



## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP, FORGIVENESS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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One of the defining characteristics of human nature is the ability to discern one's own faults, to be broken as the result of such faults, and in response, to seek a meaningful change. Socially, both forgiveness and the disciplined process of reconciliation draw us into a crucible from which we can emerge more refined, more willing to see the heart of another, and more able to create just and lasting relationships. Such relationships—robust—durable—enjoyable—courageous—form what is best in people, in families, and in the workplace. The will to seek forgiveness, the will to forgive, and the will to pursue reconciliation may be a significant part of developing the kind of wisdom, health, autonomy, and freedom espoused by Robert Greenleaf in his idea of the servant-leader, an idea whose time has arrived, an idea that is destined to remain on the vanguard of leadership theory, research, and practice.

In reflecting on the uncommon and profound depth of Greenleaf's theory, I am reminded of the hollow existence experienced by so many, a thought captured by Thoreau's societal indictment: "Most [people] lead lives of quiet desperation." It is a difficult truth, one that runs subtly beneath the surface of our lives, our organizations, and our communities. More specifically, I am reminded of my grandfather. Upon his death from alcoholism some years ago, I remember feeling disappointed in the lack of time I had with him, a lack of good time spent in conversation, of good experiences shared. He died having lost the basic respect of others, a man without an honored leadership position in his own family, a person no one went to for wisdom or sanctuary. In his later years, filled with despondency and self-pity, he was largely alone. Though he had once been strong and



vital, few family members were close to him when he died. At one time he had been a true Montanan, of unique joy and individual strength, a man who loved to walk the hills after the spring runoff in search of arrowheads with his family. But in his condition before death his joy for life was eclipsed. He had become morose and often very depressed—a depression that hailed from the sanctions the family had placed on him, disallowing him to obtain alcohol for the last years of his life. In the end, it seemed he had given up.

“What happened to him?” I asked my father.

“He stopped dreaming his dreams,” my dad replied.

In making this statement my father echoed a truth forwarded by Greenleaf in 1977: “[F]or something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams” (p. 16).

#### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

The idea of the leader as servant is rooted in the far-reaching ideal that people have inherent worth, a dignity not only to be strived for, but also, beneath this striving, a dignity irrevocably connected to the reality of being human. Philosophically, if one believes in the dignity of the person, the ideas of servant-leadership, and the experience of leading or being led from a servant perspective, not only make sense, they contain the elegance, precision, and will power necessary for human development.

The nature of change in the contemporary climate is both complex and swift. Notably, the intensity of such movement has brought with it the exposure of major character flaws in local, national, and international leadership personas, thus increasing the urgency for a more purposeful, more lasting response in society. Presently, leaders who are able to build community without sacrificing productivity, and who are able to embrace diverse potential rather than adhering to traditional, more hierarchical approaches, are inspiring a growing movement in business, the social services, education, and religion (Northouse, 2001). The more traditional



model of leadership, often based heavily on hierarchical structure and a designated chain of command geared toward increased efficiency, has resulted not only in the moral decline of the relational environment, but also in a pervasive malaise common to the psyche of the contemporary working person. The practices of servant-leadership foster a deeper, more personal sense of vision and inclusiveness, and produce answers to the failures of leadership found in traditional models. On the rise in scholarly literature, studies in forgiveness and restorative justice form one expression of the present need for answers regarding failures of leadership. Such studies validate the capacity for moral fortitude, point to greater efficiency and productivity, and maintain a healthy sense of hope and meaning in organizations.

#### SEEKING ANSWERS TO THE FAILURES OF CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP

A common experience of being led from the traditional model is one of dominance or control, while the experience of being servant-led is one of freedom. In the words of Greenleaf, those who are servant-led become “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous” and “more likely themselves to become servants” (1977, pp. 13-14). A true sense of forgiveness, not a false forgiveness that overlooks the harm caused by others, but a true forgiveness inherently bound to the ideas of integrity and justice, can move us toward the kind of robust and resilient relationships that build the foundation of legitimate power, both personally and professionally. It is in legitimate power, a form of power Greenleaf expressed from a servant-first mentality, that we experience the human capacity for love and greatness.

Throughout society, in the culture of families, groups, communities and corporations, the call for effective leadership is increasing (Gardner, 1990). The old leadership model in which leaders directed others toward increased productivity at the expense of personal meaning often concentrated on correcting problems and maintaining the status quo (Bass, 1960; Burns, 1978; Harrison, 1997). Change itself is taking place at such a rapid pace that people often find themselves caught in a storm of stress (Senge, 1995). Moving forward, taking the wisdom of past models, moving beyond



the industrial mindset to the relational, we face the increasing need for leaders who inspire through integrity to a higher vision of what it means to be human (Goleman, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Heifetz, 1994). In response, Greenleaf proposed that we need leaders who understand the nature of humanity and who can foster a deep sense of community (Greenleaf, 1977). Such leaders embrace diversity, rather than insisting on uniformity. They understand what it means to develop the freedom, health, wisdom, and autonomy of others. They understand forgiveness and are able to develop just restoration, rather than push for legality and retribution (Harris, 1999). The ideas of servant-leadership, uniquely positioned in contemporary leadership theory and practice, can be seen in movements that have brought dead organizations to new life, and reconciliation and healing to nations deeply wounded by human atrocities (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1998; Tutu, 1999).

My first recollections of trying to understand servant-leadership have to do with my connection to significant others who gave me a vision of the dignity of life. Often these were people who stepped out of their world into mine and drew me into the larger concept of living to which they had attuned their lives. This concept, something central to their own identity, inevitably had to do with internal, relational, and societal movements that have noticeably transformed humanity—movements such as quietness, discernment, courage, forgiveness, and love. Even without an intentional understanding of Greenleaf's ideas, each of the people who influenced me, women and men, were servant-leaders. In each person was a sense of fearlessness regarding self-discovery, accompanied by a disciplined, creative approach to relational meaning that became an antidote to the "terrifying emptiness" (Smith, 1970) that is too often our collective experience of one another.

Before being influenced toward a greater understanding of what it might mean to be a servant and a leader, early on I was almost entirely given to images of bravery or ambition. I lived consumed by hopes of advancement and adulation. Much of my early professional development





was spent envisioning others adoring me, me as the sports champion, me on top of the world, the big money maker, the professional man, the leader of mighty corporations. And before this, as a high school athlete, I lived needy for the praise of others, often carrying about a vague wish that by some chance others would suddenly devote themselves to telling stories of my excellence.

Conveniently, in the world I conceived, my faults were protected; I didn't want anyone to notice my faults or point them out, and I spent most of my energy trying to please others so they would have nothing to be disappointed in concerning me, even as I lived a life that was both unaware and unconcerned with the personal wellbeing of others. If someone poked a hole in my façade, as did happen on occasion, my deflation was immediate and complete, and people discovered that inside I was defensive and rigid, a fragile person. I had little idea of what it might mean to be true to myself or someone else.

I grew up in Montana, a state where basketball was valued as highly as family or work; and Jonathan Takes Enemy, a Crow Indian who played for Hardin High School, was the best basketball player in the state. He led a school with years of losing tradition into the state spotlight, carrying the team and the community on his shoulders all the way to the state tournament, where he averaged 41 points per game. He created legends that twenty years later are still spoken of in state basketball circles, and he did so with a fierceness that made me both fear and respect him. On the court, nothing was outside the realm of his skill: the jumpshot, the drive, the sweeping left-handed finger roll, the deep fade-away jumper. He could deliver what we all dreamed of, and with a venom that said *Don't get in my way*.

I was a year younger than Jonathan, playing for an all-white school in Livingston. When our teams met in the divisional tournament, he and the Hardin Bulldogs delivered us a crushing 17-point defeat. At the close of the third quarter, with the clock winding down and his team comfortably ahead, Takes Enemy pulled up from one step in front of half-court and shot



a straight, clean jumpshot. Though the range of the shot was more than 20 feet beyond the three-point line, his form remained pure. The audacity and power of it, the exquisite beauty, hushed the crowd. A common knowledge came to everyone: few people can even throw a basketball that far with any accuracy, let alone take a legitimate shot with good form. Takes Enemy landed and as the ball was in flight he turned, no longer watching the flight of the ball, and began to walk back toward his team bench. The buzzer sounded, he put his fist in the air, the shot swished into the net. The crowd erupted.

In his will to even take such a shot, let alone make it, I was reminded of the surety and brilliance of so many Native American heroes in Montana who had painted the basketball landscape of my boyhood. Stanford Rides Horse, Juneau Plenty Hawk, and Paul Deputy of St. Labre. Elvis Old Bull of Lodge Grass, Marty Roundface, Tim Falls Down, and Marc Spotted Bear of Plenty Coups. Joe Pretty Paint and Takes Enemy himself of Hardin. Many of these young men died due to the violence that surrounded the alcohol and drug traffic on the reservations, but their image on the court inspired me toward the kind of boldness that gives artistry and freedom to any endeavor. Such boldness is akin to passion. For these young men, and for me at that time, the passion was basketball.

But rather than creating in me my own intrepid nature, seeing Takes Enemy only emphasized how little I knew of courage, not just on the basketball court, but in life. Takes Enemy breathed a confidence I lacked, a leadership potential that lived and moved. Greenleaf said that “A mark of leaders, an attribute that puts them in a position to show the way for others, is that they are better than most at pointing the direction” (1977, p. 15). Takes Enemy was the embodiment of this quality. He and his team seemed to work as one, and he and they were able to play with fluidity and joy and breathtaking abandon. I began to look for this leadership style as an athlete and as a person. The search led me toward people who led not through dominance, but through freedom of movement, and such people led me toward the experience of humility, forgiveness, and relational justice. One



of the most potent experiences of this came from the mentoring I received from my future wife's father.

My wife, Jennifer, and I were in our twenties, not yet married. I was at the dinner table with her and her family when Jennifer's father said something short, a sharp-edged comment, to her mother. At the time her father was the president of a large multinational corporation based in Washington State. Thinking back, I hardly noticed the comment, probably because of the nature and intensity of the ways I had previously experienced conflict. For me most conflicts revealed a simmering anger or a resentment that went underground, plaguing the relationship, taking a long time to disperse. I did not give her father's comment a second thought until some time after the meal when he approached me as I relaxed on the couch. He had just finished speaking with his wife over to one side of the kitchen when he approached.

"I want to ask your forgiveness for being rude to my wife," he said.

I could not imagine what he was talking about. I felt uncomfortable, and I tried to get him and me out of this awkward conversation as soon as I could.

"You don't have to ask me," I said.

But from there, the tension only increased for me. I had not often been in such situations in which things were handled in an equitable way. My work experience had been that the person in power (typically, but not always, the male) dominated the conflict so that the external power remained in the dominant one's hands, while internally everyone else (those not in power) suffered bitterness, disappointment, and a despairing, nearly hopeless feeling regarding the good of the relationship. Later in my family and work relationships I found that when I lived from my own inordinate sense of power, I too, like those I had overpowered, would have a sick feeling internally for having won my position through coercion or force rather than through the work of a just and mutual resolution. In any case, in the situation with Jennifer's father, I felt tense and wanted to quickly end



the moment by saving face for both of us. “You don’t have to ask me,” I said.

“I don’t ask forgiveness for your benefit,” he answered. “I ask in order to honor the relationship I share with my wife. In our family, if one person hurts another, we not only ask forgiveness of the person who has been hurt, but also of anyone else who was present in order to restore the dignity of the one we’ve hurt.” Later I found the same practice was common in the culture he had created in the corporation he led.

From a relatively brief experience, I gained respect for myself and began see the possibilities of a family and work culture free of perpetual binds and rifts, and free of the entrenched criticalness that usually accompanies such relationships. My own life was like a fortress compared with the open lifestyle Jennifer’s father espoused. I began to understand that much of my protected-ness, defensiveness, and unwillingness to reveal myself might continue to serve as a fortification when in future conflicts, but would not lead me to more whole ways of experiencing the world. I also began to see that the work of a servant-leader requires the ability to humble oneself, and a desire to honor relationships with others as sacred. In Greenleaf’s work, this takes the form of listening and understanding, and only the one who is a servant is able to approach people first by listening and trying to understand, rather than by trying to problem-solve or “lead.” Just as “true listening builds strength in other people” (1977, p. 17), it follows that a lack of listening weakens people. In the following section a story by Tolstoy illumines this idea.

### *Tolstoy on the Essence of Listening and Understanding*

Traditional leadership models often create an environment in which leaders take action without accountability to the emotional or spiritual well-being of themselves or those they lead. This can result in an elitist mentality in which leaders carry a false sense of direction. In the following paraphrase of the Tolstoy story entitled “The Three Hermits,” the bishop is such a leader, a person with good intentions, but blind to the dignity latent



in those he seeks to lead. In this way, even well-meaning leaders who do not make themselves accountable to the deeper issues of leadership end up diminishing themselves and others by approaching the work environment as leader first rather than servant first.

A bishop was traveling on a merchant ship when he overheard a man speaking of three hermits who had lived for years on a nearby island, devoting themselves to prayer. Crew members did not believe the man, saying it was just a legend, an old wives' tale. But the man persisted. He related how some years before, he had been shipwrecked off the island in question, taken in by the hermits, and sheltered, and fed by them while they rebuilt his boat. He told the crew the hermits were devout men of prayer, the most saintly men he had ever met. Overhearing this, the bishop demanded that the captain take him to the isle. It was out of the way, and the captain was reluctant, but the bishop was determined, and offered to pay the captain for his troubles. The captain relented and in the early morning, while the ship anchored off shore, the bishop was let off on the hermits' island. The hermits emerged, walking slowly toward the visitor. They were old and of grizzled appearance, with long beards. Having been so long away from civilization, they spoke little and appeared meek or afraid. The bishop asked them how they'd been praying. The tallest one seemed to be the spokesman.

"Very simply, my lord," he said. "Three are we. Three are Thee. Have mercy on us."

"I must teach you how to pray, then," said the bishop.

"Thank you, my lord," the three hermits replied, and the bishop proceeded to require them to memorize the Lord's Prayer. It was long, hard work; the hermits were out of practice. Throughout the day they fretted at how difficult it was for them to memorize it, and they feared they were disappointing the bishop. In fact, night had nearly fallen before the three could recite to the bishop the prayer he'd taught them, but finally the last of them had it and the bishop flagged the small boat to take him back to the



ship. He felt he had served his purpose that day, served God, and enlightened the three men.

When the ship set sail he was on deck, high up in the fore of the ship, near the captain, looking back at the ship's wake and the path of the moon. They had been moving for some time now but he did not feel like sleeping. He felt satisfied. The work had been hard work, but good work, and necessary. Just then he saw a silver sphere far back on the dark of the water moving toward the ship at a tremendous pace. The bishop was afraid. The entire crew was on deck now, watching it, trying to make out what it might be. At last the sphere seemed to split off into three. Then he saw clearly, three lights, three men, long beards flowing in the wind—it was the hermits, moving over the water with great speed. They approached the ship and floated up to where the bishop was seated, stopping in front of him just beyond the railing. They had pained looks on their faces.

“What is it?” cried the bishop.

“Father, Father,” pleaded the taller one, “forgive us. We’ve forgotten the prayer you taught us. Please teach us again.”

Hearing this, the bishop immediately fell on his face. “Go your way,” he said. “Pray as you have prayed. God is with you. Have mercy on me.”

#### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP, FORGIVENESS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Gadamer (1993) in philosophy, and Freire (1990) in education, speak of the importance of dialogue in understanding the world and initiating change across broad human scientific, societal, and interpersonal levels. Greenleaf (1977) speaks of the absolute necessity of trust, a form of love in which people are free of rejection. Greenleaf stated, “The servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects. The servant as leader always empathizes, always accepts the person, but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person’s effort or performance as good enough” (p. 21). In meaningful dialogue the servant as leader submits to a higher perspective, one that can be pivotal to the development of the self in relation to others.



Greenleaf addressed this when he stated that the real motive for healing is for one's own healing, not in order to change others, implying that the true motive to serve is for one's own service, one's own betterment. In this light one seeks to heal or seeks to serve not necessarily for others, but for the greater good of oneself, and by extension, the greater good of the community. Such healing may take place best in a community that initiates and sustains meaningful dialogue.

Meaningful dialogue gives rise to the forces that unhinge the way we harm each other, opening us toward a more accepting and empathic understanding of one another. Greenleaf, in forwarding an ideal of love in community, places servant-leadership firmly in the contemporary landscape of the family, the workplace, and the global pursuit of social justice. In this landscape, the retributive justice represented by the legal system in mediating familial and professional conflicts is replaced by the idea of a community of forgivers, people with the foresight and vision to build a just and lasting reconciliation, people interested in the deeper restoration that is the result of a disciplined and unflinching look at the wrongs we do to one another.

Forgiveness studies in the social sciences have gathered an immense following in the last two decades through research that is beginning to connect the will to forgive with lowered depression, lowered anger, fewer heart problems, and lower immune-deficiency levels (see McCullough, Sandage, and Worthington [1997] and McCullough and Worthington [1994] for excellent reviews of the will to forgive in individuals, marriages, and families). New bridges are being formed from the social sciences to the study of leadership, pointing organizations toward the acceptance and empathy Greenleaf envisioned. This involves the development of leaders who are able to understand the way people diminish one another, leaders who are able to invigorate in the organization a culture of acceptance, empathy, and relational justice. From this perspective the servant-leader creates an environment in which forgiveness can be asked and granted, and the servant-leader creates this by example. Two people who come together to recon-



cile, who choose to forgive and be forgiven, can experience a cleansing in which embittered rigidity becomes transformative openness (Valle & Halling, 1989). The leader exemplifies this process, and in settings of strong relational trust, the process becomes embedded in the life of the organization. An early look at forgiveness in leadership settings was published in the *Journal of Leadership Studies* (Ferch & Mitchell, 2001), detailing an intentional, specific approach to forgiveness work.

Globally, in the contemporary landscape, the traditional route of retributive justice is shown in the response to World War I and World War II, and reaches its apex in the international spectacle of the Nuremburg trials. Though retributive justice seeks a just answer to wrongs committed, it usually does so through punitive or violent means (e.g. imprisonment, death, and so on). Retributive justice, especially in its most undisciplined or wanton forms, tends to beget greater alienation between people, continued oppression, greater atrocities, and greater spiritual poverty. Restorative justice, promoted by leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights movement, and Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in response to the atrocities of apartheid in South Africa, has sought a different answer to the harms of humanity.

Martin Luther King, Jr., an exquisite servant-leader on the international scene, stated that the oppressor will never willingly give up his or her power—a statement of clarity that explains why we are often drawn toward either violence in an attempt to overthrow the oppressor, or silence in an attempt to escape the oppression: the fight or flight response. King, a pupil of Gandhi, advocated neither violence nor silence. He furthered his discernment regarding the unwillingness of the oppressor with the following revolutionary idea, an idea akin to Greenleaf's idea of the servant-leader's response to injustice: rather than hate or distance ourselves from the oppressor, we should love the oppressor (1986). King believed that when we love the oppressor we bring about not only our own salvation, but also the salvation of the one who harms us.

The first democratically elected president of South Africa was Nelson





Mandela, another extraordinary contemporary servant-leader. From a country of bloodshed and hate, he and those around him effectively built a country of hope. He held to a vision of South Africa involving reconciliation, where black and white Africans could live and rule together without retribution or violence. He spent more than twenty-seven years as a political prisoner, eighteen imprisoned at Robben Island, yet Mandela refused to be vengeful either personally or politically. Notably, upon his release he refused to gain power through suppression of dissent. Finally, his refusal to deny the humanity of those who imprisoned him or those who confessed to the most heinous of human right abuses, drew the people of his country toward the monumental task of forgiving in the face of grave injustices, forgiving even with regard to atrocities that had demonstrated the brutality of the human condition at its worst levels (Mandela, 1994).

Mandela, Tutu, and other democratically elected officials designed the Truth in Reconciliation Commission in response to the atrocities committed during the apartheid years. They felt that retribution, either legal or punitive, would only result in widespread violence, a violence that had plagued many African countries in their emergence from colonialization. The Commission set a specific and drastic vision, and due to the deep respect the majority of South Africans felt for these leaders, the country implemented a plan of forgiveness and reconciliation, of restorative justice, unlike any the global political community had ever known. Rather than seek out those who committed crimes against humanity, bring them to justice and punish them, the Commission asked for honesty. The commission asked people to honestly admit what they had done, where and when and how they had harmed, abducted, tortured, and killed others. The result of telling the truth was that the perpetrators would receive amnesty; they would go free. At the same time, the Commission asked the people of South Africa to make a forgiveness response. The Commission made this vision of truth and reconciliation an Act of Law, hoping it would give people a chance to hear word of lost and dead family members, friends, and loved ones, and a chance to truly grieve the harms the nation had experienced.



Tutu, chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, stated it clearly:

The Act says that the thing you're striving after should be "ubuntu" rather than revenge. It comes from the root (of a Zulu-Xhosa word), which means "a person." So it is the essence of being a person. And in our experience, in our understanding, a person is a person through other persons. You can't be a solitary human being. We're all linked. We have this communal sense, and because of this deep sense of community, the harmony of the group is a prime attribute (Harris, 1999, p. 26).

Some years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, South Africa remains largely free of bloodshed. The country's legacy, unique to the political, governmental, and military communities of the world, has begun to be defined by forgiveness and reconciliation rather than by force, retribution, or violence.

I do not think it far afield to say that most Americans have not read the works of Martin Luther King, one of our own, let alone the works of leaders such as Mandela and Tutu. Often we generate an egocentrism that insulates us, even from the kind of international servant-leadership ideas that are presently changing the world. In an unrelated but poignantly fitting statement made by Greenleaf while attending an international symposium in 1976, he noted, "Our African friend has said that we Americans are arrogant. It hurts—but I accept the charge" (1977, p. 307). In acceptance, empathy; in empathy, listening; and in listening, understanding. Such understanding may turn our self-absorption toward real care for others and in turn make us wiser, healthier, and better able ourselves to become servants, better able ourselves to lead.

## CONCLUSION

The hope of forgiveness and reconciliation is not without its critics. We shed our naiveté when we realize human evil exists despite our best efforts to forgive and reconcile. The echo of King's words remains—the



oppressor will never willingly give up power. Even so, the deeper echo of King's words rings higher, stronger: when we love the oppressor, we bring about not only our own salvation, but the salvation of the oppressor. In these words we find solace regarding our own failures, the inequities and injustices, the character flaws, the great harms. Members of our own families can live with an enduring sense of loving and being loved. Women and men in our communities can be true women and true men, not displaced, not diminished. And in our workplaces we can work with joy, a sense of calling, and the personal meaning that accompanies good work. These things are possible, for it is in the servant-leader, in his or her movement toward healing the self, toward truly serving, that an answer to the failures of leadership emerges. On the horizon of this landscape, a landscape that is as personal and spiritual as it is political and global, we see ourselves free of what binds us, and we walk in such a way that others are drawn forward so that they too, may be free.

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