



***Pat Mora** emphasizes that leadership is not the goal but the means of achieving fulfillment in our lives. The importance of self-knowledge in leading effective lives as agents of change is emphasized when she says, “If indeed you and I each have a voice like no other, how sad it would be if we didn’t practice and steadily increase our range, explore our capacities, take some risks, listen to ourselves, and watch how others respond to our various music modes.” What is necessary to accomplish a life of service is practice. Practice is prioritizing, flexibility, persistence, inclusivity, solitude, and leaps of faith. Through her own journey, work, and experiences, she helps the reader understand the comprehensive nature of self-exploration. Knowing when to bend and when to stand firm often determines the leadership character of each of us. Pat Mora helps us explore the many facets and dilemmas of living a leading life.*

# PRACTICE, PRACTICE

*By Pat Mora*



**GEESE BOLDLY STRETCH THEIR LONG NECKS** into the future, sensing the annual cycle of cold gray wind approaching. Here in the Cincinnati area, I look up still a bit startled at the fluid lines of such large birds in flight, at the mystery of their ascension. I may have been an adult before I actually saw a Canada goose, creatures that don't frequent my hometown of El Paso, Texas.

**I STUDY THE BIRD LEADING THE V FORMATION** high above me. What impelled and propelled her to gather her energy, call to her companions and rise? Is she merely aggressive, a plump ego beneath those feathers, or is she particularly attentive to her inklings, her surroundings, her companions? How did she learn to make her call infectious, to compel others to follow?

**PART OF THE KELLOGG EXPERIENCE** was exposure to occasions that forced or nudged me to stop and reflect on such questions and thus on my life; to ask What am I learning? Where am I going, and why? And here I am again, invited to mull, though keenly aware of all the projects tugging at my sleeves like impatient children. This practice – a word that means more to me each year – of pausing and pondering is one of the many gifts of the fellowship. What are my practices now, the advice I give myself?

## *Practice Prioritizing*

**EACH OF US LIVES** in a bit of a swirl. Our body protests that we need a nap or a cup of tea while our mind urges us to dive in and tackle at least the first 10 pressing projects, while our spirit both panics at the undone and chastises us for our lack of engagement with international tragedies. Other voices bombard us – colleagues, friends, *la familia*. And then there are the twins: our fears and our dreams. I long to write another book and yet sit here wondering if I can even complete this essay well. Talent isn't lacking on the planet, but the discipline to insist that our values select what we do, and where we'll first invest our prized resource – energy – is an hourly challenge.

**WHEN I RECEIVED THE FELLOWSHIP** in 1986, I was writing in the edges of my life, evenings and weekends, but supporting myself and my children as a university administrator. With the fellowship, I visited museums across the country and in other countries and acquired a deeper understanding of cultures other than my Mexican heritage. Excited to learn more about how cultures are preserved, I saw the role that museums can play in cultural conservation. I'm sure colleagues grew weary of my "Look what they're doing in Oakland. *¿Porqué?* Why aren't we doing what they do in Mexico?" I had no particular training to become a museum director, nor had I been trained to be an administrator, nor a writer for that matter, but I let my excitement well up and propel me. I was given opportunities, and then I struggled at focusing. Books and speakers helped me to say no to worthy projects that would have left less of me for what I'd decided was most important.

**IN TERMS OF THE MUSEUM**, this was its role in public education. The formerly sleepy building was jolted awake as African-American choirs shook the rock walls during Black History Month and as busloads of schoolchildren raced up the stairs to see the mineral collection. Much in the building needed attention – the collections, the display areas, the grounds – but the small staff focused its energies on our highest priority, convincing our border community that the museum building was theirs, public space, not private, a local resource.

## *Practice Flexibility*

**THANKS TO THE EXAMPLE** of my strong mother, Estela Delgado Mora, I began public speaking in elementary school as Mom had done, which means I learned to speak up. Embedded in this practice is the habit of having strong opinions, a valuable trait for a "minority woman," someone who could be easily dismissed as pleasant but different and thus inferior, a composite of nots – not a man, not Euro-American, not a Ph.D., not a graduate of prestigious schools. We have only to imagine the media reaction to a Latina as a presidential candidate to have an inkling about the knottiness of those nots.

**WHEN I ARRIVED** at the first Kellogg gathering, I'd packed my strong opinions about what I'd explore during my fellowship. I wanted to examine the very undiverse world of publishing, a topic that remains a deep interest. "No, no, no," I was told. "You'll do that anyway. What else intrigues you?" Internally, if not externally, that "no" and my strong opinions collided with a thud. I was confident that I knew what was best for me – silly me. Thanks to the patient advice of a new friend, I explored both the topic of cultural conservation and the role of media in cultural preservation while I also quietly learned more about publishing.

**“IT’S A PUZZLEMENT,”** says the king in *The King and I*. That short sentence is a good summary of life. So much paradox. Part of evolving, of developing into our true self, requires living with the discomfort of uncertainty. I’m to be both self-confident, to trust my instincts like that goose who sensed it was time to up and leave, and I’m to cultivate a healthy self-doubt. I hope age and experience have helped me to be much more curious about alternatives, to meander a bit off the path I’m so determinedly trudging, to explore what I might find that could teach me or sustain me.

**I HEAR MYSELF TELL MY THREE CHILDREN** about the rigid tree that snaps in a gale while the tree that bends, survives. The dilemma is knowing when to bend, of course. Repeatedly I learn that others, often of differing political persuasions or personality styles, have much to teach me, that other strategies to make the world more just can sometimes be more effective than what I might propose.

### *Practice Persistence*

**I APPLIED FOR THE FELLOWSHIP** three times before I received it, and it was friends, including my husband, who helped me gather myself to keep trying. I’ve received many more than two rejections in my publishing life. To participate in change, whether changing our opportunities or an organization, I’ve learned both to heed my inner necessity, my sense of urgency, and to accept change as a s-l-o-w process, to persevere long after I would have thought necessary, when my weariness saps my hope.

**IN 1996 I BEGAN WORKING** with librarians and literacy organizations on institutionalizing the observance of April 30 as *Día de los niños/Día de los libros*, a day to celebrate a yearlong commitment to linking all children to books, languages, cultures. Only 2 percent of the 5,000 children’s books published each year in the United States are by or about Latinos, though the school population is about 13 percent Latino. Such an observance, then, would seem easy to establish, but the work required – letters, calls, e-mails, friendly reminders – seems endless. I could stop promoting this concept and probably no one would call to ask what happened, the way the bill collector or an editor might call. There are no externally imposed deadlines, no system of accountability, except to my dream. How do I balance again and again, articulating a compelling vision while both proposing initial steps and celebrating that incremental progress?

**ON MY DESK I KEEP GANDHI’S WORDS:** “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” I visit schools and find that in the year 2000, in our multilingual country, Latino students still are unwilling to translate a phrase in Spanish for fear their knowledge will be a liability, that their classmates will snicker. Students suppress knowledge at an educational institution? This ironic nonsense both saddens and enrages me. How do I transform those feelings into energy to persist in promoting pride in home languages and cultures and the work of strengthening the tie between Latino children and all children with books, a tie that can dramatically both enrich their lives and affect their horizons? How do I continue to write and submit to a publishing community that remains undiverse, and often disinterested in an alternate aesthetic? How do I encourage the young to develop their skills and believe that language liberates us? How do I engage the interest of educators and parents in changing the reality that our national literature does not yet fully reflect our diversity, in seeing art as part of the solution to our national fragmentation? I return to the words of T.S. Eliot: “For us, there is only the trying/ The rest is not our business.”

## *Practice Inclusivity*

**WHAT IS LABELED** “identity politics,” our clustering at meetings based on our gender, ethnicity, class, etc., though explainable, often impedes our ability to strengthen our interdependence, and ultimately our hope for survival as a species. We arrive at a planning meeting or a National Endowment of the Arts poetry panel with our assumptions. Can I remain open to the help and ideas of those in positions of dominance? Can I ever fully learn that barrio organizers and writers may have more to teach me than do college presidents and poet laureates? Can I become a better self-monitor, again living in uncertainty and ambiguity, assessing when silence is cowardice and when it is essential so that the seldom-heard can guide? I think of a friend’s stunning lilac bush, unnoticed for years due to aggressive honeysuckle, that when given space and light, rose to a stunning 15 feet of blooms. How do I become more alert to the capacities of those who, through no fault of their own, are undervalued because their skin is dark or their bank account low or their accent thick? I’m reminded of a masseuse’s recent comment to a friend: “You need plenty work.” I’m still smiling over that assessment. Don’t we all!

**HOW DO I STAY MINDFUL OF CONTEXT?** I’ve known some highly intelligent people who are passionate about change but highly ineffective. Why? They are so tangled in their often-accurate pronouncements, so busy re-forming the world that they don’t watch how others respond. Such people might argue that they don’t care how others react, that they have a truth to tell, which is legitimate. If, however, we hope to inspire others to join us, if we seek to snag their minds and hearts and energy, don’t we need to notice if they can hear us? In developing a repertoire of approaches, we increase our capacities and also learn to be more attentive to others, to what they say and to what they feel but may never say. Our U.S. society so prizes data, the quantifiable, that we can forget the knowledge and power of the emotions.

## *Practice Solitude*

**I WONDER IF I WAS BORN RUSHING**, since it seems such a natural inclination. When we feel a sense of urgency about our work and when we’ve received a blessing such as the fellowship, our activity level can soar, and mine certainly did. In the last few years, though, I’ve made a conscious effort (prioritizing) to begin my day with quiet – a luxury, I’m aware, as are my many other privileges including safety, health, shelter, print, paper. I seek to resist the frenzy of my former life and thus to increase my reservoir of energy and creativity. Since I’m from the desert, I well know the importance of such pools. Among the channels that feed my reservoir are quiet, time to write, the natural world, family and friends, books, museums, travel. Each of us needs to know our sources of replenishment.

## *Practice Leaps of Faith*

**IN 1989, I LEFT THE SECURITY OF UNIVERSITY WORK**, thanks in part to the fellowship experience. Surviving quite a bit of solitary international travel helped boost my courage. I’m hoping that I made a wise choice, that I am more useful as a writer and speaker. It’s difficult if not impossible to clarify our callings, to honor them and refine our skills, without the daily silence for contemplation. Only then can we pause and ponder Rilke’s “You must

change your life.” I purposely haven’t used the words *leading* or *leadership*, concerned they’re too often viewed as the goal rather than the means, the entitlement of some, rather than the work of all. I think again of the uplifting energy of geese in flight, their faith in their wings, their companions, and the invisible wind. Repeatedly, I seek to balance trusting myself, trusting others, trusting the Spirit.

**I AM A LATINA** dissatisfied with our global and national inequities and thus a woman committed to change. How do I/we control our egos, hungry as sharks, and continue to refine our abilities and discover new potentials? I am repeatedly moved by the concept that we are each a bundle of unique talents and experiences and have, then, unique work to do in the world, particular work that won’t be done unless you do it, unless I do it. One of my children’s poems ends with the words “growing / into my own green song.” To use that analogy for a moment, if indeed you and I each have a voice like no other, how sad it would be if we didn’t practice (that word again) and steadily increase our range, explore our capacities, take some risks, listen to ourselves, watch how others respond to our various music modes. Seeing our hard work and yet our pleasure in it, others just might decide to sing along, to join us on the journey. Imagine a world in which we were each transformed by our insistent, exuberant song.

**I HAVE NEVER MET MANY OF MY IMPORTANT TEACHERS.** They instruct me from the page, the power of words. Brother David Steindl-Rast writes in *A Listening Heart: The Art of Contemplative Living*, of the Benedictine practice “of wholehearted listening, as a sunflower grows from its seed.” That’s our challenge until the hour we die with grace, to create a healthy daily rhythm, time to burrow into our unique *corazones*, our essence, and then to rise with joy and gratitude, to struggle and labor together in the oppressive heat of prejudice and greed, to unfold our talents and gifts, small but imperative flames, beacons, all of us, bringing forth our deepest self-rising, rising.

*A Group VII Kellogg fellow and a native of El Paso, Texas, Pat Mora writes poetry, nonfiction, and children’s books. She received both the Kellogg National Leadership Fellowship and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. The mother of three grown children, Pat is a frequent speaker at conferences and campuses. She divides her time between the northern Kentucky / Cincinnati area and Santa Fe, New Mexico. For further information visit [www.patmora.com](http://www.patmora.com).*

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