



GREENLEAF'S SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND QUAKERISM

A Nexus

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Two hundred copies of a small thirty-seven page booklet with a bright orange cardstock cover were published in 1970. The author, Robert Kiefner Greenleaf (1904–1990), introduced a paradox in *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 1970) and presented a new approach to leadership including followership and service. Today there is an abundance of literature about the concept of leadership in general, and specifically, about particular types of leadership, for instance, contingency leadership (Fielder & Chemers, 1974); moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992); distributive leadership (Harris & Muijs, 2005); lateral leadership (Fisher & Sharp, 2004); shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003); and transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2008). Forty years later, *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 1970/2008), and the philosophy of servant-leadership, remains popular and now has been translated into many languages, including Czech, Mandarin Chinese, Turkish, Dutch, French, Spanish, and Japanese (http://www.greenleaf.org/catalog/The_Servant_as_Leader.html). The endurance and popularity testify to the value of the written content. If our belief system guides our values and our behavior, then an examination of Greenleaf's beliefs may reveal the foundation for his servant-leader ideas first penned at the age of sixty-six. In this article I initiate a discussion of Greenleaf's concept of servant-leadership and his beliefs and practice of Quakerism. The connection may prove vital.

DEFINING SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Greenleaf worked first in Indiana as a telephone lineman and eventually moved into organizational management at AT&T between the mid-1920s and 1960s. He lectured at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.), Dartmouth, and the Harvard Business School. Greenleaf believed through



strategies of service and stewardship, a leader would be identified by the people as the first among equals or *primus inter pares* (Greenleaf, 1976). Greenleaf tells the story of how he discovered the concept of servant-leadership through reading a small book, *Journey to the East*, by Herman Hesse (1956). The book speaks of a band of men who set out on a long journey. Accompanying the men was a fellow named Leo; his job was to care for the band of men by doing all of the menial chores and providing for their comfort. The journey progressed well, until Leo disappeared. At this point, the travelers or band of men aborted the journey, having quickly fallen into disarray without Leo.

Many years later, the narrator of the story encountered Leo. It was at this point that the narrator realized Leo was the titular head of the order that sponsored the journey. He was the leader, but his nature was that of a servant. His leadership was given to him but could be taken away by the band of men. His desire to serve the group of men came from his heart: a desire that was intrinsic, natural, and genuine. Leo wanted to be of service to the band of men. Leo was a servant first by taking care of their basic needs each day while on the journey.

Greenleaf believed the message of the story was that one had to first ~~serve society, and that~~ through one's service a person would be recognized as a leader. Who is the servant-leader? Greenleaf's (1970) response is clear:

The Servant-Leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant: first, to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: 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? (p. 7)

Greenleaf believed strongly in the equality of all human beings. He worked with educational, business, theological, and industrial organizations and his goal was for the development of strong, effective, caring communities in all segments of our society (Greenleaf, 1976). There is a common, yet narrow conviction, that servant-leadership is linked to Christian practice only. Many people see Jesus Christ as the consummate example of a servant-leader. But, I would suggest, greater inclusivity is needed in a list of servant-leaders, such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., John Woolman, Nelson Mandela, Dorothy Day, Stephen Lewis, Parker Palmer, Eleanor Roosevelt, the Dalai Lama, and



many other people who are not famous or affiliated with a specific religious group. Frick (2004) clarifies Greenleaf's intent: "Greenleaf, content 'to stand in awe of all creation' when it came to religion, hadn't conceived the servant-leader as part of any particular doctrine" (p. 280).

Greenleaf (2002) recognized an important reality. He noted, "They do not see the servant leadership in action as you saw it. And that may be the fundamental key. Effective servant-leaders can be so subtle about it that all anybody is likely to see is the result. They don't see the cause" (p. 151). Servant-leaders are, first, human beings with the same frailties as anyone else. They are not perfect. They make mistakes; and, if they are famous, those mistakes are certainly magnified. Greenleaf wrote about all human beings living out their lives on a continuum: at one end is leadership and at the other end is followership. He contends that we move back and forth along this continuum throughout our lives. As long as one continues to move one way or another there is growth or learning. It is only when one becomes "stuck" in one spot that growth is stifled in status quo.

The term *servant* usually causes a level of discomfort in people. They often ask why another word wasn't used instead, for example, service? Some find it demeaning, and relate it to the concept of "having power over someone." I had a teacher yell out to me in a presentation about the philosophy of servant leadership, "I am no kid's servant." In his papers Greenleaf explained his choice of words: "I got the idea that the key to the greatness of Leo was the fact the he was first a servant and then a leader, and that's where the term that I have coined from my writing *Servant Leadership* came from" (Frick, 2004, p. 274). Frick carefully explains Greenleaf's concept of servant: "A servant is one who consciously nurtures the mature growth of self, other people, institutions, and communities" (p. 5). Greenleaf believed perhaps a new moral principle was emerging. People respond freely only to those individuals chosen as authentic moral leaders "because they are proven and trusted as servants" (p. 275).

AN INTRODUCTION TO QUAKERISM

Greenleaf did not stress specific religions in his writing. He lived the latter part of his life at Crosslands Retirement Center, a Quaker community (Frick, 2004). Greenleaf's biography reveals (Frick, 2004) that he held Quaker values, beliefs, and ideals. What are Quaker ideals? The Quakers or Friends were founded in 1652 by George Fox in England. Fox preached that



“direct revelation is available to all true seekers, Christian and non-Christian, without benefit of ‘steeple houses,’ priests or rituals, and is presented to us through the ‘Inward Light,’” (Frick, 2004, p. 127). Quakers are pacifists and do not support violence, abuse, coercion, war, or the death penalty (Cox, 1985; Curle, 1981; Lakey, 2004). They are interested in the penal system and the human condition of those incarcerated. Friends support a simple lifestyle and are conscious of the environment. Groups such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and Save the Children were initiated and/or supported by Quakers. Wilmer Cooper (1991) writes, “A typical list of Friends’ testimonies today includes peace, simplicity, honesty (integrity), equality, community, and care for the environment” (p.10). Quakers do not believe in converting people to their ways or beliefs. Thus, many people often are unaware of Quakers living in their area. Those who join do so through “convincement” or by being convinced of the truth of the Quaker way through inward reflection and commitment (Hertzberg, 2002; Lamb, 2000).

In Canada, Friends gather in homes or in a meetinghouse on First Day (Sunday) for Meeting or Worship. There is no official leader. Friends simply enter the meeting room and sit down quietly for about an hour. The arrangement is a circle or a square. All are welcome: children, the elderly, all races and cultures; men and women are treated equally and valued, regardless of sexual preference or occupation. There is no hierarchy, no figurehead, just a community of fellow “seekers” of the truth (Curle, 1981). A social time and refreshments follow the Meeting where people connect with each other in their community. Quakers speak plainly and directly and carefully. What do Quakers say?

- There is something sacred in all people.
- All people are equal before God.
- Religion is about the whole of life.
- We meet in stillness to discover a deeper sense of God’s presence.
- True religion leads to respect for the earth and all life upon it.
- Each person is unique, precious, a child of God.
- (*Quaker Faith & Practice*, 2nd ed. 1999).

A NEXUS

Several scholars have identified servant-leader characteristics in Greenleaf’s writing. Spears (1998) lists ten: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, foresight, conceptualization, stewardship,



commitment to the growth of others, and building community. Barbuto Jr. and Wheeler (2006) add calling to the list. Recently, Sipe & Frick (2009) have listed seven pillars of servant-leadership: person of character; puts people first; skilled communicator; compassionate collaborator; has foresight; systems thinker; and leads with moral authority. It seems to me that an interconnected web (Wheatley, 2006) provides a frame for servant-leadership: at the center of the web is relationships. Subtle but powerful strands interconnect or support each other to make the web strong. At the juncture of the connecting strands are essential concepts of *caring* (which can be demonstrated through empathetic listening, reflection, stewardship, inclusivity, respect); *tenacious purpose* (including courage, vision, growth, and treating all people as valuable, capable, and responsible); and the *moral imperative* (ethical, thoughtful, selfless, humble, democratic, just, community builder). I agree with Wheatley (2006): “We need to create stronger relationships” (p.145), a critical step to being a servant-leader. Many of these concepts are embedded in Quaker beliefs.

Quakers stress the importance of *listening*. Notably, hearing one’s self is highly valued. Reflective thought and being quiet are stressed. “This is one of the great things about being a Friend—that we learn how to listen; we learn how to listen to the voice of the spirit inside us; we learn how to be quiet. This is a great art. It’s a very uncommon art” (Curle, 1981, p. 4). “Friends are encouraged to listen to each other in humility and understanding, trusting in the Spirit that goes beyond our human effort and comprehension” (*Quaker Faith & Practice*, 1999, p.19). Quakers “sit in silence” for an hour during their meetings. Listening and hearing are critical to getting the message right. Taking time to think decisions through carefully, to discern, will lead to better judgment than rushing without input from others and time for pondering outcomes (Smith, 2003). The best communication forces you to listen (De Pree, 1989). Effective leaders are great communicators and must be good listeners, to themselves (through their inner voice), as well as to others. A good servant-leader strives to understand and empathizes with others. Greenleaf (Spears, 1998) wrote that trust could be developed through the use of empathy when he stated,

Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted. (p. 81)



Noted Quaker scholar Dr. Gray Cox (1985, p. 4) writes,

The Quaker ethic is a process meant to be practiced rather than a theory meant to be accepted or a set of dogma meant to be blindly obeyed. It is an activity born of commitment and concern, it is rooted in a coherent set of ideas about the nature of meaning and truth, and is a living discipline. Quaker attitudes towards their concerns—and towards the process by which we come to act on them—are rooted in fundamental beliefs about truth, meaning, reason, and the self.

Cox (1985, p. 5) clarifies the four fundamental beliefs as viewed by Quakers (paraphrased):

1. Truth is something that happens, it occurs. Truth is not a dead fact which is known; it is a living occurrence in which we participate.
2. Meaning is communal. Mind is a social activity; meaning is something we do together and share jointly. We may say many different things, and yet somehow speak with one voice.
3. Feeling and reason are viewed as continuous with one another. With feeling we touch, with reason we reach. Feeling is the aspect of immediacy, reason is the aspect of mediation or bridging.
4. The self is inherently social and transitional, becoming. People are aspects of communal processes.

During Quaker Meeting for Business everyone listens attentively to the person speaking. They may not agree with what is spoken but they respect the person's right to an opinion and hold them in positive regard. But this understanding should be supportive as opposed to patronizing. "It is a misuse of our power (as leaders) to take responsibility for solving problems that belong to others" (Block, 1993, p. 72). An ethic of care is present (Noddings, 2003) and acceptance.

In Quaker Meetings for Business there is always a period of silence before the meeting begins, ends, and often during the discussion of issues and decisions. Quaker Cox (1985, p. 7–15) identifies five aspects in group decision making during a Quaker Meeting for Business:

1. Quieting impulses
2. Addressing concerns
3. Gathering consensus or seeking clearness (meeting in worship with others often serves to intensify markedly the sense of being addressed by an issue and by the concerns of our community)



4. Finding clearness (this is the stage of resolve, the stage at which we find ourselves standing in the conviction of some truth) (Clearness usually involves a sense of openness with a wide variety of perspectives. It involves wholeness, an integrity that comes from different positions. There is unanimity and a sense of presence.)
5. Bearing witness—such clearness compels some activity, either demonstrated verbally or by doing, in private or public.

Yes, this takes time, but ultimately all voices are heard, and a sense of collaboration, inclusion, and affirmation prevails in the group. Greenleaf's ideas about persuasion, not coercion, fit well. The servant-leader seeks to convince or *persuade* others, rather than coerce compliance. One can use persuasive language or persuasive actions. Greenleaf believed that consensus is a method of group persuasion. Frick (2004) acknowledges the source of Greenleaf's consensus/persuasion approach:

In the Quaker practice of consensus, Greenleaf found a proven way of making decisions that honored all voices and used some of his favorite strategies: silence, listening, and a reliance on spirit as expressed through individual insight. He also learned about the critical role of the chair—called the Clerk by Quakers—who makes consensus work. A Clerk is a situational leader, no better or worse than anyone else. He or she is a *primus inter pares*—a first among equals—not a final arbiter. (p. 130)

Autry (2001) states that the transition to a culture of servant-leadership requires time for the development of necessary features or qualities for a servant-leader. Time is an important aspect of healing as directed toward servant-leadership. A servant-leader has the potential to heal oneself and others (Greenleaf, 1970). Quaker Marcelle Martin (2006) recently wrote, "Instead of entering into the suffering of others, one can imagine those persons in their essential wholeness: visualizing them surrounded by the Light, seeing 'that of God' in them" (p.70). Sturnick (1998) writes extensively about *healing* leadership and servant-leadership and warns that it is not always possible as a healthy leader to find followers and she believes that, "sick organizations really do contaminate" (p. 191).

Gardiner (1998) suggests that healing can come through just quietly being and that a "quiet presence is an act of renewal" (p. 122), and Greenleaf, a lifelong meditator, viewed the action of meditation as serving because one is taking time to think about things, to reflect, and, often, to solve one's



problems. Greenleaf suggests that taking the time to ponder decisions, when possible, is an ethical thing to do. Quaker Murphy (1983) connects the healing concept directly to those in “social services” when she writes, “The phenomenon of burn-out is characteristic of teachers and social workers who feel they are working against the intractable evil of the world and the incorrigibility of those they try to help. Often they become cynical, or feel they themselves are part of the unjust structure to which they can only apply band-aids” (p. 22). A young doctor who attended a Quaker Meeting sat in silence for an hour. He commented after the time had passed that he “felt refreshed and appreciated the quiet time to just sort things out.”

The servant-leader has a general *awareness*, especially self-awareness. Servant-leaders often examine and ponder their values, beliefs, and actions. Quakers develop awareness through self-reflection; through listening to what others tell them about themselves; through being continually open to learning; and by making the connection from what they know and believe to what they say or do. This is called in the vernacular, “walking your talk” (Bennis & Goldsmith, 1997). “Each Quaker deserves to be a leader, because God is equally available to each as the Light within” (Frick, 2004, p. 129).

Servant-leaders seek to nurture their own abilities to dream great dreams. They are “conceptualizers” and big picture thinkers or visionaries. Greenleaf called them prophets in his original 1970 booklet. I would call them, “keepers of the dream.” It is interesting that Greenleaf believed at the age of sixty-six that he finally had something worthwhile to put down in print. He personally paid for and published those two hundred copies of *The Servant as Leader* and distributed them to friends and colleagues and waited for a response to his dream. Greenleaf (Frick & Spears, 1996) describes conceptual talent as:

The ability to see the whole in the perspective of history—past and future—to state and adjust goals, to evaluate, to analyze, and to foresee contingencies a long way ahead. Leadership, in the sense of going out ahead to show the way, is more conceptual than operating. The conceptualizer, at his or her best, is a persuader and a relation builder. (p. 217)

Experience often helps develop foresight. Frick (2004) paraphrases Greenleaf: “The leader needs to ‘have a sense for the unknowable and be able to foresee the unforeseeable’ through intuition and reflection. Quakers hold their seniors in high regard and often seek their advice, wisdom, and



foresight. Foresight, in fact, is the “central ethic of leadership” (p. 276). Greenleaf (1991) states:

Foresight is seen as a wholly rational process, the product of a constantly running internal computer that deals with intersecting series and random inputs and is vastly more complicated than anything technology has yet produced. Foresight means regarding the events of the instant moment and constantly comparing them with a series of projections made in the past and at the same time projecting future events—with diminishing certainty as projected time runs out into the indefinite future. (p. 18)

Greenleaf believed all members of an institution or organization play significant roles in holding their institutions in trust (caring for the well-being of the institution and serving the needs of others in the institution) for the greater good of society. This is *stewardship*. Fullan (2003) suggests that school principals (and teachers, as well) be mindful that “changing context is the key to deeper change” (p. 21) and seek to ask: “What is my role in making a difference in the school as a whole?” (p.21). De Pree (1989) emphasizes the need for us to make a contribution to society. “The art of leadership requires us to think about the leader-as-steward in terms of relationships: of assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, of civility and values” (p. 13). Sergiovanni (1992) explains that stewardship “involves the leader’s personal responsibility to manage her or his life and affairs with proper regard for the rights of other people and for the common welfare” (p. 139). The essence of stewardship is moral leadership.

The servant-leader is committed to the individual *growth of human beings* and will answer the call to nurture others. “The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers. Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving?” (De Pree, 1989, p. 12). As a Quaker, Greenleaf spoke of being a seeker of truth and constantly growing and learning in the process, and he wished the same for others in any organization. “Education is thought of in its broadest sense—the transforming of persons and of society” (Murphy, 1983, p. 34). An interesting Quaker perspective is noted about teaching: “We are educators, we do not treat our students as empty vessels to be filled with our superior knowledge. We consider them as equals; we do not try to teach them, but to help what is within them to unfold” (Curle, 1981, p. 12). Quakers have always been concerned about education and have a history of the development of Friends schools



at the elementary, secondary, college, and postgraduate level (Cooper, 1991, p. 22). Sergiovanni (2001) comments on servant-leadership in the school context:

The leader serves as head follower by leading the discussion about what is worth following, and by modeling, teaching, and helping others to become better followers. When this happens, the emphasis changes from direct leadership based on rules and personality, to a different kind of leadership based on stewardship and service. (p. 34)

Ultimately, the servant-leader seeks to identify some means for *building community*. There are several approaches to building community outlined in the literature (Starrat, 2003); three approaches mentioned include giving back through responsible service to the community, investing financially into the community, and caring about one's community. Sergiovanni (1994, p. 146) states that caring is an integral part of shared community, a moral act. Cooper (1991) elaborates, "Integrity creates a sense of togetherness and belonging when applied to persons in community.... Individualism, which is preoccupied with doing one's own thing, often with little concern for how it affects other people, dominates much of our behavior in western society" (p. 21). When one enters a Quaker Meeting, someone greets and welcomes you and if you are known, then you usually receive a hug. If a visitor, then someone will shake your hand and invite you in and make sure you are comfortable and aware of what happens in a Meeting. The Quaker Meeting is a community and those who belong are valued as precious members (Garman, 1994; Haight, 1987). Their safety is always paramount. Quakers have a long history of providing safe passage or lodging for those in need—dating back to the fight for the abolition of slavery in the United States, all the way to present-day Quakers who help those fleeing from violent or oppressive situations.

CONCLUSION

I hope this brief discussion will be a catalyst for a broader investigation into Quakerism and servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1970). It does seem apparent that Greenleaf's Quaker beliefs have been reflected in his philosophy of servant-leadership. As an educator-administrator for more than forty years and as a student of leadership since 1980, I feel comfortable engaging an analytical process of seeking greater understanding of the concept of servant-leadership. In addition, perhaps my perspective as a Quaker has added to this



intentional form of stewardship. Senge (1990) reminds us that organizational change requires a variety of leadership types at different times. It seems to me that the time for servant-leadership is now. What can we learn from this Quaker-Greenleaf servant-leadership nexus? The emphasis upon human value and acceptance and encouragement for the greater good is clear. Moral and ethical leadership (and followership) that builds community and includes all members of society can be the result of an intentional journey into the heart of servant-leadership. Servant-leadership, like Quakerism, is a philosophy grounded in listening, integrity, caring, affirmation, inclusion, and clarity of purpose. Greenleaf's servant-leadership is an intrinsic and humble investment of service to society toward the moral imperative. Servant-leadership is also a philosophical foundation whose ancestry melds comfortably into Quakerism and whose example quietly permeates our world toward a legacy of good. May we encourage compassionate leadership-followership today and always.

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