



THE PRINCIPLES OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP =
THE PRINCIPLES OF FORGIVENESS

—PAUL NAKAI

On an overcast summer day in 1944, Sgt. Jimmy Makino was with his squad on patrol in a field outside of Livorno, Italy. Suddenly, they were under heavy German cannon fire. To Jimmy's right, Pfc. Kiyoto Nakai fell to the ground. Shrapnel had entered Nakai's left eye socket, torn out the bridge of his nose, and continued on through his right eye. Another piece of shrapnel injured his left ear as well as wounding him in a number of other areas of his body. That field in Italy would be the last thing that Nakai would see. Kiyoto Nakai was my Dad.

For the next two years, Kiyoto would focus on healing physically. He was then sent to Hines VA Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, to further his rehabilitation. From there, we moved to Exeter, New Hampshire, where he learned his trade as a furniture and cabinet maker.

In 1972, during my wedding reception celebration in Hawaii, I noticed a small group of my Dad's Army buddies talking among themselves and casting disparaging looks at one of the guests. I must admit that I could only recognize half of the people who joined us that night. The rest were distant relatives or family friends I had not met. This fellow who stood alone and under the disgusted gaze of my Dad's friends was someone I had placed in that category of "unknown."

Unable to get an explanation from any of my Dad's buddies, I asked my Dad about this person. He immediately knew who I was talking about.

My Dad had invited a few people he felt close to from his rehabilitation days. The fellow's name was Willits. Willits was an orderly on Hines Hospital's "blind ward" and was assigned to take care of the blind veterans. He was caught pilfering the veterans' packages and then passing on to them whatever he did not take.



When this was discovered, the ward administrator spoke to the affected patients. My Dad was one of two who did not want to press charges. He went on to say that Willits was a good friend and companion during his stay at Hines. The two of them would talk together through both the sad times as well as the fun times. Willits would read him his mail and show a sincere interest in my Dad's family. He would take my Dad for walks around the facilities as well as take his breaks with him.

As my Dad would constantly tell me "Not all bad people are all bad... and not all good people are all good." He would say that if you need to forgive, you've already let it get too far. Yes, there will be instances when a person or circumstances hand you a thoroughly rotten situation and you will have to find your way to forgiveness but, in many normal day-to-day situations, you can see it coming and can resolve it in your heart before it implodes.

Before the hospital administrator let him go, Willits asked that he have an opportunity to apologize to the GIs. It was then that Dad asked Willits that they stay in touch.

I haven't seen Willits again since that night at my reception. He did send his condolences when Dad died a couple of years later.

Interestingly enough, it's taken me most of my life to comprehend the three stances that Dad had toward life that enabled him to forgive, achieve what he achieved, and keep moving forward.

First and foremost, he had a deep acceptance and appreciation of people. Although my Dad was rather quiet and unassuming most of the time, many others found it difficult to be around some of his friends because of his friends' personalities and apparent flaws. Some of his friends would occasionally "stretch the truth" or exaggerate their accomplishments. Others would borrow his tools and then lose them. They would come over and empty the refrigerator of beer. But throughout this, he always saw their humor and their commitment to his and our welfare. He never judged them and accepted their completeness.

This capability to truly accept others because of their basic character endeared him to his friends when others rejected them. More importantly, he held this stance when the rejection occurred not because of irritating traits but because of reasons of race, religion, or standing in the community. He saw people as people. Today, I wish that I had been listening more intently back then.

One thing that I do recall is how impressed I was about his second trait, namely, his humility, his curiosity, and his desire to do things regardless of



his blindness. He stretched the apparent boundaries of his talent as a furniture maker when he decided to build a four-poster bed for my Mom. As he turned out each section on his lathe, the only assistance that he asked of me was the color of the wood and the coarseness of the grain. He would surprise me with the occasional statement like “I wonder how good I could be at bowling?” or, “I’ve always wanted to try golf.” He did both.

Finally, although my Dad was not a religious man, I believe that he was a generous and purposeful man. Being the surviving “eldest son” of the “eldest son” of a traditional Japanese family, his purpose was to take care of the extended family. He not only furnished our home with furniture that he built, but you could find his furniture in every relative’s home as well as in the homes of his closest friends. I only started to realize how prolific he had been as his friends and our family members started to age and pass on. We would receive phone calls about dining room sets, dressers, chairs, stools, and end tables that Dad had built without charge that had been in their homes for decades. Our family and the families of his deceased friends now thought that it was only fitting that these pieces were returned to the family of the man who built them. As I mentioned, Dad was a quiet and unassuming man who had a simple sense of purpose and meaning...and, he lived his life accordingly.

LIFE’S CLUES FROM FORGIVENESS

A few years ago, a horrendous tragedy occurred in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. A deranged gunman entered an Amish schoolhouse and shot ten young school girls, killing five. As Jonas Beiler wrote:

But perhaps even more startling than the violence was the quiet yet powerful response of the Amish community offering unconditional forgiveness to the murderer and reaching out to his family with baskets of food (and money) and warm welcomes into their homes.

As much of the world was amazed by this response and tried to understand how a community could respond with such forgiving solidarity, I was struck when Caroline Myss, PhD, commented on the Amish response of truly forgiving by saying, “Forgiveness is *irrational*. It is the most *irrational* thing people will try in their lives.” This caused me to pause and reflect. I wondered, “What makes forgiveness an *irrational* act?” Is it because it is contrary to our inbred or learned reaction for revenge, retribution or justice? Is it irrational because



it indicates we condone the act? Or is it because it doesn't fit within a simple or linear solution? Perhaps I needed to explore another way of seeing life.

I realized that much of my life has been spent being rational and objective. I believed that viewing and laying things out rationally was the best way (only way) to do things. I was convinced that there was an order to maximize learning and performing. I believed in prerequisites—that 101 needed to occur before 201, that “basic” needed to be learned before “advanced.” I studied Latin to improve my English. I studied physics before I studied fluid dynamics.

Perhaps this is true in many objective, mature, and static learning situations. But, perhaps this approach also limited my ability to truly forgive, love, lead, and be with others. I believed that a simple statement would lead to the necessary and profound epiphany. I noticed that this belief was at the foundation of my blindness to a more synergistic understanding of how life worked.

Up to then, I could not see those people who learned another language, not by merely memorizing words or learning sentence structure, but through the multidimensional and at times “irrational” emersion in the culture of the language to be learned. I failed to see great achievers and great achievements occur from those who didn't draw on previous credentials or experiences. I did not fully understand the entrepreneurial spirit or the Eureka moment. I could not fathom how leaders could hold two or more conflicting ideas in their mind until an insight occurred. These results challenged my rational and linear objectivity.

If in fact forgiveness is irrational, it may be more effective to explore forgiveness in an irrational fashion than the usual rational approach that I have taken. Perhaps I needed to explore this notion by holding it lightly on my finger tips and looking at it holistically. It occurred to me that rational forgiveness is called tolerance—a reasonable substitute that is more available to most of us. I can tolerate and still hold negative feelings toward the offender but I am free of those feelings when I forgive. Perhaps achieving tolerance is an easier place for me to start this journey than at the point of forgiveness. Perhaps reconciliation comes from tolerance... and true acceptance comes from forgiveness.

Instead of seeing the state of forgiveness as mostly a goal, it may be wiser to see forgiveness as a journey. Instead of seeing forgiveness only as the intention of our efforts, it may be wiser to reflect on forgiveness as the mechanism for discovery. What can we learn for ourselves when we've been in the state of forgiveness? What can we learn for ourselves when we find the forgiveness mindset impossible to achieve or revolting to our desire for revenge or to our need to be “right”?



Are there clues for us to be found with those who have forgiven in the direst circumstances?

There are so many “larger than life” examples of forgiveness in the personas of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. Perhaps it is because of their tremendous impact that we find ourselves quietly whispering “I could never do that.”

However, all that you need do is to listen to and embrace the stories of everyday people who forgave when they had every reason not to do so. I am moved and inspired by those members of the Amish community in Nickel Mines or the journey of individuals such as Linda Biehl or Azim Khamisa.

In 1993 Linda and her husband, Peter, learned that their daughter, Amy, a Fulbright scholar working in South Africa against apartheid, was beaten and stabbed to death in a black township near Cape Town. In 1998 the four youths convicted of her murder were granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) after serving five years of their sentence—a decision that was supported by both Peter and Linda. At the amnesty hearing Peter and Linda clasped the hands of the families of the perpetrators. Peter then quoted from an editorial Amy had written for the Cape Times: “The most important vehicle of reconciliation is open and honest dialogue,” he said. “We are here to reconcile a human life which was taken without an opportunity for dialogue. When we are finished with this process we must move forward with linked arms.” Easy Nofemela and Ntobeko Peni, two of the convicted men, now work with Linda for the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust in Cape Town, a charity that dedicates its work to putting up barriers against violence. Since Peter Biehl’s sudden death in 2002, Linda regularly returns to Cape Town to carry on her work with the Foundation.

Not unlike Linda’s tragedy, Azim Khamisa was a successful international investment banker when his son, Tariq, was murdered by a fourteen-year-old gang member. For Azim, this started a two-year journey of trying to find peace and conciliation for the pain in his heart and the turmoil in his head. He actively read books, sought counsel, prayed, and spoke with others who suffered similar losses. However, at the end of each day, the thought demons would return in force...and at the beginning of each day, he had to “will” himself to get out of bed.

As he shares, finally, after two years, spiritually spent and emotionally bankrupt, he “completely surrendered and collapsed into the lap and embrace of his God.” Instead of moving forward from the moment of his



sadness, he returned to a state of grace and acceptance from which he could renew his journey of forgiving. By stepping onto this path, Azim started to work with the murderer's grandfather, Ples Felix, delivering their message to elementary school children warning them of the terrible price that gets paid because of gang life. Azim has also long forgiven his son's murderer, Tony Hicks, and frequently meets with him in prison. Azim is also leading the effort for Tony's parole so that Tony can join him and his grandfather in their campaign to work with the youth of Southern California.

True forgiveness seems to be best understood when experienced in a nonlinear holistic fashion. Forgiveness starts to reveal itself as one spends more time in the confluence of the three mindsets of vitality, discovery, and purpose, that is, when we spend more of our time in our psychological and spiritual "sweet spot."

A dear friend who is an accomplished artist and author and a sought-after counselor likens these moments to an "opening portal." She notices that whatever she does takes on a special dimension if she does it while this "portal" is open. Her art is more inspiring, heartfelt, and complete. Her counseling is more gentle, impactful, and profound. She attracts people to her and opportunities to contribute appear miraculously. When she forces her performance—when the portal is closed—she notices that her work is good...but not spectacular. This phenomenon is also true of forgiveness.

When Azim surrendered himself, he allowed his "portal" to open. It was then that forgiveness fully displayed itself to him through this opening. He regained his state of vibrancy and resilience. He partnered with Ples Felix and engaged Tony Hicks in his journey. He immersed himself in learning and deciphering the attraction that gang existence had for the youth of his community. From this exploration, he realized that gang living was actually a social reality that took the life of his son. As a social reality, he played a role in both its existence as well as in its demise as a member of that society. From this "research" he realized that the majority of children make the decision to become a part of a gang around the time that they are in the third grade. He became inspired to reach out to as many children as he could to interfere with this choice being made. This became his purpose and what provided meaning to his being.

Life is often viewed as a journey. One of my early mentors told me, "From the moment we are born to the moment that we die, we are constantly trying to make sense of life." At any given moment in time, we are either moving forward or we are stuck. Forgiveness is the mindset that frees us from the anchor-like affects of our past. Fresh starts enable us to step enthusiastically into our future.



Ask yourself, how well do you forgive and forget? Can you see the life-affirming and freeing affect that comes from our ability to forgive?...or do you find yourself burying your hurtful feelings within you or find yourself taking these feelings out on those around you? Do you have a familiarity with feelings of judgment and distrust? Does your life feel as though it is constricting around you and becoming more rigidly defined?

If you notice that forgiveness is not a path that you frequent or even entertain, the next question is to ask yourself if that is something that you want to explore and change. If so, there may be a clue for you in reflecting on any of the three stances we've mentioned.

LIVING A MORE FORGIVING AND THRIVING LIFE

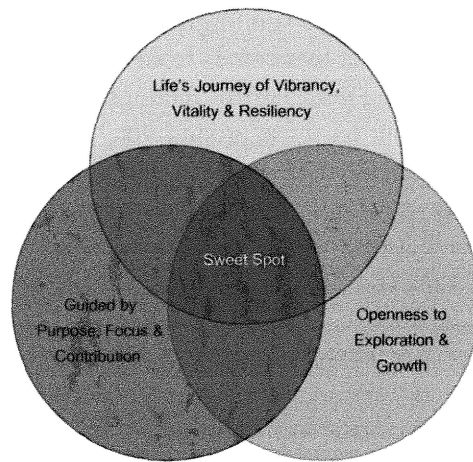
As I mentioned in my previous article in the 2009 Volume 5 of the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, based on extensive research initially conducted by the University of Michigan and by the University of Southern California, we discovered three elemental stances toward life that are universally shared by effective and *thriving* individuals. Since that writing, we have continued on the journey to better understand each of these stances as well as how they manifest when they are in concert with one another. Taken collectively, the resulting capability that comes from this synergy contributes to our “being at our best” and is at the foundation of our interconnectedness with one another.

When I consider my Dad's journey of forgiveness with those of Linda Biehl and Azim Khamisa, they are all reflective of the three stances toward life uncovered by this recent research.

The three stances are:

Stance #1: An openness to exploration and growth—A hunger and humility for learning. Holding “lightly” what one already knows or has experienced. A high regard and gratitude for epiphanies. Being able to simultaneously hold two or more conflicting thoughts in your mind until an insight occurs. Seeking and discovering simpler, more profound and creative ways to get things done.

Stance #2: A life's journey of vibrancy, vitality, and resiliency—A personal ownership of and appreciation for one's vitality and vibrancy. Seeing the oneness of us all. A respect for rapport and collaboration. A sense of dignity born from a personal journey of values. Resiliency born in forgiveness and fresh start.



Stance #3: Being guided by purpose, focus and contribution—A clear and evolving sense of meaning, purpose, mission, and direction. A growing sense of authenticity and grace. Valuing deep and natural connections with one another. Gratitude for inspiration and wisdom. A connection with and to something larger than self.

Taken separately, each of these stances holds the promise of providing tremendous perspective, heartfelt compassion, and hopeful certainty. However, the profundity of these three stances occurs in those moments when these three dimensions operate simultaneously. There appears an exponential magnification that surpasses anything that results from the sum of the three parts. When we experience this moment, we often time refer to it as being in our “sweet spot”...performing beyond ourselves but not so much beyond so as to jeopardize our authenticity.

Metaphorically speaking, these three dimensions parallel the three forces of powered flight, namely, thrust, lift, and drag. However, what enabled the Wright brothers to succeed where others had failed was their discovery of a fourth element. This fourth element enabled them to access the simultaneous affect of the first three forces. This fourth element is what makes stable flight possible, that is, the ability to instantaneously and appropriately adjust to and accommodate any and all changes in the moment.

How then, do we fully embrace and benefit from these three elements and from their collective influence?

As I mentioned earlier, for most of my life I have followed a linear process to learning, understanding, and performing. I’ve frequently asked



myself, which element am I most comfortable with...and which ones am I least comfortable with. The feedback that I've received is very much along these lines as well, i.e., what am I good at and where do I need to improve? My journey of improvement was to hold fast to my strengths and to strengthen my weaknesses. Unfortunately, this did not work as well as I had hoped it would.

Recently, I've noticed that much of this approach comes from an assumption that I am a certain way *all* of the time, that my comfort and proficiency level is a relatively static and accurate indicator.

Interestingly enough, we have discovered that at any given moment in time, we may vary within these three elements. These are not static descriptions of character or style. There may be times and situations where we are open to discovery and growth (the learning stance)...and there may be times when we are not. We can also see the openness and closedness of our mind-sets change even within the boundaries of an on-going conversation.

In fact, we can experience the same phenomenon occur within our stance of vitality. Our moods and attitudes move up and down at any given moment in time. The more we try to control them, the more ineffective and self-conscious we become. There are times when we see the innocence in ourselves and others...and there are times when we easily impugn less than noble motives to others actions. There are times when we fully experience our dignity and resilience...and there are times when we take things too personally and harbor hurts and resentment.

As for our purpose stance, there are times when our self-centeredness, our self-interest, or our greed gets the better of us. We lose sight of why we are here or how we can contribute to a greater good...and there are times when we find ourselves chasing short-term fixes to the problems of the day. There are times when we are inspired and aligned with our purpose...and there are times when we feel the drudgery, obligation, and boredom of life.

In answering this question, instead of taking this linear approach or looking at how we can improve ourselves, why not look at how we can be more sensitive to where we are on this continuum at any given moment in time...and then, how we can be more adaptive and flexible to that moment in our life. If this is too big an arena for you to play on, try to find that area of reality for you that presently lies on the continuum between benefit-to-self and benefit-to-humanity. If we can keep this essence and intention in our heart, we cannot help but contribute at a higher level. Although we are not always one way or the other, the promise of servant-leadership is not



only to achieve great things but to also engage with others in a contributory fashion and to do so in such a way as to uplift the spirits of all involved.

THE PRINCIPLES OF FORGIVENESS = THE PRINCIPLES OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

The mindsets of forgiveness and servant-leadership are lofty and magnificent ideas. They are not hypothetical notions but real ideals that manifest themselves when we are in a state when the three stances of vitality, openness to discovery, and purpose are very much alive and active. If I were to paraphrase Caroline Myss, in many instances servant-leadership is also an “irrational” act and is also one of the most “irrational” things that a person can attempt. Very similar to the additive affect the three stances have to unleashing the state of forgiveness, they have the same affect on the notion of servant-leadership. I wrote about this in my previous article “Receiving the Gift of Servant-Leadership.”

As an example, I want to share with you my long-time work relationship and good friendship with a hospital CEO. He has frequently led from this “sweet spot” state and has been the positive catalyst in many lives. Having worked with him for more than a decade, I’m grateful for being able to share the discoveries and achievements of his journey. (An agreement of confidentiality prevents me from disclosing his name at this time.)

As long as I’ve been working with this leader, I’ve appreciated his capacities to manifest his loftiest purpose-driven intentions and his insatiable curiosity and desire to consistently grow. His efforts in creating a “magnet” hospital system were born from his motivation to provide quality healthcare to everyone in the area which they served regardless of whether they could afford it or not (the purpose mindset). In addition, he was constantly exploring and reinventing himself and wanted to find ways to awaken this desire to learn in those around him (the learning mindset).

However, when we first met, his vitality and vibrancy were in a fragile state. He felt emotionally tossed about by some of his relations, both personal and professional. Regardless of all of his efforts, his marriage was coming to an end. His corporate boss and the people that his boss surrounded himself with, treated people as expendable commodities and would regularly insult if not violate the dignity of those around them. The driving orders that came from the corporate offices were duplicitous and misleading. He was ordered to achieve maximum profits while promoting the optics of a caring, people-first organization.



In addition, he had inherited much of his senior team from a recent merger. His foundation president approached his role purely on the basis of popularity and nonrelated activities. This president based his fundraising approach on extravagant events, favoritism, and political maneuvering. Regardless of the coaching that the CEO would give to his foundation president to bring greater values-based substance as well as providing greater county-wide services and benefits, the foundation president kept his focus on playing to the chosen few.

This CEO's COO/Chief Nursing Officer had put her name in for the CEO's job. When she did not get it, out of disappointment, she would withhold information whenever she and the CEO would get together. She had a difficult time with the cultural values that this CEO wanted to make a way of life and would control everyone around her with an "iron fist."

The CEO could rely on a few members of his team who were aligned with the purpose, values, and mission and consistently performed in an admirable way. Because of their results, these individuals found themselves being promoted to the corporate headquarters shortly after the CEO took the reins of his county hospital.

As long as I've known him, this CEO's strength has been his sense of purpose and his authenticity (purpose). He has always looked to discover and internalize new and better ways to get things done (learning). However, during the early days of our working together, this leader's initial response to the turmoil and misalignment in his team was to try to placate or cater to the upset and skepticism instead of dealing with the source of the skepticism, namely, how they thought and felt. Because of his strong sense of accountability, he found himself taking these attitudinal and values issues upon himself. He tried to calm the troubled waters. He became the go-between or referee between key executives who could not get along on their own. He found himself choreographing activities and taking upon himself the role of coordinator. He started to demand the attitudes that he wanted to see come from those around him. After awhile, he found himself being the "hub" through which all major activities had to flow. This not only slowed down progress but it necessitated him working twice as hard as necessary. In fact, as a result, when he was fatigued or disheartened, he would lecture and tell them what to do. He was caught in a continuous loop of stimulus-reaction.

However, shortly after we started working together, as a testament to his sense of character and humility, he could see the pivotal role that his



feelings and his thinking played in assessing and responding to any situation. He discovered his capacity to strengthen and weatherproof his personal sense of vitality and resilience (vitality). His state of mind was no longer victimized by others negative attitudes and points of view. For the first few years, he and I not only worked together but I introduced him to another consultancy that I felt could better accompany him and his organization on this journey.

His strengthening stance of vitality combined with his already strong stance of purpose and learning yielded a highly effective and profound leadership. He held himself and his team to high yet realistic standards of performance. He also held everyone to expectations of consistent improvement, learning and growth. Finally, he held himself and everyone on his team to high levels of dignity and resilience. From this grounding, he proactively coached and mentored those around him in daily dialogue. To this day, he fluidly integrates the three dimensions of servant-leadership as he addresses his role as CEO.

Since that time eleven years ago, this CEO and his organizations have been consistently accelerating in their sense of service, in the quality of their offering, and in the substance of their culture. They have been recognized not only within their community but among the broader world of organizational excellence and quality healthcare.

The three elements that contribute to a state of forgiveness are the same three elements that contribute to the effective servant-leader. Interestingly enough, it has been my experience that for many servant-leaders the “front burner” elements seem to consistently be purpose-driven and open to learning. They share an inspiration born from contribution and a never-ending curiosity and desire to discover and grow. This stance is the threshold through which they consistently raise their sense of vitality and resilience... and through which they become clearer and more inspired by how they can contribute and be of service to others as well as to the world in total.

THE JOURNEY FOR THE NEW YEAR

From our conversations over the last year, it appears that, in addition to forgiveness and servant-leadership, the three stances of vitality, learning, and purpose are key to understanding and internalizing other of life’s “ideals” such as interconnectedness (monism), freedom, peace, love, and fresh starts.



Although at times difficult to truly achieve, forgiveness appears to be a natural and innate state. As we've mentioned, it is an internal state that you return to instead of an external state you learn about. As such it's not "special" within our nature, however, it appears "special" because of its infrequency. The effort and angst we appear to expend to get to that point is not necessary to create forgiveness, the effort is spent for us to get past the thought habits and personal obstacles that we place in our way. We do not create forgiveness, we allow the gift of forgiveness to reappear. It's a state that is always there.

The same is true of servant-leadership, that is, leading through being of service. It may be as simple as:

Forgive frequently

Lead frequently through service

Frequently be at peace

Love frequently

Frequently be in awe

Frequent gratitude

Frequent freedom

Step into new moments frequently

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Nakai is the founding partner and principal of Leadership Spirit International, with offices in San Francisco. Leadership Spirit International is a consulting group specializing in developing and deepening the leadership capacity of executives, in teambuilding and optimizing performance-based relationships, and in shaping organizational culture to more effectively meet organizational objectives. Paul was formerly a Managing Partner and Executive Vice President with Senn-Delaney Leadership Consulting Group, where he specialized in executive coaching and leadership development to support and lead intense business challenges such as mergers and acquisitions, shifting corporate cultures, leadership shortages, downturns or



upswings in business, and debilitating internal strife. Paul has consulted and led major engagements in healthcare, insurance, financial services, manufacturing, energy, high technology, aerospace, pharmaceuticals, and telecommunications, including crucial engagements at Three Mile Island Nuclear plant and for NASA in response to critical challenges. Through Leadership Spirit International, he is dedicated to servant-leadership in order to assist executives in unleashing the spirit behind their personal leadership as well as unleashing the collective spirit of their organizations.

The International Journal of Servant-Leadership welcomes Paul's understandings of corporate culture. We look forward to his ongoing editorials, which can be found in each volume of the journal under the section entitled: "Servant-Leadership and the Executive."