



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP, A WAY OF LIFE

—SHANN FERCH

What is it about a child's voice, a child's smiling face and exuberant laughter, that reminds us of the mystery and wonder of existence? Something of freedom is found in that smile, and peace, the simple unburdened essence of being young and alive. Yet so often this essence is clouded in adulthood, becoming increasingly more elusive, and for some seemingly unreachable. At times our lives can be so filled with rapid motion, entanglements, pressure, and confusion we find it difficult to breathe.

Here, in the center of our humanity, the opportunity to live differently presents itself. The discipline involved in growing the interior of the self, the heart and the soul, creates a complex, often unwieldy set of circumstances for all who aspire to lead. Greenleaf's reversal of the aspiration to lead forms a first step for many in the pursuit of a more compassionate and appropriately powerful interior. He stated that the true leader aspires first to serve, and this simple revolutionary thought has unseated the entire historical foundation of most leadership traditions. The person who has lived and grown up under the fast-paced command and control mentality finds it very difficult to turn toward quietness, contemplation, and the thoughtful action of servanthood. Even so, the underlying premise of servant-leadership becomes apparent whenever and wherever it appears. The essence of servant-leadership, shown in the subtle and graceful interactions between people, often takes us unaware, heals us, and draws us to a deeper sense of ourselves.

Consider again the life of a child. There is something wonderful to be noticed in our children, something resilient, perhaps even invincible. I'm speaking of how they are so full of joy. It is difficult to find a depressed child, unless basic needs are not taken care of, and even then their resilience



is disarming. I remember a time when my daughter was 4 years old. She was sleeping in our bed. She loves to get up early in the morning. I don't love to get up early in the morning. I like to sleep in the morning. That's gone now. But she loves to get up early in the morning, and you recognize that if a child is on your bed and stands up, she might walk a little bit close to the edge of the bed. It's a sixth sense with parents; even if we are half-asleep there is a heightened awareness; we are always ready to grab her ankle if we need to, to keep her safe, to save her if we need to, to catch her, or hold her. So she's walking kind of precariously on our bed on that day, it's pitch black, dark, and she leans over to the window. There are some Venetian blinds there and when she parts the blinds, sunlight pierces the room. She turns around and says in a loud voice, "It's a sunny day!" Just like that and I'm still thinking, *Well I'm not ready for the sunny day. I want to sleep.* She walks back to the middle of the bed and at that point, it's June, the height of summer for us, very hot. December and winter are a long way off. She walks back to the middle of the bed, and she stands in the middle of the bed and I have half an eye on her. She puts both hands in the air above her head and shouts in total happiness, "Christmas presents!"

She's like that. That's joy.

Now consider the counterpart to joy: despair. To live with the legitimate power involved in servant-leadership, not a power that dominates or controls, but a power that heals, restores, and reconciles, humility is necessary. The servant-leader submits to the subtle forces of life that lead away from self-embeddedness and toward the kind of transcendence that is capable of leading and healing the self and beloved others. Herman Hesse's elegant call from *Journey to the East* gives a telling description of this process:

Children live on one side of despair, the awakened on the other.

Joy is a unique and courageous entity, a significant mover in our society, and one of the great engines of humanity. Earlier this year I had the honor of going to the Philippines to interview former President of the Phil-



ippines, Corazon “Cory” Aquino, a woman so filled with joy merely her presence brings joy to others. A couple of decades ago, only a few short years after her husband Ninoy’s martyrdom, her spiritual, non-violent, and love-imbued leadership rallied the great spirit of the Filipino people and toppled the Marcos regime. In many ways, I believe this set the stage for nonviolent movements that ensued in the following years, worldwide. Joy is something that Ninoy and Cory Aquino brought to the world—a great joy in the possibilities, the deep possibilities of life. Some things are worth fighting for, our children, our joy, the fulfillment of a whole life. . . these are worth fighting for, which brings to mind the arresting and graceful sentence Ninoy uttered before returning to the Philippines from exile in the U.S., only to be shot and killed immediately upon his arrival in Manila. The image of his body, dead on the tarmac, became a touchstone of justice and liberty for oppressed people everywhere. Before his arrival, before facing the death he imagined he might face, Ninoy said, “The Filipino is worth dying for.”

You see real joy in Ninoy and Cory Aquino. You see boldness and even the willingness to die so that others may have a better life. These are great dreams. Others too have generated great dreams, and in America, someone whom I would call a spiritual brother of President Aquino, Martin Luther King, Jr., also dreamed a great dream, and began to unseat the power abuses, privilege, and elitism that have tended to surround circles of economic, political, and religious leadership in every society. Martin Luther King, Jr., a man of dignity for all people, led through service, action, and a resounding voice of strength, intelligence, and hope. He stated: “Everyone can be great because everyone can serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

Like Ninoy and Cory Aquino, and like Martin Luther King, Robert Greenleaf too was a person unafraid to dream a great dream; he is the founder of servant-leadership and his life and thought have richly influenced our ideas of leadership worldwide. One of the things we notice about America today, is that Americans often consciously and unconsciously pro-



mote leadership that is egocentric, overly market- and consumer-driven, and harmful or even violent to ourselves and others. It is an area in which we need both much help and deep healing in our nation. Servant-leadership, from nation to nation, within nations, and internationally within our individual and communal lives, is drawing us to a better, more whole way of being.

Robert Greenleaf said, "For something great to happen there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams."

Consider Vincent Van Gogh, the meditative and vibrant iconoclast. He was not known for his art in his lifetime, yet one of his paintings recently sold for more than eighty million dollars. Though Van Gogh was a brave and deeply perceptive man, full of hope for the world and delight in God, he was also very troubled at times, and in fact he died in despair. Yet his truth lives on. He said, "The most difficult and true work of art is to love someone."

Yes, the most difficult and true work of art is to love someone.

Johann Sebastian Bach, the musician and composer, is another who was largely unknown. His music did not gain a legitimate audience until nearly 100 years after his death. If one of us set out right now to script Bach's music, if we wrote down each note he wrote in his lifetime, it would take more than a decade. Because of this fluid and prolific quality and the unique nuances of his music, he is considered a genius. He could compose entire orchestral arrangements in his head, the entire musical notation for every instrument, without even going to the piano.

George Frideric Handel was alienated, alone even in the midst of the great dream he dreamed. Consider this: he was at the bottom of his career, disrespected in society, dejected, living in obscurity, and at the low point of his life when a deep moment of grace came to him and he wrote *The Messiah*, the music that forms the glorious landscape of so many of our lives today.

My wife, Jennifer, just finished reading William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, a scholarly and shocking book about the rise of



Hitler to power and then the tremendous fall. She has relayed to me so many accounts of people showing love and care for each other even in the face of the most atrocious conditions the Nazis had forced on them. Earlier this year, before I flew to the Philippines, she said to me, “You know, I believe it is possible for us to get better in chaos, suffering, and difficulty, rather than getting worse.” That’s a profound sentence. That’s something that heals me as a person just to hear her say it and heals our family just to have her as a part of our family saying it, living it. That we can get better in chaos, suffering and difficulty rather than getting worse: this is what Ninoy and Cory Aquino exemplify. This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. exemplifies. This is what Robert Greenleaf and servant-leadership exemplify.

In the leadership that rose from the Aquinos, MLK, and Robert Greenleaf, we see two significant qualities: deep spirituality and deep love. Their interior fortitude, the strength of their love for people, work, and life, is reflective of one of the vital truths from the scriptures of the Old Testament:

Many waters cannot quench love. Love is stronger than death.

Robert Greenleaf was a businessman in America who devoted himself to silence and to reflective quietness from his own spiritual tradition, which is a Quaker tradition, and out of that he started to form this idea of servant-leadership. His definition remains an important compass for all who desire to lead. He listened with awakened purpose. He spoke a lasting vision:

The true test of a servant-leader is this: Do others around the servant-leader become wiser, freer, more autonomous, healthier, and better able themselves to become servants? Will the least privileged of the society be benefited or at least not further deprived?

In lives such as the Aquinos, MLK, and Greenleaf, it becomes very clear, the core of courage and love that is central to servant-leadership. The same courage, the same love is so evident in the beautiful poems, interviews, essays, and science that make up this inaugural edition of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. I want to say how grateful I am to



each author whose work appears here. Individually and collectively, their work points through the center of the human endeavor, into the interior, and from there out to the world. I want to thank the directors of the Greenleaf Centers worldwide for their life-giving and heartfelt though usually unheralded role in expanding international goodwill. Notably, the editorial board is made up of scholars who represent the work of servant-leadership in 11 different countries. The journal is designed to keep its finger on the pulse of servant-leadership throughout the world, socially, politically, economically, in science, in the scholarly world, and foremost, in the heart of our humanity. I hope you find the work presented here enlightening, critically rich, and yes, full of joy!

The servant-leader lives a life of significance and others are drawn to their own great significance by being in the presence of the servant-leader. May a discerning love surround us in the pursuit of this great dream.

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