

The Leadership of a Life

DOLLY PARTON · WENDELL BERRY · GLORIA STEINEM

on how we live becomes the way we lead

by Amy Shortt

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As August gave way to September, America said goodbye to three distinctive voices. Dolly Parton died in Nashville on August 25, at eighty.¹ Six days later, Wendell Berry died at his home in Port Royal, Kentucky, at ninety-two.² On September 2, two days after Berry's death, Gloria Steinem died at her home in New York City, also at ninety-two.³

It is hard to imagine three more different Americans, and easy to overstate just how different. A country singer who built a theme park and a children's literacy foundation. A farmer and essayist who wrote his books by hand and refused to own a computer. A journalist who became, whether she sought it or not, the public face of American feminism. They did not see the world in the same way. Berry's suspicion of industrial capitalism sits at some distance from the entrepreneurial world Parton built, and both from Steinem's long argument with inherited gender roles. The differences themselves are enough.

Here they are anyway, arriving in the same week, insisting, by the accident of their proximity in the obituary pages, on being considered together. I found myself wondering what these three lives might have to say to one another.

None of the three owed their influence to the kind of formal authority we usually associate with leadership. Berry never held elected office. Steinem co-founded Ms. magazine and organizations including the National Women's Political Caucus and the Women's Action Alliance, but consistently resisted being cast as the sole leader of a movement she insisted belonged to no one person. "Linked, not ranked" was the phrase she kept returning to, in interviews and speeches across five decades, for the kind of movement and society she envisioned.⁴ Asked in 2019 whether she planned to hand off her role to a successor, she said that she meant to keep her torch and use it to light others', since a crowd of torches was a better image of revolution than one person holding the only flame.⁵ Yet each of them changed what millions of people understood a life could be for.

That cuts against how we usually talk about leadership, located in position. These lives suggest something else: that leadership may be less about power held over others than about what our way of being makes possible in someone else. It does not depend on being obeyed. Parton did not command her audiences. There was something about the sheer particularity of who she was that seemed to give other people permission to inhabit themselves more freely. Berry did not manage a movement; he offered a way of seeing one place that helped other people notice their own. Steinem did not issue directives; she asked questions other people found they could not stop asking themselves.

Still, becoming more fully oneself is not necessarily the same as becoming wise. A person can be authentically selfish. Belief and action can align with real discipline around convictions that diminish other people. Living consistently with our convictions does not necessarily make those convictions good. Formation cannot simply mean becoming more fully ourselves. We still have to ask whether what we are becoming is good, and what our lives are actually in service of. What interests me about these three lives is the way their becoming turned outward, toward other people's dignity, agency, and sense of what might be possible. The question worth asking of any formed life is not only did this person become more themselves, but what was their becoming in service of.

Each of them was, at some point, ordinary in the way all of us are: formed by circumstance, finding their way toward something they could not yet name.

Steinem's early life was shaped, by her own account, around her mother's illness. Ruth Steinem suffered what she called a "nervous breakdown" before Gloria was born and never fully recovered. Over the years that followed, Gloria watched a spirited, book-loving woman become someone "afraid to be alone," unable to hold a job. From around age ten, when her parents separated and her older sister eventually left home, Gloria became her mother's primary caretaker in a rundown Toledo house.⁶ She wrote about this decades later in the essay "Ruth's Song," and has said the experience taught her something about what a woman's life could be reduced to, long before she had language for it.⁷ None of this led neatly to the person Steinem would become. Before feminist organizing, Steinem directed an organization that sent American students to Soviet-bloc youth festivals with covert CIA funding, and when this became public in 1967, she defended rather than disavowed it, calling the agency officials she'd worked with "liberal and farsighted."⁸ It is a complicated chapter her admirers do not always mention. Looking backward, it is easy to make a life seem more consistent than it actually was.

Berry's formation ran toward, not away from, the place he came from. After graduate work at Stanford under Wallace Stegner and two years teaching at New York University, he had, by his late twenties, a well-reviewed novel, a poetry prize, and a post in the literary capital of the country. In 1964 he turned it down and returned to Kentucky, first to teach and then, the following year, to farm a rocky hillside above the Kentucky River with his wife, Tanya.⁹ The decision, he told a visiting writer decades later, came with "some fear and trembling, but also a sense of doing the right thing"; once the car pointed south, he felt "a great, deep relief, as if I was following, at last, my true path."¹⁰ What he built there was a discipline he called affection: not a feeling but a practice, sustained through decades of attention to one place and its people. "It all turns on affection," he told an audience at the Kennedy Center in 2012, arguing that no one really cares for what he has not first learned to love.¹¹ He was not naive about his own

compromises: he relied on the industrial economy he criticized, and for years his wife typed his handwritten manuscripts on a manual typewriter, an arrangement he defended at length once readers objected to its gender politics.¹²

Parton's formation begins with the most familiar story of the three: the fourth of twelve children in a one-room Smoky Mountain cabin, gone to Nashville by bus the morning after her 1964 graduation.¹³ Less examined is how deliberately she built the persona that carried her out of that poverty. "It's true I look totally artificial," she told NPR in 2014, "but I like to think I'm totally real where it really counts."¹⁴ This distinction matters. The exterior wasn't a departure from who she was. It was an exaggerated expression of it. Her generosity has a specific and personal origin: her father never learned to read, something she has said embarrassed him and left her wondering what he might have done otherwise.¹⁵ The Imagination Library, which has by now mailed hundreds of millions of free books to children, grew in part from that experience. Her relationship to feminism has stayed unresolved. She has said at different times that she supposes she is one and that she is not, and that she prefers to make her case through how she has run her life and business rather than by marching.¹⁶ And yet in 1980 she starred alongside Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin in *9 to 5*, a comedy about three working women confronting a sexist boss, and wrote its title song, which became an anthem for working women.¹⁷ Perhaps the contradiction is more interesting than resolving it.

None of these experiences, of course, produced what followed by themselves. What mattered was what came after: the noticing that would not let go, the slow work of living a conviction until it became more permanent than a belief. Experience alone guarantees nothing; two people can survive the same loss and be shaped by it in opposite directions. Something has to happen in between. We encounter something. We notice it, or we don't. Sometimes we return to it and begin to ask what it means. And sometimes that meaning changes a choice, then a practice, and eventually something about the person we are becoming. Character, visible to others long enough, starts to do work in the world its owner cannot fully control. It becomes a kind of influence.

None of this was tidy, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. Steinem's early collaboration with an intelligence agency sits uneasily beside the movement she later led; Berry lived inside the very economy his essays condemned; Parton spent decades alternately resisting and, on her own terms, claiming the feminist label. None of them was finished. What each life offers is not a completed self to imitate but a long, unfinished argument a person kept having with their own circumstances.

This, I think, is what makes the three lives worth setting side by side. Over time, something in each of them turned outward. For Parton, that meant literacy, generosity, a stubborn insistence that dignity and rhinestones were not incompatible. For Berry, it meant land, place, obligation to people not yet born. For Steinem, it meant pressing at the edges of what women were permitted to imagine for themselves. They did not understand these things in the same way, and they likely would have argued about the details. But in each case, gifts and convictions became something other people could draw from. No title required.

Most of us will not build a Dollywood, or a body of essays that changed how a region thinks about its land, or a magazine that helped redraw a national conversation. That is not the point. Death gives us an unusual vantage on a life. We can see convictions alongside compromises, courage alongside what went unexamined, in a way we rarely can while a life is still being lived, including our own. We are, right now, still becoming whatever we are going to become. We notice some things and miss others. We practice. We resist. We love. We choose. And some of what we were given may take a lifetime to unlearn. Whether what we are becoming serves something good beyond ourselves is not a neutral question. It is already forming something, already making certain things more or less possible in the people watching us, which is more people than we usually realize.

We tend to think of legacy as what someone leaves behind: the monument, the bibliography, the body of work. A song, a body of essays, a magazine. These are things a life can leave, and they matter. But there is another inheritance, harder to catalogue: the permissions we gave people, the way of seeing we made visible to them, the courage, patience, or refusal to be reduced, made visible in us and possible in them.

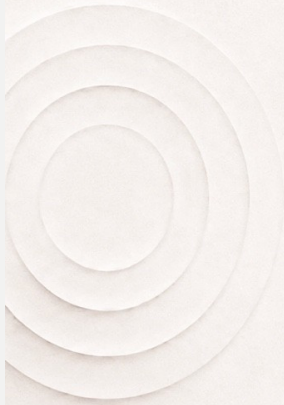
Maybe this is part of what it means for a life to lead. What we notice, what we practice, what we love, what we refuse, what we give ourselves to: these things are forming us. Over time, who we are becoming becomes the way we live, and the way we live becomes the way we lead. A life itself can exercise leadership through what it makes possible in other people.

If who we are is how we lead, then who are we becoming?

SOURCES & NOTES

1. Emily Langer, "Dolly Parton, country music singer and cultural icon, dies at 80," Washington Post, August 26, 2026; "Dolly Parton, one of country music's most singular performers, has died at age 80," NPR, August 25, 2026 (citing publicist Marcel Pariseau's statement that the cause of death followed "a brief battle with cancer").
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3. "Gloria Steinem, trailblazing journalist and activist, dies at 92," NPR, September 3, 2026; "Gloria Steinem, Feminist Icon and Ms. Founder, Dies at 92," Variety, September 3, 2026 (both citing the statement posted to Steinem's Instagram account).
4. Gloria Steinem, quoted in "Gloria Steinem Dies: See How TIME's Coverage of Her Evolved," TIME, September 3, 2026, citing her 2011 remarks to TIME: "I believe that things are a circle, not a hierarchy... The kind of society we are striving toward is one in which things are linked not ranked." Corroborated in Marianne Schnall, "Celebrating Feminist Icon Gloria Steinem On Her 90th Birthday," Forbes, March 25, 2024, a direct interview in which Steinem elaborates on the phrase at length.
5. PBS NewsHour, "Gloria Steinem on keeping the women's movement 'revolutionary,'" Brief But Spectacular, April 25, 2019 — primary source, official PBS transcript. Steinem's words, closely paraphrased here rather than quoted at length: "I'm keeping my torch... and I'm using it to light other torches, because everybody needs a torch — that is a way better revolutionary image than one person with a torch."
6. Gloria Steinem, "Ruth's Song (Because She Could Not Sing It)," in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983) — primary source. The essay states Steinem's mother suffered a "nervous breakdown" before Gloria's birth; describes her as having become a woman "afraid to be alone, who could not hang on to reality long enough to hold a job, and who could rarely concentrate enough to read a book"; and states that Steinem's own caretaking years ran "from ten to seventeen." Corroborated by the Gloria Steinem Special Collections research guide, Smith College Libraries (institutional/archival source).
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8. "CIA Work With Youths At Festivals Defended," Washington Post, 1967 (contemporaneous reporting, Internet Archive copy); CIA Reading Room (foia.cia.gov), contemporaneous wire clipping quoting Steinem directly: "I found them liberal and farsighted and open to an exchange of ideas." Additional background from Karen M. Paget, *Patriotic Betrayal* (Yale University Press, 2015), as discussed in "The CIA's Student-Activism Phase," *The Nation*, June 2015.
9. "Wendell Berry in California," *Boom California*, 2017 (on Wallace Stegner's role in Berry's Stanford fellowship and later recommendation to the University of Kentucky); National Endowment for the Humanities, "Wendell E. Berry," National Humanities Medal biography (institutional/primary source), confirming the 1964 return to Kentucky and 1965 move to the farm at Lane's Landing.
10. Amanda Petrusich, "Going Home with Wendell Berry," *The New Yorker*, July 2019 — primary source, based on Petrusich's visit to Berry's farm and correspondence with him over the preceding year. The quotations regarding "fear and trembling" and following his "true path" are drawn from this piece, as reported and repeated in obituary coverage this week, including the Kentucky Lantern, August 31, 2026.
11. Wendell Berry, "It All Turns on Affection," 2012 Jefferson Lecture, National Endowment for the Humanities (full text at neh.gov) — primary source.
12. Wendell Berry, "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer," *Harper's Magazine*, 1987, reprinted in *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990) — primary source; states that Berry's wife, Tanya, typed his handwritten manuscripts on a Royal standard typewriter bought new in 1956. The follow-up essay, "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine," also reprinted in that volume, contains Berry's defense of the arrangement against readers who objected to its gender politics.

13. Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, official biography of Dolly Parton (institutional/primary source); "Dolly Parton, country music icon, dies at 80," NBC News, August 2026 — both confirming she left for Nashville the day after her 1964 graduation from Sevier County High School.
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15. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, "Letter From Dolly," imaginationlibrary.com — organization's own site, primary source, in which Parton describes her father's inability to read and its influence on the founding of the program. Corroborated by CNBC, "Dolly Parton: How my father inspired the 'Imagination Library,'" June 2, 2016.
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Amy Shortt

Founder, The Formed Leader

theformedleader.org

amy@theformedleader.org

[LinkedIn](#)