



## SAVORING LIFE THROUGH SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

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Since the dawn of civilization, great thinkers have debated the quality of human existence, often calling it “the good life.” To some thinkers, the ideal state is one of generating power and wealth; to others, it is about community and relationships; and to yet others, it is about service and humanitarian ideals as the path to the good life.

The good life from cradle-to-grave has proven to be an elusive concept to agree upon. There are enough definitions to fill a small book. Yet, one central theme, purpose—having a reason to get up in the morning—seems to be an element consistently considered essential to a good life. E.B. White captured the good life debate well when he claimed: “If the world was merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning, torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. That makes it hard to plan the day.”

### SAVORING LIFE

Any universal definition will be inadequate to some degree. Each of us ultimately is an experiment of one. But it is useful to have a conscious framework from which to ponder our individual lives. Richard’s *The Four Flames of Savoring Life* is one such framework. This booklet explores four core “flames” or elements of the good life. The fire theme is used because



it is universal, timeless, and real in its appeal. Each “flame” highlights a task of personal maturation that contributes to savoring life.

For the past two decades, Richard has led annual walking safaris through Tanzania with small groups of people he calls “inventurers”—individuals who adventure inward through outdoor experience.

On one African journey, he and his companions found themselves sitting around a campfire with a collection of elders from a tribe of hunter-gatherers known as the Hadza. Still living and working just as their ancient ancestors did, the Hadza reside on the edge of a primeval baobab tree forest, where an intimate, time-tested understanding of the natural world is a prerequisite for survival.

Unlike Westerners, who live in a youth-oriented culture that tends to marginalize and ignore older people, the Hadza tribe view their elders as vital, invaluable resources—people who can be counted on for guidance, insight, experience, and service. When senior members of the clan come together to share their wisdom, younger members of the Hadza form a larger circle around them, leaning forward and listening carefully to drink in their wisdom.

As the flames of one evening’s fire morphed into smoldering coals, one Hadza elder asked Richard, “Who are the elders of your tribe?” Richard found himself stumped. He also found himself intrigued—intrigued enough to turn the question into a quest for an answer. “My tribe? What is that? My elders? Who are they? How does one become an elder in our society, today?”

The very concept of “elder” for our tribe—contemporary men and women in Western industrialized society—seems foreign. Yet it is clear to us that the question begs for an answer.

#### OLD AGE: THE ULTIMATE TEST OF SPIRIT

Robert K. Greenleaf was a wise elder who wrote importantly about the idea of servant-leadership. Today, Greenleaf is known as the person who



coined the term *servant-leader*, and who wrote about it extensively in a series of essays and books in the 1970s and '80s. Since Greenleaf's death in 1990, Larry C. Spears has carried forward and enlarged upon Robert K. Greenleaf's ideas: as editor of five books of Greenleaf's own writings; as author and editor of numerous articles, journals, and books on servant-leadership; and, as President & CEO of The Greenleaf Center (1990-2007) and The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership (2008-Present).

Elsewhere, Larry has written, "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 for social change."

Today, Greenleaf is best known for his essay *The Servant as Leader*, and for his book *Servant Leadership*. What is not so well known is that Greenleaf wrote a wonderful, final essay with the title *Old Age: The Ultimate Test of Spirit—An Essay on Preparation* (The Robert K. Greenleaf Center, 1987), when he was 83 years old. Later, Larry included it as the closing chapter of a posthumous book of Greenleaf's writings that he edited (*The Power of Servant Leadership*, 1998).

In many ways, it is the final essay by Robert Greenleaf that has inspired us in our commitment to savoring life through servant-leadership. It is also the linking thread in our writing this particular essay.

Spirit! What are we talking about? The unabridged dictionary I consulted begins a full page of definitions with "The breath of life." But dictionaries can do little more than summarize common usage; and it seems clear to me, after reading the full page of definitions, that there is no well accepted meaning for this much used and important word.

I conclude, then, that I cannot give a concise definition for spirit, for which old age seems to me to be the ultimate test. The meaning of that word, as I use it, lies beyond the barrier that separates mystery from what



we call reality. Yet I have a sharp awareness of spirit when it is present, in myself and others, and I have a depressing feeling of loss when it is absent, in myself and others, at times when it is urgently needed.

I have come to connect spirit, the kind I would like to see more of, to a concept of *serve* as I see it in the consequences on those being served: do those being served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become stronger, wiser, freer, more at peace with themselves, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what will be the effect on the least privileged in society? Will she or he benefit, or at least not be further deprived? The quality of a society will be judged by what the least privileged in it achieves. My hope for the future rests on the belief that among the legions of deprived and unsophisticated people are many true servants, and that most people can be helped to discriminate among those who presume to serve them, and identify, and respond only to those who are true servants.

Spirit can be said to be the driving force behind the motive to serve. And the ultimate test for spirit in one's old age is, I believe, can one look back at one's active life and achieve serenity from the knowledge that one has, according to one's lights, served? And can one regard one's present state, no matter how limited by age and health, as one of continuing to serve? One of my deeply etched memories is the view of an old man of ninety-five sitting by the window of his fisherman's house on the far out coast of Maine quietly knitting nets for lobster traps which the active fisherman in the family would use. He was still serving with what he could do best at his age.

Robert K. Greenleaf,  
*Old Age: The Ultimate Test of Spirit—An Essay on Preparation*,  
Chapter 8 in *The Power of Servant Leadership*,  
L. Spears, Editor, Berrett-Koehler, 1998

#### SOUL SEARCH

“New elders” are those who choose to live in ways characterized by a vitality that is grounded in a deep sense of “servant-leadership.” In pondering new elderhood, we reflect on four central “saving and savoring” ques-



tions: What is my role? How can I serve? What do I care about? What is my legacy? The good life is a proactive pursuit of the qualities that engender vitality not just for the satisfaction of the individual, but also for the common good of society.

The “four flames of savoring life” which are intrinsic to the good life are:

*The Flame of Identity:*

*Claiming Our Stories*

Principle: Wisdom

Quest: What is my role?

*The Flame of Community:*

*Claiming Our Place*

Principle: Service

Quest: How can I serve?

*The Flame of Passion:*

*Claiming Our Vitality*

Principle: Savoring

Quest: What do I care about?

*The Flame of Meaning:*

*Claiming Our Purpose*

Principle: Saving

Quest: What is my legacy?

#### THE NEW ELDER SERVANT-LEADER

What strikes us vividly about these four flames is that they are not distinct from one another. They dance together in pairs, in trios, and as one. The elders in traditional societies earn and accept the respect they are given. In addition, it is not just that they are automatically respected by their people because of age; some are definitely not.

Importantly, they claim themselves by becoming servant-leaders in their communities. We see this dynamic represented clearly in the places



that individuals take around the traditional fire. A person seated close to the flames is expected to have something valuable to bring forth—and must take the initiative to do so. In this way, he or she claims that place of respect at the fire.

This idea of “claiming” one’s place at the fire is an essential element of the good life; and servant-leadership is a central element of the good life. But it is a missing piece in the role of too many elders in our society. Too many of us have accepted, at least to some degree, our culture’s picture of aging as withdrawal.

But many of us are now realizing that it is time for us—individually and as a group of people entering the second half of our lives—to create a new vision of vital aging. A picture where we are growing whole, not just old. A picture where we are fully engaged in the good life of the community.

For an example of new elders at work in the world, we think of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter. By teaching Sunday school, building low-cost homes for Habitat for Humanity, and working for social justice in fledgling democracies, the Carters have committed themselves to both saving and savoring the world. They are putting to use the deep wisdom they have developed over their long and useful lives. They are experiencing a sense of the good life that comes to us when we have discovered who we truly are and how best to serve.

#### SAVORING LIFE THROUGH SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Writer-theorist Joseph Campbell noted wisely, “The first requirement of any society is that its adult membership should realize and represent the fact it is they who constitute its life and being. . .and, on which that society itself must depend for its existence.”

Elders teach by story and by example. But it isn’t a simple recalling of stories about “the good life of the past.” Rather, it is an ability to serve the lives of others through their own experiences in a manner that brings that



service alive in the present, through the past. New elder servant-leaders care passionately about those who follow in their footsteps. They find deep satisfaction in giving their gifts in new ways that serve others rather than just themselves. And they embrace this as a critical responsibility of their elderhood. Consequently, the new elder spirit is one of "giving it away." The elders know that people are strong not in proportion to what they can hold on to, but rather, according to what they can give away.

New elders know "why they get up in the morning"; and it isn't just because their alarm clock goes off. As a matter of fact, for many new elders, the alarm that might have dragged them out of bed for so many years has been permanently retired. Freed up from imposed schedules, some now find the freedom to make their own. And with that freedom, they are enthusiastically greeting the day, fired up about saving and savoring the world.

These new elders burn with the fire that guides them: their purpose. They ignite that fire for themselves and others to follow. The incandescence of such elders is powerfully illuminating. As they forge ahead, lit by the fire of purpose, they light the way into the future.

#### THE BEST IS YET TO BE

In *Old Age: The Ultimate Test of Spirit*, Greenleaf wrote, "I have long pondered those lines with which Robert Browning opens his poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra":

Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be;  
The last of life for which the first was made.

For many of us, the last of life for which the first was made is inextricably linked to the idea of spirit and service to others. It is also a deepening understanding of what it means to be a servant-leader.



#### SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVANT-LEADERS WHO SAVOR LIFE

Over the past two decades, Larry has written about some of the characteristics of servant-leaders who savor life. These include:

*Listening:* Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision-making skills. Although these are also important skills for the servant-leader, they need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant-leader seeks to identify the will of a group and helps to clarify that will. He or she listens receptively to what is being said and unsaid. Listening also encompasses hearing one's own inner voice. Listening, coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant-leader.

*Empathy:* The servant-leader strives to understand and empathize with others. People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. One assumes the good intentions of co-workers and colleagues and does not reject them as people, even when one may be forced to refuse to accept certain behaviors or performance. The most successful servant-leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners.

*Healing:* The healing of relationships is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing one's self and one's relationship to others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is a part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity *to help make whole* those with whom they come in contact. Greenleaf wrote, "There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share."

*Awareness:* General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Awareness helps one in understanding issues involving





ethics, power, and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position. As Greenleaf observed: “Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity.”

*Persuasion:* Another characteristic of servant-leaders is reliance on persuasion, rather than on one’s positional authority, in making decisions within an organization. The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. The servant-leader is effective at building consensus within groups. This emphasis on persuasion over coercion finds its roots in the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)—the denominational body to which Robert Greenleaf belonged.

*Conceptualization:* Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to *dream great dreams*. Having the ability to look at a problem or an organization from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. For many leaders, this is a characteristic that requires discipline and practice. The traditional leader is consumed by the need to achieve short-term operational goals. The leader who also wishes to be a servant-leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Within organizations, conceptualization is, by its very nature, a key role of boards of trustees or directors. Unfortunately, boards can sometimes become involved in the day-to-day operations and, thus, fail to provide the visionary concept for an institution. Trustees need to be mostly conceptual in their orientation, staffs need to be mostly operational in their perspective, and the most effective executive servant-leaders need to develop both perspectives within themselves. Servant-leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach.



*Foresight:* Closely related to conceptualization, the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation is hard to define, but easier to identify. One knows foresight when one experiences it. Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind. Foresight remains a largely unexplored area in leadership studies, but one most deserving of careful attention.

*Stewardship:* Peter Block (author of *Stewardship* and *The Empowered Manager*) has defined stewardship as “holding something in trust for another.” Robert Greenleaf’s view of all institutions was one in which CEOs, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first a commitment to serving the needs of others. It also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion, rather than control.

*Commitment to the growth of people:* Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of every individual within his or her organization. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues. In practice, this can include (but is not limited to) concrete actions such as making funds available for personal and professional development, taking a personal interest in the ideas of and suggestions from everyone, encouraging worker involvement in decision-making, and actively assisting laid-off employees to find other positions.

*Building community:* The servant-leader senses that much has been lost in recent human history because of the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives. This awareness causes the servant-leader to seek to identify some means for building community



among those who work within a given institution. Servant-leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in businesses and other institutions. Greenleaf said, “All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his or her unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group.”

#### WHY DO WE GET UP IN THE MORNING?

The four flames, and the characteristics of servant-leadership, represent choices available to all of us. We can take those steps to re-vision the good life, no matter our age or our stage in life. And, while they may be choices that lend themselves more naturally to those in the second half of life, new elders are by no means elderly.

Robert K. Greenleaf’s subtitle for his essay *Old Age* was *The Ultimate Test of Spirit*. It seems clear to us that both solitude and meditation were key strengths in Greenleaf’s life, as he wrote:

I have long been a meditator, and as I have grown older, meditation has become more central to my existence and takes much more of the typical day. I have been training in both transcendental and Buddhist meditation, but my current meditation practices are pretty much my own. I have arrived at a point where I prefer my own private meditation to any formal religious service. As I have grown older, I have come to value solitude more and more. I doubt that I would ever want to be a hermit and live in complete isolation, but I definitely limit my contact with people and this tendency is growing. My wife and I, without talking about it, have evolved a relationship in which there is very little conversation. We enjoy being together and we appreciate our solitude together. Neither of us feels the need to be entertained, nor do we yearn to be young again.

—Robert K. Greenleaf,

*Old Age: The Ultimate Test of Spirit—An Essay on Preparation*,  
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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.

Time spent alone in the second half of life returns to you a hundred-fold, because it is the “ultimate test” of the spirit. You quickly find out if you are comfortable in your own skin, or if the meaning of your life is found only in the busyness of the day. If it is in the busyness of the day, time spent alone will throw you back upon yourself in a way that will test your spirit.

We can easily fill our second-half days with busyness. There is always more to be done, always a way to avoid the ultimate test of spirit question. If we are not careful, we begin to mistake this busyness for meaning. Better, however, that we accept the big questions in life and know that there are times when we need to stop to push the pause button, no matter how endless the labors of life. This can be a hard lesson to learn, but an important one.

Solitude is not loneliness. Isolation—loneliness—is fatal! Solitude is opposite loneliness. Loneliness is separateness. Solitude is union. Loneliness is small and self-centered. Solitude is large and other-centered. Loneliness is self-talk. Solitude is rooted in the silence of eternity. Loneliness is about “I.” Solitude is about “We.” Solitude is about abandoning the self as the focus of the universe, and embracing servant-leadership as the focus for getting up in the morning.

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.

Slowly, we emerge into the ultimate test of spirit. We are in a place where we are living in the ongoing presence of life. In fact, we are present to our own purpose. Through this awareness, the world changes. We sense



the true essence of servant-leadership. The peace we feel in solitude is the priceless gift of fulfillment. It is also the key to true servant-leadership.

Now, more than ever, we need energetic new elder servant-leaders among us. They are natural resources essential to the family, the community, the enterprise, and the Earth. We must become them. We need to understand that we are not alone. Indeed, there are many of us in the world who are seeking to find the wisdom within ourselves that can make a difference. As we enter a new era of hope and change, it is incumbent upon us to accept the mantle of elder servant-leader for ourselves, our loved ones, and the society as a whole.

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