



## FIFTEEN BRIEF INSIGHTS ON SERVANT-LEADERSHIP<sup>1</sup>

— LARRY C. SPEARS

### 1

“I have come to believe that we should insist upon having choices and making decisions for ourselves, rather than having decisions forced upon us by others—no matter how well-intentioned. We should also become powerful advocates for allowing others to have those same rights. Yes, we live in an increasingly interdependent world, and we should take very seriously the careful balancing of personal choice with the greater social good. However, as Gordon Livingston says in his excellent book, *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart: Thirty True Things You Need to Know Now*: ‘Nobody likes to be told what to do. It seems too obvious to mention, and yet look how much that passes for intimate communication involves admonitions and instructions.’ This is another place where Robert Greenleaf’s ideas have great relevance—particularly around his encouragement of the use of persuasion as much as possible. Instead of telling others what to do, or what to think, I believe the world would be a better place if we saved our admonitions for ourselves and expected to persuade others (and to be persuaded in turn).”

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<sup>1</sup> From Larry C. Spears’ Course Announcement, 2020.



—From “Servant-Leadership,” a Keynote Presentation by  
Larry C. Spears to the Louisiana Office of Mental Health  
Conference, New Orleans, 2007

## 2

“In preparing for today’s program, I did a Google search of the words, ‘servant-leader,’ and ‘Mennonite’ and came across some fascinating articles. One in particular that caught my eye was titled, ‘Sting: A Servant-Leader.’ In this short piece, the author commented upon an interview he had heard with the popular musician in which Sting said that he never thought he had all the answers to make his music better, and that he routinely asked his band members for their own ideas.

Over the past 25 years, I have asked people to name servant-leaders, and I have almost never heard a rock musician mentioned. Robert Greenleaf said there were contemporary prophets speaking to us all the time, but that we tend not to be listening to them. I am a fan of Sting’s music, and as a longtime listener I tend to agree: Sting appears to be an inspiring example of a creative musician as evolving servant-leader.

Max DePree’s lovely companion books, *Leadership is an Art* and *Leadership Jazz* eloquently make the case for servant-leadership and the musician’s life. So does a wonderful book, *The Conductor as Leader*, by Ramona Wis.”

—From “The Meaning & Practice of Servant-Leadership,” a  
one-day program given by Larry C. Spears to the Atlantic  
Coast Mennonite Conference, New Holland, Pennsylvania,  
2008



### 3

“An essential connecting point between servant-leadership and Myers-Briggs work has to do with the notion that everyone should be accepted for who they are, and that all too often in the role of supervisors we make the mistake of trying to change others into our own image. I have had some direct experience with this over the years, both as the recipient of mostly well-meaning supervisors, and in my own well-intended advice to staff members whom I have supervised. In recent years, I am no longer comfortable with the thought of my encouraging others to change, and this growing awareness has heightened my own sensitivity to those instances where others seek to change who I am. I am increasingly of the opinion that we are not only doing a disservice to others by not accepting them for exactly who they are now, but that we may even be doing harm to others, and to ourselves, through such practices. What passes today for standard management practices may someday be viewed as a kind of misuse of power toward others.”

—From “Myers-Briggs and Servant-Leadership,” by Ralph Lewis and Larry C. Spears, *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 2008

### 4

“One important aspect of the Religious Society of Friends is the nurturance of seekers. Greenleaf addressed modern-day seekers in this way when he wrote: ‘There is a theory of prophecy which holds that prophetic voices of great clarity, and with a quality of insight equal to that of any age, are speaking cogently all the time.’ I believe that Greenleaf continues to speak to all of us with power and clarity through his encouraging challenge to each of us to be both servant



and leader.”

—From “Robert K. Greenleaf and Servant-Leadership,” by  
Larry C. Spears, Spark newsletter (New York Yearly Meeting,  
Religious Society of Friends), March 2008

## 5

“So, how does one proceed from intention to practice as a servant-leader? Greenleaf left a clue in the name he first used for the fledgling, non-profit organization that he founded in 1964: The Center for Applied Ethics. Evidently, in some way or at some level, he viewed ethics, or moral reasoning, as a compass or pathway for effective leadership and a better world. According to ethicists, sound moral reasoning requires a holistic approach; that is an appraisal of three distinct dimensions—motives, means, and ends. Motives are about intentions; “why” we do something. Means are about methods; “how” we do it. And Ends are about outcomes; “what” we are trying to accomplish. Ethics demands that each of these be judged as right, good, and desirable by both those involved and those affected. Separately apprising each of these dimensions of servant-leadership—motives, means, and ends—can help clarify both its philosophy and practice. It can also lead to insights about how these dimensions relate to one another, as well as the specific work that servant-leaders are called to do and live out in each domain.”

—From “Holistic Servant-Leadership,” by George SanFacon  
and Larry C. Spears, Servant-Leader Essay Series, The Spears  
Center, 2008



## 6

“I believe that we are here to care for and to love one another. I believe that my spirit is inextricably linked to the act of serving others. How I choose to serve others is expressed in a myriad of conventional and unconventional forms. I define religion as the act of rebinding: ourselves, ourselves to others, and ourselves to the universe. I strive to live my life as an inspired servant-leader, by which I mean that I seek to be someone who helps to build a shared sense of community and encourages institutions to serve the common good. I have a deep commitment to honesty, fair treatment, and justice. I believe in the importance of asking questions of others, and especially of myself. I am hopeful of finding meaningful answers to some of my remaining questions, but I am increasingly at peace with the belief that there are some answers that I may simply never find. I am a seeker.”

—From “The Seeker’s Journey,” by John Izzo and Larry C. Spears, *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 2008

## 7

“Some organizational leaders have concluded that servant-leadership is the right thing to do, and have subsequently embraced it. This has certainly been an important way in which servant-leadership has grown and advanced over the years. However, I think it is vitally important to note that Greenleaf titled his essay, *The Servant as Leader*, and not *The Leader as Servant*. While encouraging leaders to act as servants was a remarkable idea; asking servants to act as leaders was (and remains) a truly radical idea. It is also an idea that goes against our expectations of contemporary culture. It is this fact that makes servant-leadership such a unique and potent philosophy.”



—From a talk by Larry C. Spears, The 3M Company, St. Paul, MN, October 2008

## 8

“Robert Greenleaf’s writings have influenced several generations of people. Part of Greenleaf’s great contribution to the world was the simple act of bringing together the words, “servant” and “leader” in an innovative hyphenated word, “servant-leader.” In providing us with a name for something that many of us intuitively understand, he has helped to link together many who might otherwise have felt even more isolated in their beliefs and in their workplaces. I believe that leading others can be quite meaningful. Serving others is better yet. But, both serving and leading others—at least for me, is the best. It offers opportunities for wholeness, for making a difference in the world, and for helping to fulfill Bob Greenleaf’s “Best Test” of a servant-leader: Is one healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to serve others? And what is the impact on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?”

—Larry C. Spears, Presentation, Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCT), Arlington, Virginia, 2008.

## 9

“I recently had the distinct privilege of visiting the Philadelphia Freedom Schools (PFS), where I learned about a significant and inspiring program underway to encourage young people in their understanding of servant-leadership, and to live their lives as exemplary servant-leaders.



‘It always begins with a vision,’ said Sedrick Miles, Philadelphia Freedom Schools Manager. ‘For a great institution like Philadelphia Freedom Schools, any worthwhile contribution to the collective vision of the community must be equal to the legacy passed down from servant-leaders who came before us.’

The PFS program was inspired by the historic mobilizing efforts organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. The original Mississippi Freedom Schools of the 1960s served as inspiration in the creation of Philadelphia Freedom Schools.”

—From “Philadelphia Freedom Schools Foster Servant-Leadership,” by Larry C. Spears, *Servant-Leader News*, The Spears Center, March 2008

## 10

“The literature on leadership includes a number of different listings of character traits as practiced by leaders. I particularly like Warren Bennis’s short list as contained in his book, *On Becoming a Leader*, in which he identifies, “vision, inspiration, empathy, and trustworthiness” as key characteristics of effective leaders. (p. 140). Much of the leadership literature includes as an implicit assumption the belief that positive characteristics can and should be encouraged and practiced by leaders. Robert K. Greenleaf is someone who thought and wrote a great deal about the nature of servant-leadership and character.”

—Larry C. Spears, “Character and Servant-Leadership,” *Servant Leader News*, December 2008



## 11

“The term ‘servant-leadership’ was first coined in a 1970 essay by Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990), entitled *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf, born in Terre Haute, Indiana, spent most of his organizational life in the field of management research, development, and education at AT&T. Following a 40-year career at AT&T, Greenleaf enjoyed a second career that lasted 25 years, during which time he served as an influential consultant to a number of major institutions, including Ohio University, MIT, the Ford Foundation, the Mead Corporation, the American Foundation for Management Research, and Lilly Endowment Inc. I am grateful to have met Bob Greenleaf, and to have served as President & CEO of The Greenleaf Center from 1990 to 2007. In 2008, I launched The Spears Center, where I continue to carry forward the idea of servant-leadership as defined by Greenleaf.”

—From “Servant-Leadership,” by Larry C. Spears, *The Diary of Alpha Kappa Psi*, Spring 2008

## 12

“Servant-leadership is part of this new direction that entails striking a better balance between self-interest and the common good. In this dimension, servant-leaders are called to lead their enterprises in:

1. transitioning to goods and services that promote a workable and meaningful world;
2. embracing a Triple Bottom Line—sustaining people, profits and the planet; and,
3. adopting the practice of moral symmetry—balancing the legitimate needs of all those affected by the enterprise.”





—From *Holistic Servant-Leadership*, Essay #13, 2008, By  
George SanFacon and Larry C. Spears

### 13

“We believe that one test of spirit may be how each of us chooses to answer the question: “Why do we get up in the morning?” While there is no single secret to living an inspired life, for us it includes a focus on service to others, seeking meaning, and solitude. For most of us, answering the question involves a big shift as we slow from hurry sickness, to quiet, to still. However, it is worth the effort, for it is out of deep stillness, and listening to our inner voice, that meaningful change and action may occur. It was Greenleaf’s own journey. It has been our personal journey. Perhaps it is your journey, too.”

—Richard Leider and Larry C. Spears, “Savoring Life Through Servant-Leadership,” (2009)

### 14

“My dictionary offers the following definitions for the words: Heart, Mind, and Spirit—

Heart: regarded as the seat of emotions, personality, attributes.  
Mind: the thinking and perceiving part of consciousness.  
Spirit: a pervading animating principle, essential, or characteristic quality of life.

I believe that all three of these are important to understanding the essential nature of servant-leadership.

Standard practices are rapidly shifting toward the ideas put forward by Robert Greenleaf, Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, Max



DePree, Margaret Wheatley, Ken Blanchard, and many others who suggest that there is a better way to lead our organizations. Robert Greenleaf's writings on the subject of servant-leadership helped to get this movement started, and his views have had a profound and growing effect on many."

—From, "Servant-Leadership: Heart, Mind, Spirit," by Larry C. Spears, *The Spirit of Servant Leadership* (Shann Ferch and Larry C. Spears, Editors, 2011)

## 15

"Robert Greenleaf once had a cup of tea. On the back of the tea bag, he read this statement: 'The pearl caused the oyster great pain.' Greenleaf thought this was both an amusing and true statement when also applied to ourselves as evolving human beings. The discomfort that we sometimes feel as servant-leaders in training during times of change may be likened to the bit of sand that irritates the oyster, and yet, the end-result is a beautiful pearl."

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Larry C. Spears is president and CEO of the Spears Center for Servant-Leadership ([www.spearscenter.org](http://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](http://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.