The success she garnered in terms of medical outcomes and medical research substantially positioned her for the role as the nation's top doctor.

The hard lesson learned in the Elders case, the disciplined application and value of strategic planning, applies pervasively in the context of complex organizations and networks. Hickman (2010) provides a perspective on this aspect of leadership. Strategic planning and strategic leadership comprise a pivotal element of competence, particularly in complex organizations. Strategic planning improves the efficacy of an organization and while commercial enterprises leverage it for competitive advantage, nonprofit and governmental bodies leverage the skill for, "intentional direction to the organizations and adapt to external changes that affect their services and stakeholders (p. 83)." Hickman (2010) also outlines eight elements to consider in the context of strategic planning. Of the eight, stakeholder analysis is critical in the Elders case. Stakeholder analysis as outlined by Hickman (2010) encompasses the following perspective.

Stakeholder analysis-an assessment of the expectations, wants, and needs of all parties that have an interest or stake in the organization, including leaders, team members, managers, employees, customers/clients, recipients of services, and investors/shareholders, among others. (p. 84)

By her own admission, Elders did not pay attention to this element of strategic leadership and planning in her role as Surgeon General. Perhaps she believed in the putative support of the president. However, the dynamics at the state level were far less complicated than those at the national level. This phenomenon, particularly true in terms of the magnitude and density of stakeholders, had stark consequences for incompetence.

Grounding

Elders grew up in a rural community in Schaal, Arkansas. This grounding provides a foundational and empathetic backdrop for her public life. Elders embraced her family and hard work. She was born in 1933 to a rugged but loving and supportive family. She was the eldest of eight siblings. Her childhood days were filled with cotton field work, housework, babysitting, and school. Elders' mother stressed education and from her own account this presented a constant focus in the household.

Horizons broadened after the family spent some time in California, her parents obtaining manufacturing jobs near Oakland, California. During this time Elders was exposed to higher career aspirations beyond "being a store clerk", which was an early goal when she was in Schaal (Elders, 1996, p.33). This loomed critically because while attending school in California, Elders clearly expressed her interest in science, a perspective she might not have gotten until much later, conditions in her hometown being what they were. As she writes:

The first thing I noticed about my classes was that I could compete with the white kids. The second was that what made the school in Richmond different wasn't just that most of the kids were white or that there were lots more of them than I was used to. It was that many of these kids had aspirations. Some of them were sure they were going to college.... For the first time it occurred to me that there might really be something in life other than being a field hand or a maid. I liked chemistry; I liked being in the laboratory. Maybe I could become something like a laboratory technician. (Elders, 1996, p. 84)

Elders exhibited a consistent sense of confidence throughout her younger years. In the example above, her notion of competing with white kids on a level basis imbued Elders with a sense of confidence. However, she also reflected upon the efforts of her teachers in Arkansas to instill confidence rooted in examples from her community. She certainly recognized the power of examples from her own cultural heritage. She articulates this as she reflects on the teachers she had in Arkansas.

Those teachers of ours may not have had as much math or science as some others, but they instilled in us the value of being a decent human being and the value of education. They also taught us all the way along how to make it in the white world outside Howard County.... Negro history was part of that same lesson. Everybody in school study that.

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We talked about George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington. We read Carter Woodson,... [sic] Who said that if you control a man's mind, you control his actions,... But now is the time to control our own minds for ourselves. (Elders, 1996, p. 101)

Several pillars define the basis for Elders to stand in the whirlwind. The first, that she garnered tremendous security from a supportive family structure and extended family. It provided examples and a context for what to do and emulate and what not to do. Her paternal grandmother was "feisty" and resisted the economic mechanism of the day, fieldwork. Her mother and others constantly pressed for excellence in education and a view beyond sharecropping. The family exhibited mobility, a willingness to move nearly 2000 miles to embrace an opportunity for economic gain. This demonstrated to her that the world possessed dimensions bigger than Schaal, Arkansas. Her father provided strong support of her as a child and while he appeared somewhat agnostic about college, he did not block the progress.

Secondly, her educational experience fortified her confidence. In California, she experienced nominally competitive parity with her white peers. This experience in the 1940s cannot be underemphasized. Further, her view of career possibilities was informed and she absorbed the positive aspirations of her peers in a more personal way. She also got buoyancy from grounding in her own cultural heritage.

Lastly, the experiences fueled her desire to craft a different life than that experienced by the women in her life. This theme appears numerous times throughout the autobiography.

What I did know was that I had no interest in being like any of the women I knew. None of them struck me as someone I wanted to emulate. Looking at my mother and grandmother, I certainly didn't want to be like them. Later on I was able to see their lives as farm women and mothers for the successes they were. There's no question that all the children in our family were secure and all of us felt loved. (Elders, 1996, p. 103)

All these pillars gave solid ground for Elders to withstand the whirlwind. Time and again, Elders refers to these pillars, beyond the love and support of family, she articulates and demonstrates a pervasive spiritual faith. Flowing from the example Haller (her mother) demonstrated, this gave Elders buoyancy in stormy seas. She suffered her share of personal loss. She lost a brother and sister to murder and a traffic accident, respectively. Her son, Kevin, had unfortunate interactions with drugs and prison. Through these personal crises and the public ones, her faith provided a source of comfort and stability.

Context

Dowd (2008), Irving (2000), and Morone (2004) highlight the idea that the combination of science, politics, and religion has been and continues to be a turbulent dynamic in American civic life. These fields touched nearly every aspect of life, environment, healthcare, economics, education and so on. The schism between the wholly scientific community and the holy religious community manifests itself in political engagements rich with tension, passion, hyperbole, and rancor. This is clearly the case for Dr. Joycelyn Elders. Her engagement in the arena of competition among these domains is not novel. Importantly for this case, the trilateral domain of science, religion and politics and its attendant volatility outlines the context in which

Elders and other public scientist matriculate. No domain exhibits pristine dynamics and each conspired with the other for dubious and nefarious ends.

The moving and shifting balance between science, politics, and religion constitutes a backdrop for both the success and political demise of Elders. Elders reflected on this shifting balance numerous times in her autobiography. She seemed clear about the players, the conservative politicians, the Christian right, and the implications of doing battle. Yet at times she expressed a sense of wonderment at the responses she got. The purveyors and leaders in each domain pull cultural levers to move the argument about this or that, in a range of directions. Specifically, in the case of healthcare policy, the volatile balance between individual liberty and choice is informed or not, by educational and religious doctrinal perspectives. Hyperbole by all, as well as dubious machinations, tends to cloud and obscure valid progress.

Elders experienced a powerful dichotomy between her experience in Arkansas and the federal government. The criticality of a competent, loyal and tenured staffer in the person of Tom Butler, among others, provided three support structures she did not experience as Surgeon General. Mr. Butler was a seasoned professional that knew the landscape in Arkansas politics and ran interference on behalf of his boss. He and others had the benefit of time and engagement over which period trust was engendered. As a result, sage advice and council flowed in both directions between Elders and her staffers. Lastly, Mr. Butler maintained a working relationship with a powerful web of stakeholders, state senators and representatives, which facilitated the realization of more controversial aspects of Elders' vision for the department. In the ensuing quote, Elders provides a recognition of the talent she had supporting her efforts in Arkansas.

By now I had decided I was going to keep Tom Butler, which I hadn't been sure of before. I knew Tom has a reputation for competence and absolute loyalty, but I also knew we was used to running the show. Louise Dennis, who ran the delta, was a well-bred white woman who came from a wealthy, political family. She had been a public health worker for thirty years plus. Public health was in her bones. (Elders, 1996, p. 402-408)

At the federal level, she did not have the benefit of tenure or relationship with staff. In this sense, she may have under appreciated the criticality of building these supportive stakeholder webs prior to wading in to troubled waters.

Another important stakeholder constituency was the religious community, her brother Chester, a Methodist pastor facilitated a link to the Ministerial Alliance. Chester was instrumental in securing offensive minded support for health care justice in Arkansas to meet and in some ways mitigate her more conservative adversaries. She wrote the following about her brother's advocacy.

When I recognized how important it was to take my message to the churches, Chester was the key person. Without an audience you are sure not to make a difference [again, here is a clear articulation for an appreciation for stakeholder engagement in the context of building alliances to mitigate opposition] Chester's superior Bishop Wilke, was very supportive. Methodists had always been on the right side of contraception... Chester also set me up with the black Ministerial Alliance and the white Religious Forum groups of churches. ...I didn't know exactly what it meant, that they were going to support me... a couple of months later when the legislative session opened up, a lot of those men put their collars on

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and came up to the State Capital to shake hands with their legislators and twist arms. Black ministers and white. (Elder, 1996, p. 446-448)

Stakeholder engagement and the importance of webbed networks outlined a fundamental part of her leadership efforts in Arkansas. She demonstrated an appreciation for keeping her direct sponsor apprised of thorny situations ahead of time and experienced full-throated support from then Governor Clinton.

Dowd (2008) puts a fine point on the dilemmas faced by public scientist, when he outlines the power of the theologian and philosopher to frame descriptive analysis and research in terms of good and evil. Further he credits the theologians and philosophers with the ability to command the linguistic mechanisms with a confidence far exceeding that of the nominal, if not stereotypical scientist. This lack of talent on the part of the scientist tends to result in a lower potential to secure "cultural authority." Dowd presents the following perspective:

As in the case of the first two types of questions [descriptive questions, observations, the scientific realm or normative questions, moral or behavior ideas, the philosophical/theological realms], there are people who have devoted their lives to the study of "normative" questions. These philosophers and theologians are familiar and comfortable with the detailed, scholarly treatments of concepts like right and wrong, moral and immoral, and good and evil. They know the history of those concepts; the various theories regarding them; and, if they are historians of events as well as ideas, they know the real world consequences that have resulted from labeling as good those actions that were evil, and vice versa. (p. 249)

This is the environment Elders found herself in as she entered the public arena in Arkansas. Like an insect in a spider web, she found herself caught in this dynamic - the reduced "cultural authority" a role played by scientists in service to political and moral authority.

Irving (2000) clearly identified the fault lines and dangers laden in the discourse. Irvine positioned Elders in the center of the world when she discussed the dynamics of sex education and discourse in America. She leveraged the resignation of Elders as a case in point for touching the third rail. Irvine (2000) characterized the discourse as follows.

Public debate over sex education (sex talk about how to talk about sex) have become more visible, and far more volatile, than the actual classroom pedagogical practices. Hundreds of American communities have suffered acrimonious battles over what to teach in the schools about sexuality community meetings have erupted in shouting matches and even physical violence.... Like implacable Hollywood screen monitors, these are the conflicts that won't die. They are the sort of recursive, unyielding civic arguments partly known as culture wars. (p. 59)

Fundamentally, Elders underestimated the power of descriptive analysis (the *logos*) to prevail in the court of public debate, even delivered with the passion she could command, juxtaposed to the normative ethos wielded by her conservative, theologically rooted opponents. It was no match. Irvine (2000) described the intensity and dexterity of the conservative religious right to marshal the public and their elected representatives against any effort by the likes of Elders. Elders' colloquial imagery was no match for the normative power arrayed against her.

In Arkansas, Elders' situation is fortified by key elements of change management articulated by Kotter (2006)-to be reviewed in greater depth in the implication section.

Dancing With The Bear

Elders (1996) used the phrase "dancing with the bear," to describe the political machinations required to navigate healthcare public policy. The term was also used by her brother, Chester Jones, a Methodist minister and confidant of his older sister to illustrate the dilemma she faced. The heart of the question for this article revolves around Dr. Elders' decision to use sharp colloquial rhetoric to engage in the public discourse vis-à-vis public healthcare policy. The controversies in which she found herself embroiled were anything but new. As noted previously, Elders represented the quintessential case, a familiar way of for a scientist, using descriptive analysis in a political and decidedly normative context.

Elders did not take Falstaff's advice, "the better part of valor is discretion, in which better part I have saved my life." Ultimately Elders did not save her political life as Surgeon General. Based on her testimony, in her autobiography, she respected her political opponents yet still appeared naïve to the ultimate pressure that could be brought to bear. She consciously articulated the racial and gender based firestorm surrounding Lani Guinier, Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill. Elders (1996) at least twice, describes deeply racist commentary she experienced during her residency and during her tenure as a medical researcher. Both incidences describe professors making inappropriate comments using the N-word. She handled these incidents with tact and forthrightness. She, in fact, applied Falstaff's insight with brilliant effect, building a robust medical research career. The following example represents a typical approach she employed in both cases.

It was the rare incident that got through my crust. But it's true that some did. One of those happen later that year at the med school. A group of us were talking with some doctors about an experiment that had not turned out the way it was supposed to. No one was sure what had gone wrong, but it was clear that something must have. "Well," one of the doctors said, shaking his head, "you just know there's got to be a n[****]r in the woodpile somewhere." I looked up and stared directly at him. I didn't say a word, just stared. The room was dead silent. And somehow right in the middle of it I felt that I needed to save this person. "Well," I said, "I guess we have to keep digging until we find the results." (p.164)

Further, in her leadership style, one can see strong elements of transformative and transformational leadership constructs. She exhibited the basic traits articulated by Bass as framed by Hickman (2010). Transformational leadership incorporates three elements: a) building enthusiasm for a common set of goals and objectives, b) challenging the team to be creative problem solvers, and c) developing people to enhance innate leadership capabilities (p. 77). Her compassion and empathy for people effused from her background and her competency undergirded her credibility. Lastly, her gravitas came from positional power and competence. Whether in the role of chief resident, professor and medical researcher, or Director of the Arkansas Department of Health, she acted with authority. Moreover, the work of Adrienne Smith proves insightful regarding women in position of municipal authority. While Elders never held the office of mayor, she held public office and some parallels appear. Smith (2014) argued the following point in regard to power generally but specifically speaks to women in power. She framed the point as follows.

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It argues that when women obtain leadership positions in municipal government and when the positions they hold have greater power relative to other municipal positions, cities will be more likely to produce policy outputs that are often associated with women's interest and needs. (p.313)

Elders leveraged her positional power to impact public health care policy in Arkansas with great effect. At the federal level, the relative ability to exercise positional power, diminished dramatically.

Three things fuel Elders' use of controversial colloquial metaphors and imagery when engaging in public discourse relative to public policy issues. First, Elders possessed a sense of connection and passion that stemmed from her childhood experience and her work in endocrinology. She connected many of her experiences both in her medical research and her leadership of the department of health, with clear experiences in her childhood. An example of this phenomenon occurred during a surgery on a child patient whose injury was similar to one of her siblings. Here she recalls:

The patient was a five-or six-year-old boy with a ruptured appendix. I had seen him up on the pediatric ward when they first brought him in, sick as a dog, with his stomach swollen and hard. The instant I saw him I thought of Bernard, that this was exactly what he had had. I remembered my father's voice when he brought Bernard back on the mule that night and told us, "the doctor said his appendix burst." (Elders, 1996, p. 178)

An important link to the posture she took on sex education happened when she conducted endocrinological research. When dealing with the idea that she evolved into the state expert in the field, she recalled her naïveté in regard to human sexuality as a child. She articulates this perspective reflecting on being left as the sole researcher at the facility:

Given my nearly complete ignorance about sex when I was growing up, I still wonder sometimes exactly how it was that I became the Arkansas state expert on child sexual development. (Elders, 1996, p. 261)

Lastly, in terms of empathy for people in poor socioeconomic demographic categories, regardless of race, gender, or other classifications, her direct report at the Department of Health, Tom Butler noted when speaking of Dr. Elders, "At least we don't have to teach you how to be poor (Elders, 1996, p. 431)." This sensitivity served Elders well in engagements with the Arkansas legislators and other constituents in the state. In fact, Elders (1996) highlighted the following self-reflection.

The only person in the world who can say this or do this [advocate for sex education among poor girls in Arkansas] is an educated black female.... I've got all the tools necessary to take this on. This must be God's mission for me. (p. 431)

The second factor impacting her use of colloquial metaphor revolves around her deep descriptive scientific research both patient focused and health outcome focused, as a function of demographics. Early on, the funding she got from National Institutes of Health grants, fully integrated her research with public health care concerns. She reflected as follows on the implications of her early research as it relates to the connection with public health care.

Though it didn't particularly occur to me at the time, all those years of working with diabetes and other endocrine diseases were teaching me a set of lessons about health in general.... But looking back now, I can see that the work I was doing taught me a paradigm for healthcare that got itself ingrained in my thinking long before Bill Clinton hijacked me out of the University. (Elders, 1996, p.319)

In a range of public dialogues, during the Congressional hearings, in interviews, and in speeches, you see Elder's rhetorical style flowing from logos to pathos in an effort to connect facts to emotional force. The classic scientific effort to connect facts and figures to wield "cultural authority," characterizes Elders' efforts. Her objective was to move the needle in terms of the critical health care crisis in the country and effect this by both descriptive analysis and normative political discourse. This represents the essence of "dancing with the bear."

In several interviews, Elders demonstrates a routine. Initially or early in the interview (e.g. Marwick (1993), Frankel (1994)) she put questions in the context of a response to a controversial comment. Elders responded - nominally by confirming the statement - by clarifying the discourse, then grounding the basis for her response in data (qualitative or quantitative). This can be seen as a defensive posture that manifested itself during the congressional hearings. The congressional hearings were the crescendo of the prior interviews. From the very beginning, Senator Kennedy, bombarded with a range of technical and procedural maneuvers, skillfully pushed Elders' confirmation process to a successful conclusion. Excerpts from Senator Kennedy's opening comments give a flavor for the last-minute machinations orchestrated by her political opponents.

I have been notified by the majority leader just a few moments ago that there is an objection to this committee meeting beyond the hour of 10. That has been filed. Under the Senate rules, for those who are not familiar with them, there is the opportunity for any single member of the Senate to object to a committee meeting that has been in session for two hours, and we will have been in session for two hours by 10 this morning. That objection has been filed, so until the Senate recesses we will not have an opportunity after 10 to permit Dr. Elders to respond to many of the allegations, charges, distortions, misrepresentations and character assassinations that have been directed at her.... For the purposes of the members of this committee, I want to indicate that whenever the Senate adjourned Sunday-whenver it is-this committee is going to be back in session, and we are going to stay here all afternoon, we will stay here during the evening, and will come back tomorrow if necessary and stay as long as necessary on Saturday. (United States, 1993, p.1)

This is the kind of staunch political cover and backing she enjoyed in Arkansas when Bill Clinton was governor.

Lastly, Dr. Elders sense of competence and scientific authority, flowed from her determination to have a manifestly different outcome than her parents and others. Further, she represented her high school as valedictorian and early on demonstrated a competitive spirit. Her successes, either by plan or providence, fueled a gravitas exhibited throughout her career. During the congressional hearings, more than a few senators noted her plainspoken manner while acknowledging her many successes and honors. Senator Boren, speaking on behalf of Senator Pryor (from Arkansas) frames the force of Elder's conviction and determination to shoot straight. He positions quite clearly the need for such forthrightness in the public discourse. He also makes the point that such veracity necessitates political cover.

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In many ways, the importance of the post of Surgeon General stems from its ability to serve as a bully pulpit. It is not a doctor's job to mince words. It is the physician's job to tell us what is wrong in the plainest possible terms. In her position as director of the health department in Arkansas, Dr. Elders, if she had minimized in that position the problems, if she had acted like a politician in the worst sense of that term, if she had not pointed out what needed to be said, she would most likely sail through the nomination process without controversy. (United States, 1993, p.17)

She tackles issues head on and during her endocrinology research, Elders and her research collaborator made scientific and cultural decisions about the sex of children born with ambiguous genital development at birth. These recommendations to parents took clarity of process and surety of science to propose.

What then are the consequences?

Elders did not build political relationships with the management chain, to put this in corporate terms. She worked in the Department of Health and Human Services under Donna Shalala. It was clear from the beginning that Elders was not a member of the political in-crowd. During the early debates and dialogues on health care reform, Elders' views were inconsequential, and her sense of bipartisanship was not shared. She saw the work of the previous administration, particularly that of Louis Sullivan, should be integrated into the process. Elders, in describing her frustrations noted the following:

At some point after I understood that none of my suggestions or recommendations was going to get anywhere, I took stock and made up my mind just to buckle down. I think I decided that I wasn't going to keep upsetting myself, that there are times in life when you just have to be a good soldier and keep your mouth shut. (Elders, 1996, p.525)

After the confirmation hearings, Elders interaction with her boss became obviously distant. Elders speculated that it might have been that they were both in contention for Health and Human Services Secretary. The following excerpts from her autobiography are telling.

But I thought my interactions with Donna Shalala might have been a little bit schizophrenic. My first exposure to that was back in January during the inauguration. Shalala had seemed very friendly and had invited me to meet with her the next morning in her office. But when I got there, a secretary said she was too busy to see me; if I needed something, I should call her later.... Shalala would ask me to be with her for some speech or event, but when I show up at her office, she would seem surprised and annoyed that I was there.... Yet she seemed to go out of her way. "I didn't pick Dr. Elders," she'd make a point of telling people. "I hired Oliver Elders, but I didn't hire Jocelyn Elders." There wasn't exactly an open antagonism there, but I think most people felt that something was going on. (Elders, 1996, p. 544)

In hindsight, it appears Elders recognized that she did not create political cover for herself. This was clearly a different ball game and she was several layers removed from President Clinton. While in the role in Arkansas, she had a more direct relationship hierarchically. This represents a political lesson she did not have to reckon with as Director. In the absence of this kind of cover, she was vulnerable to attack. By her own admission, she got encouragement to engage her management chain (both Shalala and Panetta). Again, in her own words:

I guess there were some disadvantages to running around as much as I was, the main one being that I wasn't spending any time taking care of my political flanks. Often I wasn't current with everything going on behind the scenes at HHS, and I practically never saw anybody at all from the White House.... Shalala, I knew was not a friend, and I never went out of my way to cultivate allies who might help compensate for that. ... My Chief of Staff, Carol Roddy, suggested a number of times that I go over and meet Leon Panetta, especially after some flap or the other. But I never did. (Elders, 1996, p. 551)

In the end, she made one too many controversial comments and the consequence, in part, led to her resignation. Clearly the position of Surgeon General is fraught with controversy and rancor. During the confirmation hearings, more than a few senators spoke to the historical tradition of controversy vis-à-vis the Surgeon General's post. It is clear from Elders' writings that she appreciated public controversy. Elders' commitment to seeking out cultural authority with which to drive health care policy seems to represent a significant aspect of her short tenure as Surgeon General. Jones (1995), her brother, cites a criticism from Mary Frances Berry that the firing was endemic of systemic racial and gender bias. Jones cites an article where Geraldine R. Segal articulates the inevitable analysis from a social justice perspective.

She is quoted in an article in the December 19, 1994 issue of *Black Issues in Higher Education* by Mary Kristin Phillips "Taken for Granted Again":

... This is not the first time that a Surgeon General has talked about masturbation. What Elders did not realize was that she could not do what former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop did. She is a black woman and he is a white man. He said a lot of the same things she is saying. He talked about masturbation, he talked about AIDS, and made the same recommendations,' Berry says. 'There is a booklet he put out about AIDS and sex education, and masturbation was part of it. But the fact that he was conservative, and although he said controversial things, he is a white man. It is a different ball game for her [Elders] as a black woman...' (p.217)

Implications for Ethical and Creative Leadership

The saga of Dr. Jocelyn Elders, rife with powerful examples of conviction, cultural and ethnic grounding, spiritual fortitude, eminent scientific and medical competence, and leadership, provides a context for ethical and creative leadership. Elders did not consider herself, according to her autobiography, a civil rights leader in the sense of Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and others. She provided effective leadership for social justice in the context of healthcare policy and service. She, quite sensitive to her unique position as an African-American woman with both lived experience and an affinity for her community, provided effective leadership and delivery of health care for the community universally.

T'Shaka (1990) provides a powerful discussion of leadership and leader development from an African centered perspective. He posits that leadership in the African diasporic and continental tradition requires two aspects. The first characteristic, "lead through following," wherein a leader reflects the aspirations of their constituency (p. 10). The leader in T'Shaka's view reflects and understands the general conditions and desires of the community and gives voice to them. The leader emerges out of the community and works within the normative cultural constructs. The second characteristic, "to improve on the people's vision," wherein a leader inspires people to achieve to the highest capacity (p. 10).

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While not overtly articulating African centered orientation, the fact that Elders' teachers provided a grounding in the luminaries of African-American heritage and declared the lessons from the lives of those luminaries, Elders and her classmates were bound to and quilted into the fabric of African diasporic heritage. T'Shaka (1990) posits that African-American leadership tradition, secular or religious, reflect African tradition, including democracy. He articulates the following linkages of African-American and others in the diaspora.

To understand leadership traditions among African Americans and Africans in the Diaspora, it is essential that we understand traditional African leadership traditions. This understanding is necessary because African-American and African diaspora leadership traditions contain strong African carry overs. (p. 10)

Dr. Elders' career demonstrates the highest articulation of African-American leadership tradition. She lived and worked among those in her community. She created programmatic efforts that reflected the environment and needs of her community. School-based health clinics, a hallmark of her healthcare agenda, were autonomous vis-à-vis the local school boards and parents. She did not dictate the focus of the healthcare services. Instead, she provided a menu of choices for local authorities, and also parents.

Hickman (2010) described a range of leadership concepts. Ubuntu, a style of leadership that effuses from African tradition. Hickman shares the following insight with regard to this concept.

The philosophy of Ubuntu leadership comes from traditional African concepts of leadership and life as a collective function. Ubuntu means "a person can only be a person through others" (Mikgoro, 1998). It exists only in the interaction between people in groups and functions to sustain humanity and dignity. Ubuntu embodies the belief that an individual's most effective behavior occurs when he or she is working toward the common good of the group. (p. 63)

To add texture to this term, Desmond Tutu (1999) provides an indigenous view of the meaning of ubuntu as follows:

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When you want to give high praise to someone we say, "Yu, u nobuntu"; "Hey, so and so has Ubuntu." Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours..."...A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole...(p.31)

Dr. Elders exhibited this attribute throughout her career. She works from a view of the value of humanity and the right of every person to effective healthcare, preventative healthcare. All her efforts were focused toward the common good. During a speech to the American Public Health Association, Elders (1994) noted the following in relation to the common good.

As Surgeon General, I want to tell you that we in health, and we especially in public health, need to take some lessons from our colleagues in the American Bar Association. I gave

a talk to the American Bar Association some time ago, and I remember standing there, and I was talking. I made a statement that I thought everybody agreed with. I said, "Every American has a right to health care." When I finished my remarks, all of these hands were up in the air to ask me questions. One lawyer stood up, and I took the first question. He said, "Dr. Elders, who gave them that right?" I didn't quite know what to say, especially because I was not expecting that particular question. I thought about it for a minute, and then I replied, "You lawyers feel that in America every criminal has a right to a lawyer; why shouldn't every sick person in America have the right to a doctor?" I feel that we've got to give the American people the same constitutional rights the lawyers have fought hard to make sure that all criminals have. (p.134)

To be sure, the backdrop for Dr. Elders troubled tenure involved a cauldron of social and cultural issues related to race, gender, and the complexities outlined by Dowd (2008) and others regarding science in the public interest. It is the author's contention that the ineffective attention to stakeholder dynamics provided additional and substantial reduction in the coefficient of friction that supported her tenure or proved an additive force in terms of her resignation.

Kotter (2006) frames eight elements for leading change, paraphrasing they are: 1) Create a Sense of Urgency, 2) Pull Together the Guiding Team, 3) Develop the Change Vision and Strategy, 4) Communicate for Understanding and Buy In, 5) Empower Others to Act, 6) Produce Short-Term Wins, 7) Don't Let Up, 8) Create a New Culture. In her experience in Arkansas, you can see powerful and compelling examples associated with most of these principles. Dr. Elders creates a data-based sense of urgency and integrated her already aligned staff to the mission. She along with her staff and brother created a guiding team of clergy, political support, and community support. She certainly empowered her staff to act in the interest of the aligned vision. She had a clear sense of the division of labor between herself and Tom Butler.

Tom was a great administrator and manager. He did not enjoy the combat and confrontation though. So we were good complements for each other. ... Having Tom behind the scenes allowed me to do the visionary and missionary part, and having me out front allowed him to do the manipulating and jockeying part. (Elders, 1996, p.458)

Together the sum of the parts produced short term and longer-term wins, maintained a sense of continuity, in the community and legislatively. This in the end moved the needle in terms of a shift in health care outcome and positioning in the state.

At the federal level, there was a different terrain, broader and more complicated networks of opposition. The Clinton administration embarked on a complicated agenda in terms of healthcare policy generally and this impacted her agenda as Surgeon General. Positional power of a competent shepherd in the form of Senator Kennedy facilitated her confirmation hearing success. Past this process she had much less of a clear sense of urgency, diluted by presidential and national politics. She appeared to have difficulty framing a guiding team, particularly with the political hierarchy in which she found herself. She did not have a direct line of communication to Clinton. The atmospheric conditions did not facilitate clear opportunity for driving an analogous change visions and strategy, opportunity to communicate for broad buy-in, nor either empowering other or generating quick wins, akin to the Arkansas context.

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Without these key ingredients of stakeholder engagement for change, the decision to continue to leverage colloquial metaphor and imagery when engaging in public discourse on healthcare policy might have had manageable consequences up until Elders ignored the value of stakeholder analysis and mitigation planning at the national level. Neglecting to appreciate the importance of building relationships with Shalala, Panetta, and others loomed critically over her potential for success on the national stage. It also seems to indicate a diminished appreciation for the opposition's power to create constant and intense pressure. That pressure ultimately allowed the cultural pathologies of race and gender to overcome the inertia of support she had, mitigating resignation from the Clinton Administration. This blip on the radar screen of her contributions and career represents just that, a blip. She remains a powerful illustration of African-American leadership. She is a strong and principled leader in the model of Nzinga of Angola, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Haller Jones (Elders' mother).



Admiral Elders giving an address to the employees of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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