



WHEN THE WORLD SPEAKS LIFE

Servant-Leadership as a Guiding Force Below Conscious Being¹

— SHANN RAY FERCH

As I consider the beautiful writings in this year's journal, I am humbled. The poets, scholars, and scientists contained in this volume represent an investment of heart, mind, and soul in the process and practice of servant-leadership worldwide. I want to thank each writer, wholeheartedly, for their contribution, and for helping to heal the heart of the world. Because of them, I am reminded of the servant-leadership that informed my life in the wilderness of Montana as a boy, and later, as a man.

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At night from the rims above Billings, Montana, stars pattern the vault over the Beartooth Range. The Yellowstone River roils unseen in the darkness, and the sky is dusted white by the Milky Way, turning a slow wheel. I was lucky to get there

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early with my father; at sunset, a blood red line on the edge of the world parted the horizon under a granite swath of cloud, the whole sky lit from above, light blue becoming violet, becoming black.

Then nightfall, and he and I are seated on rim rock, looking south toward the star fields over the mountains. In my mind's eye I'm a boy again, and in the dark he's calling me toward something I can't see.

"Going to Sylvan Lake tomorrow morning," he says. "You want to come?"

It is a five-mile hike up switchbacks as steep as teeth. I don't want to make the climb, but my father persuades me. We were a fishing family, as comfortable with fly rods as we were with handshakes. For years, fishing put food on the table. This was one of the first times I remember being hungry for something other than food. I couldn't put a name to it, but it was fiercer than any physical hunger.

Growing up, the sensation only strengthened. I felt it equally in the trailer houses we lived in, on the hardwood my brother and I flew over on our way to collegiate and professional basketball, in the rivers we body-floated under white August suns, and atop the mountain passages our father led us through. I felt it on the Northern Cheyenne (Tsitsistas) reservation in southeast Montana, where I lived for part of my childhood, and at the mouth of Paradise Valley just outside Livingston, Montana, where I went to high school.

We fished and we hunted, and hunger permeated my life.



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My father woke me at 4 a.m. His voice was quiet. “You ready. Time to get up now.”

Bright light over the kitchen table. We poured cereal into thin white bowls. He’d flirted with alcohol, tempted divorce. Drank more. Fought in bars. Divorced my mother for a Crow (Apsalooke) woman in Plenty Coups south of Billings. Fled the family. The divorce allowed for visitation time for only a couple of hours every other Tuesday night. He felt broken by the loss of his sons. Eventually, he left the Crow woman. Remarried my mother.

He leaned over his cereal. Ate his toast. Opened his Bible as if splitting wood. He read from the Proverbs.

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There is a spiritual quality to climbing mountains for fish. From the trailhead at Sylvan to the first incline, the hiking is easy. From there it’s a grind to the top. We wore daypacks and totes fly rods in dented aluminum tubes, climbing with a light restlessness and hunger inside. I was 14, he was 40.

We rose through mature lodgepole pine forests flared at times by stands of aspen, until we left trees behind and moved through switchbacks carved into the mountain wall. We stopped, leaned into the rock and drank water, admiring the beauty below, and kept on.

Sylvan Lake is a gem more than 9,000 feet high, holding,



uncommonly, California golden trout. Stocked in 1938, the fish in Sylvan remain so genetically pure, Montana's Fish and Game still gathers the eggs to stock other lakes. The granite faces of Sylvan Peak ascend another 3,000 feet above the water.

The gain is so precipitous in the first four miles of climbing that I start to hate wilderness, despite my best intentions. My father is pleasant the whole way, not to spite me, but because he's always taken delight in moving steadily into the sky, a thing common to him nearly his whole life in Montana.

A few hours in, we rest again. Far below we see East Rosebud Lake, the Phantom Creek drainage, and far off the hard span of Froze to Death Plateau, a barrenness covered in snow and ice 11 months of the year, where winter winds blow spindrift at hurricane speeds. Today is a blue-sky day, the sun high and hot. Artic gentian blooms mingle with lichen and tough grasses. Crow Lake remains unseen from here, as does the West Rosebud valley and Mystic Lake with its long difficult rock field.

To cut time, my father moves us off trail to traverse the edge-wash of a shale ascent, where we grab at rock and root and scramble on all fours for a few hundred yards until we top the lip of the bowl. Finally, we stand, staring down at the bright blue diadem of water set in the crater. We find sparse trees and hearty scrub brush in the granite swales of the mountain.

Sylvan is positioned at the apex of the Hellroaring Creek drainage. The descent from lip to lake is steep but within the hour we stand near one another setting our lines on the air,



schools of goldens visible below the lake's surface in a great clarity of water and light.

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To curb all kinds of hunger, my family hunted the mountains and fished the rivers.

Both provided sustenance, but fishing was more elegant and refined. Fishing was romance slicked with water. A fish felt like quicksilver, cold and electric.

Hunting was visceral and violent. We cleaned animals in the field, always for food, and also for trophy. We split the animal from pelvic crown to neckline and peeled the hide from the body hot. We removed the quarters and all the edibles, using the rectangular bone saw as needed. We removed the head from the spine. If the animal was large enough, we kept the cape for taxidermy. Our hands were steeped in blood.

Fishing could be dangerous, but rarely so. The Yellowstone tried to kill me twice, but I'm sure the death would have been declared human error.

On another occasion, our hunting dog, a high-strung Brittany, was swept into rapids. Flailing, he disappeared a mile downstream but eventually came back, his tail between his legs.

Fishing meant walking the river in jeans and tennis shoes, moving out shirtless into the pooling water below rock. Leaning back into the flow, my father and I made casts that felt like perfection in a world of imperfect things.



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People often ask me what it was like living on the Northern Cheyenne reservation.

“Scary in the beginning,” I say, “but good in the end. I made great friends. They taught me a lot about courage.” They got through heartache, both historical and present, with an alchemy made of boldness, fear, grit, and loyalty. I cherished the brotherhood they gave.

Trace my family a generation or two and you’ll find alcohol in excess, bar fighting, jail time, and poverty. You’ll also find love and an affinity for wilderness. Much of that love came from the Northern Cheyenne people, who showed us more grace than we deserved.

Before I was born, my father ran with Cleveland Highwalker, a talented Cheyenne basketball player who was revered throughout Montana. He and my dad won a number of tournaments in their late 20s.

Cleveland’s grandmother spoke only Cheyenne, and lived alone, far from anyone. My father visited her once deep in the snowbound hills with Cleveland. He brought two deer, a gopher, and a magpie, in trade for the moccasins she made for him and my mother. After she’d dried the skins, she chewed the leather to soften it, then sewed precise stitches and set her immaculate beading into the surface.

The friendship between Cleveland and my dad was uncommon. In addition to being a stellar athlete, Cleveland



was loyal and generous. He had a good job. He didn't drink. But before he turned 30, he committed suicide. The small church funeral was filled to overflowing. People witnessed from the outside too, looking in through the windows to where the Cheyenne women wailed and pulled their hair, and the men wept and beat their chests.

My dad is still haunted by the loss. He keeps those moccasins like a talisman, a touchstone. He hopes for the chance to see Cleveland again.

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What do we do with our most insatiable hungers?

When my brother and I were young, our father was a teacher with a small salary. For extra money, he taught fly-fishing during the summer at Montana State University. The class spread out in a long line on the edge of a close-cut field above the campus. Casting vertically toward sunset, gold light set the lines afire.

I loved the rhythms. The accordion-like motion through the chest, cast-hand from 10 to 2, draw-hand like a bellows moving line below, the cast lengthened to a parabola that released and fell soft as a wish flower on open grass. The days were robin's egg blue, the high plateau of the college held in a sun-gold crown of mountains on a full radius around us.

We fished the Yellowstone, Gallatin, Jefferson and Madison, but we loved the East Gallatin above all rivers. To get there we walked through a farmer's field, avoided a black



bull, leapt a low barbed wire fence and made our way to a set of riffles cascading among cottonwoods, opening on water where fish sparked to the fly.

We were servants of the body, of water and light. We cleaned our fish on the bank. Homeward, fish in the creel, the fly rods rattled in the truck bed.

In the evening light of the trailer, we made simple meals: deer or elk steak, rainbow, browns or cutthroat shaken in a bag of flour with salt and pepper, fried in a cast iron skillet with sticks of butter that made the meat glisten as the coat came up. We ate quietly and well, smiling over the day's catch. Afterward we recalled the river, where we flew Parachute Adams, or Royal Wulffs, or wooly buggers. The fly rod bowed, the line attached at a fierce angle to the water, the fish flashed below the surface like lightning. The fight was a gift of heaven, and my father's bold laughter rang off the canyon walls.

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My mother and father loved and fought and lost each other and returned to each other. They made mountains and water their places of devotion. They influenced me toward a fuller way of life. Like an intimate dance, they helped me move from mechanical functionality to something more fluid.

As a young man, fly-fishing was a crucial part of this expression —the hunger for the perfect cast a desire even more instinctive than the catch. Increasingly evident in the fast-pace of everyday living is the fact that beauty is too often missing



from our lives. When I fish, I search for an echo of the gracefulness we see in water. I view wilderness not as something to fight against or defeat, not as a masculine adversary, but something worthy of respect, infinite affection and our deepest listening.

As my father has aged, he has grown more attuned to wilderness, and more tender with his sons. I can see the peace it has brought in his eyes.

I reflect on the distance between fathers and sons, the physicality, and the affection. Water quiets the soul, but never quite overcomes the emptiness.

That day on Sylvan Lake my father and I touched mountains, water and sky. But we caught no fish. Life humbles us, just as love calls us to this place.

A man who'd come up earlier gave us a few of his goldens before he ascended and topped the ridge and was gone. Toward late afternoon, my dad and I sat together, eating over a small fire. Brotherhood and kindness appeared in the wilderness and we were happy to receive the food.

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What losses change the arc of a life?

Servant-leadership makes itself known in the deep quiet known to the soul, in the interactions, graceful and profound, between people, and in the mystery of existence, unseen, that is embodied in a profound balance between love and power.

I believe in the generosity of Cleveland Highwalker, my



mother, father and other family members, and of the wilderness — pressing into my hand like the taut body of a cutthroat I slip on the stringer and clean beside the water at day’s end.

Yearning for a full life keeps us vital, strikes the soul, makes fire, keeps us searching. Even now when I look to the night sky, I recall a thousand nights with my father. The star fields over these mountains lead me home.

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(Unbridled Books) won the Western Writers of America Spur award and considers colonization, racism, and cultural dignity in the American West. His collection of poems, *Balefire*, won the High Plains Book Award and appears with Lost Horse Press. As a poet and prose writer, his work has appeared in some of America's leading literary venues including *Esquire*, *Poetry*, *McSweeney's*, *Narrative Magazine*, *The Journal of American Poetry*, *Poetry International*, and *Salon*. He has served as a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellow and as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Humanities, Research Division.