



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES

A Conversation with Larry C. Spears

— JIYING SONG

Jenny: The year of 2020 has been most challenging to many people all over the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has left almost no one's life untouched. Robert Greenleaf's best test says, "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?" During this pandemic, the least privileged in society suffer the most, and various groups of vulnerable people have been marginalized, or pushed further into poverty. Is it possible for leaders to serve-first while battling for the survival of their organizations or themselves during this pandemic? How can servant-leaders help the least privileged in society?

Larry: The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has been and continues to be such a turbulent time for everyone in the world. If there is an upside to it all, it may be that our shared experiences have helped many of us to understand and to empathize with one another a bit more than we have in the past. There are so many stories and instances of ways in which people are helping one another in ways great and small. The commitment of our healthcare workers to aiding those who are sick has been remarkable. The same is also true of so



many other “essential” workers. On the downside, we have seen many instances of people who seem to care only for themselves, and not for the well-being of others. So, yes, it is certainly possible for people to act as servant-leaders during this pandemic, and many have. At the same time, so many others have not. The failure of some of our elected leaders to encourage safe practices such as wearing of face masks has contributed to untold numbers of deaths and illnesses. If we use Greenleaf’s best test as a kind of rubric by which we hold leaders accountable, I think it is possible to discern between those who care more for the least privileged in society, and those who do not. It is a truism that difficult times bring out the best and worst in people. I also think that awareness and self-awareness tend to make us feel more caring toward others. Perhaps history will show that this was a time when servant-leadership grew in its influence and practice in the hearts of many people.

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Jenny: What would you like to say to people who are physically, emotionally, or financially vulnerable to COVID-19?

Larry: I feel great empathy for so many people, and I know many people feel similarly. It is difficult for anyone who feels at risk, especially when our lives are at risk. There are many people who have underlying conditions that make them even more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. I am among those who are at increased risk. For many years I have been combatting a rare illness called Autoimmune Encephalopathy (AE)—a condition in which the body’s autoimmune system attacks the brain, causing a broad range of symptoms. On two occasions, in 2012 and 2013, I was



hospitalized for AE and was treated with a combination of plasmapheresis, IVIG, and anti-inflammatory drugs. Thankfully, I was able to make a significant recovery, and I count myself as extremely lucky to have done so, since some people die from this illness. However, I continue to take a daily immunosuppressant in an effort to keep my autoimmune system in check, and this increases my susceptibility to potential complications if I should catch the COVID-19 virus. Like so many others, I have been doing what I can to limit my exposure to it. And, like all of us, I hope that an effective vaccine and treatment will be found soon, and that it will be possible to administer it in relatively short order to the billions of people who want and need it around the world.

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Jenny: George Floyd's death and other race-related incidents also unsettled the world to its core during this pandemic. What is your reaction to the days of protest that have followed the death of George Floyd?

Larry: Like many people, I am deeply troubled by the death of George Floyd and many, many others who have been killed and injured. What is taking place in 2020 is just the latest in a centuries-long history of African-American deaths as a result of systemic racism inherent in our country. I am cautiously optimistic that the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement is gaining ground and broad support through its commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience and persistent presence. As a social change movement, Black Lives Matter continues to build upon many who have come before. Deep social change takes time, and it requires incredible persistence. Some years ago, Lea E. Williams wrote an excellent



book titled, *Servants of the People: The 1960s Legacy of African-American Leadership*. In 2002, I included in *Focus on Leadership* a chapter that Lea wrote called, “Fanny Lou Hamer: Servant of the People.” Fanny Lou Hamer became an outspoken voice for equality in Mississippi, and throughout the United States, in the 1960s. As Lea Williams wrote in that chapter, “The test of this type of leadership is twofold: Those being served must grow and evolve as persons, and those least privileged in society should benefit.” Near the end of that chapter, Lea Williams quotes Mrs. Hamer as saying, “You don’t run away from problems—you just face them.” Everyone who aspires to understand and practice servant-leadership will find great inspiration in the commitment of Civil Rights servant-leaders past and present. Black Lives Matter is helping many of us to face the problems of systemic racism.

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Jenny: George Floyd’s brother said that officers can do their jobs and “still maintain respect for others.” How would you address George Floyd’s brother’s suggestion from a servant-leadership perspective? What insights could servant-leadership offer to policing with respect for everyone?

Larry: I certainly agree with the statement that police can and should do their jobs and maintain respect for others, and I believe that most do that. Of course, as we know all too painfully, there are those who do not. In 2014, following the events in Ferguson, MO, President Obama said, “Trust between law enforcement agencies and the people they protect and serve is essential in a democracy. It is key to the stability of our communities, the integrity of our criminal justice



system and the safe and effective delivery of policing services.” There is actually quite a bit of information on the benefits of servant-leadership when applied within police departments. Servant-leadership training can help to encourage a greater practice of listening, humility, and service to others. If you Google ‘servant-leadership + police’ you will find a number of papers, articles, and studies. David N. James and Mac Tristan have been recognized as leading experts in the law enforcement community on the topic of Servant-Leadership and its relationship to personal leadership, organizational social architecture, and crafting healthy and ethical organizational culture and empowerment. Both enjoyed lengthy law enforcement career with several police departments in Texas, and each of them has helped to introduce servant-leadership to some in the police community. Here’s a link to a good article for those who are interested:

<https://thesystemsthinker.com/engaging-head-hand-and-heart-at-the-carrollton-police-department/> Also, our readers may be interested to know that our new book, *Servant-Leadership and Forgiveness: How Leaders Help Heal the Heart of the World* (Song, Tran, Ferch, Spears, Editors; SUNY Press, 2020) contains two chapters written by law enforcement professionals and Gonzaga University alums. One chapter is titled, “Amazing Grace: Seeking Grace and Forgiveness in Law Enforcement,” by Lena Pace; and, “Forgiveness: A Humble Path to Servant-Leadership for Police,” by Mark Whitson. Both chapters, and the entire book, contain wise and encouraging insights into some of the pressing institutional changes that are needed to heal the relationships between law enforcement and the communities that they are there to protect and serve.

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Jenny: What can we do to gain a better understanding of racism and take action against injustices in our daily life? How can servant-leadership help address racism?

Larry: In “The Servant as Leader” essay, Robert Greenleaf tells the story of John Woolman, the noted 18th century American Quaker who spent thirty years travelling up-and-down the East Coast, and who used moral persuasion to convince all Quaker slave-owners at that time to free their slaves. As Greenleaf writes, “By 1770, nearly one hundred years before the Civil War, no Quakers held slaves.” In the 1950s and 60s, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and many others practiced moral persuasion to achieve change. Just this summer, we lost one of our greatest contemporary servant-leaders, U.S. Rep. John Lewis. Lewis said, “*Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society.*” At their best, servant-leaders like John Woolman, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Lewis help us to understand and practice moral persuasion in order to change hearts and minds for the better.

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Jenny: Higher education has been in turmoil, shaken by the decline in student enrollment numbers before the pandemic. During this pandemic, forced online teaching and learning shook the purposes and methods of higher education even more. What advice could you give to servant-leaders in the field of higher education?



Larry: Well, one thought is to encourage everyone to practice patience and empathy. The more we are able to imagine ourselves in the shoes of another, the more possible it becomes to understand and support one another, especially during difficult times. Another thought is that this may be a great learning opportunity for faculty and students alike to understand the many inherent benefits that come from online learning. For too many years, online education has been viewed by some as somehow inferior to classroom instruction. I have spent the last dozen years teaching mostly online courses (Servant-Leadership; and, Listen Discern Decide), punctuated by occasional teaching of more traditional in-class courses, and I can tell you from my first-hand experience that online instruction is at least the equal of in-class instruction, and in some ways it is better. In particular, I have found that the asynchronous online teaching through our Blackboard platform, which we use here at Gonzaga University, allows for more careful thought and responses from students and teachers alike. The normal classroom environment often works against Introverts, and those who desire the time to think carefully before offering a response. The online teaching through Blackboard is a great leveler of the playing field between Introverts and Extroverts and allows for more thoughtful exchanges. I also know that much of the online teaching that has occurred during this time of pandemic has been real-time, which has its own strengths and weaknesses in comparison to either in-class learning or asynchronous online learning. All three approaches have their advocates and detractors. I would simply say that as a result of this pandemic, many are learning that there are considerable advantages to online learning.

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Jenny: What thoughts or hopes do you have about the future of servant-leadership?

Larry: The world desperately needs more servant-leaders—servant-leaders who listen carefully, and who practice empathy on a regular basis. It is my hope that the slow unfolding of servant-leadership that we have seen in the past fifty years will continue to grow, and to pick up its pace. The expansion of servant-leadership as I have witnessed it has been encouraging, but we need many more people to put it into practice. A lot of the focus in recent decades has been on organizations and companies in their practices of servant-leadership, and that is important. However, 90% of servant-leadership is about the personal growth and development of people who choose to serve first, and then to lead. My great hope for servant-leadership is that it can serve as a bridge for all who wish to see a better, more caring world. Servant-leadership has the potential to fuel social change beyond our imagination. It also has the possibility of being a healing force between the great divides of religion, race, and countries. What will it take to get there? It will take many more people who have the natural desire to serve, and who are willing to take on the role of leadership within organizations, communities, and governments. It will also take ‘the Big Mo’—behavioral momentum on a scale where servant-leadership is viewed as the norm. I believe that is possible to achieve, if enough of us learn to dream the great dream, as Robert Greenleaf and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. both called upon us to do.

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Jenny: What suggestion do you have for servant-leaders during this unprecedented time?

Larry: I wrote a piece a dozen years ago called, “Top Ten Lessons I’ve Learned Over a Lifetime,” which I include as an email-announcement in my online courses. The number one lesson in that list is, “Show people that they matter to you.” This is the single greatest lesson that I have learned in my life—and one that I continue to work hard at learning and remembering. Let people know that they matter to you. This has a broad range of expressions and includes such things as: showing your love for family, friends, colleagues, and students; sharing your appreciation for others in your life; saying please and thank you frequently. I have even found that writing down or speaking thanks to those who are deceased can be quite meaningful. One can even choose to make a point of thanking people whom they have never met, but who have nevertheless had a positive impact upon their life. During this time of tremendous upheaval, we can all demonstrate through large-and-small ways that we value those who are around us, and let them know that they make a real difference in our lives.

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Jenny: Is there anything else you would like to add pertaining to servant-leadership?

Larry: I would simply like to encourage everyone to read all five books of Robert K. Greenleaf’s writings: *On Becoming a Servant-Leader* (1996), *Seeker and Servant* (1996), *The Power of Servant-Leadership* (1998), *Servant-Leadership: 25th Anniversary Edition* (2002), and *The Servant-Leader Within* (2003). Greenleaf’s wisdom-



filled writings have inspired me ever since I first encountered them in 1982. It was Robert K. Greenleaf who launched the modern servant-leadership movement in 1970 with the publication of his essay, “The Servant as Leader.” So much has emerged from it over the past fifty years, and I am hopeful that servant-leadership will prove to be even more globally transformational fifty years from now.

Jiying (Jenny) Song is Assistant Professor at Northwestern College. After earning her Master of Engineering in China and working in the field of IT for 14 years, Jenny came to the United States to pursue a Master of Divinity from George Fox University. After completing her second Master’s degree, she earned a Ph.D. in Leadership Studies from Gonzaga University. Through this process, she has discovered that she has a passion for both effective leadership and academic work.

During her career in China, she served as the Operation Director of an IT company and managed the Operation Service Center and Marketing Department for seven years. She obtained a Project Management Professional (PMP) certification and an IT Service Management certification and worked as a project manager for more than 10 years. During her graduate study at George Fox University, she worked as Teaching Assistant for Dr. MaryKate Morse, teaching and tutoring graduate students in New Testament Greek. She has been active in ministry to international students and visiting scholars at George Fox University since 2013. She graduated from George Fox University and received the Dean’s Award for “superior academic achievement, exemplary Christian character and extraordinary potential for service as a Christian scholar.” At Gonzaga University, she worked with Dr. Chris Francovich as a data



analyst for National Science Foundation's ADVANCE project. She taught project management and spiritual formation at George Fox University. Currently she is Assistant Professor of Business and Economics at Northwestern College and serving as Associate Editor with Dr. Shann Ray Ferch and Larry C. Spears for *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. She enjoys reading servant-leadership studies and essays from all over the world.

Larry C. Spears is president and CEO of the Spears Center for Servant-Leadership (www.spearscenter.org), Indianapolis, and he serves as Servant-Leadership Scholar at Gonzaga University, Spokane. He is a writer-editor-teacher and contributing author to 34 books on servant-leadership, including the critically acclaimed *Insights on Leadership* (1996), *Fortuitous Encounters* (2013, with Paul Davis); and, with Shann Ferch, *The Spirit of Servant-Leadership* (2011) and *Conversations on Servant-Leadership* (2015). He also served as an editor on all five books of writings by Robert K. Greenleaf. Larry serves as senior advisory editor of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. From 1990-2007, Larry served as president and CEO, and also as Senior Fellow and President Emeritus, of The Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership. Since 2008, he has served as Servant-Leadership Scholar for Gonzaga University's School of Leadership, where he is an adjunct faculty member and teaches graduate courses; and, as President of The Larry C. Spears Center for Servant-Leadership (www.spearscenter.org).

Among other honors, Larry has received the "Outstanding Leadership Award" from Chapman University in California (2002); the "Dare to Lead" Award from the International Leadership Network (2004); the Community Leadership Award from DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana (2008); a special recognition from



the Greenleaf Centre-United Kingdom (2015); and, as the inaugural inductee into Gonzaga University's School of Leadership Studies' Hall of Honor (2018).

In 2004, Larry was interviewed by NBC reporter Stone Phillips for a segment on servant-leadership that appeared on NBC's DATELINE news program, which was seen by ten million viewers.