



FILM REVIEW———

“THUS HAVE WE MADE THE WORLD”:  
USING THE FILM *THE MISSION* TO EXPLORE THE CHOICE  
FOR SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

—MICHAEL LIEBERMAN CAREY  
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

Early in my career as a teacher, I taught English and American literature to high school seniors. I loved teaching literature because the themes of great novels, short stories, drama, and poetry allowed me to discuss with my students things that mattered: birth, death, and all the many choices that humans make between those events. High school seniors are at the perfect age for such discussion because developmentally they are at a stage of questioning all that they have been taught and trying to figure out what they really believe.

Thirty years later, I teach leadership studies to graduate students, most of whom are in their thirties and forties. Mid-life is not too different from adolescence: my students are at a more advanced developmental stage, and they question all that they have been taught about leadership and try to figure out what they really believe. Sometimes I use great novels and plays in addition to the literature of leadership to trigger discussions among my students, but I find that more often I make use of extraordinary films.

#### FILMS AS LEADERSHIP CASE STUDIES

When exploring leadership, films can be used as case studies drawn in dramatic terms. Like a well-constructed case study, a good film allows students of leadership to experience vicariously the tribulations of conflict without also experiencing the actual consequences of the choices made.



Good case studies and films, even when fictional, are true, in that they give us insights into the way things really are. My experience is that as students consider what they see happening to the characters in a film, they are actually discussing what they see happening to themselves in their own lives. When I show the film *Gandhi* in class, students do not think that they are involved in liberating a country from colonial rule, but they do relate—sometimes viscerally—to dealing with being controlled by others or oppressed by an organization. When students watch the film *Strictly Ballroom*, they do not see it as an advertisement for “dancing your own steps” in ballroom dance competitions, but as a lesson on the difficulty of staying focused on the essence of leadership, rather than merely on its form. *Norma Rae* is not only a well-made film about the unionization of the textile factories, the last major industry in the United States to remain unorganized, but also a case study of empowerment, collaboration, and dialogue, and ultimately of transformational leadership.

No well-made film is unable to teach us something about leadership because leadership is about conflict, choices, and integrity. A well-written screenplay is great literature as surely as is a poem, play, short story, or novel. When the script is skillfully directed and acted, the result is not only a work of art, but also an incredible learning tool. In my experience, no screenwriter has done a better job of examining the essence of leadership than Robert Bolt in such highly acclaimed works as *A Man for All Seasons*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and more recently, *The Mission*.

#### *THE MISSION AS A SERVANT-LEADERSHIP CASE STUDY*

*The Mission* was written by Robert Bolt, directed by Roland Joffe, and starred Jeremy Irons, Robert De Niro, and Ray McAnally. In 1986, the film was nominated for eight Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Director; the film won an Oscar for Chris Menges (Best Cinematography) as well as Golden Globes for Ennio Morricone (Best Original Score) and Robert Bolt (Best Screenplay).

What does this beautiful film have to tell us about leadership? I think



that *The Mission* ably presents Robert Greenleaf's concept that "the great leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness" (Spears & Lawrence, 2004, p. 2). I also think that *The Mission* illustrates the ten characteristics of servant-leadership identified by Spears: *Listening, Empathy, Healing, Awareness, Persuasion, Conceptualization, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to the growth of people, and Building community* (Spears & Lawrence, 2004, pp. 12-16).

The story of *The Mission* is relatively simple, although the history that serves as its backdrop is complex. It is set in eighteenth-century Paraguay, a society made up of Spanish, Portuguese, Jesuits, and aboriginal natives known as the Guarani. Spain and Portugal control specific colonial territories, and both are busily draining the region of its resources to satisfy an ever-increasing trade relationship with Europeans "back home." The Jesuits have created "reductions," or missions, that are planned communities of native Guarani constructed around a central church building. In these communities, the natives have created successful farming cooperatives, organizations which are problematic in that they represent obstacles to the economic control sought by the Spanish and Portuguese colonialists. Inevitably, conflict results, and the natives, as is usually the case, are caught in the middle.

In the preface to his play *A Man for All Seasons*, Robert Bolt reflects on the drama inherent in "inevitable conflicts." He writes about the main characters of his play, from King Henry VIII to Sir Thomas More:

The economy was very progressive, the religion was very reactionary. We say therefore that the collision was inevitable, setting Henry aside as a colorful accident. With Henry presumably we set aside as accidents Catherine and Wolsey and Anne and More and Cranmer and Cromwell and the Lord Mayor of London and the man who cleaned his windows; setting indeed everyone aside as an accident, we say that the collision was inevitable. But that, on reflection, seems only to repeat that it happened. What is of interest is the way it happened, the way it was lived. (Bolt, 1960, p. x)



Into the fractious relationship between the colonialists and the Guarani are thrown three men: Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert De Niro), a Spanish mercenary who captures natives to sell as slaves; Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons), a Jesuit who works with the natives to create the farming communities mentioned above; and Cardinal Altimirano (Ray McAnally), who has been sent by the Pope to negotiate between the interests of the Spanish and Portuguese colonialists and those of the Jesuit missionaries.

Altimirano appears to have come to Paraguay on a “fact-finding” mission that will inform his recommendation to the Pope, but the viewer is soon aware that Altimirano has no illusions as to the actual purpose of his trip. The Jesuits in Europe are under attack by the rulers of Portugal and other countries, accused of undermining civil authority through their radical political ideas about justice. (Apparently, things haven’t changed much in 300 years!) Altimirano knows that if *individually* the Jesuits in Paraguay are seen as obstacles to the economic growth of the colonies, then *collectively* the Jesuits in Europe may need to be suppressed by the Pope in order to appease the Catholic monarchs of the European countries controlling those colonies. Altimirano’s attitude can be contrasted sharply with Greenleaf’s notion of *listening*, in which the servant-leader seeks to be open to the views of others, even to the point of having those ideas change the thinking of the servant-leader.

Gabriel is introduced at the very beginning of the film as the leader of a group of Jesuit missionaries. After discovering the body of a Jesuit who had earlier been sent to convert the Guarani to Christianity, Gabriel decides to journey to the natives himself. The martyred Jesuit was nailed to a cross by the natives and sent over a waterfall, an indication that his message of a crucified Christ had failed to appeal to the Guarani, who already harbored suspicions that the Spanish and Portuguese would like to crucify them as well. In Greenleaf’s terms, we can say that both this priest and the natives to whom he had been sent lacked *empathy*, the ability to project one’s consciousness onto another’s situation through imagination.

Gabriel is the example of the servant-leader as *empathetic listener*, and



through his openness and understanding of the natives he is able to *heal* the situation. In a key scene, Gabriel enters the jungle territory of the Guarani and begins to play an oboe he has brought with him. The natives surrounding him are intrigued by the music and ultimately drop their defenses to learn more about this person who has submitted himself to their power. The next scene shows Gabriel showing the other natives icons of Jesus, this time not of the crucified Christ, but of something to which they can more readily relate, namely the Christ-child in his mother's arms. The Guarani finally understand that Gabriel is not there to impose his ideas on them, and so they become interested in learning more about who he is, including what it means to be a Christian. The way in which the natives respond to Gabriel is an illustration of the power of *persuasion* versus the power of positional authority.

In the first part of the film, Mendoza is merely an instrument of the worst excesses of the colonists, murdering natives or capturing them to sell as slaves to the Spanish and Portuguese. His desire for control eventually leads him to kill his own brother over the love of a woman, an action that causes him to enter into a deep depression; it should be noted that he has felt no such emotion over the killing and enslavement of dozens of his native "brothers." The servant-leader Gabriel assists Mendoza in finding redemption through the *conceptualization* of his sins against others and an offer of the possibility of forgiveness. Mendoza is transformed by Gabriel's vision, and he journeys to the territory of the Guarani whom he had previously victimized to make reparations. Like Gabriel, he makes himself vulnerable to their power, and as with Gabriel, the natives accept him as a servant, not as a colonial "leader." Mendoza's conscious choice to serve first eventually brings him to aspire to lead, in keeping with the process outlined by Greenleaf. Mendoza joins the Jesuits and commits his life to the service of the natives in the mission community.

The entire film is presented as a flashback of Altimirano, who is writing a letter to the Pope explaining what has happened during his visit to Paraguay. Listening to him dictate his letter, the audience realizes at the



very beginning of the story that by its end the Guarani and their Jesuit friends have been either killed or imprisoned by the colonists. The viewers gradually become aware that Altimirano has decided against the mission communities in favor of the colonialists' interests; that Gabriel and Mendoza have stayed with the natives in their community even though Altimirano has ordered all the Jesuits to leave; and that Mendoza has chosen to lead some natives in a violent struggle with the colonialists while Gabriel has elected to join other Guarani in non-violent resistance to the colonists. Both Mendoza and Gabriel perish as a result of their choices.

Daniel Berrigan, a contemporary Jesuit who worked on *The Mission* as a consultant to the producers, director, and actors, wrote the following about the film:

No easy solutions, no cheap grace. Mendoza and Father Gabriel die, violently. The meekness of one is no protection, any more than is the fierce arrogance of the other. We have here in the decision of the filmmakers, in their unwillingness to play God, to create heroes or antiheroes, to stroke the one and damn the other, a rare and laudable wisdom. They have been true, as the saying goes, to the way life goes. Especially today.

But if the deaths of Mendoza and Gabriel run parallel, their lives do not; and therein lies a capital point. Gabriel dies. So did Martin Luther King and Gandhi and Stephen Biko and Archbishop Romero and uncounted thousands of others of our lifetime for whom retribution, even so-called defense, is equally anathema.

And others die like Mendoza. He stands with all who take up the sword as a matter of principle, of despair, of communism or anticommunism, of faith gone wrong, of chivalry, of plain worldly logic. His name is legion. It is ideology and power politics and "just war" theory and deterrence and the window of vulnerability. (Berrigan, 1986, p. 20)

Berrigan's insight into the meaning of the film's ending is at the heart of what I think servant-leadership proposes. Mendoza has a conversion



experience, turns away from his allegiance to the colonial oppressors, and allies himself with the Guarani who have chosen to fight. Yet, in the end, he is not a servant first—he is a leader. He battles with the Spanish soldiers, meeting colonial violence with native violence. In his lack of *awareness* of the message of love that is at the heart of servant-leadership, he engages the enemy on the enemy’s own terms, and he and the natives ultimately lose.

What Mendoza lacks is the *foresight* to see any other possibility. Gabriel, on the other hand, struggles to understand the implications of past, present, and future in the reality of the advancing Spanish army. The film shows him in ongoing reflection on how to respond in a way that will truly reflect his *commitment to the growth of people*, that is, to find a way to allow the Guarani to grow as persons, to become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants. He struggles to find the way of *stewardship*, to flesh out the values he has taught the Guarani—even in the “no-win” situation in which they find themselves—and ends up leading them in non-violent resistance to the very brutal aggression of the colonialists.

Gabriel and the natives march out of the church building holding what they believe to be the real presence of the resurrected Christ—a consecrated host—in front of them as a banner. In this moral rejection of the evil of their day, Gabriel and the native community become stewards of the Gospel message of love, a message which is at the heart of servant-leadership.

Upon the destruction of the mission communities, along with the Jesuits and Guarani who formed them, Altimirano is irate. He demands of the Spanish governor, “Was this slaughter necessary?” The response is one that can be heard over and over again, both in climactic political situations and less dramatic organizational contexts: “We must work in the world; the world is thus.”

Altimirano hears this, knowing that he is a failure at both being a leader and being a servant, and for the first time he fully understands the choices that have been made: “No, thus have we made the world,” he says.



“Thus have *I* made it.” His final words in dictating the letter to the Pope are to affirm that the martyred Jesuits will live on in the memory of the natives who have escaped the destruction of their community. In the final images of the film, the viewer sees some of the surviving Guarani children picking through the remains of their burned-down homes; one young girl takes with her a violin, an act that suggests that the *community was built* by the natives and that the Jesuits will continue.

## CONCLUSION

*The Mission* is a perfect film for discussion of servant-leadership because the story as told by Bolt and the filmmakers does not preach as much as it poses problems. Did Altimirano really make the only decision he could make, given the “bigger picture,” or did he lack imagination and moral integrity? Should Mendoza have resisted the invitation of the Guarani warriors to lead them into battle, or was his decision his only option to serve them? Can Gabriel’s non-violent resistance be deemed successful when nearly the entire native population of the mission has been killed? Finally, what does this story set three hundred years ago have to say about our present situation in the world? There are no easy answers, and my experience is that as a result the dialogue among students about these issues is deep and heartfelt.

In showing *The Mission* to students of leadership, my hope is that they will see in the epic events presented in the film some metaphors for their experiences in the more mundane realities of societal, organizational, and family life. I hope that Gabriel may be seen as the epitome of the servant-leader, whose greatness as a leader is due to his choice to be a servant first. I hope that non-violent action can be understood to be the only legitimate power base for a servant-leader. Finally, I hope that there will be a realization of the consequences of choosing to be a non-violent servant-leader: namely, that in the end, we may someday look upon a more peaceful landscape and say, “Thus have we made the world.”



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Michael Lieberman Carey is Associate Professor of Organizational Leadership at Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington, United States of America. He is the chair of Gonzaga's online Master's of Organizational Leadership program, a program that offers an emphasis in servant-leadership. He has written and taught about the ethical imperatives of transforming leadership and servant-leadership, often using films as a method of accessing the fundamental choice involved in the practice of leadership.

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