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Guest Editorial: A Reflection on the Leadership of Aretha Franklin, Queen of Soul

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A Reflection on the Leadership of Aretha Franklin, Queen of Soul

– *by Yvette Lynne Bonaparte, PhD, member of the JVBL International Editorial Board*

When I heard the news report that Aretha Franklin was in hospice care, I thought to myself that another person of influence from my parent’s generation was about to leave us. I grew up hearing Ms. Franklin’s powerful voice and the messages her songs delivered. She passed away on August 16, 2018. As a leadership scholar, listening to the numerous tributes honoring Ms. Franklin, I couldn’t help but think about her life in the context of transformative leadership.



Transformative leadership is a model of leadership that requires the leader to acknowledge and understand of the impact of inequities on those who lack power and privilege. It is a model in which the leader commits him or herself to affecting social change. The transformative leader is self-aware, authentic, and acts with moral courage. He or she is an activist who challenges the status quo, encourages and facilitates inclusion, and gives voice to those that might otherwise be silenced. In numerous ways, Ms. Franklin embodied these leadership practices. In an interview regarding her own fame she said “being the Queen is not all about singing, and being a diva is not all about singing. It has much to do with your service to people, and your social contributions to your community and your civic contributions as well.”

As a leader in the civil rights movement, Ms. Franklin, together with other accomplished African Americans, shared their talents and financial resources to support the movement. Ms. Franklin advocated for social justice, and in doing so illustrated the traits of a transformative leader. She demonstrated moral courage and inserted herself into challenging situations. For example, in 1970, Ms. Franklin offered to pay the bail for Angela Davis’s release from jail. In *Jet Magazine*, Ms. Franklin was quoted, explaining her view of the situation in the following way: “I’m going to see her [Angela Davis] free if there is any justice in our courts, not because I believe in communism, but because she’s a Black woman and she wants freedom for Black people. I have the money; I got it from Black people – they’ve made me financially able to have it – and I want to use it in ways that will help our people.”

Ms. Franklin’s music was transformative. Many of her songs became anthems for both the feminist and civil rights movements and in doing so, inspired and motivated many. In 1972 when she recorded “Young, Gifted & Black,” she delivered a poignant message of affirmation to a generation of young African American:

*In this whole world, you know
There are millions of boys and girls
Who are young, gifted and black
With their souls intact, and that's a fact
You are young, gifted and black, we must begin to tell our young
There's a world waiting for you, yours is the quest that's just begun.*

In 1985, she recorded “Sisters are Doin’ It For Themselves.” This song served as a declaration of strength, confidence, and celebration for multiple generations of women:

*Sisters are doin' it for themselves
Standin' on their own two feet
And ringin' on their own bells
Said, sisters are doin' it for themselves
Now this is a song to celebrate
The conscious liberation of the female state
Mothers, daughters and their daughters too, yeah
Woman to woman
We're singin' with you
The inferior sex had got a new exterior
We got doctors, lawyers, politicians too
Everybody, take a look around
Can you see, can you see, can you see
There's a woman right next to you.*

Aretha Franklin’s incredible musical talent expanded numerous genres: soul, jazz, rock and roll, pop, classical, and gospel. Whether it was her demand for “Respect,” her reminder to each of us to “Think” and “Say A Little Prayer,” or her delivery of a soul-stirring testimony in one of her many gospel songs (“Surely, God is Able” is one of my personal favorites), she helped to inspire us. Through her actions as a leader committed to social justice and using her talents, influence, and resources to advocate for change, she helped to transform us. Her relevance and impact were (and are) undeniable. She will be missed.

About the Author



Dr. Yvette Lynne Bonaparte is a collaborative and metric-driven scholar and practitioner in the areas of marketing and leadership. She has a twenty-year track record of success in private industry and has held leadership positions in the areas of brand/product management, global marketing, customer insights, and program management with some of the world's best-known corporations. She has also consulted with leading organizations within higher education and the health care industry in the areas of strategic marketing, and diversity and inclusion. Dr. Bonaparte can be contacted at: bonapartephd@gmail.com.