

## Chapter 1

# WEBS

## *Earning My Wings*

I am iron butterfly . . .  
I am she/we  
of flesh  
and iron  
and silk wings,  
healing, flying  
into a gentle blue sky.

Janice Mirikitani, from *Love Works*

As I stood on my deck overlooking the Contoocook River in Hancock, New Hampshire, a gossamer mist, like gauze, shrouded the trees, the river dock, the ferns. The scent of sweet pine and the pungent dampness of river water filled the morning chill of early autumn. Having spent several days immersed in reading the transcripts of the women I had interviewed for this book, I was filled with their many insights, their heartfelt truths, and felt honored that these amazing women had entrusted me with their stories, their legacy to future generations of women.

In the midst of the morning stillness, the power of their stories suddenly hit me, and I felt an unexpected rush of vulnerability. These women's lives had deeply moved me—moved me to tears, tears of love and gratitude. They gave me such valuable gifts: their candidness, their generosity, their firm conviction and clarity of mind, their compassionate presence,

their humor, their iron will. Something emerged from their collective voice that embraced me and validated me. Feeling their support also revealed paradoxically how much I had unknowingly isolated myself while writing this book. You know the feeling—like finding yourself navigating through a dense forest alone but determined to tough it out and keep your chin up. You don't even realize you feel lonely until someone places a gentle hand on your shoulder, utters a kind word, or offers you a drink of water. Suddenly a hidden reservoir of vulnerability opens up and you collapse into your own quiet softness.

As I walked down the wooded path toward the river, sunlight split the clouds, splintering the mist. Suddenly, all around me, I saw hundreds of spider webs. Some were draped like hammocks between diminutive princess pines. Others hung like upside-down parachutes suspended from twigs or nestled in ground cover, the mist captured in their delicate weaving. Orb spider webs, beaded with dew, dangled from trees like sparkling gems in an exquisitely strung necklace. Single threads, like silken tightropes, spanned the trees, forcing me to duck my head to avoid breaking them. Though I had walked down this path many times, I had never seen such a spectacle. The dispersing fog caught in emerging morning light had revealed a community of webs, an amazing world hidden in plain sight.

Those webs called to mind the women's stories I had gathered for this book. Their stories had also revealed an amazing, ever present, but often unseen world. With little fanfare, women around the world are weaving a reality filled with compassion, cooperation, and grit that challenges the status quo and transforms the meaning of power, leadership, and success. Their achievements demonstrate how feminine power is changing our businesses, our organizations, and our world into better places to work and live. Like the webs exposed by the sun refracting the mist, these women's stories reveal a social revolution hidden in plain sight whose time has arrived.

## **BRING BALANCE TO A WORLD OUT OF BALANCE**

Since 9/11, the world has seemed tipped off its axis, and not just because our planet has been visited by the attack on the World Trade Center, a devastating tsunami, earthquakes, floods, fires, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Preemptive military strikes, unilateralism, corporate scandals, violation of human rights, murder and assassinations, genocide, wars, torture, world

poverty, pedophiles in religious institutions, environmental degradation, violence, sex slave trade, terrorism and roadside bombs, global economic havoc—all have conspired to silence people who would speak out for peace and safety and love. Such acts share one common denominator: the urge to dominate, to exert *power over others*, an urge all too deeply embedded in human society. However, this approach has reached its limits; no longer can we resolve the world's complex problems only by brute force, by imposing our will, or by flexing our muscles and unleashing our weapons. Instead we should strive to find a better way, a more humane, civilized, caring, and loving way, to resolve differences of opinions and conflicts of interest. My travels, my interviews, and my research have convinced me that a better way lies just around the corner. By encouraging strong women to step forward, speak out, and display the power of their inherent feminine skills, we can, I think, bring some much-needed balance to a masculine-infused world and restore humanity and safety back to our torn and ravaged planet.

We can sit around feeling depressed or helpless about the sorry state of the world, or we can do something about it. The women leaders I met and interviewed while writing this book have done something about it, either in their own small, local world or on the broader world stage. Their life stories and their work gripped me because their selective wisdom seemed to be saying, “We can create a better place.”

Imagine such a place. Women gathering in vast numbers to create cooperative webs of connection that replace the old and tired domination approach of conquer, control, and coerce; women no longer restricted by sex discrimination; the end of the sex slave trade and other forms of violence against women; women unafraid to walk the streets at night; eliminating the feminization of poverty due to the devaluation of all the caring and care giving that women worldwide provide for free; an equal number of women sitting at the power and peace tables that decide our future; women collaborating with each other rather than competing; families with plenty of resources for childcare and proper training of childcare workers; a greater investment in other professions long associated with the feminine, such as teaching and nursing; quality care for our elderly and educational opportunities for everyone; and women uniting for peace and justice in a world that does not need any more wars and violence. In their gathering and connecting, women are already weaving another way of living and working together that does not rely on hierarchies devoted to exercising *power over* others, but rather evokes a world of working together. Although their efforts have been largely off the radar screen in a world

where the sensationalized media preoccupy themselves with celebrities and bad news, it is out there and it's a potent, ever-increasing presence, with sufficient power to shift our world.

I have seen women from all walks of life all around the world midwifing, in small and large ways, a different reality, based on cooperation, inclusion, and power *with and for* others, serving the greater good, and bringing out the best in people and the humanity in us all. They are nurturing a higher level of consciousness that transcends greed, self-interest, and survival. They are bound by their caring, in the service of progress. They are igniting a feminine consciousness.

When we engage a feminine consciousness, we think about our children's future for seven generations ahead, as the Native American Mohawks do; we care for Mother Earth as a way of caring for ourselves; we learn from each other and work together globally to find better solutions to common problems; we reject short-term gains in profits driven by ego-interests that harm and limit long-term aims for improving the community; we wage peace through education and healthcare and the eradication of poverty; we heal traumatic wounds inflicted by the violence of domination with compassion and love, and break the seemingly endless cycle of violence and revenge.

Women around the world are engaging in social transformation. And they are doing this one person at a time, one relationship at a time. They showed me a different world I could believe in; they filled me with hope.

## SHAPE THE ERA OF WOMEN

A prophecy shared among indigenous Mayan and Mongolian people, despite their geographical separation, predicts that, in 2010, the 5,400-year cycle known as the Era of Man ends and the Era of Woman begins. I would amend that to the Era of Women, because women's unrealized power is a collective power. Unlike the Era of Man that revered such masculine role models as Superman, John Wayne, and the Lone Ranger—powerful, fearless, strong men who epitomized individuality, autonomy, and independence—the Era of Women respects and values feminine models, be they men or women, who embrace the power of a collective effort, community, and interdependence. Unlike the Era of Man that excluded women from circles of power, in the Era of Women, men and women work together as global citizens and pool their resources and skills in service of the greater good, such as redirecting impulses of aggression

locally and globally. You'll meet many of these new models in the pages ahead: from Kim Campbell, former prime minister of Canada, and Jody Williams, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, to Australian aboriginal elder Violet and Cynthia Trudell, former CEO of Saturn cars.

The prophecy affirmed what I came to believe after coauthoring my last book with Roger Lewin, *The Soul at Work: Embracing Complexity Science for Business Success*, that women are in a position to lead in the twenty-first century. In a complex environment and an interconnected world, skills associated with women will prove more and more effective and keenly pertinent: their holistic view of the world, their ability to see interconnections among things, their relational intelligence, their tendencies toward collaboration and inclusion, their ability to empathize. Daniel Pink made this prediction in his book *A Whole New Mind*: "The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers—will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys." In other words, the future belongs to people, regardless of gender, who embrace their feminine power, and we need to move in a direction that emboldens women to step forward and speak their mind and truths in a world begging for a different kind of leadership.

The Era of Women ushers in a time for high-touch, right-brain, feminine aspects of our psyche to come fully into play. We associate these qualities with women, but unfortunately, in the past, leaders in the realm of politics, business, and media have disdained, marginalized, or dismissed these qualities as frivolous, ineffectual, and touchy-feely. Seldom were feminine skills ever granted authority. That attitude consigned women to a subordinate position in business and government organizations. Now, however, the very qualities that have kept women out of the mainstream are the very same qualities that empower them to lead in the Era of Women.

The Era of Women calls us to be open and not afraid, to find the courage to take back our power. As Gloria Steinem insists, "Power can be taken, but not given. The process of taking is empowerment in itself." Throughout history, when women took back their power, they created change—the abolitionists freed the slaves, the suffragettes won women's right to vote, the feminists created equal opportunities for women and control over their own bodies. When we take back our power, we place value on the abundant fecundity of feminine power that sustains and nurtures life in all its diversity. When we take back our power, we bring balance to the world. Whether women act or don't act, women will make the

difference in shaping this new Era of Women. Women's role is to rescue society from abusiveness, competition, and violence created by men holding unchallenged dominance. But not just for women. For men as well. As philosopher Richard Tarnas urged, it's high time for men "to enter into a fundamentally new relationship of mutuality with the feminine in all its forms. The feminine then becomes not that which must be controlled, denied, and exploited, but rather fully acknowledged, respected, and responded to for itself. It is recognized: not the objectified 'other,' but rather source, goal, and immanent presence." Without the feminine counterbalancing the masculine, the human spirit languishes as a one-winged creature unable to soar.

## BECOME AN IRON BUTTERFLY

The women I met during my global journey represented a wide range of ages, races, nationalities, and occupations. In talking to them, I discovered that although many of these women were very public personalities, they often felt alone in their work. I wondered if I should coin a phrase that would convey the qualities they all shared, something memorable that would not only describe them but would also serve to unify and honor them as sisters and kindred spirits.

When I interviewed Janice Mirikitani, poet laureate for San Francisco, she gave me a book of her poetry, *Love Works*. The book fell open to the page with the poem titled "Iron Butterfly," which opens this chapter. My first thought was of the rock group from the seventies of the same name. As I read her poem, the two words conjured up a beautiful feminine image that also captured strength and perseverance, a powerful metaphor for the essence of feminine power these women displayed. For me, the term captured their individual resilience and fragility, their conviction and poignancy, their inner beauty and outer strength.

And of course, the butterfly symbolizes life reinventing itself, an image of transformation. A once crawling creature, enclosed in a cocoon of its own becoming, miraculously emerges as a winged creature, unfolds its wings, and takes flight. The wings of an Iron Butterfly may consist of gossamer threads, but her heart beats like an iron drum, a drum tempered by life's hard lessons and her own deep reflections. Iron Butterflies deploy their natural, even vulnerable, feminine gifts while maintaining an unbreakable will.

The Iron Butterflies in this book come from many parts of the world:

the United States, Canada, England, Italy, Colombia, Australia, Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq. They are married with children, have lost children; are single mothers, single women, divorced, married once, twice, three times; and are straight and gay. They come from all walks of life and include doctors, artists, a federal judge, a novelist, businesswomen, a governor, a wine maker, a priest, CEOs, lawyers, a professor, a housewife, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, nurses, a congresswoman. As mostly middle-aged American women, they struggled through the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the Vietnam peace movement, and they fought for equal access to education and job opportunities, and for reproductive rights.

These women have achieved a certain status in their communities. We often read about successful women when they have reached the top of the ladder. But we don't often hear about their struggles, their fallibilities, their journey on the rocky road to becoming strong women. The Iron Butterflies in this book have earned their successes. They are also forthright about the obstacles they have overcome. They have been neglected or, sexually, physically, or emotionally abused. Some have been robbed, assaulted by fist or gun or knife, and raped. Others described themselves as having been anorexic, bulimic, alcoholic, drug addicted, neurotic, or depressed. Think of any weakness or victimizing situation, and they have "been there, done that." But no matter how grave the injustices and hardships they have suffered, they have in their brilliance never let it turn them into victims. Rather, they have become kinder, stronger, and wiser.

Despite their many differences and unique journeys, these women share common patterns in terms of how they live in the world and create change. Their qualities range over all human attributes, but eventually I narrowed them all down to five essential ones. Iron Butterflies are (1) radically vulnerable and (2) *revolutionary*; they are (3) healers while being (4) strong; and they (5) welcome the paradoxical. Do you possess these traits yourself? If you do, you are already an Iron Butterfly and welcome to the club. If you'd like to acquire and develop them, welcome to the journey.

## **BE RADICALLY VULNERABLE**

If someone forced me to pick one quality that distinguishes these women, I wouldn't hesitate to say "vulnerability." Initially meeting these women, "vulnerability" would have been the last word I used to describe them because they all exuded an ease with themselves and a quiet self-assurance. This self-assurance was in part the fruit of their ability to manage and

learn from vulnerable moments and times in their lives. Vulnerability also serves as a crucible for generating the other qualities, and allowing it is the most essential step on the path to personal and social transformation.

This finding, vulnerability as the doorway to change, took me by surprise and exposed what I would come to regard as the radical behavior of Iron Butterflies. I call it radical because vulnerability is all but taboo in a domination-based culture that shuns and ridicules vulnerability as a shameful weakness to avoid at all costs. We will see in later chapters coercive, controlling, aggressive leaders who cannot tolerate vulnerability in themselves and exploit it in others and the roots of these behaviors. Iron Butterflies, on the other hand, recognize it as a wellspring of potential strength. But it is, nevertheless, a challenging path. Former administrator of the EPA Christine Todd Whitman told me how she tried to address our vulnerability as a nation after 9/11.

After 9/11 I had a vulnerability study done, a lessons-learned effort. We were the first agency to do that, and much to my surprise FEMA had never done a lessons-learned after any disaster. The purpose of the study was to find out what we did right so we could strengthen and build on it, and to find out where we could do a better job. If we are afraid to look at vulnerabilities then we lose opportunities to improve and strengthen things.

It wasn't about finding fault or blame. Yet when you publish these things, the press and others tend to look at it only as self-criticism. "Aha, they admitted to doing this wrong; they failed here." They don't see the whole picture, and instead focus exclusively on the criticism. That makes it difficult for people to admit to an area of weakness. I think women are more willing to look at vulnerability, but the problem is that you take a bigger hit for it. You have to be willing to say it's worth looking at those vulnerable places and not be afraid to look and find out.

We will see throughout this book the influence vulnerability has on defining leadership and power and the challenges it presents.

By *vulnerability* I mean a profound experience of openness. Think of the word as a coin. On one side is the openness that exposes you to potentially being harmed and diminished; on the other side is the openness that allows you to be receptive to a depth of connection to others and all their thoughts and emotions, which is otherwise not possible. We are all well aware of the dangers associated with vulnerability, but we don't often acknowledge the benefits that we can also gain.

Often women learn to dissociate from their vulnerabilities as a way of

surviving in a culture that derides it, but doing so limits our self-knowledge. When we let ourselves experience vulnerability, we nurture the full range of our reactions and expressions to the world: all our yearnings, our needs, our shyness, our humility, our hope, our fears. This doesn't mean we walk around with our beating hearts in our hands, but it does mean that we discern those moments when opening ourselves to people can transform our lives and the lives of others. When we do so, we transform harming into healing, weakness into strength, isolation into love, ignorance into wisdom.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about. Linda Rusch, whom you will get to know a lot better in later chapters, is the vice president of Patient Care Services at Hunterdon Medical Center in New Jersey. One of the strongest leaders I have ever met, she also exemplifies radical vulnerability. Among her many initiatives, Linda has addressed the hierarchy between nurses and doctors, what she calls the "not-knowing" nurse and the "all-knowing" doctor. Nurses sometimes complain bitterly about the way doctors treat them, as if they were handmaidens compared to omnipotent gods.

Linda dismantled that hierarchy, and not just because it hurt nurses' feelings. The old hierarchy actually threatens lives. For instance, a nurse, fearing a reprimand, intimidation, or worse, abuse, might refrain from calling a doctor at two in the morning to report an emergency with a patient. It wasn't easy to change that pattern of intimidation because confronting abusive doctors was not something nurses learned in school. Linda got the word out that allowing abusive behavior was not part of a nurse's job. As Linda puts it, "What you permit, you promote." In one particular case, a nurse I'll call Jane came to Linda with a typical tale of abuse.

The doctor in question was generally well liked, though he did tend to lose his temper. He had yelled at Jane, derided her in front of patients over a small mistake she'd made with one of his patient's charts. "I'll talk to him," Linda promised. For the next week, however, the doctor appeared to avoid Linda, perhaps because he knew she would not let his misbehavior go unnoticed. Then one day, she found an attempt at a humorous message from him on her answering machine: "Just want to report to you that one of your nurses intimidated me, and so I'm calling you as the hotline number." Was he trying indirectly to apologize for his behavior? Perhaps, but Linda did not feel comfortable letting the matter drop. So she wrote him a handwritten note inviting him to have a cup of coffee with her.

Somewhat surprisingly, he scheduled an appointment and dropped by

her office with two steaming cups of coffee. Linda had decided beforehand that she wasn't going to talk about the incident with the nurse. She wanted to talk to him at a totally different level, not from anger or disapproval but, as she told me, from "a place of love."

She never uttered Jane's name. Instead, Linda started their conversation by saying, "I care about you. I don't like the way you are coming across. I know that's not who you are when you act this way." She could see a look of relief spread across his face. Starting with an attitude of care and concern created the context for a very different conversation, and the doctor opened up, confiding that he had grown up in poverty and that his mother had raised him and lifted him out of the ghetto, and shepherded him through college and medical school. And here he was, a successful doctor. He admitted that growing up in the streets made him tough and angry and taught him to intimidate people. He was critical and tended to see a half-empty glass, an attitude that spilled over onto the nurses.

Linda responded to him by saying, "I want you to be successful. I want people to love working with you because I know that's who you are." Any hierarchy that may have existed melted away as two colleagues chatted and formed a stronger relationship. They talked about how stress might be a factor in his edginess, and together they devised a plan for constructively dealing with it. "Speaking to the best in him," Linda recalls, "I could see the shift. Over time, I could see his behavior changing."

Note the dynamic here. By making herself vulnerable, "I care about you," Linda set a nonthreatening context for their conversation and the doctor felt safe enough to permit his own vulnerability to come out. Soon they were playing on a level field. Care had replaced intimidation, openness had replaced defensiveness, and trust had replaced fear. By working together on the problem, Linda modeled a different behavior, a cooperative one that he could replicate with the nurses.

As Linda demonstrates, one person at a time, one relationship at a time, and one opportunity at a time, we can create profound openings between people that can change a workplace and, in the long run, transform an organization, an industry, and the world into a better place.

I love how Linda defined vulnerability during our conversation. "Vulnerability is a power. It's letting yourself feel the love and be in the love." She describes it as an "incredible connectedness" with other human beings, in the moment, where you are heard and validated. "It's about being authentic and having this dance go on between you and the other person, when you can really understand what the other is feeling and thinking."

Opening yourself, as Linda did, takes incredible courage and conviction, but when you see its power to transform your life and the lives of others, it becomes easier to do. The more you enter this space, the more you sharpen your other Iron Butterfly qualities. Remember what I said earlier about radical vulnerability serving as a crucible in which a certain alchemy occurs, in which an almost magical chemistry forges the other key attributes of an Iron Butterfly? In the remainder of this chapter, we will note the role that vulnerability plays in the other Iron Butterfly qualities: becoming *revolutionary*, vowing to heal, remaining strong, and welcoming the paradoxical within oneself.

## **BECOME REVOLUTIONARY**

When Carol Jamison's eight-year-old daughter, Becky, asked her, "Why does the church hate women? Does God not like women?" Carol could no longer ignore her own growing uneasiness with the church. "Why aren't we hearing about women in the history of our church? If God is male, where does that leave women?" she asked herself. For her own sake as well as her daughter's, she felt compelled to do something about it. When she initiated conversations with the parish priest and other women, she met Paula Slovenkai-Driscoll, whom you will meet later. Paula started a group exploring women's role in the church. This group ultimately evolved into a gathering each month at a different member's home to celebrate the feminine divine. "The whole vision of God being a woman and taking you in her arms changed something within me," recalls Carol. She would leave these meetings rejuvenated, refreshed, and refocused.

While Carol had always enjoyed wonderful relationships with her girlfriends, she experienced a different sort of bond with this group, which she came to value as a revolutionary force. Although the group provided mutual support, it didn't deal exclusively with solving personal problems. Instead the women devoted their time together to awaken the feminine divine in themselves. At a given gathering, the hostess would choose a theme and create an experience that connected the guests to their own spirituality. "It's about spiritual growth of ourselves as human beings and what we are capable of doing in this world," Carol told me.

For instance, Carol loved gardening but never seemed to find time to create a garden for herself. With the support and urging of the women in her group, she finally dug up a garden, placed a hollowed tree trunk resembling a womb in the middle of the space, and filled it with her favorite

plants. To celebrate her new garden, she invited the group, accompanied by their daughters, to meet there at dawn. Each woman brought something from her own garden, such as lavender or lemon thyme, to plant in Carol's garden. Carol's daughter painted a bright blue bench adorned with yellow daisies as her offering. Carol handed out some of her favorite quotes and poems about gardens, and each woman read aloud a poem that held a special meaning for her. The daughters, wearing flower wreaths woven for them by one of the women, listened intently. This celebration of Mother Earth represented an important milestone for Carol, her friends, and their daughters. The new garden not only symbolized Carol's own spiritual evolution but also represented the transformative and unifying power of the feminine divine that left no woman untouched.

Paradoxically, this spiritual process prompted Carol to reevaluate her priorities at a mundane level. "I began to look more closely at my own interests, what was really important to me. What do I really want to do with my life and how can I share that with my family? Playing in my garden is really important to me." Before she had built this personal playground, she had always put everyone else in her life first. Now she feels this "new me" could set a better example for her children. As she said, "You have to be a human in your own right and not just live for other people." Feeling more like the master of her own destiny, Carol's self-confidence grew; she felt more capable to take on whatever challenges she met in life.

This new sense of herself spilled over into her work life. A customer service executive in the software industry, Carol works with a lot of women. Having experienced the impact of the group's support on her life, she found herself drawn to supporting the younger women at work. Carol would invite the women into her office, close the door, and encourage the women to talk about their lives, their work, and their personal struggles with striking a work/life balance. Carol would help them think through their priorities, and in this way she extended her personal evolution to revolutionize the workplace. "Before we didn't bring anything personal to the workplace," said Carol. "Now that we do, we're a closer group. That closeness helps us to brainstorm better and more fully explore options for our customers, and we are a more effective group."

Carol's personal evolution and growing confidence also affected her behavior with customers. She spends a lot of time managing relationships and has always been a good listener. But now that she has shed much of her former timidity, she more confidently confronts customers in a positive way, which has made her work a lot less stressful. Customers appreciate

the way Carol has evolved. As one customer wrote in an evaluation, “Carol always asks me how I’m doing. She cares about me as a person and as a customer, and that’s something that I appreciate.”

Iron Butterflies, like Carol, embark on a personal, inner journey that leads them down the road to social transformation. That journey may take each Iron Butterfly beyond herself to family and community and a nation or the world, but as with the caterpillar, there comes a time when she spends time alone wrapped in a cocoon, as Carol did when she created her new garden. As we will see in later chapters, that time of aloneness can be difficult, perhaps even a descent into despair, where all the images about herself are let go, where beliefs she once held come into question, and hard realities, once clouded and out of sight, emerge in full view. Then through a personal transformation, both spiritual and psychological, a journey often taken more than once, Iron Butterflies greet the world with a greater sense of themselves and their mission in life. Like the caterpillar, they reinvent themselves.

Like a stone cast in a pond, personal evolution expands its influence and leads to social revolution. Note the ripple effect of Carol’s personal evolution that in turn affected her family, her co-workers, and her customers in a positive way. In fact, the gardening itself had its own ripple effect. Carol’s gardening has expanded from her own little plot into her community. The Main Street of West Concord, Massachusetts, now has flowers stretching for a half mile along the beach strip, a result of a collaboration forged between Carol, her neighbors, and the town. She most recently designed and planted a garden for Minuteman ARC for Human Services, an organization that supports people with developmental disabilities. Carol has found many places that can benefit from a garden.

When I spoke with Nobel Peace Prize laureate Jody Williams, she called this “enlightened self-interest,” a balance between individual will and community good. Whether you head a fledgling software company or a major corporation, whether you work in business or government, or the arts or activist causes, whether you sit on a board of directors or chair a PTA meeting, you can help evolve the rules of the domination game as Carol did, by simply reordering your priorities. Iron Butterflies show us how our feminine power enables us to attain our goals, to excel at what we do, and to guide others to another way of being successful at work and in the world, and everyone benefits.

**VOW TO HEAL**

In 1999, Swanee Hunt, former ambassador to Austria and lecturer at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, founded Women Waging Peace, now known as the Institute for Inclusive Security. The idea for the organization came to Swanee in a very concrete moment. One day, while she was serving as ambassador to Austria during the Clinton administration, a woman named Vjosa Dobruna called on Ambassador Hunt and told her a compelling story. Dr. Dobruna, founder of the Center for Protection of Women and Children and cominister for democratization with the United Nations mission in Kosovo, had crossed several war lines at great personal risk to come to Vienna to meet Swanee and implore her to get the US government to intervene in Kosovo. Swanee recalls their encounter: "Vjosa said, 'We've seen what happened in Croatia. We've seen what happened in Bosnia. It's going to happen in Kosovo.' I said, 'You've come so far. Here, have some coffee, have a pastry.' We talked and then she left. My next appointment was waiting, about genetically engineered soybeans, then the opening of an art exhibit, a political problem, the family tragedy of a staff member, and so on. I thought I should send a cable to the State Department saying I had met an interesting woman from Kosovo. But I didn't."

After Swanee left Vienna and came to Harvard, her mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. In the fall of 1998, Swanee and her husband, Charles, flew to Dallas to stay with her. One night, sitting on her mother's bed and watching the television news, Swanee saw footage of the exodus of thousands of Kosovo refugees fleeing to Macedonia. Later, when Charles found his wife rocking back and forth on the porch, he asked if she was weeping for her mother.

Swanee replied, "No. My mother has twenty-four-hour nursing care to make sure that she is in no pain. Think about these refugees sitting on the tractors. How many of them are psychotic at this point? How many of them are diabetic and can't get their insulin and are in shock? Babies are being born on the side of the road, camps are being set up in mud. A few years ago, a woman came to me in Vienna because she had heard that there was someone in Austria who cared and could help. She traveled for days for that one-hour appointment. I was the only hope of a certain number of people in Kosovo." That was Swanee's epiphany, the precise moment she vowed to heal. "I had so failed to do what I should have done," she told me, "that I had to reverse myself."

Swanee transformed her vulnerability, her failure to respond, into a healing power by creating Women Waging Peace, a network empowering

more than eight hundred women in over forty conflict areas by connecting them to each other and to policymakers. As Carol Jamison did, she began by exploring her own soul, and then she tossed the stone into the still pond, causing ripples to spread to the edges of the world.

Like so many of the Iron Butterflies you will meet in this book, Swanee was shaken into going where she wouldn't go on her own. It took an outside stimulus and an epiphany to ignite her dedication to heal. When Iron Butterflies peer into their bare and vulnerable souls, as Swanee did, they become more empathic to others, more welcoming of the fallibilities of the human spirit and embrace it with their wings. Only when leaders gain such self-knowledge of vulnerability can they transform themselves into healers. When you listen to and empathize with those who suffer, you see the need to rally against the sort of domination culture that causes such suffering. When leaders are healers, their leadership is transformative.

For millennia, the women I call Iron Butterflies have sustained and mended the social fabric of community, developing webs of connection, locally or globally, addressing the needs of the marginalized, the ignored, and the disenfranchised. Studies show that in spite of our accelerated technological access to each other, people today feel more alienated than ever in the United States. Iron Butterflies strive to heal feelings of alienation by fostering a sense of shared needs and beliefs and of being in it together. Paradoxically, it takes an iron spine to usher in this softer era of interdependence.

As healers, they also cultivate a new way of being. Like butterflies that generate life by pollinating flowers, Iron Butterflies regenerate individuals, organizations, and communities by pollinating the soul. As generous and giving women, they find pleasure in bringing out the best in people, in evoking and expecting the highest self. We will see how they actually do this in later chapters.

Like the butterfly effect, where a butterfly flitting its wings in the Amazon jungle can cause a storm thousands of miles away, the small actions of Iron Butterflies that heal and cultivate the best in people hold the potential for a huge effect in their workplaces, their communities, and the world. And like the butterfly effect, we don't know which one of those small acts will be the catalyst to a big change. Iron Butterflies teach us that we do not need to move mountains in order to transform ourselves and the world; a little pollinating will do it.

**BE STRONG**

After working in the corporate world for many years for companies such as Cable and Westinghouse, Laura Liswood grew restless and began questioning the worth of selling a cable television service to the world. She relished the camaraderie, the results orientation, and, of course, the paycheck, but the work lacked any sense of higher purpose, and that bothered her. Wanting to involve herself in something that might contribute more value to the world, she set out on her own as a consultant. With more free time on her hands, she opened herself to new possibilities and let herself, as she recalls, “ramble in my thought processes.” She had been involved in women’s issues in Seattle and had even published her own magazine, now defunct, called *Seattle Women*. When she heard about a study that showed women legislators legislating differently from men, that piqued her interest and she decided to investigate that finding for herself. Maybe she could interview one woman leader.

After confiding this idea to her friends, a friend of a friend of a friend finally brought her to a woman leader halfway around the world who granted her an interview—Corazon Aquino, president of the Philippines. Laura would learn there were fifteen living women presidents at the time and in the end interviewed them all. This ultimately expensive undertaking included video crews, which Laura, far from rich, paid for out of her pocket. The personal sacrifice paid off because from that project was born the Council of Women World Leaders, with Laura serving as its secretary general.

Here is how Laura describes her vision:

I wanted to create institutions, structures, a network for women because I believe one reason women haven’t made as great an impact as men on history is that women played second fiddle and helped the wounded while the men built structures. The structures are what last and create the history that you learn. I think there are enough powerful women to create a critical mass of power that can change how we think about leadership. Change happens when you get a few people to do it, get a larger group to go along, and then you get your tipping point.

Like the other women I interviewed for this book, Laura answered a central question, one I actually never asked: What does it mean to be a strong woman? Laura needed tremendous strength to realize her vision, a strength that came from managing her feelings of vulnerability. “The overriding emotion you have in doing something like this,” Laura told me, “is fear. Fear you

cannot do it, fear you cannot handle it well, and fear you will not be diplomatically correct in doing it.”

Laura, however, had learned to master her fear even before this project. In 1992, she had decided to bicycle across central Asia, hoping to prove something to herself while at the same time enjoying an atypical adventure. It certainly wasn't typical. Her constant companion on the trek? Fear. Fear was in fact the right animal instinct. Imagine a woman bicycling across a remote Siberian landscape, bouncing along a rutted, unpaved road, with no medical centers in sight should she injure herself or get sick. One day she encountered a band of escaped prisoners. She could just disappear and never be heard from again. What did she do with this daily companion, fear? “I learned how to *not* conquer my fear,” laughed Laura, “but to carry it with me.” She told me how the experience made her be honest with herself and admit her fear, and how this paradoxically taught her that she could be strong and vulnerable at the same time. She also learned perseverance, to keep moving forward. What else could she do? She couldn't turn back. “That experience prepared me for this work, to keep going forward one step at a time. It's like climbing a rope, hand over hand until you reach that next ledge where the next thing opens up. And then you start the ascent again.”

Iron Butterflies, like Laura, discover inside themselves the strength to persist in the most difficult situations, and like monarchs who fly two thousand miles to their destination, they persevere against all odds. Strong women stand up for themselves and protect themselves because they know they are worth it, and they stand up and protect others for the same reason. When Iron Butterflies challenge the status quo, they are immediately vulnerable. As they learn to deal with fear, to take risks, to handle unpredictability and uncertainty, they become stronger.

Iron Butterflies are also strong because, like butterflies, they are sensitive to shifts in the environment; they both sound the alarm and act when they see unhealthy, unethical changes taking place. They are the whistleblowers, the troublemakers, the resisters who can take down corrupt institutions as Sharron Watkins did at Enron, Colleen Rowley did at the FBI, and Cynthia Cooper did at WorldCom. When Iron Butterflies see inequities and wrongdoing, they speak for those who cannot or will not speak for themselves.

Iron Butterflies are strong in their openness; they are willing to be influenced by others and invite opposing and different points of view, which we will see prove to be highly effective negotiating skills. Their wings stir fields of resonance and encircle dissonance. They are strong

because they take their place but make room for others. They are strong because they are willing to be outrageously honest and will admit if they are wrong. And they are fun. They have a full body, bawdy laugh, and sometimes like to swear. But most of all, Iron Butterflies are paradoxically strong enough to be vulnerable.

## WELCOME THE PARADOXICAL

When I set out on this project, I had just one condition, that the women demonstrated both feminine and masculine skills and capabilities. I didn't want "sperms with perms," women who lost their womanhood on the path to success, or the all-sacrificing mother figure who cared for everyone but herself. I wanted women who could hold and balance seemingly opposite realities.

When I looked back at my previous book, *The Soul at Work*, I realized I had interviewed all male leaders who had come to embrace their more feminine side, such as valuing and forming deep relationships in a way that balanced their more masculine goal-driven nature. For this new book, I wanted to know how that manifested in female leaders.

The ability of the women I interviewed to strike a balance between masculine and feminine values and skills provided them, I found, with an enormous range of resources. Their masculine side helped them deal with their domination-oriented environments. They could talk football with the "boys" and push that project over the goal line. But their feminine side enabled them to act as agents of transformation because it infused their environment with more inclusive, emotional, cooperative, intuitive approaches, as we saw Carol do.

Already you have seen many paradoxes in these pages: strong yet vulnerable, tough yet soft, practical yet spiritual. Paradox is a quality that kept emerging among these women. For example, I was struck by how comfortable these women were with themselves, and how they continued to reach, to learn, and to grow. Paradoxically, they were in a constant state of becoming while remaining the same person in all contexts.

Think about the paradoxes in your life. Do you feel insignificant but also dedicate yourself to giving people a sense of their own importance? Do you feel both saddened and outraged, courageous and fearful, detached and empathic, calm and excitable, patient and impatient, private and public, humble and proud? Are you both flexible and orderly, linear and holistic, analytic and intuitive? Iron Butterflies do, which makes them

both fascinating and powerful women. List some of your own personal traits and then list their opposites. Are both true? How do you feel about the paradoxes in your life? Holding paradoxes isn't an either/or proposition, but rather a both/and. Welcome the paradoxes that you hold because they create a tension from which new possibilities and creative solutions emerge.

## SUSPEND DISBELIEF

Does a woman who possesses all these qualities sound too good to be true? I would have thought so myself before I heard their stories and learned about both their struggles and their triumphs, as you will as you read this book. I ask you to suspend your disbelief. Their stories are true, their voices real. I have myself been troubled from time to time by what Buddhism calls the "monkey mind," that nattering self-critic that fills us with doubts and worries and doesn't like risks or change. It's the little voice that tells us that life's not supposed to be this hard, that in a million years I couldn't possibly do what these Iron Butterflies do. It chatters most loudly when we dare to challenge the status quo. If your pesky monkey mind starts nagging for attention while reading these stories, bonk it on the head and tell it to shut up. Knock that monkey off your back. You need to focus your full energy elsewhere as you do both your valuable feminine work, such as care giving and uniting with your sisters and brothers in the service of transformation, and your masculine work, such as taking the helm to pilot the ship of change through all the troubled waters ahead. Only when we bond the fully feminine with the fully masculine can we evolve to a third possibility where genderless leadership abounds, where the spheres and responsibilities of men and women overlap, dissolving boundaries between what we think of as masculine and what we think of as feminine. When women have more opportunities to lead, and men are relieved of their burden and privilege of decision making, we can discover a new synergy between genders.

Listen to what David Gergen, commentator, educator, and advisor to three presidents, has to say about the matter:

Yet women are clearly the solution to many of the world's problems. We know, for example, that one of the most productive investments to foreign assistance is in the education of women. We know that micro-financing in places like India and Bangladesh empowers women and lifts the quality of life. We know that empowering women with the vote

deepens the roots of democracy. . . . Back in the early 1990s, we had the Year of the Woman. It wasn't enough. Some writers like Tom Peters called the 1990s the Decade of the Woman, but that wasn't enough either. Now it's critical that we truly show our commitment to justice by making this the Century of the Woman.

But that's not enough either. We need to usher in the Era of Women.

There are many paths to actualizing this goal and, like the threads of a web, these paths come from different directions that all lead to a core truth—the wisdom of vulnerability. The nearer each woman comes to this truth, the closer she is to all women, who are simultaneously approaching it on their own paths.

## THE PARADOX OF ONE

I end this chapter where I began, in the woods of New Hampshire. Imagine a pristine early spring day with crystal blue skies and the fresh scent of melted snow lingering in the air. The sun, like a parent warming up a child's hand, absorbs the chill in the air, caressing the still-dormant bare trees with their tiny buds. Silver light dances on tiny river swells, pregnant with the spring runoff. I had just finished writing the last sentence of this book, and with that final period came a sense of emptiness, a feeling akin to sending your child off to school for the first time. I wondered how my words and ideas would find their way into the world, and whether you, dear reader, would welcome them into your life. The confident and proud mother was overwhelmed by feelings of doubt. And humility.

Then as I walked down the path toward the river, the ground moist beneath my feet, I heard the sound of returning birds echoing through the woods. I felt at one with Mother Nature. She, like me, was in transition, moving into a new season and a new age. As I came to the river's edge, I remembered how choreographer Paula Josa-Jones described leadership to me. "Leadership," she said, "is being the banks of a river." I looked in the distance and saw the purple majesty of Mount Monadnock, a three-thousand-foot mountain I have scaled many times, as have countless others. It is, after all, the most climbed mountain in the world. It is a magical mountain, purportedly a place that enfolds a convergence of meridians, the invisible channels where the life force circulates, the *qi* as it is known in traditional Chinese medicine. Locals call this area the vortex.

The word *monadnock* is a geological term meaning an isolated rocky hill rising above a plain as a result of erosion. Once part of a chain of

mountains, Mount Monadnock alone has survived the work of rain and river because the rock is erosion resistant. Like Mount Monadnock, Iron Butterflies also resist and are not eroded by the false myth that domination is normative. Like the mountain, the collective power of women stands alone and, at the same time, is connected to and is part of something bigger than itself. I knew then, as I stood at the river's edge gazing at the distant purple summit, that as we press forward for social transformation, Iron Butterflies are always alone and never alone; we are paradoxically one. We remain strong, yet vulnerable.