



FINDING THE WAY HOME

The Emergence of a Servant-Leader through the Power of Forgiveness

—MARK T. MCCORD

Sitting at a corner table in a small café in the Plaka neighborhood of Athens, Greece...Afghanistan seemed to be a million miles away and yet it had followed me there. Like an unseen vapor Afghanistan permeated my every thought, causing words to catch in my throat and my body to be in constant motion. Even then, more than three months after I completed an almost-four year-posting, I could not seem to shake Afghanistan. The result was an awkward silence, and fractured thoughts. My wife sat across from me, the look on her face belying her frustration. She did not know what to do for me...after all this time apart when she had subjugated her needs and desires to become my lifeline to the rest of the world...she had run out of answers. I was lost and for the first time in twenty-one years of marriage, she could not help me find the way home. As raindrops dripped slowly down the window panes, I began to ask myself how things had come to this.

The seeds of what Debbie and I now refer to as “the Athens Incident” had actually begun many years earlier, when I left the economic development business in the United States to accept a position as country director of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) in Romania.¹ In 2000, our family left behind everything we had ever known to embark on a global adventure to implement United States Government-funded programs to build the economy of developing countries, commonly called emerging markets. As an economic development specialist, I was well positioned to lead such programs. What I was not prepared for, however, was the exponential change that this move would make in my life and that of my family. Our experience in Romania was profound, with the project earning accolades from the Romanian government, stakeholders, and our client alike for its impact on the country’s economy and the lives of its people. Yet, as with all initiatives of this type it had to end, so in October 2003 CIPE appointed



me its country director for Afghanistan. This began an almost-four-year odyssey, which culminated in dramatic success from the standpoint of the impact our projects made on the country's economy and citizens but which also eroded my spirit, placing me in a dark and unforgiving mental state.

Through my years in the international development business, I not only led long-term economic growth projects in a number of countries, but I also provided short-term assistance to private sector and government institutions around the world as requested by my organization. This took me to some of the most troubled areas of the world, where building the economy was a high stakes game fraught with political, ethnic, and educational challenges. None of these experiences would fully prepare me for Afghanistan, however, as the level of destruction in the country upon my arrival in 2003 was staggering. As a post-conflict specialist² I felt fully capable of embracing the challenge. Yet all my training and experience had not prepared me for the magnitude of the task, as it required more than rebuilding buildings and infrastructure...it required rebuilding lives.

Afghanistan's sad history is etched on the faces of its people. Friends, enemies, tycoons, and paupers have all been affected by the scourge of violence dating back to the overthrow of His Majesty Mohammad Zahir Shah in 1973. Working there is an exercise in perseverance, as it has worn down even the strongest leaders and organizations. When CIPE sent me to open an office in Kabul in October 2003, I did what I always had done on international assignments. I went to work. Fourteen to sixteen hour days were common, most with little electricity, even less hot water, and nascent communications apparatus. I soon realized, though, that my inconveniences paled in comparison to the life lived by the majority of Afghans, including members of my own team.

I have long considered myself a servant-leader, having built high-performing teams throughout my career. I prided myself on working side by side with my team members, getting to know them, listening to them, and empowering them to achieve their goals. This is the attitude with which I approached our work in Afghanistan and it resonated with our team and stakeholders alike. Over time, though, servant-leadership was replaced by an unwavering focus to succeed where others had failed...to achieve dramatic results in a place where incremental victories were lauded as significant...to leave a legacy that would be respected by all those with whom I came into contact. In short, the longer I stayed in Afghanistan, the more it became about me rather than about them. The fact is that success was



achieved, the impact was dramatic, and a legacy was built, but in doing so I became obsessed with processes and results instead of people. I became so lost in the work that I forgot why we were doing the work in the first place. In short, I forgot the “power of the hyphen,” meaning I placed emphasis on leadership rather than service.³

In his seminal work on the topic, Robert Greenleaf stated, “The servant-leader is a servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”⁴ Greenleaf expanded on this thought in his later writings, noting that “servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community; and the sharing of power in decision-making.”⁵ My initial focus in Afghanistan was as a servant, but all too soon the difficult circumstances and daily challenges caused me to revert to my natural predilection to control my environment, making servant-leadership a style rather than a core belief.

I should have seen warning signs of this transformation, but it happened so gradually I failed to notice that the more we achieved, the more driven and unhappy I became. Relationships crumble when there is an absence of joy...When unhealthy reality hits so hard and so often that happiness is snuffed out like a candle. This is the situation in which I found myself in Afghanistan, and while one could argue it was normal given the circumstances, it negatively impacted my relationships with people who were empowered to and wanted to help me. The seeds of discontent were sown early, growing into a briar that ensnared all of us.

The initial part of my story deals with my relationships within my own organization, outlining how my embracing of “the other path” led to forgiveness and ultimately reconciliation. The narrative would not be complete, however, without the focus on the personal relationship with my wife, which had to be reconstructed even after restoration of my work relationships had taken place. My wholeness is very much interwoven into the overall story, as it represents the compass with which I found my way home.

SOWING THE SEEDS OF DISCONTENT: THE BEGINNING OF CONFLICT

Greenleaf contended that optimal organizational performance rests at least in part on the ability of a leader to accept the existence of a shared vision of which he is part but not parcel.⁶ It was a difference in philosophy over organizational vision, which sowed the seeds for discontent early on in my tenure as country director for my organization’s United States



Government-funded programs in Afghanistan. The organization's vision, as crafted by its executive director (and the organization's founder) was singularly focused on building democracy around the world by supporting transparent elections, freedom of the press, and corporate governance. My philosophy, and functionally what we were required to do in Afghanistan as part of our contract, was vastly different in that it focused on economic growth as a catalyst for the development of a stable society. In short, the foundation of our organization's philosophy was to build democracy and good governance first, which would lead to the creation of economic growth. My approach from twenty-five years as an economic developer, as well as the mandate from our client, was to generate economic growth as a way to buoy the country's movement toward democracy. This difference in vision created conflict from the beginning, which resulted in a power struggle that shook the organization to its core. In essence, I became over time a "hero-as-leader" as discussed by Ann McGee-Cooper and Duane Trammel, in that I fed off of conflict...acting decisively, rolling over all obstacles, and achieving significant results...all the while leaving a trail of fractured relationships and acrimony in my wake.⁷

As our projects in Afghanistan gained greater success both in terms of results and accolades from our client, my relationship with our executive director and senior management team at our Washington office was gradually reduced to a test of wills. For every push from the home office to comply with what I believed were inane regulations or to change our program to be more "democracy"-focused, I pushed back, contending that our results and client relationship proved our vision and approach were sound. This led to a series of actions by our senior management, which tracked along with Greenleaf's dimensions of power, namely coercive, manipulative, and persuasive.⁸ First, our deputy director utilized coercive power, letting me know that if our office did not comply with organizational regulations, even though they were not required by our client, as well as alter the program to focus more on governance and democracy, she would be forced to "write a letter of reprimand and put it in my file." As it happened, this call came a few hours after a suicide bombing had taken place just a block from our office in Kabul, injuring a good friend of mine. I was in no mood for coercion and replied, "Here's what you need to do. Write the letter of reprimand, copy it a hundred times, and put all of them in my file, because I am not going to alter a program that is successful and making our organization money because you feel the need to have us do more paperwork." I reminded her that every



time we left our compound we could die, so she was the least of my worries. My response was emotional and made the situation worse. Her request might have been inappropriate for the situation, but my response provided little room for negotiation. William Reyes, vice president of diversity at Gonzaga University, contends “You can’t give what you don’t have. If you want peace, you have to give peace.”⁹ Neither one of us was in a place where we could give peace because we did not possess it ourselves.

In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that when a relationship has been damaged or made impossible, the perpetrator should apologize.¹⁰ In this case, we were both unwilling to acknowledge our error, dogmatically clinging to our views of the organization. This led to the use of manipulative power, where both the organization’s senior leaders and I attempted to force compliance through the use of powerful intermediaries.¹¹ In my case, it was then Afghan minister of commerce Sayed Mustafa Kazemi, who informed our organization’s leadership that our program’s efforts in the country were “exactly right” and needed no alteration or distraction. In the case of my executive director, the manipulation came in the form of the vice president of a powerful U.S.-based counterpart organization who visited us in Afghanistan to make the case for democracy building as a path to economic growth, instead of vice versa. Powerful forces were at play, but these attempts only worsened the situation within the organization at a time when our programs continued to achieve success. Ferch states, “One of the defining characteristics of human nature is the ability to discern one’s own faults, to be broken as the result of such faults, and in response, to seek meaningful change.”¹² With neither party able to accept their faults, the situation was destined to get worse.

A final effort to bridge the ideological and communication gap between our leadership in the field and in the home office was the use of persuasive power.¹³ The organization’s executive director traveled to Afghanistan in an effort to persuade me and our client that the philosophy behind our implementation of the program was flawed...that democratic actions buoyed economic growth, not the other way around. He failed to make headway in either case, which was frustrating for all concerned. In fact, our client commented at one point during a contentious meeting, “Your organization is making money... You have a leader here who is making an impact on this country during a time of real danger and difficulty... Why are you trying to ruin a good thing?” This visit, more than anything which had occurred prior, caused both me and our executive director to lose faith in the system, thereby creating mistrust.



The power struggle going on within the organization reinforced Greenleaf's contention that organizations are seen too often as a means to end, entities to be exploited, that are devoid of humanity.¹⁴ The struggle became a test of wills that had less to do with results than with victory, which led to mistrust and ultimately to a failure within the organization's systems.

THE PATH TO MISTRUST: LOSING FAITH IN THE SYSTEM

James Sipe and Donald Frick elaborate on the dimensions of a system in the form of a pyramid, which includes events, strategy, culture, and beliefs. Beliefs constitute the pyramid's foundation, as they are the critical factor in the development of systems.¹⁵ Utilizing this pyramid, one can readily identify the stress these dimensions put on our organization as a whole. The divergence of beliefs relative to economic development and democracy between me and our home office leadership combined with cultural differences germane to working in Afghanistan negatively impacted our strategy. This, of course, put in place a series of events, which augmented the overall disconnect throughout the system.

Greenleaf also looked to formal and informal organizational structures as both a necessary element for governance, but also potential stressors.¹⁶ However, when rigid formal structures clash with informal structures that respond more to leadership, friction is likely to occur. This is especially true when the former undermines the latter, meaning that leadership breaks down because of conflict over elements of the formal structure.

In my mind, the formal system was inflexible and had to change, yet the harder I pushed against it, the harder the system pushed back.¹⁷ This resulted in our Afghanistan team losing faith in the home office system, focusing instead on what we needed to do at the country level to serve our client. At the other end of the spectrum, the home office leadership continued its attempts to force the Afghanistan office into the system it had developed for its other programs in the United States and around the world. Instead of reevaluating the system and making adjustments, it attempted to "cure" the situation by changing the scope of the project, which resulted in major pushback from our client and stakeholders in Afghanistan. In short, the cure, as highlighted by Sipe and Frick, was worse than the disease.¹⁸ By late 2006, there was little trust and even less cooperation between our field office and



our headquarters, which widened the communications gap. It was, for all intents and purposes, a war of attrition.

THE PATH TO GRIDLOCK: OVERCOMING SYSTEM FAILURE

It became apparent in early 2007 that the system was broken and someone had to intervene in order to repair it. Greenleaf pointed out in *Servant-Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Power and Greatness*, “No matter the competence or intentions, if trust is lacking nothing happens.”¹⁹ This lack of trust had to be overcome, and in order for the gridlock within our organization to be broken, one side or the other had to seek reconciliation. After spending many hours evaluating my own belief system, along with my actions over the previous years, which contributed to the internal conflict, I realized the need to accept responsibility for my own decisions and generate momentum toward reconciliation. Ferch notes, “Usually the leader who commands and controls has good intentions, while failing to see the impact of diminishment he or she is having on others.”²⁰ I realized my intentions had been good, but my unwillingness to cede control had, if not caused, at least inflamed the disintegration of trust between our field and home office leadership. Because of the stress compounded by the isolation, danger, and politics surrounding the daily implementation of our work in Afghanistan, I had resorted to “below the line” thinking, using retribution, control, and dominance in dealing with our organization’s leadership and colleagues at the home office.²¹ In essence, I became the ultimate critic, spending much of my time, as Greenleaf pointed out in his essay “The Essentials of Servant-Leadership,” dissecting the organization’s wrongs instead of building on its strengths. In essence, I had begun to “hear the analyst too much and the artist too little.”²² The time had come for forgiveness and reconciliation and the process had to begin with me.

THE OTHER PATH: FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Archbishop Desmond Tutu contends that true forgiveness deals with the past in order to lay the foundation for the future.²³ In order to create a better future, I reached out to everyone at our home office, beginning with our executive director, and asked for forgiveness. In *American Masculine*, Shann Ray relays a story about reconciliation between a husband and wife,



in which the protagonist says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have drawn you with loving-kindness.”²⁴ This is what occurred through my act of contrition. Not only did I ask for forgiveness, I adopted an attitude of love that while not erasing the hurt of the past, laid the foundation for a future. When I asked my colleagues for forgiveness, they almost universally responded by asking my forgiveness for their actions.

Tutu also argues that forgiveness is not an end-state, but rather the beginning of a process of reconciliation.²⁵ This being the case, I initiated dialogue with our home office leadership to comprehensively and constructively address the issues, which had contributed to the systems failure. In doing so, we worked together to find a workable solution. Within less than a month, a system was in place that allowed us to serve our client, comply with home office procedures, and maintain strong communication ties. It took many more months for the reconciliation to be complete, but the initial traction gained from a simple act of contrition was nothing short of miraculous. For two years, we had jointly chosen a path of conflict, stubbornness, and mistrust...but now we embraced another path, the one to reconciliation, and it made all the difference.

Over the Afghanistan program’s final years, our team in the field and the home office leadership reconciled our beliefs, culture, and actions, reaching a state of tolerance in which we came to understand and appreciate the differences between us.²⁶ It also led to a state of personal and professional healing, as we were able not only to forgive each other but to forgive ourselves. We learned, we grew, and we established “the other path” as the standard by which we would deal with each other.

At the end of 2007, I was recruited by my current company, a large multinational consulting firm, and after a great deal of soul searching I decided to accept its offer of employment, therefore becoming leader of a major program to support peace and reconciliation in Cyprus. Before accepting the offer, however, I sat down with my organization’s executive director during his final visit to Afghanistan in order to discuss this opportunity. His response was overwhelming. “Mark,” he said with more sincerity than I had ever seen him exhibit, “we don’t want you to leave. You are more than part of our team; you are part of our family. Family members don’t always get along...and heaven knows we haven’t...but we are in a good place now. I know I have no right to ask you to stay, but you need to know that if you do we will do everything we can to ensure it is a good decision. If you decide to take this offer, we will be disappointed but you will no less be part of our



family.” I cried because of his sincerity and because of my own feelings of loss and remorse. He cried because he knew things could have been different had we not stubbornly held to our points of view for so many years. In the end, I determined that four years in Afghanistan away from my wife and family was enough, and the ability to be part of the peace negotiations in Cyprus was too compelling. Even now, however, I have good relations with my former colleagues. The war is over, as we embraced “the other path,” which led to understanding, reconciliation, and ultimately restoration.

In *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity: Servant-Leadership as a Way of Life*, Ferch asks an important question: “Can we notice where we are causing harm and at least try to do no harm?”²⁷ I have embraced this philosophy, looking within myself and monitoring my actions to determine if I am doing harm...causing others to stumble. As a servant-leader, I embrace my responsibility to be flexible, facilitate empowerment, and promote fairness. To do this, I have had to focus on being a servant first, no easy task since I had always valued leadership above all else.²⁸ By stepping back and empowering others...by giving up some control...I was able to move forward. Of all I learned during my almost four years in Afghanistan, this was by far the greatest epiphany. Yet, to make this so, I had to face an even larger challenge in the reconstruction of the relationship with my wife. After almost four years apart, seeing each other for a week or two every quarter, a fissure had developed which I had not been able to see...A fracture that made itself apparent in a graphic way on a cold, rainy night in Athens, Greece.

THE ATHENS INCIDENT: A COLLISION OF LEADERSHIP AND CONSCIENCE

In his novel, *Fools Crow*, James Welch interweaves the story of Fast Horse, a warrior from the Lone Eaters band of the Blackfeet tribe who through a series of events alienated himself from his family and his community.²⁹

He lived an isolated life, joining other bands of Blackfeet, but belonging to none of them. When he was at home, his guilt and anger made him a stranger, and when he was with others, the fact that he was a stranger exacerbated his guilt and anguish. It was a vicious cycle that he could not break but for an act of contrition, specifically, retrieving the body of his old friend Yellow Kidney who had been killed in a raid on the Crow tribe years before



because of Fast Horse's disloyalty. In order for him to find the way home, Fast Horse had to take Yellow Kidney home.

In recent years, I have found that forgiveness is a pathway for finding the safety and comfort of home. It is my story, yet it is not unique to me. It begins in Afghanistan, comes to the forefront in Athens, Greece, and still continues today.

A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

The Sunflower recounts Simon Wiesenthal's experiences as a Holocaust survivor, talking specifically about his encounter with a dying SS soldier who asked him for forgiveness.³⁰ Wiesenthal listens to the soldier but declines to forgive him, later asking whether or not this was the right thing to do. Scholars from all over the world have attempted to answer his question. In his response to Wiesenthal's question, Matthew Fox stated, "Forgiving and forgetting are two separate acts. One should forgive—not out of altruism but out of the need to be free or get on with one's life—but we ought not forget."³¹ This statement encapsulates the wall of issues that separated me from finding my way home. During my time in Afghanistan, I felt I had seen too much, accomplished too little, and worked too hard. Physically and emotionally, I was spent, and even the eight cups of coffee I drank before noon each day could not lift the mental fog, which engulfed me.

Greenleaf expounded on the issue of care, calling it "an exacting and demanding business," which requires "wisdom and tough-mindedness and discipline."³² While I possessed tough-mindedness and discipline, wisdom had eluded me, as I had for years focused on leadership and control as means to an end versus servanthood as a path to lasting impact.

As a post-conflict specialist, I had seen the worst the world had to offer. I had stood at the sites of mass graves in Cambodia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone. I had seen the sick and dying and I had heard the stories from those who had survived. Even so, I had been able to compartmentalize...to do my job with compassion yet detachment. Yet, because of the nature of our work, the length of time I served there, and the intense pressure under which we operated, Afghanistan was different. The enormity of the task weighed on me, taking precedent over everything else in my life. As the pressure to rebuild the country's economy and social structure increased, my ability to remain detached became acute, causing me to psychologically pull away from everything and everyone that was not associated with the work I had to



do. This manifested itself in a rigid structure, an almost insatiable desire to achieve results, and the development of a communication and support network that was all about me instead of about those who were trying to reach out. The result was that every conversation with my wife became focused on how I was doing, without a thought as to how her life was unfolding. This created resentment within her that was never articulated, but it seethed under the surface as she bore the weight of not only her own life, but mine as well.

I failed to acknowledge during this period that joy, sadness, pleasure, and pain are choices. Greenleaf put it succinctly but powerfully when he said, “The forces of good and evil in the world are propelled by the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of individual beings.”³³ At this stage in my life I had made a choice to be unhappy, which permeated my thoughts, attitude, and actions. I had made my peace with those in my organization that I had wronged in my myopic pursuit of results, but I had not done so with the one person who had been my ballast through it all...my wife.

In Ferch’s research on forgiveness, one of his research participants revealed, “When resentment is going on, I think it dehumanizes, destroys.... You are feeding on each other’s weaknesses and there are shrugs, and look aways, the evil eye...sarcasm....No intimacy.”³⁴ When I left Afghanistan, I was bestowed honors by the Afghan people and by James Wood, the United States Ambassador to Afghanistan, for the success our organization had achieved in rebuilding the country’s economy and physical infrastructure. I was lauded for the intense focus I brought to the work and for the “unyielding tenacity” with which I reached out to the Afghan people...but no one gave my wife an award for buoying me during the times I wanted to quit...during the long nights alone in the dark with nothing but her voice to guide me, during the long winters when there was no heat and electricity, and during the intense summers when a cool breeze was as scarce as a stream in the desert. She had always been there even from thousands of mile away, and yet her role in my success had gone unnoticed and unappreciated.

Another Holocaust survivor, Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, provided a transparent and poignant view of how constant pressure and conflict can create a level of detachment whereby even those one loves the most are subjugated to one’s own basic desires. In his case, sharing food and providing comfort to his dying father became a chore...something he did not out of love or understanding but out of duty. Throughout my years in Afghanistan, my relationship with my wife had become the same way.³⁵ Her needs became distractions that I could ill afford...burdens I could not or would not carry in



addition to those of keeping my team and myself alive while still achieving results.

When one is immersed in a situation that consumes him, it is difficult to see beyond the enormity of the issues that are readily apparent. An example is found in *My Father's House*, where Sylvia Fraser spends much of her life confronting her own demons caused by sexual abuse by her father, while ignoring the plight of those around her. This was never more apparent than in her relationship with her mother, who had also suffered physical and psychological abuse from Sylvia's father, which was made exponentially worse by the gravity that she had done nothing to protect her children. She had not been there for Sylvia, but Sylvia likewise had not been there for her, as she was singularly focused on rebuilding her own life.³⁶ In hindsight, I understand that I adopted this mentality in dealing with my wife, as in my altered state of consciousness I did not consider what my words, actions, and neglect were doing to her.

As my years in Afghanistan progressed, my compartmentalization and detachment manifested itself into a lack of concern for my own safety. I took chances that others would not take...I went where others would not go... all the while convincing myself that it was my job. The low point was when I called my wife in the middle of a firefight that had erupted in our neighborhood between pro-government soldiers and Taliban militants. It was time for me to call her, so I did, never thinking about the psychological effect it would have on her to hear gunfire and explosions in the background. I had reached the point where I did not care about anyone but myself and those around me who contributed to our work.

Throughout this period, I was under the illusion not just that I was a leader, but a servant-leader, having empowered those around me and impacted the lives of the Afghan people. This belief became like a blindfold, blacking out the glaring deficiencies in my leadership brought on my single-mindedness and hubris. Greenleaf contended that a servant as leader "always empathizes, always accepts the person, but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person's effort as good enough."³⁷ In this case, my actions did not meet the standard of a servant, let alone a servant-leader, but my wife's did. Had my focus been outward instead of inward, I would have realized it was her patience and grace that kept me going during my time in Afghanistan.

In his short story "How We Fall," Shann Ray provides insight into the toll that compartmentalization and detachment play in the creation of resentment.³⁸ Through the story of a married couple, Benjamin and Sadie,



who are divided by communications dissonance and abusive behavior, Ray sheds light on the loss of intimacy that occurs when communication breaks down and self-indulgent behavior becomes an obstacle to understanding.³⁹ Until restoration is achieved through forgiveness, the natural predilection of individuals is to want emotional and physical separation because acts of tenderness and compassion are expressions of the heart. These expressions become too painful and thus are relegated to silence or worse yet, emotional and/or physical detachment.

It took a night in Athens, Greece, for the wall between my wife and me to crumble...for me to see for the first time since my departure for Afghanistan the true effect it had on her. As we finished our meal, a rainstorm moved through Plaka, drenching the ancient streets and sending tourists and locals alike running for cover. We could have stayed at the restaurant until the storm subsided, but my skin was crawling. I wanted to leave, and as usual my wife silently complied. Our driver began navigating the narrow streets to our hotel until we exited Plaka onto one of the main avenues of the city, snaking toward our hotel near Syntagma Square in bumper-to-bumper traffic. As our car lurched to a stop and we were surrounded by other vehicles, I was overwhelmed by the urge to get away, as getting caught in traffic in Afghanistan made one vulnerable to suicide bombers and other types of attacks. I told Debbie that we had to get moving; that it was unsafe...we had to get back to the hotel. She patted my arm and said, "It is okay. We are in Athens. You are not in Afghanistan. Nothing will happen here. Just relax and enjoy the ride." But alas, I could not, and a few moments later I jumped out of the stopped car in the middle of traffic and began walking in the torrential rain toward our hotel.

Debbie caught up with me in half a block, soaked to the skin and angrier than I had ever seen her. "This is it," she screamed against the wind and rain. "I can't take any more. You don't care about me...you don't care about anyone but yourself. All those years you were in Afghanistan, where we met once every three months somewhere in the world, I was dying inside. I had no peace, I had no joy...I had nothing but shiny baubles all around me to remind me of your success. I gave up everything...my career, my friends, my volunteer work...just so I could be exactly where you needed me to be when you called and what you wanted me to be when you were home. I can't do it anymore. I'm done. I am through trying to fix everything. This is your mess, you fix it." With that, she stormed down the street to where our driver was waiting and they drove off into the rainy night. For the first time



in years, I realized I had no home that I felt was my own. I was a stranger in a strange land, alienated even from the one person who had supported me through everything.

FINDING THE WAY HOME: RESTORING INTIMACY AND PEACE

Reviewing Greenleaf's writings over a long period of time, Larry Spears, CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-leadership, developed ten characteristics of a servant-leader, two of which are empathy and healing.⁴⁰ Until I began to move past my own needs and have empathy for my wife's, healing could not occur. Empathy and healing are indelibly connected by a cord of understanding, for it is through understanding that one can truly empathize, therefore leading to healing.

Debbie returned to our hotel room hours later and sat on the edge of the bed. She looked at me with eyes that were no longer angry, but sad. "What I said on the street was wrong," she said with her voice quivering, "this is not your problem to fix, it is ours. We have always been able to talk to each other and I need you to talk to me now." It was like a dam broke...we talked all night. There were tears and raised voices, but the end result was forgiveness.

In asking Debbie's forgiveness, I acknowledged my unfeeling actions, my detachment, and my narcissistic tendencies, but I also expressed the willingness to change. It was the latter that most resonated with her. She said, "I want my husband back. I want the man I married twenty-one years ago to come home." In a powerful gesture that broke down the last of my defenses, she touched my face and said, "This is home. Home is where I am. Home is where your son is. Forget about our house and what we have to show for our success. Home is us...everything else is secondary."

In a movie, this would have been the end of the story, but reality requires a much longer process for reconciliation and healing. It is apparent, however, that even if forgiveness occurs, one cannot "unring the bell." Forgiveness is part of the restoration process, but it is not the parcel. Restoration takes time, effort, and open communication that rebuilds trust. This was certainly the case with our relationship, as Debbie and I worked intensely for the next two years to gain back that place of peace and trust that had previously surrounded us. In essence, we found our "forgiving touch" by taking the opportunity to (1) restore a loving bond, (2) restore our character, (3) move beyond past relational pain, (4) lift the burden of shame, and (5) restore oneness.⁴¹ This process allowed both of us to find



our way home, using introspection to examine our motives and actions. What we came to realize coincides with C. M. Thompson's statement that "the problems you encounter in your world are problems that are within you—change yourself and the world around you has to change."⁴² I knew I had to change within before I could change from without. This took time, effort, and forgiveness-asking, but the effort resulted in the restoration of our marriage as well as of our relationships with others.

Finding my way home was a journey of discovery, which included both tragedy and comedy...joy and tears...laughter and sadness. The importance of this journey cannot be overstated, however, in that it allowed me not only to find my way home, but to find myself along the way. It was as though the fog lifted...not all at once but gradually as the sunlight of a new consciousness shone through. For Debbie and me, the experience was not unlike the final paragraph of the short story "How We Fall," from Ray's (2011) book *American Masculine*, where Benjamin and Sadie's restoration took them to new heights from which they overcame the past and "rose again on vigorous wing beats all the way to the top of the sky where they met one another and held each other fiercely, and started all over, falling and falling."⁴³

We rose, we fell, we clung to each other, and through that process the forgiving touch was restored. Debbie forgave me, I forgave myself, and in doing so I found my way home...to her...to the center of my universe. Finally, after everything, there was peace.

NOTES

1. CIPE is an affiliate of the United States Chamber of Commerce that promotes democracy, good governance, and economic growth around the world.
2. A post-conflict specialist is a person who implements complex programs within an environment that has recently suffered from internal conflict. Typically, this requires a high degree of diplomacy, negotiation skills, and cultural sensitivity, as even small issues are magnified due to the political and economic circumstances.
3. David Wallace discusses the importance of the "hyphen" in servant-leadership, as it takes the emphasis off of leadership and denotes it as an expression of servanthood.
4. R. Greenleaf, *Servant-Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977), 23.



5. R. Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 148.
6. R. K. Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant-Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998).
7. A. M. Cooper and D. Trammell, "From Hero-as-Leader to Servant-as-Leader," in *Focus on Leadership: Servant-Leadership for the 21st Century*, edited by L. Spears and M. Lawrence (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 141.
8. Greenleaf, *Servant-Leadership*.
9. Leadership Video Series: Gonzaga University.
10. D. M. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
11. Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant-Leadership*.
12. S. R. Ferch, *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity: Servant-Leadership as a Way of Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 17.
13. Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant-Leadership*.
14. Greenleaf, *Servant-Leadership*.
15. J. W. Sipe and D. M. Frick, *Seven Pillars of Servant-Leadership: Practicing the Wisdom of Leading by Serving* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009).
16. Greenleaf, *Servant-Leadership*.
17. Sipe and Frick, *Seven Pillars of Servant-Leadership*.
18. Ibid.
19. Greenleaf, *Servant-Leadership*, 83.
20. Ferch, *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity*, 73.
21. Ibid., 124.
22. R. K. Greenleaf, "Essentials of Servant-Leadership," in *Focus on Leadership: Servant-Leadership for the 21st Century*, edited by L.C. Spears and M. L. Lawrence (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 23.
23. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*.
24. S. Ray, *American Masculine* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2011), 13.
25. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*.
26. C. M. Thompson, *The Congruent Life: Following the Inward Path to Fulfilling Work and Inspired Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000).
27. Ferch, *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity*, 209.
28. Greenleaf first promulgated the concept of the servant-leader in his seminal essay on the topic, which he published in 1970.



29. J. Welch, *Fools Crow* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).
30. S. Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).
31. Ibid., 148.
32. Greenleaf, *Servant-Leadership*.
33. Ibid.
34. Ferch, *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity*.
35. E. Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958).
36. S. Fraser, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and of Healing* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1987).
37. S. R. Ferch, "Servant-Leadership, Forgiveness, and Social Justice." *Voices of servant-leadership series*, booklet 9 (Indianapolis: Greenleaf Center for Servant-leadership, 2003).
38. Ray, *American Masculine*.
39. Ibid.
40. Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant-Leadership*.
41. Ferch, *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity*.
42. Thompson, *The Congruent Life*, 151.
43. Ray, *American Masculine*, 14.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark McCord is an organizational executive who has led economic development organizations around the world. His twenty-five year career in economic development has spanned fifty-eight countries, where he was responsible for multimillion dollar programs to increase economic capacity and promote democracy. During his career in the United States, he was twice named Chamber of Commerce Executive of the Year for the State of Oklahoma, as well as being named one of the "Top 40 Leaders in Colorado Springs, CO under the Age of 40." He is a published author, with numerous articles on innovation and economic development to his credit. He currently resides in Amman, Jordan, though his heart will always be in eastern Tennessee. Mr. McCord has been married for twenty-eight years to the former Debbie Castor of Woodward, Oklahoma, and they have a twenty-six-year-old son, Daniel.