



A JOURNEY IN SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

— LARRY C. SPEARS

W elcome to our 2015-2017 edition of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. I would like to offer my special thanks to all of our contributing authors in this journal. The depth and breadth of articles and papers, poetry and research, film reviews and reflections demonstrates the vibrant nature of our ongoing journey in servant-leadership from around the world.

TOP TEN LESSONS I HAVE LEARNED OVER A LIFETIME

About ten years ago, I was invited to give several talks at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Sponsored by the 21st Century Leadership program at St. Mary's University, one of the presentations I was invited to do was on the specific theme of the "Top Ten Lessons I've Learned Over a Lifetime." I was grateful to receive this invitation as it encouraged me to think about particular life lessons that have had considerable meaning for me. I found that I had many more than ten, but I managed to whittle the list down to the requested number. I thought that I would share these with you, and invite you to



engage in the same exercise yourself. You may find coming up with your own list to be as thought provoking as I did.

10. Be kind to others/Be kind to yourself.

This seems so obvious, so fundamental, and yet it is a life lesson that is sometimes difficult to practice faithfully. Being kind to others is a desirable trait in-and-of-itself. But it can also have the added benefit of encouraging others to be kind in turn. Being kind to yourself is sometimes more challenging than showing kindness to others. While I have generally sought to learn from my own mistakes, I am increasingly convinced that it is just as important to show loving kindness to both yourself and to others around you.

9. Seek to understand others and listen carefully to what they have to say.

“Seek first to understand” is one of Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. It means, in part, placing a greater emphasis upon truly understanding others. Robert K. Greenleaf encouraged us to “listen receptively” to others. That’s a kind of intense listening coupled with a genuine openness to the possibility of being persuaded by what others have to say. Understanding others and listening carefully to others is a fundamental aspect of effective servant-leadership.

8. Avoid making assumptions.

Some years ago, I came across the following comment that has stuck with me as being both humorous and quite meaningful: “When we ‘assume’, we make an ‘ass’ of ‘u’ and



‘me’.” It is difficult for many of us to avoid making assumptions in life. It sometimes seems like it is a part of human nature. However, making assumptions about others nearly always reduces our real understanding and sometimes diminishes others and ourselves. We make assumptions about family, friends, strangers and enemies. Rather than assume we know what someone thinks, I have come to learn over time that we are usually better off asking questions.

7. All things considered, it is generally best to be cautiously optimistic in life.

In my own experience, it is best to avoid being either overly pessimistic or overly optimistic. I have observed that both extremes occasionally seem to trip up people. Being overly optimistic can lead to frequent disappointment. And while pessimists are less likely to be disappointed, they can miss out on the sheer joy of feeling hopeful. To thine own self be true--as for me, a cautiously optimistic perspective seems to work best.

6. Recognize and understand one’s fears, then resolve to grow in your own bravery over time by gradually confronting and overcoming those fears.

Learn to understand what sorts of things scare you, and why. Sometimes people do not know that they are even scared of certain things. Sometimes people know they are scared of something, but do not know why. And then there are those who know what scares them, along with knowing why. This depth of consciousness can be helpful in avoiding certain negative



actions or behaviors. This isn't easy work. My own single greatest fear has always been the fear of poverty. My father was permanently disabled in his thirties and was unable to work for the last thirty years of his life. Our family struggled to make ends meet on the Social Security disability check that he received each month. This constant uncertainty touched each of us in our family in different ways. For me, it created a deep fear of not having the money to pay for the most basic of human needs. Let me also add a word or two about bravery. Bravery, or courage, isn't the absence of fear. If anyone exists who is afraid of nothing (and I have yet to meet him or her), I would have to call that person "fearless." While most of us are afraid of something, we may be considered brave or courageous when we take action in spite of our fears. Gradually letting go of your fears while growing in your own bravery is a very important life lesson.

5. Live your life in a conscientious fashion while holding good values and high ethics.

Seek to act in ways that reflect positive values such as fairness, trust, caring, honesty, commitment to others, and similar ethical and helpful behaviors.

4. Be an active learner throughout life.

Stay curious about people and ideas. I have found that determining how we learn best and then devoting ourselves to expanding our knowledge base and experiences with the end goal of gaining wisdom are important. Experience has taught me that some combination of gaining deeper knowledge,



coupled with learning about some completely new subjects, makes life interesting. From my own life experience, I can tell you that up until the age of fifty, I had little interest in genealogy. Yet, in the year that I turned fifty, it was as if a switch turned on and I suddenly became very interested in researching my extended family history. I have found genealogy to be a fascinating endeavor, as it combines a number of things that make it exciting for me: Solving mysteries, studying history, conducting research, and the use of both logic and intuition. I would say that it doesn't matter so much what you choose to learn about—just keep learning.

3. Leading is good. Serving is better. Serving and leading is best of all.

Robert Greenleaf's writings have influenced several generations of people. Part of Greenleaf's great contribution to the world was the simple act of bringing together the words "servant" and "leader" in an innovative hyphenated word, "servant-leader." In providing us with a name for something that many of us intuitively understand, he has helped to link together many who might otherwise have felt even more isolated in their beliefs and in their workplaces. I believe that leading others can be quite meaningful. Serving others is better yet. But, both serving and leading others—at least for me, is the best. It offers opportunities for wholeness, for making a difference in the world, and for helping to fulfill Bob Greenleaf's "Best Test" of a servant-leader: *Is one healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to serve*



others? And what is the impact on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?

2. To the greatest extent possible, insist upon the right to make decisions that affect your own life, and support others in their own quests for those same rights.

We can't always do whatever it is we think we want to do. And sometimes, what we think we want to do isn't even something worth doing. Still, I have come to believe that, to the greatest extent possible, we should insist upon having choices and making decisions for ourselves, rather than having decisions forced upon us by others—no matter how well-intentioned. We should also become powerful advocates for allowing others to have those same rights. Yes, we live in an increasingly interdependent world, and we should take very seriously the careful balancing of personal choice with the greater social good. However, as Gordon Livingston says in his excellent book, *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart: Thirty True Things You Need to Know Now*: “Nobody likes to be told what to do. It seems too obvious to mention, and yet look how much that passes for intimate communication involves admonitions and instructions.” For me, this is another place where Robert Greenleaf’s ideas have great relevance—particularly around his encouragement of the use of persuasion as much as possible. Instead of telling others what to do, or what to think, I believe the world would be a better place if we saved our admonitions for ourselves and expected to persuade others (and to be persuaded in turn).



1. Show people that they matter to you.

This is the single greatest lesson that I have learned in my life—and one that I continue to work hard at learning and remembering. Let people know that they matter to you. This has a broad range of expressions and includes such things as showing your love for family, friends, colleagues, and students; sharing your appreciation for others in your life; saying please and thank you frequently. I have also found that giving thanks to those who are deceased can be quite meaningful. You may even wish to make a point of thanking people whom you have never met, but who have nevertheless had a positive impact on your life. Demonstrate through large-and-small ways that you value those who are around you, and let them know that they make a real difference in your life.

WRITINGS

For those who may be interested, here is a short list of some of the servant-leadership publications work that I have completed since our last edition:

- *Transforming Schools Through Systems Change* (Charles Salina, Suzann, Girtz, and Joanie Eppinga, editors; 2016, Rowman & Littlefield). Foreword by Larry Spears.
- *The Contemporary Servant as Leader* (Kent M. Keith, editor; 2016, The Robert K. Greenleaf Center). Includes commentary by Larry Spears and others on Robert Greenleaf's classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*.
- *Conversations on Servant-Leadership: Insights on*



Human Courage in Life and Work (Shann Ferch, Larry Spears, Mary McFarland, and Michael Carey, editors; 2015, SUNY Press). Includes an introduction, and an interview with Larry Spears.

- *Servant Leadership: Prinzipien dienender Führung in Unternehmen* (Leonhard J. Schnorrenberg, Heinz K. Stahl, Hans H. Hinterhuber, and Anna Maria Pircher-Friedrich, editors; 2015, Erich Schmidt Verlag). Introduction, plus a chapter, by Larry Spears.

TRAVELS

I am most grateful for the kind invitations to speak on servant-leadership that I have received since our last IJSL issue. I wish to recognize and thank folks at the following institutions for their kindness, caring spirits and ongoing commitment to servant-leadership:

- Asbury University, Wilmore, KY
- Eastern University, Wayne, PA
- Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA
- Greenleaf Centre-United Kingdom, London, England
- Leadership Spokane, Spokane, WA
- Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA
- The Robert K. Greenleaf Center, Atlanta, GA
- Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, Fennimore, WI
- University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI



HONOR

I was recently surprised and honored by folks at the Greenleaf Centre-United Kingdom conference in London, England, who presented me with a beautiful glass recognition. Inscribed on it are the following words: “Larry Spears – Servant Leader. With grateful appreciation for his support, encouragement and collegueship over many years. From the Greenleaf Centre for Servant-Leadership UK Board. November 12th, 2015.” Here is a link to an article:

<http://www.greenleaf.org.uk/news.php>. My relationship with John Noble, Ralph Lewis, and others at the GC-U.K. stretches back more than twenty years, and I am thankful for our longtime friendship and collaborations in servant-leadership.

ON APPRECIATION AND AWARENESS

In this, our 2015-2017 edition of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, I feel a deep sense of appreciation and awareness surrounding the wonderful contributors to this publication, and to all those who have contributed to our previous editions since 2005. A special note of appreciation for the unflagging work and imagination of our stellar Editor, Shann Ferch, and to Jenny Song, for her beautiful work in helping to put this issue together. I am deeply grateful to serve as Senior Advisory Editor of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*; and, in my dozen years in this role, the friendship and intellectual journey shared with so many servant-leaders at Gonzaga University continues to deepen my own understanding and appreciation of servant-leadership.



Larry C. Spears is president and CEO of the Spears Center for Servant-Leadership (www.spearscenter.org), Indianapolis, and he serves as Servant-Leadership Scholar at Gonzaga University, Spokane. He is the editor and contributing author for fifteen books on servant-leadership, including the critically acclaimed *Insights on Leadership* (1996) and, with Shann Ferch, *The Spirit of Servant-Leadership* (2011) and *Conversations on Servant-Leadership* (2015). Larry has also contributed chapters to another twelve books edited by others. He teaches graduate courses for Gonzaga University (Servant-Leadership, and Listen/Discern/Decide). Larry serves as senior advisory editor of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. From 1990-2007, Larry served as president and CEO of The Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership.