



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND LOVE: THE HORIZON OF THE POSSIBLE

—SHANN FERCH

To build a good family requires immense personal discipline.

Consider then the organization, the nation, the world.

The personal and collective responsibility to initiate, develop, and sustain a way of life self-sacrificial and life-generative is daunting. Inevitably, in response to the crisis of humanity engaged in each new age, those who feel so called enter a crucible in which the paradox of the tragic and the comedic overlap, where the sacred is touched by the profane and human evil is not a separate entity but rather is found even within human good. The complexity and the initial agony of this ambiguity make fertile the ground from which rise the malaise, pessimism, and nihilistic tendencies of all societies. Again, the need for discipline presents itself, but not discipline bound to rigidity or dominance. True discipline, in the sense of servant-leadership, is oriented toward freedom, wisdom, and healing. M. Scott Peck's (1978, p. 1) great foresight becomes increasingly more poignant in the contemporary age: "Life is pain. Therefore discipline is required."

On the most basic or foundational level—the level of the individual person—everywhere in cultures of privilege and increasing consumerism a deep malaise inevitably comes to the fore, a cynicism evident in both women and men, neither believing the other capable of meaningful change, and each maintaining a fortified isolation with regard to intimacy. Socially, the impact of this isolation, both in the family and in professional life, is a crisis of emptiness, loneliness, and in the end, despair. Many women are leading the way to a brighter experience of intimacy, and men, with their great potential for deep change regarding the interior life, also have a central role to play in helping heal the heart of humanity. In so doing, men and



women who are servant-leaders will inspire the enduring movements of the next generation.

To engage well is to evoke in others a sense of their own inherent dignity. Each aspect of this evocation points to human maturity based in mutuality, listening, and dialogue. Gadamer (1993) in philosophy, and Friere (1995) in education, speak of the importance of dialogue in understanding the world and in initiating change across broad personal and societal levels. People who live strong and love deeply, who understand power and become artistic in conversation, who live transparently and develop integrity in response to their own faults, can begin to know and be known. They lead others and are led by others, and their relationships are free of degradation. Engagement, then, becomes infused with a sense of the great mystery of life.

Gadamer's concept of the elegant question, an exquisite manner of relating in which we ask of one another questions to which we do not already know the answer, is a way of listening that demands we overcome attitudes and behaviors of dominance, cynicism, or apathy. When we live from darker, more self-absorbed philosophies we effectively force others to submit to our way of living, especially when their views conflict with ours. When we live from more hope-filled philosophies we approach those around us as sacred others, as Thou or You, rather than It (Buber, 1970), and our conversations draw us toward fulfillment and shared meaning. Initiating and sustaining meaningful dialogue reflects a positive sense of understanding self and others. The servant-leader lives in a way that attends to, heals, and transcends the burden of his or her own emptiness and that discerns and respects the nuances of such movement in the lives of the beloved.

When we consider the children of the nations we consider the next generation, and the opportunity to forgo our self-insulation and sacrifice ourselves for the good of others seems almost to cry out to us, inviting us to listen and take action. The gift of knowing our own children can completely transform us. Because of the influence of my wife, because of her



vital approach to life, in the morning I go now to each of my three daughters (11, 6, and 3 years old), and touch their faces and look into their eyes and give them a blessing. The words never fail to draw us to an encounter that is quiet and subtle, and often I go from the blessing better prepared to face the day, and more grateful. For Natalya, “God has given you the garment of praise instead of the spirit of despair.” For Ariana, “I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have drawn you with lovingkindness.” For Isabella, “God knows the plans he has for you, plans not for calamity, but for peace. Plans for a future and a hope.” Yet even in the echo of a morning ritual that is personal and reverent, my own frailty and lack of maturity stalks me throughout the day and often rears up in my defensiveness, my will to dominate, my lack of patience, my apathy toward even my most important relationships, my greed to be served. . . my failure to serve.

Friere’s (1995) idea of critical pedagogy, or education that liberates us or frees us from oppression, is a foundation stone for the architecture of the mature identity. This involves accepting the grace to willingly look at oneself, gifts and weaknesses, and draw oneself and others toward liberation from fear, especially within significant relationships. In this sense what liberates us is love, an identification with the suffering that always precedes life or growth, and a resolved will to receive that which draws us nearer to such growth. Greenleaf’s notion that love is truly love only in the context of unlimited liability lends clarity to the human community. This love separates the chaff from our lives and brings us to our loved ones in a more whole and holy sense. We can then be drawn to a place of sanctuary with one another in which we find we are capable of living for one another rather than against each other. In this sanctuary joy accompanies our lives and a new form of relationship exists in which perfect love casts out fear. We go about the work necessary to transcend ourselves, and willingly then, we give ourselves to others.

In the exquisite poetry, research, essays, and theoretical advancements evident in this volume of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership* a form of delight takes shape. The authors here delight not only in their



work, but in people, in embracing paradox, and in the creative tension that accompanies every great dream. Their work is a testament to the excellence evident at the crossroads of ingenuity and the most deeply discerned sense of reality. Emerson referred to this crossroads as the *undersoul*, a place in our collective humanity reserved for humility, wisdom, and generative capacity.

Servant-leaders generate new horizons. Servant-leaders are creative and imaginative, enduring, discerning, and powerful. The notorious complacency, toxicity, and entrenched vacancy of contemporary society is replaced with the life of the possible. In this life of the possible, be it in the family, the organization, or the global encounter, we freely follow those who serve, we serve them, and we find at the end of our work we have contributed something worthy, and in so doing we discover the very nature of love.

May your life be blessed with discovery!

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