



“ONE OF US LOST OUR FRAME OF REFERENCE”: HOW
GREENLEAF’S CONCEPTS OF HEALING, BUILDING
COMMUNITY, AND EMPATHY DEAL WITH PREJUDICE AND
RACISM IN THE FILM *CRASH*

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*In L.A., nobody touches you. We’re always behind this metal and glass.
I think we miss that touch so much—that we crash into each other just so
we can feel something.*

—Detective Graham

Thus begins the opening dialogue of Detective Graham Waters, the main character portrayed by Oscar nominee Don Cheadle. Through his character’s eyes, the audience is introduced to the blatant racism that supposedly occurs in this Southern Californian metropolis. The ugliness of prejudice is dealt with in a non-politically correct and “no-holds barred” approach. The images are often deeply disturbing, and decidedly tragic, but most people will be able to resonate with the honesty of the movie. It is raw, but it is real.

While the setting is Los Angeles, the story could have been situated anywhere in the United States. At first glance, the situations appear to be disparate, unrelated vignettes, but the audience later realizes that the characters’ lives are intimately intertwined. What initially appear as random events emerge into an interrelated, choreographed morality play. The point is clear: people do not exist in a vacuum, and one person’s behaviors can irreversibly affect other lives.

Crash, winner of the Academy Award both for Best Film and for Best



Original Screenplay, examines the stereotypes held by individuals from immensely varied social classes and walks of life, and could have been written in an overstated and sophomoric manner. But it wasn't. The screenplay was poignant and touching, and one finds commonalities with each of the characters. This is a tribute to the director and co-screenwriter, Paul Haggis. Mr. Haggis also wrote *Million Dollar Baby*, which likewise forces the viewer to introspectively examine his or her value system. *Crash* produces the same effect.

Having said this, the stereotypes are extreme. For example, an Asian (Korean) woman is involved in an automotive accident at the onset of the film—all Asians are bad drivers, right? The two African American men are professional car thieves that steal only from European Americans. One of those African American men has a mother who is a heroin addict and is “strung out” most of the time. The Hispanic locksmith has tattoos all over his neck and arms, and the White District Attorney is extremely concerned about his approval rating in the Black community. Stereotypes oftentimes exist because there is *some* truth to the bias. But there are paradoxes as well.

The White District Attorney thought he pinned a medal on an African American firefighter, when it turns out that the award recipient was an Iraqi American named Osama. The Hispanic locksmith is not a gang-banger, but a hard-working businessman with a wife and a young daughter whom he supports. A successful African American director is assimilated into the “White” culture, yet is reprimanded when one of his actors is not speaking “Black enough.” Some of these scenes elicit nervous laughter from the audience, who often are not sure whether they should laugh or groan.

If one were to view only the first hour and a half of the movie, a depressing realization would set in, confirming that human nature is reprehensible and incorrigible. But something strange occurs in the last fifteen minutes of the movie. Some of the characters begin to change. Without knowing it, the characters begin to display some of Greenleaf's ten characteristics—particularly *healing*, *building community*, and *empathy* (Spears &



Lawrence, 2002). How and why this transformation begins to occur will be examined in the following sections.

HEALING

With respect to *healing*, Spears and Lawrence (2002, p. 5) write, “Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to ‘help make whole’ those with whom they come in contact.” One of the clearest examples of this emotional healing comes in the characterization of Maria, the maid of the Beverly Hills housewife, Jean, played by Sandra Bullock. Maria is an analog to Leo in Hermann Hesse’s novel, *Journey to the East*. Maria, like Leo, is indispensable to the people she serves, even if those recipients are unaware of the contributions to the household/expedition. Maria brings order to Jean’s frustrated life.

Jean is upset with the minorities in her life. They are not people; they are seen as commodities that serve her and her family. Jean has been carjacked and thrown to the ground by two African American men with guns, she is frustrated with her Hispanic maid, Maria, and is upset at the gardener (Hispanic?). In fact, Jean says to her girlfriend, “I am angry all the time. . . and I don’t know why.” As she hangs up the phone, she trips and falls down the stairs, and the scene ends with her crumpled body lying prostrate on the landing.

When we see Jean in the next scene, she is in her bedroom, recovering. Jean contacts her husband, district attorney Rick Cabot, and notifies him that she’s okay, thanks to the care of Maria. Maria drove Jean to the hospital, brought her home, and helped Jean upstairs to her bed. Jean then mentions to Rick that her girlfriend could not drive her to the hospital because she was getting a massage. As she hangs up the phone, Maria adjusts the bedroom pillows so that Jean is comfortable, and as Maria does so, Jean hugs Maria and doesn’t let her go. While Jean is still holding on to Maria,



she says to her maid, “You want to hear something funny?. . .You’re the best friend I have.”

While it is not overtly stated in the movie, Maria’s consistent and nonjudgmental service toward Jean has made an impact on Jean’s outlook on Hispanics in particular, and people of color in general. Maria’s servant-leadership (leading the Cabot family, even without their awareness) has begun to break down Jean’s stereotypic barriers to tolerance. This is healing-in-action.

What Jean has experienced is a modification of her *leaps of abstraction*, a term utilized in Chris Argyris’ concept of the *ladder of inference*. In her stereotypic view, Jean began with some “observable” experiences (Hispanics are incompetent, Blacks are carjackers), attaches cultural and personal meaning to these observations (people of color are irredeemable dregs of society), adopts certain beliefs (minorities are untrustworthy non-persons), that ultimately lead to certain actions (treating non-whites as chattel or worse).

The Maria character reconstructs Jean’s way of thinking (or what Peter Senge calls *mental models*). Here is Jean’s new *ladder of inference*. Jean’s observable experience is that Maria is always there when Jean needs her. Jean’s cultural and personal beliefs evolve into trust and respect, and new beliefs are adopted (Maria is the best friend Jean has), which leads to Jean’s heartfelt embracing of and appreciation for Maria’s impact on her life. Did Maria intend to positively impact Jean’s misguided perceptions? Perhaps not. But the fact of the matter is Maria did just that. She has “made whole” the person she has been in contact with, her boss Jean.

Maria is not the only exemplar of servant-leadership in *Crash*. Another unexpected archetype is ironically found in one of the carjackers, Anthony, who will be introduced next.

BUILDING COMMUNITY AND EMPATHY

How is it that a carjacker could *build community* in a movie? Anthony



(played by real-life rapper Ludacris) is anti-mainstream society. He believes that busses purposefully have oversized windows to display to the world that only marginalized minorities ride public transportation. Anthony also believes that waitresses (even African American waitresses) won't wait on a "brother" because brothers don't tip well (and then he admits that he didn't tip his waitress). And this African American criminal/pseudo-activist explains that he never steals from a "brother" but only from white people. Anthony lives a life full of hypocritical justifications.

One night changes his life in dramatic fashion. As he's driving to the "fence" that will purchase the Cabots' carjacked vehicle, Anthony inadvertently runs over an Asian owner of a white van. Anthony and his partner-in-crime, Peter Waters, load the Asian man in the truck of the SUV, drop him off at a nearby hospital to avoid a murder charge, and then proceed to the illegal auto broker. The auto broker refuses to purchase the SUV because of the incriminating bloodstains in the back of the vehicle. So Anthony and Peter's escapades are all for naught.

Later in the movie, Anthony returns to the white van, which still has the keys in the door. When Anthony takes this van to the auto broker, the two men discover a group of Asian refugees in the back, padlocked in a cargo hold. The auto broker offers \$500 per person, but Anthony refuses and keeps the van. In the next scene, Anthony is in downtown L.A. when he opens the cargo bay doors of the van and tells the Asians to get out. He even gives the last person \$40, and tells him to buy everyone some "chop suey." As Anthony gets back in the driver's seat, he has a sly smile on his face, clearly pleased with his altruistic act of emancipation.

In a symbolic way, Anthony has just liberated himself from the system of which he is a part. As often occurs with racist and anti-racist statements, the finger pointing goes unfettered, with each faction feeling they have experienced the ultimate wrong. Anthony blamed white society for oppressing him and "his people" through injustice and intolerance. What Anthony experiences in this moment is the humanitarian worth that he gains by refusing to sell these Asians into modern-day slavery and oppression.



He frees himself from his own shackles of cynicism and gives new hope to this newly arrived immigrant group. Anthony has become a catalyst, knowingly or unknowingly, in building a new community.

Greenleaf talks about *building community* in an institutionalized sense, within corporations, governments, and other large entities. In a sense, however, Anthony is making his impact known. Greenleaf said that what is necessary here is “for enough servant leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his own unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group” (Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. 8). Anthony has done just that.

It is clear that Anthony not only experienced aspects of *building community*, but also demonstrated *empathy* as well. Anthony could commiserate with the plight of the East Asian refugees in the rear of his newly stolen van. He is sensitive to the disenfranchised, since he believes he has been pressed into a lifestyle that has little hope for the socially oppressed, and could feel the hopelessness in these new (illegal?) immigrants. Anthony didn’t value these enslaved individuals because they had special abilities, could provide him with some reciprocal service, or were unique in some way. He saw them as people, and there is value in that fact alone. At that freeze-framed moment, an African American and a group of Asians communicated without any need for words. Anthony’s acceptance and understanding provide a wonderful functional definition for Greenleaf’s concept of *empathy*.

CONCLUSION

The power of *Crash* is that it will cause the viewer to examine the presuppositions, biases, and prejudices that are shared behind closed doors, but never in public. Its social conscious-raising portrayals of European-, Asian-, Middle Eastern-, Hispanic-, African-, and other hyphenated Americans will probably anger some and alienate others, but provoke discussion among the open-minded. And it couldn’t come at a more opportune time.

Bennis (2003, p. 168) writes that “Latinos now represent 12.5 percent



of the population and are expected to outnumber African Americans in the United States by 2005.” Well, the time is now. The face of an integrated America is changing, with different languages, cuisines, temperaments, religions, outlooks, and challenges. Sooner or later, each person will crash into someone with a diverse lifestyle and background. At that time, the servant-leader will be pressed into action to make for a smoother transition.

This movie is rated R for two scenes with strong sexual content, language and some violence.

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