



MY FATHER AS A LIFELONG SERVANT-LEADER —JONATHAN POTTER

My father, Ted Potter, is supposedly retired. He has had a long, interesting, and varied career, first as a teacher, then as a real estate agent, broker, appraiser, and consultant. Although my dad has not formally studied the literature of servant-leadership, I believe his life and work exemplify much of what Greenleaf and other scholars have conceptualized as characteristic of the servant-leader approach to interpersonal and organizational management and leadership. Over the course of a few days at the end of summer, as the leaves on the trees began turning on their fall flare, I engaged my dad in an online conversation aimed at highlighting and exploring what I see as his servant-leader qualities and tendencies over the years and into the present. In the mode of a kind of appreciative inquiry (Hammond, 2013), I aimed to delve into my sense of my father as a servant-leader, to better understand how he developed into the man I know and love, and to test my evolving grasp of servant-leadership as a vital philosophy that can inform and enhance the life of an individual, a family, or an organization, as well as the larger community, in an outward flowing ripple effect.



For Ted, the teaching came first. He taught high school vocational agriculture and science for thirteen years after graduating from Washington State University in 1962. Teaching is arguably the quintessential servant-leader role, and Ted's early impulse to teach echoes Greenleaf's assertion that servant-leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27). Teaching is, as Nichols (2011) sums it up, "the noblest of professions, and at the same time, one of the most frustrating endeavors that one will ever undertake" (p. 1). A strain of that frustration, coupled with the desire to provide a more solid financial foundation for his family, prompted Ted to transition, beginning in 1976, to a second career in real estate, which he would pursue in varying ways from that point onward to his present state of ostensible retirement.

In addition to my inquiry into my father's two careers, I also endeavored in my interview to explore other facets of his life, experiences, and relationships that seem relevant to a consideration of him in the context of servant-leadership. To begin with, I wanted to examine the influence of his own parents, my grandparents; how their attitudes toward service to the community and care for friends and loved ones, as well as their embrace of leadership roles in various ways, may have impacted my dad's development into a *de facto* servant-leader. As an outgrowth of those early developmental factors, I also wanted to explore connections with my father's lifelong pattern of rendering help in extraordinary ways to those in need whose paths happened to cross his.



I should also mention my mother here, Ursula Potter, since she is a key collaborator and participant in the pattern I examined in the interview with my dad; part two of this essay could very well be an exploration of her perhaps even more compelling embrace of lifelong servant-leadership in the shadow of her husband. In that vein, I conclude this exploration of my father with a look at something Jack Lowe, Jr. (2003/2010) identifies as a refinement of Greenleaf's test of servant-leadership: namely the idea that empowering one's followers to be "more autonomous" is not the end of the servant-leadership road, but rather "mutuality" is—"to help, but [also] to be helped." My father and mother have demonstrated this kind of mutuality throughout their fifty-plus years of marriage and together they have extended it to a larger circle of family and friends, engendering vital connections of love and community that make meaning possible and promote the values Greenleaf and other scholars and practitioners of servant-leadership have identified and espoused.

PARENTS' INFLUENCE

My father's parents, Edith and Dick Potter, were teachers and later owned and operated a small-town grocery store, among other activities they pursued at different times to eke out a living. Although Ted identifies his father as having "more of a leadership personality" than his mother, in my recollection of them as the beloved grandparents of my childhood, Edith stands out as the stronger personality of the two (T. Potter, personal communication, September 12-15, 2016; subsequent



quotations are cited from the same communication). She was a particularly doting grandmother and very keen on engaging with me, my sister, and my cousins in a manner I see in retrospect as very servant-leader oriented. She was a devout follower of Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science and often made a point of transmitting her beliefs and values to us in gracious and empowering ways (despite the problematic elements of Christian Science, such as the admonition against the medical treatment of sickness and disease). She was also often to be found in the kitchen baking—and we never failed to leave her house with baked goods of some sort, usually something incorporating chocolate as a main ingredient.

According to Ted, in the years before grandchildren arrived on the scene, his father filled a sort of “patriarchal” role among the extended family. As a teacher, he also had a reputation as “a very strict disciplinarian.” Yet despite these elements of a leadership style that could be viewed as cutting against the grain of a servant-leader orientation, Dick Potter also exhibited “the ability to help people navigate through some seemingly impossible situations without leaving ‘train wrecks’”; and as a teacher, “he had a significant effect on many of his students” to the point where even today my dad occasionally hears from old students of Dick’s who attest to “how much of a positive influence he had on them” as a teacher .

“I think the most significant thing I learned from [my parents],” Ted says, “is an attitude of respect for all people, regardless of their color, education, dress, economic situation, or religion.” They provided Ted and his siblings with a model



of inclusion and hands-on care for people; they demonstrated a willingness to give concretely and sacrificially even when that meant putting a strain on their own modest financial resources and even when they received “scorn instead of thanks” in return.

The distinction between empathy and sympathy was another key lesson Ted learned by observing his parents. “They both had a strong sense of empathy, with a clear understanding of the difference between sympathy and empathy.” Where sympathy could be described as a more abstract, detached mode of mild concern for the hardships of others, empathy involves closely identifying and involving oneself with the person undergoing a hardship—“to really listen, and try to put myself in the other person’s shoes; then to see if there is anything I can do to help.” Some of the concrete examples of empathy my dad’s parents’ exhibited included taking in “a troubled foster kid” and a “succession of cousins” with troubled home situations, providing free housing for a renter who got cancer and couldn’t work, and offering free groceries to a local town character masquerading as a hobo when several other businesses in town had ignored him or told him to move on. A key component of empathy, which Ted observed particularly in his father, is listening—he “could pick up on subtleties.” As Greenleaf (1977/2002) observes, listening not only builds a bridge for empathy but “true listening builds strength in other people” (p. 31) because it puts them on a footing with the listener and elevates them out of the trough they find themselves in.



Along with empathy and inclusion, my dad also cites resilience as another important servant-leader quality his parents instilled in him: “to never see a task as impossible—that I was as smart, tough, and resilient as the next person—which also allows one to fail, but creates a learning situation.” In Greenleaf’s framework, resilience could be seen as closely allied with healing. The servant-leader facilitates and participates in the healing that comes with inclusion in the community, in becoming resilient and helping others become resilient in the face of hardships and setbacks. But Greenleaf (1998) also associates resilience with the leader’s strength which builds faith and trust in his or her leadership: “one’s confidence in a leader rests, in part, on the assurance that stability and poise and resilience under stress give adequate strength for the rigors of leadership” (p. 131).

TEACHING

“I have always seen teaching as predominately a servant role but in a lesser sense also a service role.” My father makes an interesting distinction between “servant” and “service” here. In a way, it feels reminiscent of the empathy/sympathy distinction. Embracing the servant aspect of teaching means getting down in the trenches and identifying closely with the needs and concerns of one’s students. The servant-leader oriented teacher, empathizes with his or her students and learns along with them as a member of the community of learners. Teaching is the best way to really learn a subject and identifying with the learner is the best way to teach. In



reflecting on his experience as a teacher, Ted puts it this way: “I compare teaching to being a missionary—there to serve and help improve peoples’ lives. Pulling students along to increase their awareness, knowledge, and maybe self-actualization, is very rewarding.”

Over the span of his 13-year career in secondary education and overlapping into his real estate career where he taught college real estate classes, Ted held three teaching jobs, each with interesting differences regarding inclusion, exclusion, and community. His first job out of college was teaching vocational agriculture as well as biology, chemistry, and physics in Springdale, Washington, a low-income, rural area. After two years in Springdale, he advanced to a better paying job in Lind, another small town in Eastern Washington but one where dryland wheat farming was booming and bringing wealth to farmers in the area. In both places, Ted’s unique role as the Future Farmers of America (FFA) advisor provided a context for servant-leadership and the development of strong relationships with students and their families. The leadership skills students developed through FFA have proven over the years to have had “a positive effect on their future successes.”

“As to the community as a whole,” however, “teachers and teachers’ spouses were all held in higher esteem in Springdale than the experience we had in Lind.” In Springdale, for example, teachers and their spouses were automatically included in the Women’s Club, whereas in Lind, the word was that teachers, preachers, and their spouses “were specifically excluded since they weren’t permanent residents.”



Interestingly, the poor community practiced more servant-leader-friendly forms of inclusion whereas the wealthier community, perhaps not surprisingly, exercised exclusion. By contrast, Ted's later experience teaching college classes, sidestepped thorny issues of small-town inclusion/exclusion. "I was immediately looked upon as a leader," Ted said. "It didn't seem there was anything overt that I did to feel that I was in a leadership role when teaching adults."

"If one will study the two characters, Leo and McMurphy, one will get a measure of the range of possibilities in the role of servant as leader" (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 57). I was initially surprised to encounter this reference to the great Ken Kesey novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), coupled with Greenleaf's better-known reference to Hesse's *Journey to the East* (1957) as indicative of "the range of possibilities" for servant-leadership. McMurphy, the protagonist of Kesey's novel (also marvelously portrayed by Jack Nicholson in the film adaptation), is a wilder, more rebellious, and more disruptive version of the servant-leader. He shakes things up with humor and sly rebellion against Nurse Ratched and her orderly, subtly dehumanizing system of control within the mental hospital where McMurphy finds himself. I mentioned this reference to my dad, wondering if the alternative emblem of the servant-leader represented by Kesey's character resonated with any aspects of his experience teaching. Indeed, he had some thoughts along those lines: "That I had little fear of community retribution for teacher activism, a reputation of being somewhat of a renegade, and a



devil-may-care attitude, allowed some of the other teachers to also stretch their comfort zone.” Thus one could surmise that in relation to his students, my father embodied more of a Leo approach; whereas in relation to his colleagues and the sometimes stultifying bureaucratic structures of the educational system, he turned into more of a McMurphy.

REAL ESTATE

After thirteen years of high school teaching, Ted transitioned to a career in real estate and had an interesting start working for an eccentric character named Clarence Bumgardner. As Thompson (2000) states, comparing the work of a physician and that of a business leader, both fulfill different needs, but the purposes of business “are just as transcendent and its meaning just as encompassing” (p. 47). Similarly, with my father’s move from teaching to the real estate business, his servant-leader orientation would change in some ways but find new avenues for development and discernment just as meaningful as what he had experienced in teaching. Real estate sales also afforded him a way out of the “long term rut” he felt he was facing in education. (I recall Sting offering an interviewer a similar explanation of why he abandoned teaching for what turned out to be a somewhat more lucrative career in music.) Ted describes working for Clarence as “a wild and crazy roller coaster ride” where he learned a lot but most of it through the “sink or swim” method. Although Clarence did exhibit some servant-leader characteristics and “did see his role as more of a servant,” he could also be “totally autocratic” or launch into “a haranguing



tirade” about getting out there and selling something. He was a “somewhat functioning alcoholic who was prone to episodes of binge drinking.”

As Clarence became more confident in Ted’s ability to manage the office in his absence, the binge episodes grew more frequent; which sped up the learning curve for “how to manage a real estate office and be in a leadership position with a sales staff.” This was not exactly a tidy servant-leader scenario, but it proved Ted’s mettle and afforded “a natural transition from leadership skills acquired in education.” In a way, it created an opportunity for Ted to fill a servant-leader role within the business while also rescuing Clarence from going completely off the deep end a time or two. It was a high-stress, chaotic situation, but Ted rose to the occasion, mastered a unique seller-financing approach to sales, and in less than a year more than doubled his annual income from teaching. He was well on his way to achieving his goal of being able to pay college tuition for me and my sister—we were 11 and 15 at the time—something that would not have been possible had he continued teaching. The management experience he was thrust into at Bumgardner’s also served him well when he embarked on his own brokerage company a couple of years later.

Over the three or four decades that followed, Ted’s business transitioned from a large residential sales staff to a smaller staff focusing on commercial and farm sales to commercial and farm appraising and consulting to a unique real estate auction framework for primarily large-scale commercial and farm sales. The farm appraisal part of this



equation answered to a crisis in the agricultural community that was brought on by low commodity prices in the 1980s. Ted's role as an appraiser had a real servant-leader element in that he was instrumental in orchestrating bankruptcy "work-out plans" that helped people save their farms by showing that "the farm could survive financially with the new value."

Over the years, Ted also observed examples of "agents creating their own marketing group within the main brokerage company" in a positively interdependent relationship with the broker. "The brokers I know that did this, always have exhibited what I would call a servant mentality with their sales staff, and are the two most successful brokerages in the area." By contrast, there were also counter-examples of brokers and agents operating as cut-throat egocentric competitors. As Greenleaf (1998) put it, "There are many notable servants among us, but they sometimes seem to be losing ground to the neutral or nonserving people" (p. 22).

HELPING WHERE HELP IS NEEDED

Ted's spirit of servant-leadership has been most pronounced over the years in the ways he (along with my mother, Ursula—they definitely operate as a team) has offered help to individuals in need and has met them where they are at. My parents do not turn away when confronted with someone in need. Neither do they simply give the person a handout and then turn away. They have been willing, time and time again, to become personally involved, in vital and tangible ways, in the lives of struggling individuals with whom they happen to cross paths. "The hope,"



Ted says, “is that when help is given to someone, they are left in better shape—maybe in more than one way—higher esteem, not hungry, feeling they are part of something.”

Among the individuals my parents have helped out over the years, Ernie is perhaps the prime example. My dad initially hired Ernie to do some yard work. That was more than two decades ago and my parents have been Ernie’s principal source of income ever since. Ted has bailed Ernie out of jail several times, paid for medicine for Ernie’s girlfriend (the mother of their now-grown daughter), helped him find a place to live when his girlfriend left him and he became homeless, helped him get his driver’s license back after he lost it, took him to countless alcohol abuse classes. “All of the seemingly deal killer issues for a worker,” Ted says, “are still overshadowed by the fact that he always tries to do right, would never steal from us, and is a steady, albeit slow, worker.”

Taking him under our arms has had its reward by seeing him have more self-esteem and actually become more concerned about how he looks. I’ve always been careful not to put him down over his problems—he gets enough of that from just about everyone else in his life. He has had unconditional acceptance by us—we have had our frustrations over the years, but we both believe it’s important to treat him with respect.

Watching Ted and Ernie interact over the years has been interesting. Dignity and mutual respect are key components, but a fair amount of humor infuses the relationship as well, with Ernie seemingly playing, at times, the part of a glum



Sancho Panza to my dad's quixotic Don Quixote.

Other individuals who have entered Ted's servant-sphere include Stan, Nora, and Josh. Stan is a doctor my sister worked for at one time. He was struggling from severe depression and although he didn't know my parents well he sensed that they might provide a haven for him while he got through it. My dad's response: "we said, sure—come on in." Stan lived with them for a couple of months. Nora was a 14-year-old girl who had been abused and neglected since infancy, suffered from attachment disorder, and had nowhere else to go. "It was a nightmarish year, and we did everything humanly possible to help her find some semblance of normal existence." Josh was a 17-year-old kid who had been homeless since he was 15. He would come around looking for yard work. After the abandoned trailer he had been living in got hauled away with everything he owned in it, including ID, Ted helped him find a place to stay, helped him get his school records and a copy of his social security card. Josh eventually got in trouble with drugs and held up a convenience store to pay his drug dealer, got arrested and sent to prison for two years. Ted kept in touch with him and continued helping him until he got back out and on his feet. "He called me once last year, and told me he was married and working—so that was certainly a lot of progress." Stan, Nora, and Josh: three individuals from vastly different, but equally troubled circumstances, each in need of help and connection and receiving it because Ted was there and was willing to go out of his way to help.



CONCLUSION: THE DEACON'S FUND AND TED'S CORNER BAR

The Deacon's Fund was something Ted started with a Lutheran pastor and a few other members of the church he belonged to at the time. The group raised money to provide assistance in crisis situations. "We were structured so we could react immediately to need—middle of the night or whatever."

I think the part of this that is different from some other "help funds" is that we got into the guts of human problems—just throwing money in the collection plate for charity is the easy way out—getting your hands dirty is kind of a crude way to put it, but that's what it is. If a person speaks of the easy life of "welfare queens" they have never helped someone navigate the maze that defines the welfare system. Face to face contact with those in need, getting down into the trenches, is a whole different world than ten bucks in the collection plate.

Once again, it goes back to concrete empathy, as opposed to abstract sympathy. With the Deacon's Fund, Ted coordinated his efforts with a larger group, created a structure for empathy, for helping and being helped—a small but vital community.

Eventually Ted and Ursula dropped out of the church where the Deacon's Fund had been established. Prompted by listening to a set of six audio lectures by Franciscan priest Richard Rohr called *True Self / False Self*, they started a Sunday morning gathering in their home. A few friends would come over each week and listen to one of the lectures. At first



they called it “Sundays with Richard”—but eventually started calling it “Ted’s Corner Bar.” The Bar group continues to this day, as a kind of spiritual reboot, a support group, a group of seekers and friends. They have also taken on helping projects—an Iraqi and a Sudanese family, for example—and have been able to hit up the old Deacon’s Fund for financial assistance.

The Bar group found a revitalized spirituality—at least for most of us. I didn’t know anything about “servant leadership,” but as kind of the *de facto* leader, that’s certainly how I always approached the role—mom was much more the theologian than I, so my “leader” role is more one of scheduling, deciding what the agenda is and kind of keeping things on track. It is a group of strong, educated people, yet there are no heavy egos to work through. I think the concepts of interdependence and mutuality characterize the group dynamics very well. We look out for one another, and are alert to the needs of each other.

Considering Ted’s description of the Bar group (and having experienced it in person a time or two), I’m reminded of something Shann Ferch (2012) wrote in a different but related servant-leadership context: “To engage well is to evoke in others a sense of their own best potential” (p. 82). The mutuality and interdependence expressed within such a group depends on engaging well, as Ferch says, that is, being open and honest, being wide awake and willing to risk letting the true self show and the false self go.



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