

Goals and Values

By Anna Deavere Smith, an artist in residence at the Center for American Progress and a Tony Award-nominated and Pulitzer Prize-winning actress

As a child in an African American community at the advent of the civil rights movement and the women's liberation movement, I saw most of the educated women around me trapped in segregation, condensing their talents into primarily two directions: teaching or nursing. The women around me had modest means, but they were extraordinarily generous with their time and their concern. If the women around me had not dedicated their professional lives to educating all African American children, then legislation and social activism would not have had their necessary partner and the transformation we saw would not have been possible.

The capacity to have concern for the vulnerable, and to animate that concern into actions that protect and lift up the vulnerable, is a talent. It is a talent just as being able to decimate someone on the tennis court, in a court of law, or in business is a talent. Which talent should we cultivate in women and in men? That's our challenge today. And women must help make the right choice for all of us.

Are we hoping that women will be in more positions of power, running companies, sitting on high courts, serving in the military? Is the goal to have a woman president, more women four star generals, more women's names in the names of law firms, more women on Wall Street, more woman leading correctional facilities? In other words, is the goal to look at ways for women to gain influence in our culture by competing and potentially dominating in traditional ways?

Or will an increased presence of women mean a shift in values? Will the increased presence of women result in increased concern for the vulnerable and a healthier atmosphere for social justice? A more

robust public sphere? Will the increased presence of women ensure an atmosphere where all children get a fair chance in education and everyone has proper health care?

Not necessarily. And indeed that might not even be a goal for some people. Since the women's liberation movement of the '60s, more women run companies (not enough to be sure), govern states, serve in the military, sit on high courts, run prisons and prison systems, and compete in sports, including boxing and wrestling. Yet we do not see a full transformation of values. If anything, our culture's overarching values—greed and competition—have increased over the past two decades.

The reason: Power still rests with men. Their values reward those who dominate and even abuse the vulnerable—values that restrict care to immediate families rather than larger communities. Because of this, we as a people lack imagination about extending circles of care beyond me and mine. If this were not the case, we would have more equitable education and health care systems in this country. This needs to change. Women can make it happen.

The capacity to have concern for the vulnerable, and to animate that concern into actions that protect and lift up the vulnerable, is a talent.