

CHAPTER 1 LESSONS AND PEAK EXPERIENCES

“Forget about gender, race, or family background barriers. Continually work on building your own self-esteem. Make an effort to become a more interesting person. Have fun in your work and personal life. Gain business experience in a broad set of areas; don’t just stay in one, comfortable environment. Alternate between leadership positions and follower positions. Keep your eyes and ears open and look for new ideas and opportunities.”

When I was a vice president at Xerox I gave this advice to the Women’s Information Network, which included all the women who worked at Xerox throughout the world, and it was published in their newsletter.

In one of the mystery novels written by my husband, Alan (*Catch a Falling Knife*) the lead character who is a senior citizen, says, “When do we get old enough so that we’ve learned all the lessons?” Unfortunately, the answer appears to be “never,” but I’ve certainly learned a lot in my life, and writing this book has brought some of these lessons to mind.

Interwoven with the lessons have been many of what psychologist Wayne Dyer calls “peak experiences,” and I’ve included them too. After all, don’t we live for peak experiences?

An early lesson I learned was that if you want something done you probably have to do it yourself. That’s why I started the Hi-Folks Guild in my hometown of Old Saybrook, Connecticut. It gave me experience in leading a group of people and it led to a peak experience—spending an afternoon in the home of Katherine Hepburn.

When I was a teacher I learned that your principals won’t necessarily support you. That was one of the reasons I quit teaching, but it also helped prepare me for being a manager. As a manager, I always tried to support my people.

A definite peak experience was meeting Alan. On our first date we drove over a hundred miles to the San Diego Zoo, the prelude to many wonderful trips all over the world. Having our son, Andy, was a peak experience, but we had many anxious moments until he became healthy.

After I quit teaching I became a programmer with no formal education in computers and no experience in programming or business. If there’s a lesson here, it’s to keep your options open when you’re young, and don’t shut yourself off from possible opportunities.

During my first week working at Xerox I almost got fired. If I *had* been fired I probably wouldn’t have become a vice president, and certainly not at Xerox. I would never have had responsibility for a fifty-million dollar budget. I hate to think what the lesson is here, but it’s probably something about what part fate plays in our lives.

I took a class introducing me to the Xerox way of doing things. The instructor invited some members to his home to go skinny-dipping in his hot tub. I was glad I wasn’t invited. Not everybody at Xerox was like that, but when I was still new at the company I was kissed by a vice president. I punched him in the nose, which, as it turned out, was probably the right thing to do. He never tried anything again.

I traveled all over the world for business and had many interesting experiences, including eating a twenty-nine course meal in Japan, practicing for a presentation in a simulated coal mine, and being protected by the mob.

When I won the Xerox President’s Award the ceremony started out badly for me because members of the Xerox Board of Directors, who apparently weren’t yet used to female high achievers, congratulated Alan instead of me, but it turned into a peak experience with the help of the people who had assisted in getting me there.

And when I attended my first staff meeting as a vice president of Xerox, the first question somebody asked me was, “Bonny, what are you doing here?” It took time and a lot of hard work before I was fully accepted by my peers, but I always received support from my friends, and that helped keep me going.

In my career I met a lot of remarkable women, such as Sally Ride, the astronaut.

As a world traveler I’ve accomplished three of my major goals: sitting on the steps of the Parthenon, kissing on the Great Wall of China, and sitting in an ancient ruin under a full moon. Looking back, I wouldn’t have missed these experiences for anything.