



## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND THE ART OF TEACHING

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If ever there was an archetypical teacher, it would be Henry Higgins. Adorned in his tweed smoking jacket, with pipes in his pocket, this professor of phonetics displays an unabashed arrogance through much of *My Fair Lady*. He lectures the cockney Eliza Doolittle on the finer points of diction with the requisite disinterestedness of the research scientist, as if she is little different from the common laboratory rat. Yet, by the end of this memorable play we are entranced by the irrepressible Eliza, who proves Higgins wrong about her true capabilities and his own self-importance, and teaches him a thing or two about feelings, love, and instruction.

Most of us can recall a teacher who approached the craft akin to the fictional Higgins—the professorial sage on the stage who alone possesses the content knowledge that must be poured into empty student heads. Students, in turn, demonstrate their mastery of this knowledge by rote memorization, repeated back to the professor in a homework assignment or an exam. While we often laugh at our modern-day Professor Higginses, sometimes even with wistful affection, thirty or more years of research on the teaching and learning process clearly shows the limitations of this instructional approach. Unfortunately, as with anything in higher education, change is a slow, methodical process. Students today still experience a sizeable amount of teaching in the archetypical way, surviving it as a badge of honor rather than as the albatross to learning potential that it often is.

Twenty-five years ago, Robert Greenleaf spoke directly to the teacher



in his parable, “Teacher as Servant” (2003). In it he depicts a fictional university residence hall called Jefferson House in which a wise faculty housemaster helps his students come to appreciate the concepts of servant-leadership on campus and in their future careers. The main character, the physics professor housemaster, embodies the characteristics of a servant-leader, and in doing so is able to fundamentally transform the beliefs that the students have about their world and their responsibilities for service to others. By word and by deed the housemaster turns the professorial archetype on its head. “Teacher as Servant” offers a glimpse into what is possible when servant-leadership is applied in an instructional context. Ironically, however, not enough has been said since that time about how the classroom instructor can harness the principles of servant-leadership to enhance the learning process. The purpose of this essay is to examine how servant-leadership can be embodied by teachers in wide-ranging disciplinary areas, not just in those areas where servant-leadership is taught as content.

Larry C. Spears (2002), in his essay “Tracing the Past, Present, and Future of Servant-Leadership,” has provided a useful synthesis of Greenleaf’s writings via a set of ten characteristics that he feels are critically important to the development of servant-leaders (pp. 4-8). Although these ten were not intentionally crafted for the teacher, our embrace of servant-leadership principles, classroom instruction experience, and study of teaching pedagogy has led us to believe that these characteristics are as useful for the servant-leader instructor as they are for the servant-leader CEO. In this essay, we offer ways in which these characteristics or principles can be brought to bear on instructional practice in a way that can raise the bar for learning substantially.

Fundamental to the application of these characteristics or principles is Robert Greenleaf’s concept of the servant-leader that we believe also informs the “teacher as servant”:

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to



aspire to lead. . .The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 7)

The “best test” as coined by Greenleaf conveys an overarching goal for teachers as servants in their relationships with students. The ten characteristics of servant-leadership provide the guideposts for pursuing Greenleaf’s high standards in the teaching and learning experience.

#### INNER CHARACTERISTICS OR COMMITMENTS

At the root of the word *characteristic* is the word *character*. Character has been defined in a variety of ways but as applied to leadership, perhaps its most distinguishing feature is drawn from its middle English roots, meaning “a distinctive mark or imprint on the soul.” At the core of Robert Greenleaf’s belief about leadership was the notion that true leadership emerges from persons of high moral character who are motivated by an inner, selfless desire to serve others.

Larry Spears cast the idea of servant-leadership into a set of ten defining characteristics synthesized from Greenleaf’s writings. As we have thought about these manifestations of character, especially as they apply to the teaching craft, we are persuaded to believe that they come in two forms. The first can be described as inner characteristics or commitments. These inner characteristics lie near to the core of the servant-leader’s being. They are deeply held beliefs or soul imprints about the highest callings of leadership and are not as readily observed at the behavioral level in comparison with what we have labeled the outer characteristics or practices described later in this essay. The inner components of the servant-leader’s character—building community, commitment to the growth of people, foresight, conceptualization, and awareness—are powerful value sets that have as much relevance for the servant-teacher as they do for the servant-leader.



## *Building Community*

A recurring theme in Greenleaf's writing has been that of the loss of community, that important shaper of human lives. A key role of the servant-leader is to counteract the forces of individualism by role modeling and by creating opportunities for others to gather naturally in small groups, which are the backbone of community. Ernest Boyer (1990) echoed this sentiment when he challenged collegiate institutions to create a more integrative vision of community in higher education, one that focuses not on the length of time students spend on campus, but on the quality of their encounters both inside and outside of the classroom.

The principled ideas that Greenleaf and Boyer espoused are starting to manifest themselves as fundamental building blocks of effective teaching. In the past, colleges and their faculty adhered to an instructional or teacher-focused paradigm of teaching, the purpose of the enterprise being to provide instruction. What is emerging now is a learning paradigm wherein the college's mission is to produce learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). From the perspective of the learning paradigm, faculty create environments and experiences that bring students together to discover and construct knowledge for themselves as active members of communities of learners. As a result of this shift in thinking, the archetypical "sage on the stage" is being replaced by a new vision, the "guide on the side" who facilitates learning in multidirectional ways, student-to-student, student-to-self, student-to-teacher, and of course the traditional teacher-to-student. By becoming co-participants in the teaching and learning process, students become substantively more vested in what occurs in the classroom, thereby increasing their ownership and commitment to the "learning community." This is an outcome of foundational importance that Greenleaf highlights through the actions of the fictional Professor Billings, housemaster of Jefferson House.

Examples of how community-building occurs within a teaching and learning context are wide and deep. Much has been written in recent years, for instance, of the benefits of collaborative learning. Bruffee (1995) states



it simply when he says that “two or more students working together may learn more than individual students working alone” (p. 12). Yet old habits die hard, given that many collegiate teachers remain reliant on individual projects, refuse to allow student collaboration on assignments, and in general, eschew cooperative effort for learning despite numerous success stories emerging from its use. Our own experience working with graduate students, for example, has clearly demonstrated the benefits of group study as preparation for preliminary exams or for learning complex statistical and research methodology concepts.

Problem-based learning, a close cousin of collaborative learning, also demonstrates how community-building pays learning-dividends. With its roots in John Dewey’s progressive movement, problem-based learning emphasizes that when given an appropriately realistic problem to solve and the requisite guidance on how to proceed, students are highly motivated to learn. Problem-based learning can be a very effective method for teaching a particular knowledge area, since students are then challenged to apply that content to solving discipline-relevant problems. Since problem-based learning so often involves student collaboration on projects—case studies, games, and simulations being the most common problem-based learning mechanisms—community is created, allowing students to learn from each other as much as or more than from the instructor or facilitator.

A third example of where Greenleaf’s principle of building community is manifested is with the learning community movement that is spreading among many institutions of higher education. Hundreds of undergraduate campuses have been turning the traditional notion of what a class is, and when and where it is supposed to be offered, on its head. These schools have restructured their curriculum around thematically-linked courses in which a group of students enroll as a cohort. Faculty leaders of these learning communities seek intentionally to foster connectedness among the student participants around a program of study that has self-evident coherence outside of the restraining fifty-minute, three-days-a-week approach to course delivery. Research has demonstrated that community-building



learning models such as these increase student engagement and motivation, course completion rates, and student intellectual development. Faculty is also revitalized by this alternative to the traditional instructional paradigm.

At the conclusion of “Teacher as Servant,” Greenleaf’s protagonist is asked by the graduating seniors of Jefferson House to respond to a set of nine questions. Question nine strikes at the heart of building community and why we feel it is of core importance to instructional practice. Professor Billings is asked how a serene life is possible for him, given the many demands upon his time and person. He responds,

There must be something here that is deeper than the structure and programs of our House, something that may be carried to any situation. What makes community out of our relationship? It didn’t just happen because we live and work together. If we know what it is, you will be helped to build community in the institutions you work with in the future. You may not be able to influence a whole institution, as we have not in our University, but you might create an island of serenity that enables some people to cope, and to be a constructive leaven, in an environment that is cold and tense and hostile, conditions that mark too much of our institutional life and that will not go away easily or quickly. (p. 238)

These prophetic words about today’s lack of community reinforce why building community in teaching contexts is so important. Society desperately needs today’s students to be tomorrow’s community-building servant-leaders.

### *Commitment to the Growth of People*

To be truly successful at community-building requires a passionate commitment to the growth of those we lead. Servant-leaders believe that people have intrinsic value and as such must be as deeply committed to the growth of the individual as they are to the collective. Yet in the educational context, the individual is often overlooked as the instructor teaches to the whole, or more aptly, to the average. In other words, content is taught at a



pace and complexity that “matches” the average student in the class, leaving the slower learners further and further behind while the faster learners grow increasingly frustrated or disengaged. Making matters worse, teaching is conducted as if all students in the class learn in the same way, most typically in a visual (writing on the board or overhead) or auditory (lecturing) manner.

It is not surprising that some teachers approach their craft in this way; individualized attention is enormously difficult and time-consuming if one considers that it is the faculty alone who are responsible, and more importantly, the only ones considered capable of filling the empty vessels before them. Besides, there is content that must be relayed, and presenting it in the way that was done “to” instructors when they were in school is a comfortable, time-tested manner for teaching. Thus most of us learned via the traditional lecture method, and most students today continue to be taught in the same manner. Classroom instruction of this sort is an exercise in passivity: the instructor stands in front and talks, perhaps punctuating the lecture with board work, and the student simply listens and takes notes. Teaching becomes an act of efficiency, with the instructor trying to relay the largest quantity of information to the largest number of students in the shortest time possible.

Yet in his essay “Servant-Leadership in Education,” Greenleaf (2002), citing a former college president, challenges the teacher to a higher calling when he reminds us that “the grand design of education is to excite, rather than to pretend to satisfy an ardent thirst for information; to enlarge the capacity of the mind, rather than to store it with knowledge, however useful” (p. 197). In operational terms, Greenleaf sums up this thought by stating that the educator’s role is “to prepare students to serve, and be served, by society” (p. 197). The act of teaching must be one in which students are challenged to be constructive forces for society, and this is achieved by helping them as individuals to discover their needs and have them served. When we serve students in the educational setting, we help them see the power and possibilities of serving others, a vital leadership task that society



needs them to play when they join the myriad of institutional and organizational structures of the outside world.

Recent scholarship on teaching practice reinforces Greenleaf's ideas on serving students. For example, in their seminal work on how college affects students, a review of more than 2,600 research studies, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded that lecturing was the overwhelming approach to teaching, yet was among the less effective means of stimulating student learning. Their study of more collaboratively-based and active-learning approaches to teaching showed that these methods resulted in highly significant increases in learning over the traditional passive lecture approach. They concluded that the assumptions that all students are equally prepared for a course, learn at the same rate, learn in the same way, and differ in performance due solely to differences in effort, are fundamentally flawed ideas (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). Other scholarship on this subject has reinforced this conclusion (e.g., Englemeyer & Brown, 1998; Guskin, 1997).

At the core of the solution to individualizing instruction is the employment of active learning techniques. Bonwell and Eison (1991) define it simply: Active learning techniques are instructional activities which involve students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing. Silberman (1996) modifies Confucius' thoughts on the subject:

What I hear, I forget. What I hear and see, I remember a little. What I hear, see, and ask questions about or discuss with someone else, I begin to understand. What I hear, see, discuss, and do, I acquire knowledge and skill. What I teach to another, I master. (p. 1)

Examples of active learning techniques abound. Mixing up the ways in which content is taught over the course of a class period is one simple way to increase student learning. Short bursts of lecture, no more than twenty minutes in length, punctuated with other activities such as class discussion, journaling on their reaction to or application of presented content, and student small-group work, possibly followed by small-group presenta-



tions, are ways that student learning at an individual level can be stimulated, because each requires greater student ownership for the learning process. More sophisticated and complex examples include having students engage in case studies or debates on subject matter in which they are challenged to evaluate their personal views on an issue, defend those views in an evidentiary manner, and apply that learning to a relevant problem they might encounter in an organizational setting. By using these and related techniques, the instructor quickly sees how casting students as teaching partners is both educational and powerful; together they are synergistically capable of increasing rather than limiting the breadth and depth of material that can be covered over a semester.

The eighth question posed by the students of Jefferson House to Professor Billings reminds us why individualizing education is so important. When asked what he sees as the single most important Jefferson House learning experience, Professor Billings responds with this prophetic statement: “I believe it is this: learning to use one’s common sense and to live and work in community. . . . We need community because we are all partial people and we need the complementary qualities of others, as individuals, to be whole persons” (p. 237). By truly serving students, accomplished by sharing the ownership for learning, teachers help individuals to be made whole, a critical building block in Greenleaf’s vision of community.

### *Foresight and Conceptualization*

Two characteristics of the servant-leader that go hand-in-hand are foresight and conceptualization. Spears defines foresight as the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation. Foresight allows the servant-leader to take stock of the past, make sense of the present, and use both to inform decision-making for the future. Conceptualization naturally links with foresight; a servant-leader uses it to dream great dreams and avoid being distracted by the pressing needs of day-to-day tasks. In sum, the conceptual servant-leader uses foresight to remain focused on the strategic, relying on others to carry out the operational.



Like members of all organizations, teachers confront many pressing day-to-day challenges, making it difficult to even think about tomorrow in light of the considerable operational needs of today. Lesson plans must be finalized, exams and papers must be graded, student and sometimes parent concerns must be addressed, reports must be filed, committee and department meetings must be attended, and administrator inquiries on a variety of issues must be handled. Furthermore, society itself tells us that this is at the core of the twenty-first century's version of the Protestant work ethic—life should be led in a series of sound-bites, multi-tasking all the way, as a means of getting ahead or achieving a form of societal approving grace. Unfortunately, the pace of everyday life makes it difficult to bring to bear the lessons of the past and limits how much forward thinking can be done.

Greenleaf's notion of *entheos* provides useful insights on this problem. We often admire those who have a vibrant enthusiasm, manifested in such indicators of "success" as positional or social status, material wealth, and busyness. Yet deep rather than surface possession of the spirit, the root difference between *entheos* and *enthusiasm*, is manifested in an inner discomfort with the status quo, a desire to reach out for wider horizons while still remaining true to one's core values. Growth in *entheos* moves a person to be more conscious of the good use of time and ultimately to an intuitive feeling of oneness, of wholeness, of rightness. Thus, we admire most those who appear to exhibit *entheos*, often because they demonstrate conviction of belief about the possibilities of the future and provide the necessary conceptual or strategic thinking needed to shine a light on the way.

On one level, education might be a profession where *entheos* would easily be found. Educators ostensibly are attracted to the generally lower-paying professional field by a sincere desire to give back, powered by the noble calling to teach others in a way that provides the learner with a vision of a possible future. The teacher uses a content base, whether it be in the liberal arts and sciences or the applied fields, to equip students with the tools to use the lessons of the past and present to advance themselves as



individuals and as member participants in the collective betterment of the whole.

Regrettably, because leading from the head is typically more highly valued in education than leading from the heart, the natural outgrowth of *entheos*—foresight and conceptualization—is often underserved. Foresight and conceptualization require the substantive exercise of intuition, a heart-based value in sharp contrast with the prized rational, head-based approaches to knowledge generation and dissemination that characterize our institutions of learning. While focusing on the operational demands of teaching, instructors often neglect to emphasize pedagogy that challenges students to see possible futures for themselves or for society. Student dreams are focused instead on what it will take to achieve a certain course grade, how much time must be spent studying for the next class session, or whether a class will help them to achieve a desired occupation. What fails to occur is the student’s discovery of an inner calling, or vocation. Students are not provided the means of dreaming great dreams for their life’s pursuit, in part because they are not taught to see patterns and linkages in knowledge and experience, the core building blocks of a honed intuitive self.

Fortunately, most of us can think of a teacher in our past who did exhibit genuine *entheos*, inspiring us to see new possibilities for our lives and our role in improving the circumstances of others. How did that elementary school teacher, high school instructor, or college faculty member have such an impact on us? They did so through their strength of character combined with the uncanny ability to create opportunities for us to foresee the possibilities of our own futures. Thus, for example, they saw in us a latent talent for art, or drama, or reasoning, or persuasion, or leadership, and sought to give us opportunities to test our budding skills and abilities. Furthermore, they helped us to see the primary strategic steps necessary for achieving our dreams—enrolling in a particular set of courses, pursuing graduate education, obtaining an internship—balanced with the incremental steps needed to get there: study hard, practice regularly, ask questions.

Lastly, they had superb skills of listening and observation. They knew



who we were as individuals and tuned into what made us tick in subtle as well as overt ways. Not only would they provide nuanced feedback on our papers, projects, and exams, but also they would call upon us in class when they knew we had something uniquely important to contribute. We simply thought we must have the answer wrong, since none of our classmates seemed to think about the problem or issue in the way that we did. Our teacher, however, saw otherwise and affirmed the importance of divergent thinking. These exemplary servant-teachers saw us as fully capable of learning and strove to enable us to discover all that we could become.

Question three from Greenleaf's "Teacher as Servant" (2003) parable inquires as to the source of what the students see as Professor Billings' boundless optimism. Clearly a man of *entheos*, Billings responds,

I try to live fully in the present moment as a point of continuum from past to future. My life motif is one that I have consistently maintained with you, to serve and be served by the present society. . . . I believe that I do my best to assure the future when I do my best in the present moment. . . . Practically. . . I cannot remake the past, and I can only shape the future by what I do now. . . . I will try to anticipate future conditions and prepare for them. But my hope for the future is that, no matter what the conditions, as an individual person I will be effective as a servant. (pp. 229-230)

Clearly Billings, as the archetypical servant-teacher, exhibits a constancy of purpose that is inspiring to others and that helps stimulate his Jefferson House students to see the possibilities of their own futures. Today's servant-teacher can do the same.

### *Awareness*

Henry Fonda's character in the film *Twelve Angry Men* was a man who embodied Greenleaf's notion of awareness. In this masterful film, Fonda's character, juror number eight, is the initial sole "not-guilty" vote in a capital murder trial. Making the decision to vote against everyone else is



an act of bravery for which he pays a heavy price early on as the others are angered or baffled by his decision. Yet it is clear that juror eight has an inner calmness from which he methodically builds a case that reveals that not only are the facts not what they seem, but jury members' personal prejudices, impatience, and simple ignorance are also at play behind the reasoning for condemning an innocent man to death. By the end of the film, a unanimous "not-guilty" vote is reached thanks to the skillful awareness of Fonda's protagonist juror.

Spears describes Greenleaf's notion of awareness as being present in the person who is intimately in tune with surrounding circumstances, especially in regard to issues of ethics, power, and values, but one who also has a keen awareness of inner-self and a recognition of his or her place in the social or organizational milieu. Highly aware or awake persons are buoyed by an inner calmness and detachment, but are nevertheless sufficiently agitated to separate the important obligations and responsibilities from the urgent, and ideally address the important things first. According to Greenleaf (1970), "when one is aware, there is more than the usual alertness, more intense contact with the immediate situation and a lot more is stored away in the unconscious computer to produce intuitive insights in the future when needed" (p. 19). At the beginning of *Twelve Angry Men*, the urgent task appears to be to make a swift decision on guilt. But to juror eight the important task is to adequately review the evidence and to be sure that all jurors come to their conclusions based on the facts. In the process of doing so, juror eight is able to spotlight where ethical decision-making is lacking, build a powerful coalition of doubters, and challenge many to examine their own internal value sets.

Awareness requires the discipline to be introspective about personal values, attitudes, skills, and abilities. Aware servant-leaders need to take the time to reflect, to be open to constructive criticism, and to regularly revisit their passions and commitments as a reminder of what undergirds their choices in life. Yet awareness is not an end point, but rather a continuously moving target. For aware servant-teachers, this means viewing their



own classroom performance as a work in process. One is not a “good teacher,” as if that were an end state, but rather a continuously improving teacher who has much to learn about “good teaching.” Thus, aware servant-teachers make use of both formative and summative feedback from students and peers as a means of improving their craft. Furthermore, they embrace failure for its powerful beneficial potential. John Maxwell (2000) tells us we must learn to “fail forward.” He argues that embracing failure actually helps and improves us. It provides a window to where we fall short, how to change, and what is necessary to achieve our full potential. Thomas Edison’s words captured this sentiment: “I have not failed ten thousand times. I have simply found ten thousand ways that will not work.”

Regrettably, forces have conspired against awareness in the teaching profession because the traditional teaching paradigm places a premium on teacher expertise, assumed to mean that teachers are experts not only in their fields, but also at relaying the material to students. Teachers are not supposed to show vulnerability by admitting to students that they do not know the answer to a particular question, let alone admit that there may be better ways to engage students than in the usual one-way teacher-to-student manner. Rare are the teachers who admit to their students, “I never thought about that problem in that way,” or who believe that “Students at times are superior teachers to one another than I am.” All too commonplace are the teachers who cut off dissenting opinions, refuse to allow students to question instructor-presented ideas, or belittle students for asking “dumb” questions. Such behavior is tragic since it does not nurture student awareness.

Within the emerging learning paradigm, however, ample room is offered for the development of awareness in both the teacher and the student. A primary reason for this is that implicit in a learner-centered model of education is the belief that teaching and learning are mutually owned. This perspective moves education from a student spectator activity to a participant one, with students asked to talk and write about what they are learning, to make connections to their lived experiences, and to apply what is learned to their everyday lives (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). This



reorientation as to who should be the true center of attention in the classroom reduces the pressure on the faculty member to have to measure up to some unrealistic professorial expectation of perfection that none can achieve anyway. Instead, the teacher can be more open to self-reflection built upon openness to feedback, most especially as it regards how to facilitate—rather than dictate—powerful learning opportunities for students. Much recent work on learning assessment has affirmed this point. Alverno College, for example, has become nationally recognized for its ability-based curriculum tied to a comprehensive student assessment-as-learning process. Student performance is assessed in terms of how well students can demonstrate particular skills and abilities that they learn, and the assessments are then used to inform improvements in teaching pedagogy. Other institutions are also becoming more intentional about tying instructional evaluation to learning outcomes.

Other scholarship on teaching indicates that students are encouraging of this change in approach to the teaching and learning process. In his chapter on *Faculty Who Make a Difference*, for instance, Richard Light (2001) points out that students do want shared intellectual responsibility and they lament the fact that faculty do not capitalize on the diversity of intellectual capital in a classroom. Furthermore, the many students he interviewed for his book felt that their very best courses were ones in which the faculty member encouraged dissent, not just among the students, but also with the instructor. The students described how these professors taught them how to develop ideas and arguments that were based upon something more than opinion, ultimately leading to higher-level reasoning guided by theoretical concepts or value-based principles. This kind of classroom climate offers students rich opportunities to develop both self and other awareness, important core characteristics of the servant-leader.

Near the end of Greenleaf's "Teacher as Servant," the narrator of the story, Martin Hedeggar, a Jefferson House resident, sums up his experience under the tutelage of Professor Billings:

I realize that one of the major influences of my experience at Jefferson



House was to learn that obstacles and problems are difficult to define, and that the problems that need to be solved and giving them an order of priority is one of the highest and most difficult of arts. Further, there are usually no simple and easy solutions; life presents a challenge of learning and understanding throughout one's years. . . . Mr. Billings had consummate skill in confronting us with the hard facts that required us to accept this point of view by the time we graduated. He never talked down to us. He simply pressed us on to learn and to grow and to establish a pattern of growth that would carry us forward. And he stood there as a consistent model of what he was urging us to do. Yet, he never implied, "Be like me." Be yourself, be your most effective self, was clearly his guiding principle. (2003, p. 223)

Professor Billings had clearly instilled in his students the value of continuous learning, of introspection, of principled thinking, of awareness.

#### OUTER CHARACTERISTICS OR PRACTICES

Whereas the inner characteristics or commitments are not as easily observed, although intimately felt by followers of the servant-leader, four other characteristics that Spears identified are readily manifested in related servant-leader behaviors and actions. These equally important characteristics—listening, empathy, healing, and persuasion—can be described as outward practices of the servant-leader. Built upon the inner soul imprints, this next set of four characteristics guides how servant-leaders interact with those they serve. Furthermore, servant-leaders work hard to develop the skills to be effective in each of these areas since they are so critical to meeting the "best test" of servant-leadership, as Greenleaf says, to help others to become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and ideally, servant-leaders themselves. As we will discuss, the same is true for servant-teachers who employ servant-leadership principles in their pedagogy.

#### *Listening and Empathy*

Similar to foresight and conceptualization, listening and empathy are



also closely aligned, this time as tools or practices of the servant-leader. Many scholars of leadership have pointed to the importance of strong listening skills, something that Greenleaf believed as well. To Greenleaf listening is almost a spiritual act, given its emphasis on intensively listening to what others say orally and “speak” non-verbally for the purpose of clarifying the will of a group and listening to one’s own inner voice, heard via extended periods of quiet and reflection.

The act of listening has another purpose, however. The servant-leader uses the practice of deep listening, what Spears labels *empathic* listening, to truly understand the perspective of others in any dialogue. Empathy is the act of seeking to understand the feelings of others in a given circumstance. Being empathic is in sharp contrast to its seemingly close but distinctively distant cousin, *sympathy*. Sympathy is simply feeling sorry for another person. Thus, the servant-leader demonstrates empathy when seeking to understand the pain of a single welfare mother who is unable to secure a high enough paying job to move into her own apartment, expressed as reflected feeling in dialogue with her. In contrast, the sympathetic person does not try to understand the feelings of the welfare mother, but instead only feels sorrow or pity for her. The former embraces a loving view of the person, even if that person’s behavior or action choices may not be lovable. The latter essentially rejects the worth of the other person, even though it may be done with the best of intentions and out of ignorance rather than from malice.

Within the traditional teaching paradigm, listening, let alone empathy, is not a skill held in high esteem. Given that from the teaching paradigm perspective the intent of instruction is to transfer knowledge from the faculty member to students, what need is there for listening? If the instructor is the content expert and the students are ignorant vessels, it becomes an act of inefficiency to pause and listen to the “learners,” since doing so impedes the instructor’s ability to maximize the quantity of content to be transferred. Thus, students are left to their own devices to make sense of the material, speculate on how best to regurgitate it back to the instructor in



class assignments or exams, and in general, attempt to synthesize the content in meaningful ways. Is it any wonder, then, that we sometimes look back with a feeling of pride for having somehow survived Professor X's class, as if it were a badge of honor? Yet how much can we really remember about what was learned in the course or how it might have informed some aspect of our lives today, other than possibly as a paradoxically fond memory?

As for the specific form of listening that Greenleaf advocates, empathic listening, even fewer instructors can be bothered with hearing the stories of their students, since it is generally assumed that all are some adaptation of the "woe is me" or "here is why my assignment was late" story. Instead, instructors tell students to "suck it up and act responsibly," treating them the same way they were treated by their own professors when they faced some unforeseen circumstance affecting their class performance. Yet assuming that this is all that a student might seek from a teacher—being excused for sub-par performance—grossly underestimates the power of empathy, demeans the student, and cuts off any potential for mentoring or guidance on life issues that go far beyond those of the class itself.

From the perspective of the learning paradigm, deep listening and empathic listening play a crucial role in student learning. If students are to be co-owners of what occurs in the classroom, they must be treated with the respect accorded to anyone expected to play a leadership role. Hence, the faculty member must listen to their views and ideas and help to shape them in educationally powerful ways. True collaborative learning is built on the foundation of good listening skills. The instructor needs to hear what is said both orally and in written form and needs to facilitate opportunities for student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction. Thus, for example, an instructor might engage students in a case study of a relevant problem of practice and use the student responses on what to do to for the purpose of shaping the direction of the dialogue. In addition, when instructors refrain from imparting their own expert opinions on what should be done, instead asking probing questions, students experience self-discovery, a much more



powerful mechanism for learning than is being told. Letting students venture down wrong paths can be immensely useful for learning, since they have not just heard it from the mouth of the instructor, but have actually experienced it in simulation.

Creating opportunities for small-group work, whether on projects or in class activities, forces students to exercise their listening skills. In our work with graduate students, for instance, we often devote one-third of the class period to some kind of small-group work, for which careful listening to one another's lived experience as college administrators is vitally important to their being able to bring to the surface the nuances of a case or consulting problem.

Empathic listening has an important place in the new learning-based paradigm. In 1998, three major higher education associations banded together to produce an important document designed to inform classroom pedagogy from the learning-based perspective. Titled "Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning," it synthesized the knowledge base to date on good teaching into ten guiding principles of practice. For each principle, a subset of items was listed that proposed specific ways faculty and staff could support the goals of a given principle for enhancing student learning. Some paraphrased examples that align with or imply the educational benefits of empathic listening are as follows:

Faculty and staff should offer opportunities for:

1. Student discussion and reflection on the meaning of all collegiate experiences.
2. Student-faculty interaction in social and community settings.
3. Student contemplation.
4. Students to feel connected, cared for, and trusted.
5. Students to develop an integrated sense of identity, characterized by high self-esteem and personal integrity.
6. Students' personal histories and common cultures to be valued and human differences to be appreciated.
7. Mentoring relationships on and off campus.



#### 8. Individualized learning rather than mass-delivered presentations.

Question two from the students in Jefferson House asks how the concept for their particular living arrangement evolved and what Professor Billings meant when he said he wanted to learn from the students. Dr. Billings says when he first took on housemaster responsibilities, he had to confront his own interpersonal shortcomings, but that he was awakened to the power of listening both as a tool for learning and as a therapeutic aid to those who are heard. His most powerful lesson on the value of listening, an affirmation of its importance for the servant-leader as well as the servant-teacher, is as follows:

I have had a rich experience through listening to and learning from students who are quite mature and whose major interests are different from mine. Even if I had had unlimited time to take courses from this university, I doubt that I could have gathered the perspective on the world that I have gotten from twenty-four years of the kind of listening to and learning from students that I have had. (p. 228)

#### *Healing*

A growing number of students are coming to college with a range of emotional and physical hurts. A disturbing article in *USA Today* (Peterson, 2002) reported that ten percent of college students have been diagnosed with depression, and that as many as thirty percent of college freshmen report feeling overwhelmed a great deal of the time. Many students are also coming to college on a range of antidepressant medications, so much so that student banter about their Prozac fix is almost commonplace. Researchers have pointed to a number of factors for this rise in depression, including increased family dysfunction, the anxieties associated with an increasingly complex and competitive world, and latent fears over personal safety, whether from being assaulted or as a victim of a terrorist act. Whatever the root cause, the reality remains that the need for healing among young people is enormous and growing.



Healing, according to Spears, involves both what one does for oneself and what is done in concert with others. Greenleaf recognized the many hurts that people experience and how much they are intertwined with the institutions and organizations of which they are a part. The pain and brokenness that are inflicted and received in one setting are carried like a palsy to other settings; humans do not leave them at the metaphorical company or classroom door. Hence a key practice or task of the servant-leader is to act responsibly as a healer of broken spirits with the goal of helping others to be made whole. As Greenleaf (1970) states, "Implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they [the servant-leader and the led] share" (p. 27). Healing is facilitated by the use of other practices of servant-leadership, such as listening and empathy, as well as the fundamental belief in the redeeming value of all persons. Motivated by the potential to be a catalyst for human wholeness, the servant-leader patiently but persistently encourages, cajoles, confronts, and supports those who are hurting on their path to recovery.

The classroom, a microcosm of the larger society, is as rife with brokenness as any other organizational setting. Given the rise in student hurts, the need for exemplary servant-teacher healing is especially acute. Once again, though, the traditional teaching paradigm does not naturally lend itself well to a teacher serving in a healing role. Sages on the stage are supposed to be emotionally separate from their pupils. Furthermore, in American higher education, faculty have been slowly but steadily delegating many of their duties for student holistic development to a growing corps of professional administrators with specialized training in co-curricular programming, counseling, and advising. While this team of professionals has been of immense benefit to students, nonetheless something is lost when the teacher role is reduced to fifty minutes of faculty-student one-way contact three days a week. In sum, student-faculty and student-staff relationships become a series of compartmentalized interactions that do not serve as especially useful facilitators of healing. Few meaningful relationships are



created in which students feel comfortable sharing their hurts or opening themselves up in a way that reveals their personal vulnerabilities.

Given this circumstance, then, it is critical that faculty recognize their responsibilities to their students and realize that doing so will likely require out-of-class engagement as well. In his seminal work on what makes for powerful learning environments, George Kuh (1996) suggests that one key is for faculty and co-curricular professionals to view student learning holistically and seamlessly. In the article he presents ten conditions that facilitate student learning and personal development. Three of them are especially relevant for healing:

1. An institutional philosophy that embraces a holistic view of student talent development.
2. Complementary institutional policies and practices congruent with students' characteristics and needs.
3. Human scale settings that are characterized by ethics of membership and care.

Kuh goes on to describe ways that academic affairs and student affairs can collaborate better in these areas, all with the goal of improving student learning. We would argue that collaboration also serves a useful healing benefit, since ostensibly the student becomes the focal point of attention in the classroom setting, and faculty and student affairs professionals are more effective at communicating the intellectual as well as the psycho-social and emotional needs they see in particular students. A culture of collaboration also legitimizes a faculty member's invitation to a student to simply talk or to volunteer to serve in a student organization advisory capacity. Furthermore, the perceived self-worth of faculty is heightened once they realize that they can and do make a difference in student lives.

In their first closing question to Professor Billings, the students ask how he is able to manage his life given the amount of time he puts into Jefferson House and his other academic duties. His response speaks volumes to the barriers against faculty as healers, but also to the heartening potential of the teacher who embraces the principles of servant-leadership:



As I said, there is no complaint that Jefferson House interferes with my teaching or scholarly work. There is one curious complaint that will interest you. It is held against me by my colleagues that I am too much interested in students. Part of this may stem from my involvement in Jefferson House, but most of it stems from the time I spend with students outside of class. I say it is a curious complaint because there is a strange element in the academic culture that is averse to interest in students. The problem is that. . .academic posts tend to become bases from which one “does one’s own thing.” My attitude collides with that. Teaching my students is the center of my work. (p. 225)

### *Persuasion*

Most images of leaders in history relay some heroic element, typically as an outgrowth of their wielding considerable power or authority to change the course of human events. John French and Bertram Raven (1959) suggest that a leader’s power stems from one or more of five sources or bases. Coercive power derives from the ability to instill fear in others, and reward power is sourced in the ability to distribute something of value to others. Legitimate power is drawn from one’s positional authority, while expert power comes from one’s expertise, special skills, or unique knowledge set. Lastly, referent power stems from others’ identification with a leader’s resources or personal traits.

Of the many themes found in Greenleaf’s writings, the issue of power and how it should and should not be wielded is one of the most widely discussed. Greenleaf was deeply concerned about the ability of power to corrupt, even if used initially for genuinely benevolent purposes. Examples abound in history of powerful leaders, usually men, who wielded power to advance the interests of a persecuted minority and who then, when placed in a position of power, fell prey to hubris and corruption. Examples from third world countries are especially common, as today’s freedom fighter turns into tomorrow’s corrupt dictator.

Greenleaf proposed an alternative to this cycle of power for the pur-



pose of conquering or overtly or covertly manipulating others. Spears operationalized it into one of the ten servant-leadership characteristics, what we would consider another of the practices of servant-leadership. Specifically, servant-leaders must rely on skills of persuasion, rather than on skills of coercion based on their positional authority, when making decisions that affect an organization or institution. To do so, however, requires that servant-leader have highly honed skills at consensus building, as well as the patience generally required to achieve it. For Greenleaf, the deeply held suspicion of power originated with his Quaker roots, and he worked diligently throughout his years to show how its benefits can be applied in all walks of life, especially as it regards those in positions of leadership.

Although his writing about power shines most brightly into the corporate setting, Greenleaf offers examples from other settings as well, including education. In “Servant-Leadership in Education” (2002), he takes on those who assume that some individuals know what another ought to learn and as such are justified in imposing judgment backed up by sanctions. While not suggesting that persons with more experience should not play a primary role in organizing and providing education to the less experienced, he does argue that it is easy for that responsibility to be taken too far. Educators must regularly remind themselves that education is a partnership enterprise with those being educated, and that the experts do not always know what is best for those seeking to be educated. Furthermore, Greenleaf believed that compulsory education at the elementary and secondary levels and the gatekeeper credentialing expectations characteristic of the post-secondary level were a form of coercion. He believed that they inherently created resistance to learning and that better ways should be sought to capitalize on the power of voluntary acts in a spirit of expert and learner collaboration.

How might the servant-teacher best utilize the tools of persuasion and reduce the corrupting forces of coercion? Maryellen Wiemer (2003) offers some suggestions in her article on transforming teaching. First, faculty must realize that they make too many decisions about learning *for* students



rather than *with* students. Decision-making should be shared. For example, rather than have a large set of required assignments, she has one or two that are required but then gives students options for the other assignments from which to choose. She also gives students a level of ownership over the class participation policy, such as which kind of behaviors should be rewarded. In her view, simple acts like these stimulate learning by increasing student motivation regarding learning. Second, she argues that faculty *de facto* force learning on reluctant participants, all in the name of trying to stimulate the passive, ill-prepared students to a higher level of performance. In other words, teachers create rules for learning—strict deadlines on assignments with no makeup opportunities and strict classroom management and attendance expectations with a peppering of reward-oriented “motivators” such as extra-credit and bonus points. Instead, students need motivational environments that stimulate them to accept responsibility for learning. Personalizing learning opportunities, establishing clear consequences for not having completed reading assignments, and simple acts of getting to know one’s students as persons go a long way in this regard.

In terms of the employment of persuasion, faculty can better utilize what we already know about the development of intelligence and the matching of educationally purposeful activities to the developmental levels of students. William Perry’s theory of intellectual development (1970), for example, provides a valuable framework for designing assignments and classroom activities that challenge students to move from dualistic views on issues to more multiplistic and ultimately relativistic perspectives. Thus, for instance, students can be assigned to respond to an issue such as school prayer or the application of American military force in third world countries from the perspective of a particular stakeholder such as students, parents, the citizens of a country, and the President of the United States, as is appropriately relevant to the circumstance. By bringing forth the nuances in perspective, students are challenged to assess their own views in light of others’ views, using the tools of reason, argument, and the weight of evidence.



Of critical importance in the use of persuasion, however, is ensuring that students debate ideas and issues and do not demean those who articulate alternative positions, especially when they represent the minority view. It is often risky for students to voice their own positions on controversial topics. The instructor must establish a high level of safety in the classroom for the exploration of ideas or students will be reluctant to share an opinion, or will do so halfheartedly when they really do not agree. We have sought to do this with our students in the context of the controversial issue of affirmative action. After establishing some mutually-crafted ground rules, we have the students engage in a mock debate on the issue, with one side pressing for it to be abolished altogether as a federally-sanctioned policy, and the other arguing for why it is needed to advance the interests of the historically marginalized minority community. Once all of the issues are identified, even those that may appear racist or shortsighted, a discussion ensues as to why certain groups might adhere to particular beliefs, ultimately leading to student ownership of their own views and how they may have been challenged based on the debate exercise.

Returning to the closing question-and-answer session at Jefferson House, the students probe Professor Billings in question four as to how the idea for a junior year internship evolved to focus on the study of power. He responds,

Part of the reason for emphasizing the study of the use and abuse of power is that I hope you will look closely at the consequences of concentrating executive power in one person, a practice which has been deeply imbedded in our culture from the time of Moses. In my view, such use of power is no longer acceptable. It always seems to have a destructive aspect. In the end, much more is lost than is gained. The opportunity for those who still hold such power is to use it, while they still have it, to take the necessary steps to transfer that power to a collegial group under the leadership of a *primus inter pares*, a first among equals. (pp. 230-231)

In those well-spoken words, Greenleaf reminds those of us who are



educators why it is so important to teach students about power and why persuasion is such a valuable tool for being of service to others.

#### STEWARDSHIP: THE TIE THAT BINDS

Returning to Jefferson House, our attention is again drawn to the final conversation between Professor Billings and his students. Among the many penetrating questions posed by his admiring students was this: “Of our nearly one hundred guests of the house in our four years, who, in your judgment, had the most important message for us?” Professor Billings identified Dr. Broderick, the psychiatrist, and he went on to explain his choice. Professor Billings recalled the doctor’s observation that his powerful patients were his most difficult challenge, and sought to persuade them that people of power in relationships with others have a primary opportunity and responsibility to wield power for generous and good works. The doctor went on to say that servanthood is tested whenever one has power. The primary moral test is what one does with that power in those places where it is at its greatest.

For the teacher, that place is in the classroom. Teachers of all stripes, servant or otherwise, are entrusted by the institution with significant responsibility and authority for what occurs in the classroom and in their relationships with students. The relationship between teacher and student can even be thought of as a sacred trust. Hence, the servant-teacher assumes the mantle of *steward*, a person who guards or protects something of great value—in this case, the education and welfare of students.

The notion of the servant-teacher as steward mirrors the description that Spears crafted, the tenth and final characteristic that we believe binds all the rest together. In sum, servant-teachers are caretakers of everything in the classroom, most especially of the students. Yet playing such a role raises interesting questions regarding the meaning of that responsibility. How might a servant-teacher demonstrate effective stewardship?

It seems to us that stewardship requires that servant-teachers embrace the following responsibilities. First, servant-teachers must foster within the



classroom *a sense of community and culture committed to the growth of each individual student* as persons of intrinsic value. As Dr. Broderick told the students of Jefferson House, the ultimate goal in education, as in life, is to strive to become all that we can become as unique, fully developing individuals. In such a culture, students would be as committed to the growth of one another as they were to themselves.

Second, as stewards of the learning process, servant-teachers assume responsibility for fostering *a culture of vulnerability and collaboration*, in which each student's limitations can be unconditionally accepted and understood to be opportunities for personal growth. As the students at Jefferson House reported, "Here we laugh at our mistakes (and we make plenty of them), and we laugh at our common predicaments (which are many), and we laugh when we comfort each other in pain." For students to be comfortable with vulnerability requires courage, trust in their teacher and fellow students, and the embrace of candid reflection, introspection, and personal growth. In such a culture, the most talented and able reach out to the less distinguished and able so that together they might grow together through service to one another. This was the essence of the culture of Jefferson House as embodied in its motto, "Serve and be served by."

Third, as stewards, servant-teachers must nurture *a culture of intellectual freedom*, one that truly values diversity of intellectual thought. This requires an abiding respect for the freedom of students to engage ideas, to explore, to discover, to entertain a diversity of intellectual viewpoints, and to express themselves and be heard with respect and without fear of reprisal. Like Professor Billings, servant-teachers do not demand that their students be and think like them. Instead they tell students, "Be yourself, be your most effective self," just as Professor Billings had done.

Fourth, servant-teachers, as stewards, are responsible for nurturing *a culture of personal responsibility and accountability*. By sharing with students the responsibility and accountability for the quality of the learning experience, the growth and development of each participant, teacher included, and the commitment to serving the class as a community of learn-



ers, teachers create opportunities for students to embrace and practice the value of personal responsibility. As Greenleaf observed, “Serving requires that the concerned individual accept the problems in the world as his or her personal task, a means of achieving. . . integrity.” Greenleaf further admonishes that the “servant sees any problem in the world as. . . inside himself or herself, not out there.” Thus, servant-teacher stewards hold students and themselves to a high standard of performance and personal integrity, and insist that all take responsibility for the individual and collective educational experiences that occur.

Finally, effective stewardship requires that the servant-teacher *lead by example* and model for their students the acts and deeds reflective of servant-leadership. As Walt Whitman expressed in his poem “Song of the Open Road,” “I and mine do not convince by arguments. . .we convince by our presence.” It is through the teacher’s conduct that the essence of servant-leadership is taught and hopefully embraced by the students entrusted to their care. Commenting on Professor Billings, Robert Greenleaf observed, “He stands before them as a model of what he hopes they will become: true servants.”

In the end, how are servant-teachers to know whether they’ve been trustworthy stewards and responsible servants? The answer is discerned by applying the “best test” question as coined by Greenleaf: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

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