A Personal Remembrance of Warren Bennis
—Larry C. Spears

Larry Spears and Warren Bennis, January 21, 2010, in California.

In January 2010, I fulfilled a decades-long dream of driving Route 66 from Chicago to the Santa Monica Pier and back. On Jan. 21, 2010 I celebrated making it to the Pacific Ocean by

visiting with a dear friend, the noted leadership author Warren Bennis, who lived in Santa Monica.

Warren and I met for coffee and conversation at a hotel near the beach. As I was waiting for him, I recalled some of our previous interactions over the years. —

- In the late-1990's, Warren and I had served together on the early board of the International Leadership Association, then led by Barbara Kellerman. We generally met at the University of Maryland in College Park, MD.
- In May 2000 I had travelled to the University of Southern California to participate in a Festschrift honoring Warren on his 75th birthday. I recall it as being a wonderful recognition of Warren's contributions to our understanding of leadership, and servant-leadership.
- In 2002 I included an essay written by Warren ("Become a Tomorrow Leader") in *Focus on Leadership* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002).
- In 2003 I travelled to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I produced a videotaped presentation of Warren and conducted an interview with him. I recalled his "Five C's of Organizational Integrity: Caring, Constancy, Competence, Congruency, and Candor."
- In 2008, Warren wrote the Foreword to *Scanlon Epic Leadership* (Scanlon Foundation, 2008), a book that I edited with my friend Paul Davis.

And, there were other reasons for my appreciation of Warren Bennis, as well—

- His contribution to our overall understanding of effective leadership has been enormous. Through his writings, speeches, and consulting he helped many leaders and organizations to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in making good and ethical decisions.
- Warren was a superb writer. And, much like Robert Greenleaf, repeated reading of his books and essays yield new insights for the discerning reader—a clear sign of great writing.
- In 1977, Warren had endorsed Bob Greenleaf's first book, *Servant Leadership* (Paulist Press, 1977/2002) on the dust jacket. At the time, Bennis was president of the University of Cincinnati.
- During his life, Warren served as a living bridge to any number of people who have worked to create better organizational environments. My own understanding benefitted from his sharing of stories of his meetings with Bob Greenleaf, Joe Scanlon, Doug MacGregor, Peter Drucker and other 20th century giants whose ideas continue to shape the 21st century.
- Warren served on the Advisory and Contributing Author's Board of the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership* until his death.
- Over the years, Warren's occasional personal notes of encouragement and appreciation both lifted my spirits

and helped me to reframe my own work in servant-leadership.

Warren Bennis, who died in 2014 at the age of 89, was a wise man, and the wisdom contained in his written work continues in its growth and influence on others. I am grateful to have counted him as a friend for two decades.

The following is a transcript from a short interview that I conducted with Warren on March 17, 2003, at Harvard University.

Larry Spears (LS): I'd like to start by asking you to reflect on four people who you recently mentioned, and to ask if you would to say a bit about each of them. The four people are Mary Parker Follett, Douglas McGregor, Peter Drucker, and Robert Greenleaf.

Warren Bennis (WB): Mary Parker Follett. First, one of the most interesting things about her was that she was a social worker, and the kinds of things she focused on were quite remarkable—one of which was constructive, creative conflict. Her writings had an absurd lucidity to them, that even to this day, I do not think have been fully acknowledged. She has influenced, without our knowing it, almost all of us. In fact, her writing, her clarity, the things she was saying about leadership are just things that today people write about without even acknowledging who said it first. So, her contributions were extraordinary. She said extraordinary things that were prescient and alas, unfortunately, not still, to this day, acknowledged

well enough. People should start reading Mary Parker Follett's work.

LS: I agree. How about McGregor, Drucker, and Greenleaf?

WB: Well, I can't be objective. McGregor was my mentor, my role model, someone I tried very much to emulate and in fact, did in many ways. His contribution was interesting in that he wrote very little, and unlike Mary Parker Follett, who wrote a lot more, really, his influence is really widely acknowledged, although probably not by today's generation of management scholars and writers, but, the major contribution of Doug McGregor, other than his personal touch with people, which was profound, his *personal* touch was that he was able to have an incredible empathy with a reflective manager, a reflective practitioner, and talk in a language they got and what he basically was saying was "look, gang, what is your view of human nature?" You better look in the mirror—because your view of, what he called Theory X, what you think of the world as the jungle, where you think of the world as one in which you have to coerce people, what are your assumptions about people? That's what Doug's real contribution was.

When he wrote Theory X and Theory Y, his most famous essay, he was getting people to hold a mirror up to their face to say what's your view of mankind? What's your cosmology? What's your point of view about how you view people? Because unless that's clear--that determines your leadership behavior and style and character. If your only view of people is

that they're lazy and need to be pushed, coerced, that they'll only respond to satisfaction of their own, sort of primitive values, then you're going to lead in a certain way. But if you think of people as having a capacity to learn; have the capacity to bring out their best selves, people who have the capacity to want to, who are motivated by intrinsic jobs that they're working on, then your way of leading is going to be totally different. And that's what McGregor did.

Larry, Doug brought Bob Greenleaf to MIT—now that was interesting. People did not bring practitioners to hallowed corridors of learning, especially MIT, which valued itself as being, and for good reason, one of the leading centers of science and technology in the entire world. He brought in Greenleaf, this senior vice president for personnel at AT&T, to MIT and provided an office; a teaching opportunity, and certainly was important in Bob's own development of ideas.

I want to say one more word about Bob Greenleaf. His work on servant-leadership is unique; he really made, long before his time, made us aware that the role of the leader, to a great extent is *value* based; *value* based and that the main value is that the leader is not simply someone who's in it for the narcissistic splurge or the recognition or the idolatry or being the poster boy or girl, but someone whose basic value is to create the social architecture that benefits the cartography of the people for whom that organization is responsible.

I've left Peter Drucker to the last of the people you mentioned, he is still, thank goodness, with us, at the age of 93—still teaching and writing—he's a marvelous example of a

geezer, isn't he? [Drucker died in 2005, at the age of 95, LS] I think Peter really made the study of leadership, the discipline of leadership a respectable one. He made the field possible for the likes of me and for you to continue our work and have some degree of legitimacy. Drucker made the study of management a legitimate pursuit.

LS: I know that you had a chance to visit with Bob Greenleaf on occasion; I wanted to invite you to share any recollections you may have of Bob as a person or of any of the conversations or encounters you had with him.

WB: Well, it's a long time ago. I can't remember the exact year he came to MIT. Do you know? It was probably in the early '60s. I sort of laugh because I had my mind on tenure and I'm not sure that I paid all that much attention to all these visitors who came in. But he was a presence. And what I remember about him is I don't think he had yet really consolidated and formulated the servant-leader at that time, but the fact that he wanted to work with Doug was the giveaway. I mean, my memory of him is not so much idea-based, but who he was as a human being, which was a guy who, I thought, really had a deep intellectual curiosity, and had this marvelous sense of optimism and of hope and kind of a rather radiant human being. He had sort of a nice shimmer to him and kind of a very open, positive man, very eager to learn. That's all I remember. I don't remember talking about servant-leadership with him. But he was there and present and memorable, but in terms of

who he was as a person—we were all thrilled to have this big shot from AT&T come and join us.

LS: It was not until 1970 that Bob coined the term servant-leader in the essay *The Servant as Leader.* The 1960's I think really was a period…

WB: It was formative! Wasn't that sort of—he was gestating the ideas, right? Where did that article appear? That '70 article—was it a book? It was an essay!

LS: Yes, it was the original "Servant as Leader" essay—the separately published 38-page essay, which remains certainly, a primary way in which people have been introduced to servant-leadership over the years.

WB: Isn't it interesting how Doug was attracted to Bob and Bob to Doug—do you see that?

LS: Yes. I do. I know that Bob also had Doug to AT&T for some work.

WB: Oh, yes, one of Doug's clients was—by the way, those were the days, just as a minor historical note, before "gurus"—before the field of management had any sort of clout in the world of practice, that's another interesting thing about Bob Greenleaf. I don't think the world of management education, and of schools like MIT, really had as much of a connection to

the real world of practice and that's why Doug made it possible to bring a Bob Greenleaf in. You know, universities are very strange places. They're very strange about bringing in people who aren't part of the tribe, you know what I mean? So, Doug's doing that was a clear example of both their courage and bravery in doing something quite new.

LS: I think the same is also true for Peter Drucker and Bob Greenleaf. They used to collaborate on each other's programs and serve as guest speakers.

WB: In fact, I think I met Drucker through Doug. That was probably our connection. They both were influenced in a way, indirectly Bob, certainly directly by Doug, by Kurt Lewin who had that famous statement of "there's nothing so practical as a good theory." So, that whole connection between theory and practice informed both Greenleaf and MacGregor's vision.

LS: I'd like to take this opportunity to ask you if you could say a little bit more about your own thoughts and reflections on servant-leadership, and why you think it matters.

WB: I think it matters for some reasons that aren't fully articulated. I don't think in general, in the leadership literature and leadership studies, we've paid enough attention to the range of leaders, especially bad leadership. If you look at most of the writings about business leadership in the last 20 years they tend to deify and lionize certain exemplary leaders. At the same time,

they've ignored the fact that some of these leaders are destructive narcissists that put themselves first. And these days, especially, when the world is concerned more and more, and I think for good reason, with leadership that is evil; leadership that is destructive; leadership where the leaders will try to win at any cost, primarily for themselves, not for their organization. If there's one thing that Greenleaf's work on servant-leadership does, is it keeps reminding us of what's important, because it is so easy for many organizations to get totally consumed with the bottom line, totally consumed with pleasing just the financial stakeholder and not the community, not the workers; not all the clogged cartography of people that are stakeholders whose lives are affected by the institution and I think what Greenleaf's work has done—it's sort of like a super ego conscience prod—of what we should not lose sight of. We're there, primarily to serve the people who have a connection and are affected by the institution. And I think it's very easy to ignore that or to forget that or be mindless about that. So, I think that is a singular and very dominant part of Greenleaf's contribution. But there's another factor. The whole idea of values-based leadership is central to Greenleaf's work and that is now becoming more and more recognized. It serves as a counter balance to the glorification, deification, lionization of leaders who have neglected or forgotten what they're there for, which is to serve the people that are affected by the organization.

LS: Thank you. What are some of the key attributes that help to form effective, caring leadership?

WB: I think, Larry, so many things go into it. I wish there was some kind of blood test for a thing called a moral compass; of a powerful discernment of right and wrong. And I'm not a cultural relativist. I'm not a contingency theorist. In fact, I'm opposed to those. I do think that leaders have to have a strong ethical basis and a clear and explicit basis. Here's another factor of Bob Greenleaf's work. You have to be clear and explicit about how you lead and what the value, the hint of the value hinterland of what you believe. And I think that one aspect of effective and moral—let me call it "just" leadership, "just" leadership is a sense, not just of authenticity, but a sense of a moral compass. I mean Hitler was very authentic; so are some of the most evil people in the world. I really do think that Osama Bin Laden is authentic. I really do honestly believe that *he* honestly believes that he's doing the right thing. He's authentic, but in terms of a moral compass; that's quite different. What people most want from their leaders, by the way, is integrity, trustworthiness, and authenticity, and those to me would be the major aspects. And the moral compass, of course, is what Bob Greenleaf would focus on. And I think we in business schools, and education in general, because of our constitutional bifurcation, which I agree to, our freedom of religion and free speech, I think sometimes we've played down the value basis of leadership, which is not in any way religion, particularly any doctrinal religion, but has to do with such things as faith, and values, and belief systems. You see, everything else is perishable—you can have the adaptive capacity, you can set direction—but the only thing that's not

perishable is character, is values, is your belief systems. And that is, I think, the key attribute, should be the key attribute, of leadership. Yes, you've got to have business literacy, don't get me wrong—you can't lead organizations or any corporation without knowing a fair amount about corporate finance, a fair amount about marketing, a fair amount about a whole lot of things having to do with business, but those are easy. I know those will change a lot, but character, belief, values—they're not perishable.

LS: One of the great challenges, between people, within organizations, and as we speak, certainly throughout society and the world, has to do with conflict and divisions. What do you think leaders can do to help bridge divisions and to resolve conflicts, whatever their role or position may be within organizations?

WB: That's a big one. I can't respond to that question without thinking of right now, here we are, man, during the looming crisis in Iraq. A lot of it has to do with trust. One can communicate to warring elements that you're interested in the welfare of both, whoever the competing, conflicting elements are. That you as a peace-and-bridge-builder are interested in an agenda that would benefit both; that has the self interest of both sides, including yourself, involved. Let me give you one example that would be quite important now. George Herbert Walker Bush, President Bush, number 1, made 14 trips separate trips to Europe and Asia before the Gulf invasion of

1991—14 separate trips. The current President Bush has not made more than one. He's finally going to the Azores to talk with Spain and Britain, but he's not actually *shown* that he's interested in bringing about a settlement so that we're not going to fight a war. War is, without question, is one of the most, if not *the* most destructive things that can occur between nations bar none. The only way you can bring sides together is to indicate that you have a profound belief in the welfare of all that will be a winning situation as much as possible, or at least some compromise that you all can accept. That is the basic factor. If people suspect the motive, you don't have a chance. I'm not the world's expert, or any kind of expert on conflict resolution. I just know that you cannot resolve any conflict with threats, with playing a game of poker. I think you have to lay your cards on the table. I think you've got to indicate that you're interested in resolving things to the benefit of all sides, which means that all sides have to give up something. The important thing that I've discovered personally, about conflict, and resolving it, is try as much as you can not to make anybody wrong. And that sounds very simple, doesn't it? It sounds like a banal, very superficial thing to say: to not make anybody wrong. But just look at what our relationship is right now with North Korea. If I were the paramount leader of North Korea, I'd be very, very frightened and I would do the very best I could to get as much defensive stuff going as I could because of the way we've been playing that card, refusing to go there and talk with the people. Getting out of the cosmic level of foreign relations, for the moment, I think in an organization,

there are always turf battles. There is always competition for resources. And I think that leaders have to put the overarching goal of the organization before the interests of either party and get both parties to understand that. But I wish I had better answers. I don't feel my answer is profound. There are a lot of other people who could probably do a better job on that. But, on my mind is the current world situation, and my role as a university president for seven years. Someone once said that a university is a bunch of departments, schools, divisions, centers, institutes, this's, and that's, held together only by a central heating system. How do you as a leader create the central heating system, the sense of overarching point of view that will bring people together? That's one of the chief jobs of leaders.

LS: Thank you. One final question. What words of encouragement, or perhaps, even recommendations might you offer to aspiring servant-leaders?

WB: There is one question I would ask and one encouraging word I would give. The question I would really have to ask, first, is do you really want to lead? That is a very big question. Do you really want to do this? I think it's tough. What more challenging, more responsible, more, probably life-giving, more important thing can you do, but to be able to create a life for others that brings about joy, that brings about learning, that brings about a sense of, yes, human betterment, than being a leader? But you have to ask yourself, is that what you want to

really do? Do you want to abandon *your* ego to the talents of others to create that kind of community that will bring out the very best in people? That's a big question—why? And the other thing is, be brave. Be brave and be kind.

LS: I want to thank you for sharing your time, thank you for your life's work, and for who you are.

WB: Thanks, Larry. Thank you for inviting me.

ABOUT WARREN BENNIS

Warren Bennis was an author, scholar, and consultant to many organizations and governments throughout the world, including four U.S. presidents. Bennis was Distinguished Professor of Business Administration and Founding Chairman of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California. He was the author of 27 books, including the best-selling *Leaders* and, *On Becoming a Leader*. Bennis was also an early board trustee of the International Leadership Association. He was a longtime advocate of servant-leadership and an encourager of both Robert Greenleaf and Larry Spears. Bennis wrote a back-cover endorsement for the original 1977 hardcover edition of Robert Greenleaf's book, *Servant Leadership*, calling it, "A gem of a book on leadership." He also contributed a chapter to *Focus on Leadership* (2002), edited by Larry Spears, as well as the Foreword to *Scanlon EPIC Leadership* (2008), edited by Paul Davis and Larry Spears. Warren also served on the Advisory and Contributing

Author's Board of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*.

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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), *Fortuitous Encounters* (2013, with Paul Davis); and, with Shann Ferch, *The Spirit of Servant-Leadership* (2011) and *Conversations on Servant-Leadership* (2015). Since 1994, Larry has also contributed chapters to an additional seventeen books edited by others. He also served as editor on all five of Robert K. Greenleaf's books. As adjunct faculty and Servant-Leadership Scholar, Larry 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.