



SERVING THE UNDESERVING

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How do you know if a prisoner is lying?

His lips are moving.

According to the Pew Center on the States, on January 1, 2010, one million six hundred twenty-one thousand two hundred and twelve human beings were living behind bars in the United States of America—incarcerated by a state or the federal government (2010). That is approximately one out of every one hundred Americans. In 1972, the total number was less than two hundred thousand (2010).

The average annual cost to house an offender in the State of Washington is \$36,000 (Washington State Department of Corrections, 2008). Assuming a similar cost across the nation, we spend more than \$58 billion per year to keep people behind bars. In Washington, the \$1.8 billion outlay for the Department of Corrections is the state's third-largest budget item (2008).

For every two offenders who walk out the doors of a prison with a new life ahead, one will go back—the result of a new crime or a parole violation. Recidivism rates in Washington have dropped in recent years—likely the effect of concerted efforts to reform rather than simply punish. The state likes to keep track of three-year recidivism rates, and their official figure doesn't include parole violation-related boomerangs. Given those parameters, the rates in Washington have dropped from 35 percent of inmates released in 2003 to 31 percent of those released in 2006—that is, within three years, 35 percent and 31 percent had returned to prison (Washington State Department of Corrections, 2010).

About eight hundred of the nation's 1.6 million prisoners reside at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell, Washington. One of them is



“Simon Perry.” Simon was born in a prison—literally. On the day he entered the world, maybe thirty years ago, his mom was holed up in a California corrections facility. She would spend the first ten years of Simon’s life in that institution, while he bounced around between foster homes. When California finally released Simon’s mom, she beat the hell out of him—regularly. (I almost never swear, so pardon me for a second while I describe this man’s life as best I can.) The woman Simon called “Mom”—the one who was supposed to make him peanut butter and jelly—instead used a house knife to stab him in the arm. Simon grew up a little angry. He said one time, “I’d describe for you the things that were done to me when I was younger, but they are so brutal it’s best I leave them to your imagination. That being said, your imagination will never do them justice.”

Simon Perry turns incredible phrases. I consider him a prosaic genius. I gave him an A+ in a speech class...a class that he took in prison where he deserves to be for the crimes he has committed, and where he’s spent most of his adult life: he is the one out of one hundred.

What I have learned teaching community college classes at Coyote Ridge is that Simon and guys like him didn’t grow up in the suburbs. Their dads didn’t coach their soccer teams, and their moms didn’t drive in the carpool lanes. Forget the white picket fences; most of these guys never had anyone care enough about them to put a figurative fence around their curse words. I’ve spent many moments with tears in my eyes—thinking about Simon, and Dan, and Nate, and wondering why some of us grow up with love and hugs and red fish and blue fish. And others grow up wondering what dad’s voice sounds like, or when mom is going to come home.

Blah. Blah. Blah. Right? You do the crime; you do the time. Sure. I spent thirteen years in the military. I handed out fifteen days of restriction for hiding a tin of tobacco in the ceiling panel. I didn’t vote for Michael Dukakis—that furloughing, soft-on-crime-Democrat who couldn’t even muster some emotion when talking about the hypothetical rape of his own wife. In fact, I can’t remember having ever voted for a Democrat. I’m tough on crime, dangit. I once vowed that I’d be willing to personally inject the death into a man who lit his kid on fire.

But Simon? Simon is my friend. I respect him. I believe he is brilliant. I believe life has screwed him. My mom didn’t stab me in the arm. She rubbed my back and sang “Little angel from above...” And here’s where I stomp out on a limb and put forth my own theory for why we spend \$29 billion per year on prisoners who have already been there once. Four words:



His lips are moving.

No one in the world has ever believed in Simon Perry. No one. So what do we do when he commits a crime? (Maybe an unspeakable crime for all I know).

We sentence him to prison. Check.

We strip him of most liberties. Check.

We make him adhere to high standards of discipline. Check.

And while we are at it, we immerse him—for years—in a culture that doesn't believe in him. We surround him with authority figures whose training programs include pithy jokes.

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This “joke” was part of a training program I took part in this fall—an annual requirement for everyone who works in the Department of Corrections. We also learned that prisoners are always trying to manipulate you—so be on the defense.

There's no minimizing the damage and destruction wrought by leadership that diminishes. Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown wrote a well-researched book about it: the best leaders make everyone smarter: they multiply. Other leaders diminish. Except when it comes to Simon, we are talking about something much more important than intelligence; we are talking about the spark of life. Diminishing leadership will extinguish it (to the extent life hasn't already doused it), and educational programs, therapy, vocational training, intramural sports, and reentry cheerleading will never relight it.

I have watched for two years now—as a somewhat outside observer and yet as an inside ethnographer. What Simon Perry needs is servant-leadership—leadership that multiplies his reason for being. He needs leadership that assures him there is hope unseen—somewhere out there in the darkness.

I've never had anyone believe in me before. Really? Your lips are moving; I'm not sure I should trust you. Have you really never had anyone believe in you?

No.

From the very core of his or her being, the servant-leader believes “people have an intrinsic value” (Spears, 2004, p. 15). The commission of



a crime might require that a felon surrender his liberties, but he never surrenders his worth. The good people are not outside the prison while the bad people live inside. We all need healing in one way or another and the servant-leader recognizes this universal need. “Many people,” says Larry Spears, “have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts” (2004, p. 13). Maybe nowhere is this truer than a place like Coyote Ridge. And so—inside the fence—we need not cynics and authoritarians; we need leaders who “recognize that they have an opportunity to ‘help make whole’ those with whom they come in contact” (2004, p. 13).

This is a monumental request. Servant-leadership, with its necessity for humility and empathy and awareness, is rare anywhere. Could we expect it to transform organizations whose primary mission is to “keep the public safe” (Washington State Department of Corrections, 2008) as opposed to making people whole? On a spiritual level, I believe we must expect it—demand it as an alternative to diminishment. On a practical level, the demands should be more vociferous, raging against a prison system that has grown sevenfold over the last four decades and costs us more as a nation than we spend on educating children. I have no doubt—after all I have seen—that servant-leadership is the answer.

Every corrections officer inside a prison leads. They tell prisoners when to go, where to go, and how to go. The socialization into a culture of diminishment is almost palpable. Me good. Them bad. What a shift it would be to a culture that “always accepts and empathizes, never rejects” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 33). This has nothing to do with acceptance of unacceptable behavior. It doesn’t impact safety or discipline or punishment or respect—except that safety will be enhanced, discipline will be less of a concern, punishment will be less necessary, and respect will be truly genuine and mutual. When the servant leads, she simply refuses to joke that *his lips are moving*. Such a joke is distasteful, sickening, and warped.

“The interest in and affection for one’s followers that a leader has,” says Robert Greenleaf, “is clearly something the followers ‘haven’t to deserve’” (2002, p. 34). And when that interest and affection is genuine, he concludes, it is a “mark of true greatness” (2002, p. 34). A prison full of corrections officers—leaders—who demonstrated true interest and affection would transform culture and transform people. “People grow taller,” observed Greenleaf, “when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically” (2002, p. 35). Not acceptance for what they have done or



empathy for their current plight; but acceptance of who they could become and empathy for where they came from. They haven't to deserve it. They simply receive it.

I contend that most of our prisoners' crimes stem from the root cause of rejection. Above all then, what they need least is further rejection, further persecution, and further diminishment. The prison as an institution has to become a servant—not by providing satellite television or better food, but by providing trust. “The only sound basis for trust,” according to Greenleaf, “is for people to have the solid experience of being served by their institutions in a way that builds a society that is more just and more loving” (2002, p. 83). Without pointing any fingers, I'd argue this is the opposite of what we do in our current prisons—to the people who need to trust most of all. We diminish them as people and we diminish the little trust they had in any sort of authority, and then we set them free and expect them to be whole. Half of them return. Certainly a large portion of the other half live out lives of desperate incompleteness.

The ultimate goal of servant-leadership in the context of a prison—the strategic objective, if you will—is human development or learning. Our current system sets its sights too low; it targets *change*. But as Peter Senge contends, “Learning requires change, but change does not require learning. The heart of learning lies in the development of new capacities” (2002, p. 347). Given our current construct, we might discharge prisoners who have changed behaviors and maybe even attitudes, but we are unlikely to return to society people who have learned to see the world—and their relationship to it—in a different way. Our prisons must inspire so that our prisoners aspire.

Blah. Blah. Blah. Right? You do the crime; you do the time. On a practical level and possibly a self-interested level for you, the reader: that simply is not working. It's costing us about SIXTY BILLION DOLLARS per year. On a human level, it's simply inhumane. Simon Perry was born in a prison. You started on the inside lane and with a half lap lead. He started on the outside lane. You won the race. Congratulations.

Our prisons must become institutions that teach. But “all learning—all real, deep learning,” according to MIT's Senge, “is driven by the aspiration of the learners” (2002, p. 348). He says, “[T]he goals that are most meaningful are those that we somehow sense—intuit, feel, hear—are what I'm here to do...that's the difference between aspiration and compliance” (2002, p. 349).



As far as Simon Perry knows, he's here to be stabbed in the arm and maybe stab back. That's his view of himself in the world. When he's told what to do—in a way that diminishes—his view of himself is confirmed. We must turn this on its head. Simon has spent more than a decade in our prisons. Could we really not have transformed him if our strategic objective was to develop our 1.6 million rather than simply change them (or worse, simply punish them)?

“A college president once said, ‘An educator may be rejected by students and must not object to this. But one may never, under any circumstances, regardless of what they do, reject a single student’” (2002, p. 34). This short tidbit from Greenleaf sums up the difficulty of true transformation. It requires servant-leadership and all of its irrational humility. “Vulnerability can actually increase your effective power,” Senge concludes (2002, p. 357). Unfortunately, it can suffocate your pride at the same time and so it's rarely viewed as a viable option by those with traditional thoughts on leadership.

I made a conscious choice on the first day I stood before a classroom full of convicts: I shared with them my biggest failure in life—my greatest sin. It's a large enough mistake that I am unwilling to share it here. But those guys—they all know what it is. My transparency came from the heart. I wanted all of them to know I had been ashamed, despondent, despicable. *The good guys—they are not all out there. And the bad guys—they are not all in here.*

That moment of sharing was my first hopeful step on a journey toward creating a roomful of aspiring learners. I hoped they would learn to speak well publicly, but more importantly I hoped they would learn something about whom they are and who they want to be. It was their growth I had in mind—their growth as people whose implicit theories about their self-worth could transform into something hopeful.

There's something else I have learned at Coyote Ridge. To be humble, you must be secure in who you are. To be secure in who you are, you must have a positive view of your own self-worth. And bringing it full circle, if you have a positive view of your own self-worth, and yet your heart carries humility, you must consequently have a positive view of others. To be a servant-leader, you must believe people have intrinsic worth, but you must also believe they are *good*: good at heart. It's not possible to genuinely accept people and care about them without a positive view of their general



trustworthiness. If you believe they are lying when their lips are moving, they will know it—even if you never say it right to them.

This positive view of human nature is somewhat paradoxical. As a leader, one can foster this goodness in others by believing in it first.

I had a Boys Club Travel Team basketball coach in eighth grade who yelled at me all the time. I would sit on the bench for more than half the game and then midway through the third quarter he'd send me to the scorer's table where I'd kneel on the floor chewing my fingernails until the buzzer sounded and the ref motioned me on to the court. I'd miss my first shot, or throw an errant pass, and then that coach would yank me out of the game, shove me to the bench with his glare, and forget about me. He thought I stunk, and eventually I did. For awhile, I tried to prove him wrong. One weekend, I spent two entire afternoons practicing left-handed layups in my driveway until I could make twenty in a row. When I'd started my journey of self-improvement, I could barely make one. I went to practice that Tuesday and made every left-handed layup during a ten minute warm-up. He looked at me and asked, "Did you practice that?"

"Yes, coach."

That was the end of the conversation.

Funny thing was, I tried so hard to make that basketball team because of the misery of the preceding year. In seventh grade, I learned to be a loser. I asked nine girls to go out with me and every single one of them told me they liked me as a friend. I thought clothes would help, so I forced my dad to spend way too much money on white Generra parachute pants, a yellow Generra sweater, and a light blue Generra jacket at Nordstrom. I could have replaced Don Johnson on *Miami Vice*, but the girls didn't care.

If it wasn't the clothes, maybe it was the hair. The Devin Swensons of the world—the guys whom girls liked—seemed to have spiky-type hair right where it parted. I was a social learner, so I went home after school in mid-February and pulled out the electric barber shop from underneath my dad's sink. I slipped a #2 guard onto the clippers and began to fashion myself into Nick Rhodes of Duran Duran. Except as I trimmed a one-inch wide landing strip just where the left side of my head turned from horizontal to vertical, the hair didn't spike. I trimmed another half-inch, gripping the clippers more tightly as my prepubescent hand began to sweat. *Uh oh. This isn't working.* By the time I was done, I had mowed a fairway right down the ninth hole of my own noggin. A small passenger plane could have



landed safely on that strip. The harder I tried to be cool, the more insecure I grew.

A few weeks later, in Mrs. Wallock's Language Arts and Social Studies class, Mike Jefferson tossed a note over my head to Matt Jacobs. Mike and Matt—two of my best friends and guys I had grown up with at Cherry Crest Elementary School—were both on the seventh grade travel team. I had been cut from that basketball team back in sixth grade. Matt, slouching in his chair with his stiff legs pointing toward the front of the classroom as if he was executing a pike off of a diving board, scribbled something on the piece of paper, folded it up, and threw it back toward Mike. As the note floated in front of my face, I raised my right hand and intercepted it, wondering which girl Mike and Matt were objectifying.

"Doug, don't look at that," pled Mike with a surprisingly dire look on his face. *Well, of course I am going to look at it now.* I unfolded the piece of paper and read the first sentence—penned in all caps by Matt...

I AM GOING TO START THE "I HATE DOUG CRANDALL FAN CLUB." HE IS SUCH A LOSER. I can't believe how much I hate him. He was too scared to even try out for the basketball team. Loser. Loser. Loser.

Ouch.

I didn't learn everything I need to know in junior high, but I learned a couple of things that shaped my heart as a leader. I have a soft spot for the underdog. Seventh grade might as well have been yesterday. I remember the pain of feeling alone, feeling awkward, and wondering if anyone would ever like me again. I still wince at the sting of intercepting that note and realizing two guys who I thought were friends disdained me enough to massacre my spirit right in front of my face. Those were two *friends*. Imagine the obliteration of Simon Perry's spirit when his mom stabbed him in the arm—simultaneously piercing his heart. Yes, in my world, he's an underdog; a human being; a person of immense worth.

From that basketball coach, I learned that a leader can obliterate any spark of ability with a cruise missile targeted at self-confidence—a leader can diminish. Of all the concepts I studied while teaching leadership at West Point, the idea that even our beliefs have a causal impact on others' performance proved the most powerful. The self-fulfilling prophecy is underknown, underappreciated, and underemployed. It should be in the toolkit of every servant-leader.



Before I learned the theoretical and research-based underpinnings of the concept, I discovered its practical truths thanks to a fellow teacher named Everett Spain. Everett repeatedly told me something I have held on to with the fingers of my brain: “I’ve never met a bad cadet.” While other teachers would complain about sleeping freshmen, cynical juniors, and lazy seniors (phrases I’ve heard repeated with eerie similarity inside prison walls), Everett just kept telling me all of them were “good.” The engaged feeling of his classrooms testified to the strength of Everett’s belief in others. Because Everett had never met a bad cadet, they proved him right.

After that conversation with Everett, I manufactured a shift in my own mindset. I started to view cadets in a different way. I decided I would never meet a bad one. For four and a half years, I didn’t. And then, the first day I stepped out of my car and onto the parking lot at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center, I said a quick and quiet prayer: “Lord, help me never to meet a bad prisoner.” I still haven’t.

Maggie Dixon coached women’s basketball at West Point for one short year. She took over a deflated team of young women and led it to a Patriot League Championship and its first-ever appearance in the NCAA tournament. The clinching game was a last-second thriller, and I witnessed it from the second row, center court. When the buzzer sounded, a mob of cadets stormed the floor and hoisted Maggie onto their shoulders. It was a seminal moment at West Point for multiple reasons. Three weeks later, Maggie Dixon, twenty-eight years old, collapsed and died from complications related to an enlarged heart. She is one of only two civilians buried in the West Point cemetery. In the aftermath of Coach Dixon’s death, I heard senior co-captain Megan Vrabel comment on Maggie’s power as a leader, “She believed in us and so we believed in ourselves. *She thought we could fly, and so we did.*” My own basketball coach thought I stunk, and eventually I did. He never told me outright. He didn’t have to. The difference between Maggie and that guy was leadership—leadership explained by the self-fulfilling prophecy. Stop. Don’t let that slide by. Don’t underestimate it or write it off as common sense. Let me say it again: even what we *believe* about someone else has a causal impact on their behavior, their performance, their life.

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Maggie believed in her players. The same players who were a .500 team the year before rocketed to a Patriot League Championship under a rookie coach. There was no blue-chip freshman recruit. The improvement eventuated from the way Maggie made them feel. Her inspiration became their aspiration. Everett Spain didn't have different students than the rest of us. He didn't give them magic jellybeans when they came to class. He treated them like they were smart, responsible, and good—and so they were. Yes, I already said that. I am saying it again. It matters. And yet too few people—very few—lead this way, teach this way, parent this way. We don't run our prisons this way.

What if we believed in our prisoners? What if our corrections centers were places where offenders came, and for the first time in their lives, felt the power of servant leadership? What if we were humble, open, honest, respectful, and we believed?

Too touchy feely you say?

We'll take your self-righteous, tough-on-crime concerns and stick them in Simon Perry's stab wounds.

What we are doing isn't working. When you have a \$60 billion dollar annual price tag and a 50 percent recidivism rate, it's time for a paradigm shift. I don't need you to answer the question of whether we need servant-leadership in our prisons. I've already tried it. And if we could create servant-led corrections institutions across our country, we'd save billions, and we might even transform a few lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In the spring of 2011, Doug Crandall and his partner Matt Kincaid developed a leadership seminar for the “best of the best” in the community college program at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell, Washington. The course is based on a decade of experience creating and developing leadership content for organizations ranging from McDonald's to Amazon.com to Walmart. Prior to launching his own leadership development company (Blue Rudder), Doug spent thirteen years in the Army, including five years teaching Leadership, Advanced Leadership, and Leading Change at West Point (his alma mater). Doug has an MBA from Stanford, and he is editor of the book *Leadership Lessons from West Point* and co-author (with Captain Scotty Smiley) of *Hope Unseen*.



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