



*ELDER
WOMEN'S
WISDOM*

A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership

*DENISE THOMSON
CAROLYN MORALES
KATHLEEN S. GROVE*

Elder Women's Wisdom

The book *Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership* offers maturing women what *The Feminist Mystique* provided for under-fulfilled women: naming a phenomenon that had no name. In this case, the book contributors name the “invisibility” of aging women to reclaim women’s wisdom as essential and sacred for individuals and communities. Readers will understand how to use circle techniques to embrace their leadership in the golden era of their lives.

Chrys Egan, Associate Dean of the Fulton School of Liberal Arts at Salisbury University and co-editor of *Pathways into the Political Arena: The Perspectives of Global Women Leaders*.

As an elder aspiring to be wise, I found my journey through *Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership* captivating and life affirming. Through the lens of a Leadership Kaleidoscope™, I reflected on the seven leadership threads of my life story and was able to capture my inner wisdom and understand how to weave together my experiences into my personal Leadership Loom™. Not only did I understand and appreciate myself more, I made more transparent why and how I practice leadership, as well as how I can better serve as an example of elder leadership and how my legacy can guide future generations. Now, I seek a circle to speak my life story to strengthen the warp and weft of my tapestry and perhaps to enhance its color. This is a unique and powerful book that I highly recommend for all women who seek a more meaningful eldering process. Truly exceptional.

Randal Joy Thompson, Institute for Social Innovation, Fielding Graduate University, author of *Proleptic Leadership on the Commons: Ushering in a New Global Order*.

The Circle Way Governance Council is grateful that this radically different book on academic leadership is embedding circle as the foundational group process for students to engage in diverse, cross-discipline, and cross-generational learning. This bold and interactive pedagogy invokes women’s wisdom at its root source.

Nancy, Amanda, Diane, and Sarah,
TCW Governance Council Volunteers

Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership offers a long-overdue follow-up to Belenky et al.’s transformative *Women's Ways of Knowing*, published in 1986. Equally overdue, is scholarship on the experiences of older women in leadership. While Women’s Studies courses often examine how individuals adapt to male-centered leadership models, they less frequently provide female-centered or diverse models for students to emulate. This text addresses these gaps and provides valuable insights at a critical juncture, offering inspiration for feminist scholars, organizational researchers, and students at all levels.

Catherine A. Dobris, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Communication Studies, Adjunct Professor, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Indiana University Indianapolis

Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership

EDITED BY

DENISE THOMSON

Wisdomers, LLC, USA

CAROLYN MORALES

Wisdomers, LLC, USA

KATHLEEN S. GROVE

Wisdomers, LLC, USA



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2025

Editorial matter and selection © 2025 Denise Thomson, Carolyn Morales, and Kathleen S. Grove.
Individual chapters © 2025 The authors.
Published in English under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: www.copyright.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83708-187-5 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83708-186-8 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83708-188-2 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

About the Editors	vii
About the Contributors	ix
Frontispiece	xiii
Foreword: Circle as the Practice of Presence <i>Christina Baldwin</i>	xiv
Acknowledgments	xviii
Introduction: Warp and Weft Threads <i>Denise Thomson, Carolyn Morales and Kathleen S. Grove</i>	1
Chapter 1 Leadership Thread One: Archetypal <i>Kathleen S. Grove</i>	9
Chapter 2 Leadership Thread Two: Intergenerational <i>Khaula Murtadha</i>	31
Chapter 3 Leadership Thread Three: Indigenous <i>Rebecca Tallent and Elizabeth Parent</i>	47
Chapter 4 Leadership Thread Four: Spiritual <i>Rachel Metheny</i>	67
Chapter 5 Leadership Thread Five: Developmental <i>Joanna Sztandur</i>	83
Chapter 6 Leadership Thread Six: Intersectional <i>Carolyn Morales</i>	99

Chapter 7 Leadership Thread Seven: Embodied <i>Denise Thomson</i>	117
Chapter 8 Threading Your Leadership Loom™ <i>Carolyn Morales</i>	135
Final Thoughts: Weaving the Tapestry and Calling the Circle <i>Denise Thomson, Carolyn Morales and Kathleen S. Grove</i>	147
Appendix A: The Circle Way Pocket Guide <i>Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea</i>	155
Index	173

About the Editors

Dr Denise Thomson, EdD, is a scholar-practitioner who specializes in coaching executive-level teams and creating innovative programs that support lifelong learning. She has a diverse background in the social services field and a 20-year public service career, culminating in a Meritorious Civilian Service award from the Department of the Navy. Denise is a Certified Coach/Consultant in Appreciative Inquiry and Whole Systems Intelligence, and a Circle Practitioner with over 35 years of experience facilitating participatory leadership and collaborative conversation circles. Dr Thomson is Chair-Emerita of the Executive Leadership Team of the International Leadership Association's Women and Leadership Member Community and received an award from the group for "Outstanding Practice with Broad Impact" in 2021. Denise's academic journey includes a BA in Psychology, MS in Counseling and Human Development, and EdD in Educational Leadership. Her Storied Leadership™ model considers the story we tell ourselves, about ourselves, as a powerful antecedent to leadership integrity.

Dr Carolyn Morales, PhD, is a Principal with Wisdomers, LLC. She most recently served as Associate Dean for belonging and community engagement and as Assistant Professor of medical education in the School of Medicine at the University of Texas at Tyler. Dr Morales has 20+ years of leadership experience operationalizing diversity visions into strategic plans and solutions within higher education, nonprofit, and business sectors. Her research contributions include the Intersectional Belonging in Leadership Framework™, Leadership Loom™, and Leadership Kaleidoscope™. Carolyn has a PhD and MA in Leadership and Change from Antioch University, an MA in International and Intercultural Management from SIT Graduate Institute, and a BA in English from Baylor University. She is a Fellow of the Riley Institute Diversity Leadership Academy at Furman University, a Graduate of the Association of American Medical Colleges Healthcare Executive Diversity and Inclusion Certificate Program, and a recipient of the Toni Morrison Society Founders Award.

Kathleen S. Grove, JD, has been consulting, advising, and counseling in a professional capacity throughout a career that has encompassed the fields of law, business, mental health counseling, and higher education. She has been the Director of the Office for Women at Indiana University Indianapolis since 2004 where she works to create a welcoming and inclusive campus environment where all can succeed. These efforts culminated in 2021 with IUI being named to the Forbes

magazine list of Best Employers for Women, notably as the top employer for women in Indiana. Also in 2021, Director Grove won an award from the International Leadership Association's Women and Leadership Group for "Outstanding Practice with Local Impact." She has a Doctor of Jurisprudence degree from Indiana University McKinney School of Law and a Masters of Marriage and Family Therapy from the Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis.

About the Contributors

Author **Christina Baldwin** is a pioneer in the field of personal writing, a decades-long teacher of journal and story. Her titles related to this work are: *One to One*, *Life's Companion*, *The Seven Whispers*, and *Storycatcher*. For 25 years, in partnership with Ann Linnea, she taught the skills of circle practice across North America and around the world. Her/their titles related to this work are: *Calling the Circle* and *The Circle Way*. She continues to contribute to her bodies of work through online presence and personal appearances, blogging, and an acclaimed debut novel, *The Beekeeper's Question*. Christina's academic journey includes a Masters of Science in Psychology. She lives on an island north of Seattle, Washington with author and naturalist educator, Ann Linnea. www.christinabaldwin.com

Ann Linnea is a lifelong naturalist and educator. As Co-founder of The Circle Way, she pioneered circle practice in mainstream settings and incorporated circle into related outdoor adventure programs. Ann has a Masters in Arts & Teaching and co-authored an award-winning book that teaches environmental appreciation to children, *Teaching Kids to Love the Earth*. In 1992, she became the first woman to circumnavigate Lake Superior by sea kayak; *Deep Water Passage, A Spiritual Journey at Mid-Life* describes the extraordinary physical courage and spiritual trials of her 1,800-mile journey. In 2010, she and Christina Baldwin co-authored *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*, as a legacy contribution to two decades of pioneering leadership. Also published in 2010, is her full-color *Keepers of the Trees – A Guide to Re-Greening North America*, making natural history accessible through fascinating stories. www.annlinnea.com

Rev. Dr Rachel Metheny, PhD, serves as the Senior Pastor at Meridian Street United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. She received her Master's in Divinity from the Christian Theological Seminary in 1994 and was ordained an elder in the Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church in 1996. She has over 30 years of pastoral experience, primarily serving churches in low-income, low-wealth communities. She also spent one year in Guatemala as a lay missionary, working with the community to open schools in remote rural villages. Rachel has a PhD in Ethics from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. In addition to her pastoral ministry, she has been an Adjunct Professor at Christian Theological Seminary, Vincennes University, and the University of Indianapolis.

Dr Khaula Murtadha, PhD, born in Washington, D.C. to parents who were deaf, is a mother and educator, having taught preschool to graduate university classes. Dr Murtadha's PhD is in Educational Leadership, from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. Murtadha is the former Executive Associate Dean of the IU School of Education and has served the campus for more than two decades and now is the Associate Vice Chancellor for the Office of Community Engagement. Dr Murtadha is a Faculty Member of the Educational Leadership program in the School of Education and editor of the *ENGAGE!* journal reflecting community-university collaborative research. She has published in a number of venues; her current research includes ethics in community-university partnerships, African American women in educational leadership, and effective leadership in city schools. The recipient of the distinguished IUPUI Chancellor's Medallion, Dr Khaula Murtadha was honored with the 2021 University Council for Educational Administration, Hanne Mawhinney Distinguished Service Award.

Dr Elizabeth Parent, PhD, is an educational leader and a trailblazer. She is the first Alaska Native woman to earn a PhD and the first Alaska Native woman to become a full professor. Dr Parent was born in Western Alaska into a blend of Athabascan and Yupik culture. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Anthropology from the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, her Master's in Education administration at Harvard and her PhD in education from Stanford. Dr Parent hosted a bi-monthly radio show on Pasadena Community College's KPCC and became known as the "Treaty Lady" because of her attention to issues of Native American treaty rights. She retired in 2000 from San Francisco State University, where she taught Native American studies.

Dr Joanna Sztandur, EdD, is a social psychologist, a certified executive leadership coach, a scholarly researcher, and a consultant with over two decades of experience in 14 countries on three continents. She has spent her entire career serving and supporting the professional services industry in her leadership and consulting roles and, most recently, as an academic. Dr Sztandur is passionate about research and continues to collaborate with fellow academics to contribute to leadership scholarship. She is particularly committed to women's leadership development and its practical implications. Dr Sztandur earned her doctorate in leadership from the George Washington University. She holds a Master's degree in Human Resource Development from the George Washington University and a Master's degree in Social Psychology from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, Poland. She earned her master coach certification in executive leadership coaching at Harvard University.

Dr Rebecca Tallent, EdD, an award-winning journalist and public relations professional, earned both her BA and MEd in journalism education from the University of Central Oklahoma and her EdD in Mass Communications from Oklahoma State University. In addition to her career as a reporter, Dr Tallent was a professor at Northwestern Oklahoma State University and Embry-Riddle Aeronautics University before joining the University of Idaho in 2006. She retired

as an Associate Professor from the UI School of Journalism and Mass Media in 2019. Dr Tallent is known for developing #Press4Education, a program through the Society of Professional Journalists designed to get journalists into K-12 classrooms across the country. In 2019, she was awarded the Wells Memorial Key, the highest award in SPJ, for that project. Of Cherokee ancestry, Dr Tallent is an active member of the Indigenous Journalists Association. In retirement, she is an independent commentary writer for several media outlets.

This page intentionally left blank

Frontispiece

How might your life have been different if there had been a place for you, a place for you to go to be with your mother, with your sisters and the aunts, with your grandmothers, and the great- and great-great-grandmothers, a place of women, to go, to be, to return to, as a woman? A place where you were nurtured from an ancient flow sustaining you and steadying you as you sought to become yourself – to help you find and trust the ancient flow already there within yourself – waiting to be released ...

– Judith Duerk (1989, p. xv, 4)

Reference

Duerk, J. (1989). *Circle of stones: A woman's journey to herself*. Innisfree Press, Inc.

Foreword: Circle as the Practice of Presence

Christina Baldwin

The Circle Way, Cofounder Emerita, USA

This is a radical book: radical as in going to the root source; radical as in departing from the norm; radical as in making revolutionary change to current conditions. Researched, notated, and sourced, these chapters bring forward the voices of women academics writing across multiple disciplines and diversities to expand the understanding of women's influence and impact. The breadth and depth of ideas housed in these pages deserve to be studied in a radically different manner.

To best integrate information and foster identification with women's ways of knowing, we suggest studying this material in an interactive environment of open conversation. The radical root of education is circle. In pedagogy, circle dates to the Socratic method. In women's ways of knowing, circle dates back to tribal cookfires, councils of elders, oral lineage teaching, and the dawn of human socialization.

Circle is a return to integrating information into knowledge through multiple methodologies: reading, critical thinking, intellectual insight and emotional response, and anchoring narratives. Circle in a classroom, organization, or community invites a holistic environment that can be carried forward into lived experiences that empower readers in how they see themselves in the world and how they influence ways the world sees them.

To study this book using circle is a pedagogical shift from delivery to dialogue. The teacher or facilitator becomes the host who guides peer-centered conversation while holding focus on topic. The students, colleagues, or community members become participants informing one another's learning. The circle provides the environment of engagement. It goes like this:

First, create the space: put chairs in a circle so that all can see and hear one another. Create a focal point in the center: it may be decorative or relate symbolically to each chapter in the book. Like a bicycle wheel with many spokes anchored to the hub, the center becomes a repository for contributions and a way for participants to speak and listen through neutral ground. As the conversation flourishes with diverse thoughts, opinions, reactions, and stories the group experiences collaboration toward greater wisdom, instead of competition for "right answer."

As Baldwin and Linnea state in their book, *The Circle Way*, the circle puts "a leader in every chair." The host of the circle watches over the content, shapes the intention, opens and closes the space, elucidates the rules of engagement, and then participates in the process as a peer-mentor. A second role of authority within the rim is the guardian, who watches over group process, can call a pause in interaction, watches timeliness, helps to assure that every voice has a chance to be heard. The guardian employs a bell, chime, or other gentle noisemaker to

signal a “stop action,” a moment to take a breath and refocus on center, and then ring again to signal a “start action.” A host can initially hold both positions, but it is helpful to invite a participant to assist by serving this function and to empower anyone in the circle to ask for a pause when needed.

The strength of circle as a social container is maintained by understanding its structural elements. Circle is a kind of social molecule: it’s a building block that can be adapted to many environments and subcultures. In fact, in Baldwin’s first book, *Calling the Circle*, she postulates that circle is the global first culture that taught us how to be social beings. And her hope is that circle will become the future culture. Decisions you make in how to study elder women’s wisdom further such a goal.

Over decades of experience in training and leading circles, Baldwin and Linnea have refined a two-page guideline that illustrates circle’s structure. These Components of Circle are reproduced here. The guidelines are available for download at <https://www.thecircleway.net/circle-way-guidelines> in 16 languages.

The Circle Way

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR CALLING A CIRCLE

Circle started around the cook-fires of humanity’s ancestors and has accompanied us ever since. We remember this space. When we listen, we speak more thoughtfully. We lean in to shared purpose.

COMPONENTS OF CIRCLE

What transforms a meeting into a circle is the willingness of people to shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening that embodies the practices and structures outlined here.



INTENTION

Intention shapes the circle and determines who will come, how long the circle will meet, and what kinds of outcomes are to be expected. The caller of the circle spends time articulating intention and invitation

START-POINT OR WELCOME

Once people have gathered, it is helpful for the host, or a volunteer participant, to begin the circle with a gesture that shifts people’s attention from social space to council space. This gesture of welcome may be a moment of silence, reading a poem, or listening to a song – whatever invites centering.

SETTING THE CENTER

The center of a circle is like the hub of a wheel: all energies pass through it, and it holds the rim together. To help people remember how the hub helps the group, the center of a circle usually holds objects that represent the intention of the circle. Any symbol that fits this purpose or adds beauty will serve: flowers, a bowl or basket, a candle.

CHECK-IN / GREETING

Check-in helps people into a frame of mind for council and reminds everyone of their commitment to the expressed intention. It insures that people are truly present. Verbal sharing, especially a brief story, weaves the interpersonal net.

Check-in usually starts with a volunteer and proceeds around the circle. If an individual is not ready to speak, the turn is passed and another opportunity is offered after others have spoken. Sometimes people place individual objects in the center as a way of signifying their presence and relationship to the intention.

GUARDIAN

The single most important tool for aiding self-governance and bringing circle back to intention is the role of guardian. One circle member volunteers to watch and safeguard group energy and observe the circle’s process. The guardian usually employs a gentle noise-maker, such as a chime, bell, or rattle, that signals to everyone to stop action, take a breath, rest in a space of silence. The guardian makes this signal again and speaks to why s/he called the pause. Any member may call for a pause.

The Circle Way

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR CALLING A CIRCLE

SETTING CIRCLE AGREEMENTS

The use of agreements allows all members to have a free and profound exchange, to respect a diversity of views, and to share responsibility for the well-being and direction of the group. Agreements often used include:

- We hold all stories or personal material in confidentiality
- We listen to each other with compassion and curiosity
- We ask for what we need and offer what we can
- We agree to employ a group guardian to watch our need, timing and energy. We agree to pause at a signal when we feel the need to pause

THREE PRINCIPLES

1. **Leadership rotates** among all circle members
2. **Responsibility is shared** for the quality of experience
3. **Reliance is on wholeness**, rather than on any personal agenda

THREE PRACTICES

1. **Speak with intention:** noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment
2. **Listen with attention:** respectful of the learning process for all members of the group
3. **Tend to the well-being of the circle:** remaining aware of the impact of our contributions

FORMS OF COUNCIL

1. **Talking piece council** is often used as a part of check-in, check-out and whenever there is a desire to slow down the conversation, collect all voices and contributions, and be able to speak without interruption.
2. **Conversation council** is often used when reaction, interaction and an interjection of new ideas, thoughts and opinions are needed.

3. **Reflection, or silent council** gives each member time and space to reflect on what is occurring, or needs to occur, in the course of a meeting. Silence may be called so that each person can consider the role or impact they are having on the group, or to help the group realign with their intention, or to sit with a question until there is clarity.

CHECK-OUT AND FAREWELL

At the close of a circle meeting, it is important to allow a few minutes for each person to comment on what they learned, or what stays in their heart and mind as they leave. Closing the circle by checking out provides a formal end to the meeting, a chance for members to reflect on what has transpired, and to pick up objects if they have placed something in the center.

As people shift from council space to social space or private time, they release each other from the intensity of attention being in circle requires. Often after check-out, the host, guardian, or a volunteer will offer a few inspirational words of farewell, or signal a few seconds of silence before the circle is released.

May your circles be great teachers and places to rest on the journey.

This handout is a gift from **THE CIRCLE WAY**, a loosely connected global circle of colleagues who practice, consult, and teach **The Circle Way**. Originally mentored and guided by Ann Linnea and Christina Baldwin of PeerSpirit Inc., we offer our own consulting services and training opportunities all over the world. Drawing on the same set of teachings and practices, we work both independently and in partnership with one another to spread what we have learned further into the world.

thecircleway.net

All these components can be shaped to suit the situation and expressed in the vernacular of the learning environment. All bicycle wheels do not look the same: they are different sizes, colors, gears, number of spokes, but they all share a structural integrity for maintaining shape and strength.

What the educator/facilitator/host needs is openness to allow expression, to help people listen to differing reactions, ability to honor emotional reactions and help students hold the same, helping to acknowledge insights as they emerge.

What the student/colleague/participant needs is willingness to explore, to articulate these theories into their own words, to be curious about their own and other people's experience.

On the website that accompanies this book, the editors have interviewed Christina Baldwin and others discussing the fine points of circle in the classroom, organization, and community as well as the challenges and creativity that arises. This is

a dynamic and growing collection of videos and podcasts to support educators, learners, and book club members in using circle to study *Elder Women's Wisdom*.

In closing, the essential thing to remember is that circle is the practice of presence. Human beings are encoded to learn in environments of presence. For all the millennia of our existence, especially predating populace literacy, the voice of the storyteller, the information embedded in narratives, taught essential survival skills and ways of belonging to an evolving social unit: family, village, tribe, country, religion, ethnicity, etc. In the age of devices and disembodied educational, organizational, and community environments, the immersive experience of circle is a proven element to integrated knowledge.

Imagine: once upon a time women sat in circles, their hands busy with carding, spinning, knitting, or grinding corn, shaping a pot, kneading dough into patties for easy cooking and slipping them into the banked fire. Fire always in the center: warming, lighting, inspiring. Laughing, crying, teaching each other and the youngers gathered round: this is women's way of knowing.

Imagine invoking the resonance of that lineage into a classroom of 21st-century learners, into a project team, into community activism. Circle welcomes us back. Circle welcomes us home.

Acknowledgments

We three co-editors first came together in 2021 as members of a Mastermind cohort focused on women's wisdom. Since then, we have facilitated workshops and presentations at multiple conferences and evolved our thinking about elder women's wisdom.

Instrumental to our growth was a collaboration with Christina Baldwin, who encouraged us to shift our mindset and incorporate the archetype of circle that supports the collective wisdom espoused in this volume. Denise, Carolyn, and Kathleen are ever grateful for the elder wisdom shared and generosity of spirit embodied by Christina. We honor the legacy of Christina and Ann Linnea's circle praxis and value their thought leadership.

Our scholarship was informed and the manuscript enriched by the generous contributions of Khaula Murtadha, Rebecca Tallent, Elizabeth Parent, Rachel Metheny, and Joanna Sztandur. We are thankful they joined the circle and walked with us on our wisdom journey.

We invite you, the reader, to join us in Calling the Circle while embracing a reclaimed paradigm of leadership. The woven tapestry you fashion from the textural threads of your life's journey will create a symbolic and metaphorical outer garment that reflects the inner you.

Denise Thomson, Carolyn Morales, and Kathleen S. Grove
December 30, 2024

Introduction: Warp and Weft Threads

Denise Thomson, Carolyn Morales and Kathleen S. Grove

Wisdomers, LLC, USA

Abstract

In this introductory chapter, the editors offer an overview of the volume, *Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership*, and provide a rationale for its framework. An examination of historical precedents, qualitative research methodologies, and seven leadership threads will be undertaken within a framework designed to bridge academic research and practices of aging and wisdom.

The years 2021–2030 have been identified by the United Nations (UN) as the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (*UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, 2022*). The World Health Organization (WHO) classified four areas for action and identified four 'enablers' to support the effort. Leadership and capacity building, as one of the identified enablers, builds agency. The editors suggest in this introductory chapter that giving voice to leadership strengths embodied by elders contributes to the collaborative goals endorsed by the UN and WHO.

The qualitative research methodology, bricolage, ([Pratt et al., 2020](#)) will be examined in this chapter and introduced as a tool to construct new meanings of women's wisdom supported by the concept of conscious aging ([Levi-Strauss, 1966](#); [Pevny, 2014](#)). The researcher who utilizes this methodology is assigned the descriptor bricoleur ([Denzin & Lincoln, 2011](#)). As bricoleurs, the editors intend to showcase seven leadership threads – to include the intersectionality of women and leadership – ultimately weaving those threads into a new paradigm that encourages leaders of all genders to address internalized ageism and embrace aging as a generative stage of life.

Keywords: Circle practice; women's ways of knowing; narrative ways of knowing; spiral of experience; cultural paradigms; bricoleurs; transformation; capacity building; story; eldering

If you are a woman and you don't have a circle of women, then find one, because there is nothing more supportive than a circle of women.

—Nora Roberts (Garcia-Navarro, 2023)

Denise, Carolyn, and Kathleen welcome you home. Christina's invitation in the Foreword invites us to remember and embrace what we intuitively know about circle practice. Circle enlivens our lives, circle intersects our lives, circle epitomizes the wholeness of our lives. As noted by Christina, "circle is a life skill with the power to sustain both intimacy and cultural change" (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. 183). Without circle, we cannot thrive.

We three editors know this to be true as circle protocols enfolded this project. We first met as members of a Mastermind cohort exploring our experiences of aging. Principles espoused in *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010) grounded our conversations. An opportunity to facilitate an emersion session at a global conference was extended and accepted; a Wisdom Circle hosted on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

A book proposal was developed and submitted. A book contract was offered and, subsequently, declined. A second book proposal was submitted to a different publisher and, ultimately, turned down. Calling the circle helped provide comfort and empowered us to keep writing.

Our editor's circle evolved. Differences of opinion and approach led some participants away from the project and on to other paths. Still, an ever-present Wisdom Circle practice presented truths and offered grounding. We regrouped, asked for help, invited others on the journey, and strengthened our circle of trust. An opportunity to conduct another emersion session at an international conference fueled our creativity. The intersections of art and leadership were explored while embracing circle as a container.

Wisdom emerged and synchronicities multiplied. Our circle of authors celebrated when a second book contract with the original publisher was offered – and accepted! Circle practices became essential to editing; formalizing and finalizing a manuscript relied heavily on the center of the circle to hold differences. Throughout the years-long creation process, circle practice – at its most healing and uplifting – was vital.

The editors of this volume ask that you recognize in the following chapters the wise women who contributed to the book while also acknowledging the unique ways of knowing you, yourself, embody. The research examined and the stories told offer glimpses of the astounding capacity of women to gather, to learn, and to share those learnings ... often in circle. As Christina counsels: join us around the fire; listen to our stories.

In the mid-1980s, four women of differing perspectives gathered around a table to discuss what they were learning from their research. In their seminal work, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, Belenky et al. (1986) gave voice to the uniquely individual ways in which women craft an understanding of themselves and their world.

Forty years later, triggered by a pandemic, seven women of a certain age gathered around a virtual table to explore what they knew from lived experience about aging, leadership, and legacy-building. In this volume, *Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership*, authors honor the voices of elders and their unique leadership journeys to wholeness.

The editors of this volume facilitated an emersion session entitled “Never Finished” at a global conference in late 2024. The theme of the workshop accurately described a belief held by the eight authors who contributed to this book – specifically, women’s ways of knowing are ever evolving; our leadership essential to the well-being of future generations.

The beliefs, concepts, and processes we espouse follow. Editors grounded their scholarship in narrative ways of knowing and adopted bricolage as a methodology. Narrative ways of knowing offer a path to meaning-making. “The narrativizing of our understanding is how we make our learning visible to ourselves ... creating that coherent narrative is how we learn” (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, p. 77). Individual narratives are linked to adult learning as “to critically reflect on one’s life story is to claim the authority to rewrite it” (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, p. 25).

Rewriting one’s life story is transformational. In writing about transformational stories, Noonan (2007) referenced the “spiral of experience” developed by Baldwin (2005). She noted: “identifying the pivotal moments in our life through story allows us to compose an intimate portrait, a memoir of experience, revealing our inner self as well as the outer persona” (Noonan, 2007, p. 66). Baldwin (2005) described the spiral of experience as a learning curve that extends from a life-altering event that “shake[s] up the status quo” (p. 101), through reflective questioning to a “story of integration” (p. 108), and to an eventual “story of insight and meaning” (p. 112). In other words, the spiral of experience begets wisdom ... and elders have years of experience to harvest.

Bricolage as a methodology is ideally suited for this volume because it seeks to construct new knowledge from “previously silenced groups” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 7), and bricoleurs (those who engage this methodology) “are dedicated to questioning and learning from the excluded” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 48). Intrinsic to utilizing bricolage is the necessity to “...examine how the operation of power works within a specific discipline to construct dominant methodologies. In other words, it affords the bricoleur the capacity to interrogate the traditional methodological paradigms of leadership theory” (Morales, 2019).

Kincheloe (2005) posited:

The bricolage can be described as the process of getting down to the nuts and bolts of multidisciplinary research... In this way, bricoleurs move beyond the blinds of particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production. (p. 323)

Multi-disciplinary research and practical wisdom are interwoven in this volume, providing a rich tapestry of knowledge and application. Contributors to the volume

offer diverse, inclusive voices and extensive experiential knowledge – grounded in scholarship – that links eldering with leadership.

The seven leadership threads described in this volume weave an iterative, layered model of wisdom that honors the voices of elders and their unique leadership journeys to wholeness. *Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership*, advances emerging feminist research on aging, revisits archetypes, and endorses a pioneering paradigm of leadership.

The authors examine each of seven leadership threads – archetypal, intergenerational, indigenous, spiritual, developmental, intersectional, and embodied – from a scholarly perspective and then suggest a circle practice that integrates leadership praxis with wisdom. As such, the authors of this volume intend to spool knowledge, knit experiences, and weave wisdom into a textural tapestry that maps an elder's leadership journey to wholeness.

As the Director of the Office for Women at Indiana University Indianapolis for the past 20 years, co-editor **Kathleen S. Grove** has explored how women who suffer the intersection of ageism, sexism, and other 'isms' reclaim their agency, power, and place as leaders and wise women. The archetypal leadership thread she writes about seeks to revive "wise" archetypes and distill women's wisdom through the summoning of diverse women's voices and experiences around the aging process.

Director Grove recognizes the historical invisibility of women's lived experiences and knowledge and seeks to highlight it and restore it to the conversation about eldering and healthy aging. Her diverse careers in the fields of law, mental health counseling, and higher education offer insights into the historical, mythological, cultural, and universal stories that tell of women's lives and experiences. With this first leadership thread, Kathleen encourages women to excavate the archetypes, role models, and heroines in their own lives and follow them as guides, mentors, and leaders on their path to growth and development.

In the chapter on intergenerational eldering, **Dr Khaula Murtadha** reminds readers that the narratives of Black women's leadership rarely gain the attention of White history scholars. The daughter to parents who were deaf, she is the recipient of the distinguished Indiana University Indianapolis Chancellor's Medallion and is the Associate Vice Chancellor for the Office of Community Engagement.

Dr Murtadha shares the narratives of Black women leaders as they serve as "griots" or storytellers passing on their experiences, activism, and wisdom to future generations. Their actions are described as "midwifing" the physical and mental health of families; "othermothering" and serving as activist educators; "navigating" political loopholes and minefields; "fostering" creative images of theater, fashion, song, and dance; "warring" against injustices with truthful words using literary genius; and "organizing" and building alliances for racial self-help with an assuredness buttressed by spiritual fortitude. Khaula introduces Black women griot storytelling and the notion of Sankofa as valuable tools for the next generation. Through guiding, mentoring, protecting, and fighting, she suggests "griots" further intergenerational leadership and wisdom-building capacity.

Like many Indigenous women, the authors of the Indigenous leadership thread came into their way of thinking and knowing by listening to elders. **Drs Rebecca Tallent and Elizabeth Parent** are Aunties in their culture – a powerful, matriarchal

position in Native societies. Dr Tallent, a Tsalagi (Cherokee) journalist and emerita professor, developed #Press4Education and was awarded the Wells Memorial Key, the highest award in the Society of Professional Journalists, for her project.

Dr Parent was born into a blend of Athabascan and Yup'ik culture. She is the first Alaska Native woman to earn a PhD and the first Alaska Native woman to become a full professor. Dr Parent is a trailblazer, known as the “Treaty Lady” because of her attention to issues of Native American treaty rights, and the octogenarian in our group of elders.

Drs Tallent and Parent note that Aunties are revered, respected, and – sometimes – intimidating. Aunties teach history, culture, self-care, and self-development. Aunties share important stories of family and model how Indigenous people live in three worlds: the family world, the Native American world, and the greater world. They believe straddling three distinct universes can – with the help of elders – facilitate the transfer of wisdom and build leadership skills.

The spiritual leadership thread, authored by **Rev. Dr Rachel Metheny**, reveals how women’s voices of wisdom have shaped the Christian tradition in different and profound ways. Dr Metheny serves as the Senior Pastor in a United Methodist Church and has over 30 years of pastoral experience, primarily serving churches in low-income communities. She spent a year in Guatemala as a lay minister and has served as an adjunct professor in several institutions.

Dr Metheny, in writing about the spiritual thread, highlights how, within the confines of patriarchal societies, some women were given unique authority and even advised bishops, popes, and kings. From the examples of women mystics of early Christianity and contemporary Christian feminists, she identifies three wisdom themes for spiritual leadership: (1) deconstructing the patriarchy of the church, (2) using the language of traditional Christianity but altering it in such a way as to breathe the new life into old doctrines, and (3) engaging the power of being vulnerable and honest with others.

A recognized provider of human capital consulting services for over 25 years, **Dr Joanna Sztandur** is a pracademic with research interests in leadership development, women and leadership, leadership identity and organizational power. Having grown up behind the Iron Curtain, and currently residing in South Africa, she brings a multicultural lens to the developmental leadership thread.

The developmental leadership thread suggests leader development is adult development and, as such, is an emerging field of inquiry. Dr Sztandur discusses developmental leadership in the context of gender to illuminate the intersections between the fields of adult development and leader development in scholarly research literature. Self-authoring ways of knowing and ways of wisdom are examined using examples from the author’s research. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on mature leadership and its multidimensional aspects of time and transformational change, direct and indirect leadership experiences, formal and informal mentorship.

The intersectional leadership thread offers the reader a primer on how to connect the constructs of intersectionality and belonging to their respective leadership practices. Co-editor **Dr Carolyn Morales** has more than 20 years of leadership experience operationalizing diversity visions into strategic plans and solutions within higher education, nonprofit, and business sectors. Her research interests include

women's leadership, feminist epistemologies, belonging, and intersectionality. She is a fellow of the Riley Institute's Diversity Leadership Academy, a graduate of the Association of American Medical Colleges Healthcare Executive Diversity and Inclusion program, and a recipient of the Toni Morrison Society Founders Award.

Dr Morales explores weaving conceptual threads of wisdom to demonstrate how the methodological practice of bricolage creates something new for the discipline of leadership to consider. As such, the bricolage introduces a change framework, *Intersectional Belonging in Leadership™*, as the structural background that entwines the intellectual strands of theory to practice and highlights how leaders, specifically elders as leaders, can engage the praxis of intersectional belonging as part of their leadership legacy to share with other current and future leaders.

The seventh leadership thread, embodied leadership, is the ultimate 'owning' of one's life experiences and lessons learned. **Dr Denise Thomson**, co-editor of the volume, is a scholar-practitioner with more than 35 years of experience facilitating participatory leadership and collaborative conversation circles. She is chair-emerita of the Executive Leadership Team of the ILA Women and Leadership Member Community and received an award from the group for Outstanding Practice with Broad Impact in 2021.

Dr Thomson believes one of the keys to an embodied leadership thread is tacit knowledge – an understanding of self that is sometimes hard to describe to others. The sense of wholeness and wellness assumed when one weaves stories told to self, about self, into meaning-making events that facilitate transformative learning experiences, is tacit knowledge. The integration of said tacit knowledge and personal strengths begets integrity, translates into an embodied leadership style, and advances wisdom. Significantly, voicing long-life learnings reveals who we are as elders and furthers women's ways of knowing.

Sixty-plus years ago, novelist Mary McCarthy penned the words, "we are the hero of our own story" (McCarthy, 1961, p. 190). In the intervening years, scholars have studied – and often debated – the power of story, narrative ways of knowing, and inner voices as determinants of agency and efficacy. In this volume, eight authors have added their unique voices to the conversation. Their voices are modulated by differing cultures and life experiences. We invite you to listen to their voices, find whispers that resonate with – or, perhaps, dispute – your voice, and welcome new learnings.

One new learning presented for your consideration in this volume is a synthesis of the seven leadership threads to introduce a new paradigm called the Leadership Loom™. This model offers readers with insight into the production of knowledge and practices that shape one's leadership development. The authors intend that this new model represents a pathway for readers to engage elder women's wisdom.

Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership concludes with an expectation that current cultural paradigms of aging and wisdom will be disrupted and reimagined by individuals, as well as society, as an outcome of applying the concepts espoused in this volume. The final thoughts chapter offers a bricoleurs' understanding of how each leadership thread contributes to the expression of elder women's wisdom and how the groundbreaking book, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986) informed our thinking.

As bricoleurs, the editors expose in the seven threads an archetypal model of wisdom unique to women's ways of knowing. The metaphor of weaving is framed as a process rather than a product – a framework that allows one to unravel the fabric, when necessary, and make seemingly invisible warp and weft threads visible to create a handspun heirloom tapestry with knots, tangles, and dropped threads that reflect part of the beauty of legacy building. Weaving is investigated as a process of deconstructing and reconstructing; in this example, a new way of integrating leadership threads of wisdom.

Christina Baldwin notes in the Foreword that circle practice is a radical pedagogy in the classroom. Seemingly endorsing her notion, Jackson (1995), as cited in [Rossiter and Clark \(2007\)](#), identified the use of stories in educational settings as epistemological (to impart knowledge) and transformative (to lead to new insights and expand perspectives). Autobiographical connections are fostered when “the educational setting encourages learners to identify the congruencies, as well as the incongruencies, between their meaning systems and the new concepts or ideas in the curricular content” ([Rossiter & Clark, 2007](#), p. 75).

Calling the Circle allows for interpretation and interpretive space to coexist with research and scholarship as one harvests and integrates wisdom-building concepts. Calling the Circle is advocated throughout the volume as the authors suggest it is the thread that must be continually woven and rewoven to ensure the tapestry remains strong.

Calling the Circle invites support on our journey to wisdom; it is a transformational tool for increasing awareness, letting go, and embracing change. Circle is an archetype of the human spirit and a practice that transforms groups of people into participatory learners and leaders ([Baldwin & Linnea, 2010](#)). As such, in their Call to Action, editors endorse continued integration of leadership threads and advocate for shifting societal conversations about aging by recommending readers join or lead a supportive network of circle practitioners and participants.

Finally, *Elder Women's Wisdom: A Reclaimed Paradigm of Leadership*, aligns with a global collaborative led by the United Nations to bring visibility to and inform societal beliefs about eldering. The years 2021–2030 have been identified by the United Nations (UN) as the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing ([UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, 2022](#)). The World Health Organization (WHO) classified four areas for action and identified four ‘enablers’ to support the effort. Leadership and capacity building, as one of the identified enablers – and a focus of this volume – builds agency.

The editors of this volume suggest that giving voice to the seven leadership threads embodied by the above-referenced authors contributes to the collaborative goals endorsed by the UN and WHO. The volume's Call to Action and recommended circle practices support the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing initiatives, are intended to advance the leadership capacity of aging populations, and, ultimately, are expected to contribute to the well-being of global societies.

We, as older women, have been and continue to be, open to learning life's lessons. It is an empowering belief for it suggests that we elders have much to offer our world. We offer the seven leadership threads described in this volume not as THE answers but as conversation starters. Our diverse and distinct voices provide examples of how life experiences intersect with age to create wisdom.

References

- Baldwin, C. (2005). *Storycatcher*. New World Library.
- Baldwin, C., & Linnea, A. (2010). *The circle way: A leader in every chair*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. Basic Books.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. SAGE.
- Dresner, E. (2017). Reviewed work: Epistemic Friction Gila Sher. *The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, 66(January 2017), 93–103. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26167094>
- Garcia-Navarro, L. (2023, November 18). The critics scoffed. Nora Roberts kept writing. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/18/books/nora-roberts-romance-interview.html>
- Jackson, P. W. (1995). On the place of narrative in teaching. In H. McEwan & K. Egan (Eds.), *Narrative in teaching, learning, and research* (pp. 3–23). Teachers College Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004). Redefining rigour and complexity in research. In J. L. Kincheloe & K. S. Berry (Eds.), *Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing the bricolage* (pp. 23–49). Open University.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2005). On to the next level: Continuing the conceptualization of the bricolage. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(3), 323–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405275056>
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The savage mind*. University of Chicago.
- McCarthy, M. (1961). Characters in fiction. *Partisan Review*, 28(2), 171–191.
- Morales, C. J. (2019). *Intersectionality: Engaging the epistemology of leadership theory* [Doctoral dissertation, Antioch University]. <https://aura.antioch.edu/etds/517>
- Noonan, S. J. (2007). *Leadership through story: Diverse voices in dialogue*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Orenstein, P. (2023). *Unraveling: What I learned about life while shearing sheep, dyeing wool, and making the world's ugliest sweater*. HarperCollins.
- Pevny, R. (2014). *Conscious Living, Conscious Aging: Embrace & Savor Your Next Chapter*. Simon and Schuster.
- Pratt, M. G., Sonenshein, S., & Feldman, M. S. (2020). Moving beyond templates: A bricolage approach to conducting trustworthy qualitative research. *Organizational Research Methods*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428120927466>
- Rossiter, M., & Clark, M. C. (2007). *Narrative and the practice of adult education*. Krieger Publishing Company.
- UN Decade of Healthy Ageing. (2022, November 7). WHO's work on the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030).