Servant Leaders Who Picked Up the Broken Glass

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Abstract

This reflective essay bears witness to the fact that women of African ascent in academia look to religious pioneers within the culture as role models to achieve goals and reinforce spiritual and professional values while attempting to break the glass ceiling. Drawing from a literature analysis on the global glass ceiling, we find that African American women whose spiritual journey looms large on the professional horizon tend to reflect pioneering strategies developed by historical role models from traditional religion. Following this, their life work sees them emerge as leaders at home, within the community, church and world-at-large. In fact, women of African ascent seldom begin with an idea of being a leader; rather they begin as servants within the parameters of everyday life. In the day to day experience of being committed to a traditional religious ideal there is little time to think about ceilings. It is only as these women become valued workers as servant leaders that institutional constraints become more apparent. We provide both historical and contemporary indications to illuminate that servant leadership is a tradition among women of African ascent.

Keywords: servant leadership, glass ceiling, African American women studies, intersectionality

Background

Findings from our previous qualitative research on women of color in higher education and leadership positions confirm that spirituality serves as a refuge for difficult times (Marina 2009; Marina 2011). While this essay is not a review of the literature on the glass ceiling, it was our most recent literature analysis on the glass ceiling that merited a re-examination of key findings and manifestations. The research question that guided this reflective review was: What important contemporary determinants in breaking the glass ceiling in higher education have received minimal attention? Several databases were searched using the terms "glass ceiling" and "glass ceiling effect(s)". Descriptive categorizations of documents were aggregated to construct new knowledge to answer this question. The terms *mentoring, religion* and *spirituality* were overwhelmingly perceptible as coping strategies. Three experts who have published widely on related topics were consulted. These experts suggested additional publications for review and reflection. A critical analysis of these documents provided evidence (or the lack of evidence) regarding the determinants for breaking the glass ceiling that have received little attention and gives rise to this reflective essay. Finally, with our emic discussions, we add our conception of the glass ceiling as a nuanced construction that blends the pragmatic character of the spiritual phenomenon of servant leadership and the exigencies of the African cultural dynamic.

When we talk about the glass ceiling in Women's Studies, we often refer to the highest level that a professional woman can attain in a given professional field without running into an impasse in terms of achieving higher goals. At one time the term "glass ceiling" was used mostly to refer to mainstream, upwardly mobile white women entering male dominated professions. Today, the term is more broadly used to include all women from various professional points of view. In African American Women's Studies, breaking the glass ceiling refers to the collective, historical efforts of Black women to break down racial barriers, and destroy yokes of oppression globally. Moreover, African American Women's Studies enjoins spirituality and religious practice to achieve higher levels of leadership that benefit the larger community. Dantley (2003) opined that spirituality is actually demonstrated in African Americans' practice of human freedom and that the acknowledgement of one's spiritual self has served as the very bedrock of African American life. In this way, argued theologian Jacquelyn Grant (1995), we underscore and perceive the inter-structuring of racism, classism, and sexism that has typically denied equality and ascendancy for marginal groups. This inter-structuring is an oxymoronic process enmeshed in a context of racial and social oppression that has helped birth survival mechanisms such as improvisation, adaptation, and transformation.

If we examine the glass ceiling effect through the lens of the *theory of intersectionality*, we unabashedly maintain that African American spirituality has given women of African ascent the ability to transcend the political, social, and economic limitations imposed by racism. First highlighted by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), the theory of intersectionality began as an exploration of the oppression of Black women in society. This theory suggests that various culturally and socially constructed categories, such as race, gender, and class, interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. This theory also suggests that discrete expressions and forms of oppression are shaped by one another. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Accordingly, experiences of class, gender, sexuality, etc., simply cannot be adequately understood without carefully considering the influences of racialization. Through this intersectional lens, we also attempt to show how our experiences as women are interconnected.

Just as Grant (1995) insists on the connectedness of African Americans as "links in a chain" combating oppression, this writing rests upon the strengths of a long chain of African American women who broke the stained glass ceiling[1] through education and writing as fundamental tools of resistance. The glass ceiling has been virtually impervious to many qualified females, especially women of color who wish to assume leadership roles. When it comes to the traditional African American church, while women may dominate in numbers, men still dominate in power. While women were slow to be accepted as called and ordained preachers, it has taken even longer for African American women to be accepted as pastors, bishops, and governing denominational administrators.

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In general, it must be noted that change occurs more abruptly when a critical event is brought to the forefront. The status and presence of women as well as opportunities for inclusion in previously male dominated roles, increased dramatically as a result of key American history benchmarks such as: 19th Amendment to the Constitution (1920); World War II workforce needs; Civil Rights Act of 1964; and Title IX Act (1972). The 19th Amendment was ratified on August 18th, 1920, guaranteeing all American women the right to vote. World War II created a shortage of male workers which led to opportunities for women in non-traditional fields (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration 2011). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was legislation that outlawed major forms of discrimination against African Americans and women (Brauer 1983). Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 declares that no American shall not be excluded from participation in education or discriminated against in any education program on the basis of sex (Valitin 1997). Enlarging the scope of American democracy to include women meant significant gains for African Americans in all areas of public life.

Education has also been a key factor in tapping the glass ceiling for religious leaders who emerge with strong teaching and scholarship credentials, and *vice versa*. Patricia Hill Collins wrote that African American women often invoke our own concrete experiences and those of other women and communities of color in our selection of topics for investigation (Collins 1990). We study the concrete experiences and acts of other women of African ascent, while at the same time striving to understand and extrapolate wisdom and meaning. Our concrete experiences, uniquely individual are at the same time collectively connected. On the historical timeline, each pioneer builds upon the work of another, enlarging the scope of credible evidence among African American spiritual pioneers. In other words, each generation of pioneers serves the following generation of ceiling breakers.

As women of African ascent in the world of academia, we are able to draw upon the strength and courage of these women. Through these women, we find a connection and are encouraged to welcome the conflict inherent in our diversity, to work within ambiguity, and to develop the purpose in our work of not just honoring our own version of the practice, praxis, and politics of teaching and research as truth, but to seek to honor truth that is created and negotiated in and between ourselves, in relationship with one another as teacher scholars. We find that there is value in being connected. These connections aid in seeking harmony and wholeness as a way to discern "truth" in every aspect of our lives. For us, visionaries like Pauli Murray (1910-1985) Barbara C. Harris (1930-); and Vashti McKenzie (1947-) exemplify servant leadership and 'evidence of things not seen' for many African American women. Drawing on the cultural norms of West Africa and the oppressive realities that people of African ascent faced in this country, these women have demonstrated a profound commitment to the well-being and survival of people of African ascent.

African Ascent

The notion of African ascendance (Dillard 2006) implies a shift in the ideologies and metaphors that have been taken for granted in our lives. Dillard deliberately sought language that attempts to unmask traditionally held political and cultural constructions/constrictions, language that more accurately organizes and transforms descriptions of sociocultural relationships. Language itself is epistemic and a way to understand reality. The very language we use to define and describe phenomena transforms ways of knowing and producing knowledge. In contrast to the term descendent (a well-established canon of western thought), the term ascendant or ascent is used to articulate how reality is known when based in the roots of African thought. This epistemological thought embodies a distinguishable difference in culturally constructed social identities for African American women. Uncovering the ideologies that we have taken for granted and have (mis)guided our purposes and practices, allows us to demystify and reframe our reality. Thus, the use of the term African ascendant/ascent is an invitation to the reader to be aware of multiple ways of knowing. The term descend ascribes to falling or tumbling down, which has a negative connotation. In contrast, the term ascend can be described as coming up, which has a positive connotation. Illuminating the meaning within this discourse is our gesture toward a confluence of traditional modes of representation and African translation.

The Servant Leader as Professional Role Model

It is critical that we contextualize the thoughts and actions of African American women leaders within their particular cultural and historical legacies. It was Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. who popularized the saying: "Anyone can be great because anyone can be a servant." King, in popularizing this statement draws from the Biblical maxim: "Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43). Jesus Christ appeared at a moment of crisis in ancient Palestinian culture, democratizing ministry for men and women by taking religious teaching out of the synagogue and to the roadside and hillsides on the outskirts of town. Jesus' inclusive ministry validated women like Martha (John 11:19 ff.) and Mary (John 12:3 ff.) as servant leaders. African American women drawing upon this mode from slavery to freedom see a connection between serving the church and serving the world. "Religion," says Anna Julia Cooper in *Voice from the South*, "must be life made true; and life in action, growth, development…And a life made true cannot confine itself –it must reach out and twine around every pulsing interest within reach of its uplifting tendrils" (194). We agree with Cooper that servant leaders use religion and education in every aspect of ministry to the world. African American women as educational leaders share as they serve and lead in their communities. These women have a strong sense of efficacy and deeply care about their mission to serve, lead and educate (Alston 2005). These women have a sense of spirituality and unyielding faith that grounds them and enables them to strive towards excellence.

A Theoretical Perspective on Servant Leadership

In this section we explore the intersection of spirituality in leadership and Greenleaf's (1977) theory of a servant leader. Taking a step back, we examine the meaning of "servant leadership". Robert Greenleaf began his discourse on the *Servant Leader* in the 1960's and early 1970's out of concern for students on university campuses who seemed devoid of hope. In pursuit of hope and wholeness of life and his overarching concern for the total process of education, he has profoundly expressed how these two roles, servant and leader, can build a better society. Servant leaders are described as people who feel the need to serve and then seek to lead in order to serve (Greenleaf 1977; Spears 2002). A servant leader is also described as one who makes sure that other people's needs are being served. Greenleaf's servant-leader manifests several notable characteristics: (a) sustained intentness of listening; (b) facilitator of language and imagination; (c) the ability to withdraw and reorient oneself; (d) empathy; (e) foresight; and (f) persuasion. Greenleaf contended that more servants should emerge as leaders or should only follow servant-leaders. This notion of servant leadership runs counter-cultural to traditional Western notions of leadership where men are heroes holding positions of power (Greenleaf 1997; Ngunjiri 2009). However, the women in this essay illustrate the fact that servant leadership is not counter-cultural in the traditional African context.

Greenleaf posited servant-leaders as people who helped to build community within the institutions they led. He also portended that American society has pinned so much of hope for a better society on the school, but the school has become a "social upgrading mechanism" that has destroyed communities. West (1988) in subscribing to spirituality, suggested that schools can be communities of hope, where hope becomes praxis, meaning, and reflection in action. Those within this community engage in critical reflection of their situationality and construct an agenda for change. Community is important in African contexts and women leaders of African ascent work to strengthen existing communities, as well as re-create a sense of community where needed (Ngunjiri 2009).

Greenleaf's servant leadership concepts emerged strongly in the 1970's, after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.in 1968. If we remember that King died helping sanitation workers on strike, then we can understand the impact of servant leadership as being associated with "the least in the kingdom"(Matthew 5:19). Certainly, African American women were the least of the least in the kingdom both politically and professionally in the 1970s where servant leadership was in practice but just beginning to be "theorized". Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) illuminates the tradition of such women and educators as seeing themselves as "othermothers" who, through feelings of shared responsibility commit themselves to their community. This commitment is not simply interpersonal but profoundly political in intent and practice. Servant leadership has been in practice by African American women and even women who may not have been considered as leaders. Those who emerged as leaders had to spend considerable time in the making as servants, as did their ancestors.

As the term servant-leader (historically proliferated throughout the African American church paradigm, with roots dating back to slavery, and further to Africa) gained currency in mainstream American professions, so too, did the need and tendency to solidify its meaning. This paradoxical term and concept is now in its fourth decade of usage in the business and professional world. Similar to the characteristics described by Greenleaf (1997), Spears (2004) identified ten characteristics central to the development of servant leaders. These characteristics are: (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) awareness, (e) persuasion, (f) conceptualization, (g) foresight, (h) stewardship, (i) commitment to the growth of people, and (j) building community. Such characteristics are found in African American women pioneers who have broken glass ceilings in religion and education, but continue to sweep up broken glass as they go for those of us that journey behind them. Through their habits of servitude we find solace in our everyday lives and in our lives as academics.

From this mindset, we suggest that educator, college president, and self-described missionary Mary McLeod Bethune, certainly looked back to role models like Sojourner Truth, Zilpha Elaw, and Jarena Lee who used religion combined with political savvy to write about and preach moral authority and social justice in their work and travels as ministers. Bethune, a graduate of the Moody Bible Institute could stand alongside complementary contemporaries like Anna Julia Cooper, and Julia Foote who excelled in education and mastered the spiritual keynotes of their times as *avant garde* practitioners of African American Women Studies. Bethune's eventual decision to leave academe for rigorous political and diplomatic pursuits follows that of predecessors who combined servant work with organizing women for effective leadership outside of the home and the local church.

Educators, ministers and missionaries helped usher in social welfare and higher education opportunities for women through organizations like the National Council of Negro Women, the Federated (Women's) Clubs, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Federation of Afro-American women. African American educators who move beyond the confines of a single profession and enter ministry realize a spiritual fulfillment that might not be possible within a proscribed academic discipline. Of course this speaks to enriching aspects of spiritual possibilities for women who seek a higher level of God-consciousness combined with secular professionalism.

Recent research includes spirituality and faith as a natural extension of servant leadership. For example, Autry (2001), Bennis (2004), Fullen (2002), Greenleaf (2008) and Wheatley (2002), are in agreement that "spiritual leadership in education is an alluring but complex phenomenon" (Fullen 2002, 14). Doohan (2007, 282) asserted that:

> Spiritual leadership is not something you add on to an already existing leadership style; rather, it permeates everything one does, whether at home, in social life, or at work. The best leaders are the ones who are grounded in motivating values and have "faith" and they live differently as a result of it.

In further consideration of a biblical and historical definition of servant leader, Mark 10: 35-45, states that . . . whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Again, we see that service comes before greatness. Elder (2011) thought of this biblical passage as the benchmark of servant leadership; Jesus is the teacher, and is the supreme example of redemptive service. Somehow, servants agreed that this core tenet of Jesus' good news should be written. The writer of the Mark text (also found in Matthew 20:26) shows that a fundamental principle, or approach to learning servant leadership is to develop the habit of organizing and writing down experience, thoughts, and discoveries. If we follow through with writing as a core concept of servant leadership we find that it is another venue African American women used to clarify their understanding, of spiritual ideals, which informed and reinforced practice and behavior.

African American women writers have frequently combined creative efforts with educational pursuits on the way to religious leadership roles. There is a long chain of academic, religious writers who voiced a unified cry against racial oppressions. Zora Neale Hurston's novels and short stories, along with anthropological studies like *The Sanctified Church* informed America of a distinct African American religious culture. Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrate sermonic techniques full of poetic methodology breakthrough the white literary press, thusly helping readers to understand the folklore that informed the 'souls of Black folk'. In like manner, following Hurston's pioneering work, Alice Walker's introspective heroine, Celie, in the epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* writes letters to God, outlining her growing conceptual framework of spiritual awareness, which sees belonging to a community of women mothers and sisters as inseparable from belonging to the God of love and salvation. These African American women writers joined links in a literary chain going back to Maria Miller Stewart -America's first Black woman political writer who emerged in the 1800s (Richardson 1987), Frances E.W. Harper who wrote eleven books of poetry between 1854-1901 (Graham 1988), Ida B. Wells Barnett - a teacher, writer and social activist who shocked people by writing about lynchings in her newspaper in the early 1900's (Fradin and Fradin 2000), and finally, Mary Church Terrell – editor for the *Oberlin Review* at Oberlin College in Ohio, she is also known for her autobiography (Church 1940) .

In African American theology, new and emergent fields of liberation theologies- feminist and womanist theologies inform the works of Katie Canon (1993), Cheryl Gilkes (2001), Delores S. Williams (1993), and Jacquelyn Grant (1989). These women are academics, active clergy, and social activists. There is more than one glass ceiling glaring at their efforts. The classroom, the boardroom, and the pulpit each present formidable challenges. As modern models of servant leadership, they also write about theological understandings from a particular point of view that converges with a chain of predecessors, but at the same time departs to acknowledge African American religion as a dynamic, evolving, spiral process.

Modern Models of a Servant Leadership

Pauli Murray (1910-1985) serves as an example to help us unpack the idea of 'spirit' with a research and teaching paradigm. We begin to find some clarity and location of our own scholarship trajectory in relation to the field, as well as an identity location as an African American women scholar deeply interested in how culture and spirituality might serve critical roles in our community. From 1977 to 1984, Pauli Murray, served as the first Black female Episcopal priest in the Washington and Baltimore area in the United States. She was a remarkable woman pioneer and servant leader in several capacities. Born in Baltimore, she began her academic schooling at Hunter College (B.A., 1933), Howard University Law School (LL. B., 1944); the University of California Berkeley (LL. M., 1945), and Yale Law School. She was the first Black woman to receive a degree of doctor of juridical science from Yale in 1965.

Murray maintained several careers. She served as deputy attorney general of California in 1946, the first Black to hold that position. From 1968-1973, she was professor of American studies at Brandeis University. Murray's published writings include State's Laws on Race and Color, (1951), Dark Treatment and Other Poems,(1970), Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage, (1987), and more. Murray was named Woman of the Year in 1946 by the National Council of Colored Women and again in 1947 by Mademoiselle Magazine. Serving as one of the 32 founders of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, she won the Eleanor Roosevelt Award from the Professional Woman's Caucus in 1971. Pauli Murray died of cancer in Pittsburgh on July 1, 1985.

We also find Bishop Barbara C. Harris (1930-) to be a model of strength, confidence, and a servant leader. She was the first woman to be consecrated a bishop of the Episcopal Church. Harris was elected bishop for the Diocese of Massachusetts, USA, on September 24, 1988, and ordained and consecrated on February 11, 1989. The significance of this election was that it marked a historic moment for the Diocese of Massachusetts, the Episcopal Church in the United States, and the worldwide Anglican Communion, as it speaks to inclusiveness of women in all orders of the Church's ordained ministry -- deacons, priests, and now bishops.

The possible election of a woman to the House of Bishops in the United States was a principal subject for debate at the 1988 summer's General Convention of the Episcopal Church and at a conference of Anglican bishops from around the world. Harris was breaking glass far beyond her community. After considerable debate the Anglican bishops approved a resolution urging the autonomous Anglican bodies around the world to respect one another's decisions regarding women's ordinations and consecration as bishops. Bishop Frank Griswold of Chicago said that the Anglican Communion was leading the way in integrating women into the ministry of bishops, priest, and deacons. Many welcomed the news that a woman was elected Bishop in a diocese of Massachusetts.

At the same time, another bishop, Bishop Graham Leonard of London (Church of England) said that the election would cause deep divisions in the Church and he would be unable to recognize a woman bishop or the validity of any ordinations or confirmations performed by this woman. As Meyerson & Fletcher (2000, 136) contend, "It's not just the ceiling that's holding women back; it's the whole structure of the organizations in which we work: the foundation, the beams, the walls, the very air".

The third woman that we wish to highlight as a source of inspiration for current-day women of African ascent is Reverend Dr. Vashti McKenzie. She was the first woman to pastor at Payne Memorial African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. In, 2000, she became the first female bishop in the 213-year history of the AME Church. McKenzie has broken barriers in publishing, politics, and the social advancement of African peoples. Her great grandfather started the *Afro-American Newspaper* in 1892; her grandfather succeeded his father as publisher and editor. Her family modeled a balance between career and faith, maintaining God as the central focus of their family life. She started working for her family newspaper and wrote a column, "The McKenzie Report." She thereafter hosted a television show and worked for WEBB and WYBC, two local gospel radio stations. Her abilities were rewarded with a promotion to program director. After a period of fasting and praying, McKenzie felt a call to the preaching ministry by the Holy Spirit.

She prepared herself with formal education receiving a Master of Divinity degree and then a Doctor of Ministry degree. She has helped transform communities into viable places to live and created training programs for employment. She developed the Human Economic Development Center that provides job training and placement, Seniors daycare, and youth and adult-education programs. She readily acknowledges that these successes are not hers alone but also the contribution of her church members' gifts, talents, and time. Dr. McKenzie desired to expand her ministry globally, and campaigned for bishop. She utilized her journalism and marketing experience and became the first female AME bishop. Upon her election Dr. McKenzie stated, "The stained glass ceiling has been pierced and broken!" She also contends that it is OK to be beautiful, intelligent, and used by God. The myth still abounds that a woman must choose between her preaching career and her family. Dr. McKenzie has been a role model for many woman of African ascent. Her story affirms that we can have a family and career at the same time. She wrote a book for the development of female clergywomen, citing "Ten Commandments for African-American Clergywomen":

1. Thou shall be prepared.
2. Thou shall be a team player.
3. Thou shall network
4. Thou shall be accountable.
5. Thou shall empower others.
6. Thou shall use sound management principles and techniques.
7. Thou shall be committed to the servant leadership style of management, exemplified by Jesus Christ.
8. Thou shall pursue continuing education and personal development in order to provide quality leadership.
9. Thou shall develop, pursue, and establish a Bible-centered ethics and ethos in all areas of ministry.
10. Thou shall be accessible to Christ and to those you are called to serve.

Although the title specifies a particular race and gender, these words of wisdom are applicable to women in several disciplines despite cultural origin and gender. We view these commandments as recommendations that can be used by women of African ascent in the academy as they aspire to educational roles in leadership. We point out that the leader as servant is embedded in these ten recommendations. We view this recommendation to servant as leaders as an African worldview and paradigm. It is conceived as a unified spiritual whole, that is, that one's selfhood is understood and constituted as body, mind, *and* spirit and affirmed in relationship to both one's group and to one's Creator.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) provide a strong warning that one might do well to locate oneself within a paradigm and that "membership" would provide at least some protection from the paradigm "wars" that our field is engaged in fighting, namely, breaking glass ceilings. Such a paradigm becomes the way in which we as scholars, teachers, and thinkers articulate our sense of life around us and make sense and order of the universe. While an African-centered viewpoint would suggest that educational researchers make sense of their academic worlds in holistic terms, traditionally Western and European worldviews, by nature, categorize and separate servants and leaders in order to deem one paradigm good and the other bad.

Discussion: Lessons Learned

As women of African ascent we find a sense of belonging in our religious communities. This community has provided a buffer against discrimination and has served as a source of socialization, which provides a safe haven where we can freely speak. Through our own research we find that many African American women view the religion and spirituality as an explanatory framework for adverse advents.

Prayer and private devotion are considered as major coping mechanisms. While we agree with the notion within African American Women's Studies that breaking the glass ceiling refers to the collective efforts of Black women, we find it is still a series of individualistic events. Whereas Dantley (2003) explicates that one's spiritual self has been a foundation in African American life, the spiritual self of women of African ascent in academe is somewhat latent. Reminiscent of the inter-structuring and oxymoronic processes in academe (Grant 1995) experienced by the aforementioned women, the women in our studies, and our own individualistic experiences, we better understand the necessity of our improvisations and transformations towards our roles in leadership. These same women bring confirmation to the theory of intersectionality within the walls (and ceilings) of academe. We find spirituality to be the catalyst that transcends the limitations imposed by racism and sexism. Unfortunately, we also have found that many women of African ascent are not mentoring other women as they break the glass ceiling; even more so, they do not share their liberating spiritual experiences that bolstered them to continue tapping on the glass ceiling. It is here we again express this juxtaposition of the individualistic experience and considering the influence of showing how our experiences as women are interconnected.

The trajectory of historical events for in general and women of color in particular, give us an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on the legacy of women of African ascent. While Pauli Murray, Barbara Harris, and Vashti McKenzi have provided groundbreaking and glass shattering work through servant leadership, there are many more women that can serve as examples. These women of African ascent are far from the only examples of understanding an intersectional approach to effective servant leadership in the midst of existing barriers. We can be the example and mentor if we choose not to compartmentalize our multiple identities and divorce one facet of our identity for another. We can choose to consider our work in academe and operate at the intersections of servant leadership while simultaneously addressing social and cultural issues.

We reflected upon our own spiritual identities and asked ourselves if we exhibited the characteristics of a servant-leader (Spears 2004; Greenleaf 1997) and mentor for other women of African ascent. Dillard (2006) noted that African American academics are often faced with the dilemma of how to employ the spiritual essence which is the very fabric of Black life within academic contexts. With this reflection and the exemplars that have gone before us, we are both inspired and challenged to move our spirituality from the margin of our academic lives to the center. We can consider our research and teaching as both an intellectual and spiritual endeavor. In doing so, we can create an academic life that serves human beings, engaging our spirit and thus transforming our inner and outer lives. In this way, the purpose of our research and teaching will become centered on serving and influencing our community. Our identities have been developed against the backdrop of racism, classism, and about 'who we are *not*' versus who we are. We are persuaded that if we immerse ourselves more deeply in that which is African, both as a way of being and a way of thinking, our research and teaching will connect more deeply with our identities and purpose.

We believe it is our responsibility to engage in this continual examination, reflection, and definition of who we are in our academic lives and who we are becoming. While we can learn best about ourselves by reflecting in solo spaces, we must consider the missing element of the need to engage the *experiences* that unite us.

Concluding Thoughts and Implications

We must understand that what we have all too often attributed to luck or coincidence or our own ability, belongs to the workings of a spiritual essence. Although women of African ascent have made great strides in their collective well-being, they are still affected by systems such as the glass ceiling effect that perpetuate racism and sexism. It is important to understand how women of African ascent cope with stressors to maintain positive self-esteem while facing adversity. In a study conducted by Byrd (2001), she found that religious beliefs influenced self-esteem. Almost all of her participants reported that their belief in God was the reason for their high self-esteem. Their main sources of self-esteem were God, family, role models, and self-reflected appraisal.

Glass ceilings are not easily broken, but they can be subtly negotiated by women who combine hard work with servant-hood, community effort, and an awareness of God and neighbor as essential to ascendancy. African American women leaders whose work is informed by serving God and community form a chain of successes that rise above the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling is a metaphor for hindrances such as institutional racism, classism, and sexism that serve as stumbling blocks to women in the professions, academia, church leadership, governance, and mainstream ministry. If African American women had called attention to themselves while they were metaphorically breaking the glass ceiling, the outcomes for collective goals may not have been as rich and rewarding. The chain might not have emerged as strong. The collective strength of pioneers pressing forward in different fields of expertise, undergirded by spirituality, writing , and academic pursuits continue to make the global chain of African and Africa Diaspora women stronger and stronger.

The very idea that spirituality informs the process that African Americans use to interpret and transforms lives makes this amalgamation of the glass ceiling effect and servant leadership deserving of further interrogation, especially where educational leadership is concerned. The addition of African spirituality adds a different dimension to the discussion of educational leadership. Spiritual parlance may serve as a dissipative device to the glass ceiling effect in academia. As new and different voices are added to the traditional notions in educational leadership discourse, glass-shattering transformation can occur. Both men and women may come to embrace the need to work with the context of knowing that what he or she does as an educational leader is a contribution to something higher than him or herself. By understanding that servant-labor as leader is grounded in the context of a liberatory praxis (Dantley 2005), the tenets of African American and African spirituality can serve as the foundation for reformative and transformative leadership praxis.

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[1] The stained glass ceiling is the religious counterpart to the glass ceiling in the secular, professional world. The phrase stained glass ceiling refers to the lack of female leaders in positions of authority in mainstream
denominations.