



## INTERVIEW WITH LARRY C. SPEARS<sup>1</sup> — BEN LICHTENWALNER

**Ben:** Hi and welcome to ModernServantLeader.com. Today we have a real treat for you. I'm here with Larry Spears who's really one of the Godfathers of servant-leadership, if you will. Larry has written a ton of books and knows a great deal about Greenleaf's views on servant-leadership. In fact, he was the CEO and president of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership for almost two decades, and since 2008 he runs the Spears Center for Servant-Leadership. In fact, Larry, you recently received an award from the Greenleaf Centre in the United Kingdom for your contributions to servant-leadership over the years, right?

**Larry:** Yes, I did.

**Ben:** Great, and Larry I'd like to just kind of get a feel of who Larry is. Tell us a little about yourself.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an edited and enhanced version of the interview with Larry Spears by Ben Lichtenwalner. A video of the original interview may be found here: <https://www.modernservantleader.com/servant-leadership/an-interview-with-larry-spears-a-servant-leadership-legend/>



## **Larry's Background**

**Larry:** I was born in a small town in southwestern Virginia called Pennington Gap. My parents moved to Detroit when I was about six months old and so I grew up in Detroit until I was 12, on the southwest side of Detroit, and then my family moved to Indianapolis in 1967 and so I went to junior high, high school and college in Indiana. As a junior at DePauw University in Greencastle Indiana, I spent a year off-campus in Philadelphia, on an experiential learning program called the Great Lakes College Association's Philadelphia Urban Semester, and so I had an internship as part of that work with the American Friends Service Committee, and that was my introduction to Quakers and, and ultimately, to Robert Greenleaf, who was also a Quaker. After graduation, my wife and I moved out to Philadelphia and we lived there for thirteen years before moving back to Indianapolis in 1990 to head up the Greenleaf Center.

## **Discovering Servant-Leadership**

**Ben:** So, Larry, you mentioned your introduction to the Quakers and Robert Greenleaf is that when you first heard of the term servant-leadership?

**Larry:** Yes. In 1981 I was on the staff of *Friends Journal*, a Quaker magazine in Philadelphia, and articles for the journal



came to us by way of contributing authors. One day we received an article by Robert Greenleaf, and that was the first time I heard the term ‘Servant-Leader.’ I remember to this day what an impact it had on me to see and hear this term because, for me, it gave a name and language to something that I felt within myself, as to who it was that I wanted to become. I’d always felt this lack of clarity in terms of what to call it. I think when you have this feeling of wanting to serve others, you often can sometimes feel kind of lonely, too, and so I think one of the great things that Robert Greenleaf did in coining the term servant-leader was to give us some language and ideas where people who share similar hopes can find one another. I think that’s what has happened over many years. In no small measure, people are increasingly finding one another through servant-leadership and through the many organizations and associations that are working with servant-leadership today.

**Ben:** Wow! I love the way you framed that. It’s amazing to me to think of the lineage and all the things that have happened since that day. What would have happened if Robert Greenleaf hadn’t sent that article to the journal that you were working on. I mean because, ultimately, that led to your role as leading the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership down the road, right?

**Larry:** Yes, it had a role in that. Some nine years later, my wife and I learned we were expecting our second child, and that got us to thinking about family issues of being so far away from their grandparents, and our children not seeing them very



often. I felt very uncomfortable about that. I'd had a very close relationship with my own grandparents growing up, and they lived literally next door to us most of my life as a child. Beth and I began to talk about the idea of moving back to Indianapolis if I could find the right position. So, I got a subscription to *The Sunday Indianapolis Star* sent to me in Philadelphia, and the first issue I received contained a notice of a job listing by the Greenleaf Center. They were looking for a new CEO for the Center, which was then located near Boston and was planning to relocate to Indianapolis. I was familiar with Robert Greenleaf, and with servant-leadership. It had helped to inspire my own work during the intervening decade. What they were looking for was the kind of experiences and skills I had, and so I applied for the position and was hired in the beginning of 1990.

**Ben:** Wow! Wow! I never knew all that background is fantastic and I didn't know it started in the Boston area, that's interesting.

### **Defining Servant-Leadership**

**Ben:** You mentioned Larry that you've been doing this for nearly thirty years now—that you've been working in servant-leadership. Over that time, you must have heard a lot of different definitions of servant-leadership come and go. What's been your favorite, how would you define servant-leadership?



**Larry:** I use Robert Greenleaf’s definition—the belief that the servant-leader is servant first. Over the years, there are some people who have used the phrase ‘leader as servant.’ I’ve seen that inversion of the phrase in different places, but that does not get to the heart of what Robert Greenleaf was talking about. He was talking about people who have a servant’s heart—who seek first to serve others, and then feel called upon to provide leadership with-and-for others. So, it is really ‘servant as leader,’ not, ‘leader as servant.’

I also think that his best test of servant-leadership is critical—“Are people healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what’s the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” For me, the idea of the servant-first and the best test are at the core of understanding servant-leadership as Robert Greenleaf wrote about it.

**Ben:** I like it. You’re right it seems everybody has different variations or takes on that, but I think that seems to be the core, and the center of where it’s all coming from.

### **Greatest Challenge to Servant-Leadership**

**Ben:** Now I know you’ve also had the opportunity to work with a lot of CEOs and a lot of executives and different organizations that work with servant-leadership and try and implement servant-leadership in their organizations. Over the years have you come across something that is particularly



challenging about servant-leadership? What do you believe executives find to be the most difficult part of practicing servant-leadership?

**Larry:** Well, I'd like to take a step back if I can, and to say this: I think it's too easy for us to focus on the idea of executives as servant-leaders. That really doesn't get to the point of the fact that servant-leaders are found everywhere inside organizations, and in society. Anyone can be a servant-leader.

**Ben:** Yeah!

**Larry:** I think if we put too much of a focus on the role of positional leaders or executives, it can shift our understanding of servant-leadership in ways that I think is not healthy for us to go. So, having said that, when I've worked with executives or others, I think one of the key challenges is developing an understanding of the underlying definition and philosophy that Robert Greenleaf wrote about as part of servant-leadership. I also think it's sometimes tempting for folks who are genuinely excited about servant-leadership to want to immediately jump into organizational implementation, without first having done the personal work that is necessary.

**Ben:** Hmm-hmm.



**Larry:** You know, servant-leadership begins with the individual, and then once you have a critical mass of individuals within an organization, it is also then possible for organizations to act as servant-led institutions. However, you can't get to that point, realistically, without having invested considerable time in your own personal growth and development. Starting with Greenleaf, and particularly "The Servant as Leader" essay, is always the best place to begin. If you just invest some time in that, reading that, that's a big head start in getting on your way to implementing servant-leadership within organizations. Different organizations have done things like brown bag lunch discussions around "The Servant as Leader," or other writings by Greenleaf and others. I think those sorts of informal ways of understanding servant-leadership can help a lot within organizations, and then after you reach a certain level of commitment and understanding, there are consultants and trainers who have been working with servant-leadership for many years who can help you, if you so choose.

**Ben:** I love it. I just want to go back and highlight one thing, because you touched on a little bit, you said "The Servant as Leader" essay is kind of the first step you recommend right? It's one of the things you just invest time in reading, "The Servant as Leader," by Robert Greenleaf. I just wondered, it was his original essay, wasn't it?



**Larry:** Right. That essay was published in 1970, when Greenleaf coined the term, “servant-leader.” Greenleaf went on to write another dozen separately published essays plus two books during his lifetime. I might just add here that the hyphen in “servant-leader” is critical. And you know most people don’t look at that, I don’t think. But for Greenleaf, and for me, the inclusion of the hyphen in the term ‘servant-leader,’ was critical in communicating that it’s at least a dual commitment to serving and leading. And, in fact with, with servant as the first word, that’s the starting point, and then you look for opportunities to lead. So, that sometimes gets overlooked.

**Ben:** It’s absolutely true! I remember you mentioning that to me, a while ago, Larry, and I realized that in my blog—on ModernServantLeader.com, I haven’t done a good job of keeping that hyphen in there. I’m going to go back and do some editing, I think! [Laughs] But I appreciate it very much!

### **Is Servant-Leadership a Religious Concept?**

**Ben:** One of the other questions that comes up a lot to me and I’ve heard several times is, some people believe one way or the other that servant-leadership is either absolutely a religious concept or absolutely not a religious concept. What’s your take on it? Is servant-leadership religious in nature?

**Larry:** I would say servant-leadership, as defined by Robert Greenleaf, is neither religious, nor secular—but it’s congruent





with both. And so, I don't see it as being either a religious concept or a secular concept, but it has applications in many different places, and in different ways, within all faith, philosophical, and humanistic traditions. You can find examples of servant-leaders both historical and contemporary. There are many businesses and universities and other institutions that focus on a more secular understanding.

I find the idea of the word, "spirit," which is a word that Robert Greenleaf used frequently as well, is helpful as a linking term. Whether you're approaching servant-leadership from a spiritual approach, or from a secular application within a business or other kind of institution, everyone understands what spirit is, and particularly what the absence of spirit can mean when you don't find it in an organization, and so I think servant-led institutions are often described as spirited.

**Ben:** Yeah, I think always of Southwest Airlines, and it's actually probably a little different take on the spirit, but I always think of Herb Kelleher and the natural high energy that they have in the excitement and energy around that. That, to me, jumps out as spirited, but I know that was probably a little bit more of an extreme spirited.

**Larry:** I think Southwest Airlines is a good example of a servant-led institution.



## **Are There Areas Unfit for Servant-Leadership?**

**Ben:** And, speaking of Southwest Airlines, it happens to be one of the most well-known practitioners within the industry in which they work—the airline industry, which is always touted as one of the most difficult industries to make money in. Is there an industry or a functional area like that for servant-leadership, where it’s particularly difficult to practice servant-leadership, or where servant-leadership just won’t work? Have you ever come across an area like that?

**Larry:** You know, it’s my belief, and it has also been my own experience, that there is no place that servant-leadership cannot operate. Let me take a couple of slices at this. First, I think it’s important to realize that anybody can choose to practice servant-leadership, wherever they are. It does not require the approval of your manager or CEO, and servant-leadership is within us and it’s about who we want to be and how we want to try to relate to other people. We don’t need anyone’s approval to act as servant-leaders within organizations. I think it’s important to recognize that. We can start practicing servant-leadership within ourselves, and within the organizations where we work. When you get to the point that institutions begin to embrace servant-leadership, that’s great, and I haven’t found any particular areas where it’s not possible to practice servant-leadership.

One of the arenas where I’ve seen the least voicing of servant-leadership in some ways has been in the political,



governmental sphere. I've not found a lot of people in elected office, for instance, who have talked about servant-leadership. Over the years, the energy around servant-leadership has sort of focused around businesses, health care, higher education, schools, and faith-based institutions. But if there's an area where I'd like to begin to see more people talking about servant-leadership, it would be in the realm of public service.

**Ben:** And practicing it more.

**Larry:** Yes.

### **What Trends Currently Influence Servant-Leadership?**

**Ben:** Do you see any trends that are making servant-leadership easier to adopt or more popular lately . . . anything?

**Larry:** Yes. One has been the growth of servant-leadership internationally. It started out with Bob Greenleaf from the U.S., and the focus of the Greenleaf Center from 1964-1990 was really on the U.S. When I came to the Greenleaf Center in 1990, I had a particular interest in a couple of different areas—one was around the possibilities of international development around servant-leadership. Another was the idea of servant-leadership as related to education, and particularly higher education, but also community education and other kinds as well. In both of those areas, I've seen tremendous growth and development. Since 1990 there has been considerable growth



of awareness and practices of servant-leadership around the world.

In the early 1990s, the Greenleaf Center began to authorize the translation of “The Servant as Leader” essay into other languages; and, ultimately, there were 10 or 12 different language editions of that essay that were published. I also had contact with book publishers in other countries and authorized the translation of several books into other languages: Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and other languages. In 2005, my friend and colleague at Gonzaga University, Shann Ferch and I launched the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. The founding of that annual journal was intended to try to encourage awareness, and to give a place where other voices of servant-leadership from around the world could be published, and that has happened. So far, we’ve published thirteen issues since 2005.

In the arena of Education, there has been a growing number of institutions that are working with servant-leadership in a wide array of approaches. Today, there are courses that are being taught on servant-leadership. There are also courses on leadership or other subjects that include servant-leadership books as texts. Also, the whole service-learning movement was founded in 1980 by a group of experiential educators who came together and were looking at Greenleaf’s idea of servant-leadership, along with experiential learning, and who brought these two ideas together in a new hyphenated term of, “service-learning.”



**Ben:** I'm not familiar with that thinking. What is "service-learning?"

**Larry:** Well, service-learning can be found in many schools, both universities and high schools, that have service or work projects. Also, internships. Service-learning generally includes an identified learning component. Learning about the nature of serving and leading and similar ideas is part of what is intended through service-learning programs. So, in both international development and in education, I've seen a real growth around servant-leadership which I find great greatly encouraging.

**Ben:** Got it! Wonderful. I wasn't familiar with that. That's a great example.

### **How Does One Practice Servant-Leadership When It's Not Valued?**

**Ben:** Kind of switching gears a little . . . another area that I get a lot of questions about you know, a lot of people feel that they are really passionate about servant-leadership but they feel like they are trapped in an organization that is not valuing servant-leadership. What do you say to somebody like that when they're in an organization and they really want to practice servant-leadership or they want a servant-leadership based organization, but they just feel like the company or organization they work for does not value it?



**Larry:** Well, I say what Robert Greenleaf said in his writings, which is that anyone who is interested in servant-leadership genuinely can seek to practice it. Of course, you can feel lonely if you feel like you're the only person who's attempting to practice servant-leadership within any given organization, so trying to find allies within your own institution is often a good starting point. You may be surprised to discover kindred spirits among your close associates, and beyond. By the way, we often use the term "servant-leader in training" in our work at Gonzaga University, because all of us are always servant-leaders in training, whether we've been working with this concept for decades, or whether we have just been introduced to it that day. There are no perfect servant-leaders.

**Ben:** Yes!

**Larry:** You know there is always more that we can learn, we can always get better. Hopefully we do get better in our practice of servant-leadership as we move along in life and have more experiences. If you're in an organization that is a traditional hierarchical structure, there are always ways you can find people who share some of your interests. I think by just finding one or two allies you can begin to learn from one another. You can do some shared reading, or just have a conversation. Life experience, of course, is a major part of servant-leadership. Some of the best servant-leaders have never heard the term "servant-leader," or read anything about it. You don't have to have read anything about servant-leadership to be



an effective and authentic servant-leader.

I do know there are people who are also interested in working for servant-led organizations, and for me one of the great things that you've done over the years with Modern Servant Leader has been the compilation of these lists of organizations, businesses, and other kinds of institutions that have embraced servant-leadership—some of them national and international in scope, with offices in various cities around the country and around the world. One of the wonderful things you've done is to help provide a starting point where people who would like to work for a servant-led institution can begin to explore and perhaps attain that possibility for themselves.

**Ben:** Well thank you, Larry. And I did not pay Larry to put that plug in there for Modern Servant Leader. But thank you!

### **Can a Bad Boss Become a Servant-Leader?**

**Ben:** Now many of those individuals who are in an organization where they don't feel servant-leadership is valued, usually they're working for a leader or a boss who they don't feel is a servant-leader themselves. You know, they typically see somebody who they particularly feel is self-serving. Is it possible for someone who is self-serving to become a servant-leader?

**Larry:** I'm also going to take a step back on this one too. In my experience, it is far too easy for us to judge others, and to



judge positional leaders within organizations as not embracing servant-leadership. There is something within human beings that just kind of brings us to judging others. Over the years, I've come to feel like that's not a good thing for us to be doing. Those of us who aspire to servant-leadership, who try to practice and live our lives as servant-leaders in training, it's generally good for us to keep the focus on ourselves. Certainly, to start with ourselves, and to do a careful examination of who we are, how faithful are we in our own practice of servant-leadership. There is a creeping judgmentalism that is not a healthy thing, and I have seen that within servant-leadership from time-to-time, over the years.

Yes, I think it is possible for self-serving people to change over time. We see examples in life and literature of people who start out one way and end up another way. Sometimes it takes a major crisis in one's life to sort of see the light, if you will. To see that the way we've been functioning and operating is not a good way to be in relationship with other people. One thing Robert Greenleaf was clear on was that people can learn and grow to be servant-leaders over time, even those who are not natural servants can, with extensive work and commitment—grow to be effective servant-leaders. Part of the work I've done around the years with the characteristics of servant-leadership that I identified in his writings has been focused on trying to encourage people to look at ways in which they could become more effective servant-leaders and less self-focused.





## **What Advice do You Have for Developing Servant-Leadership Skills?**

**Ben:** I know that one of the ways that I came into learning about servant-leadership was through the characteristics of servant-leadership, which you extracted from Robert Greenleaf's writings and, and that's helped me grow, personally, in my career. Like you said, we're all servant-leaders in training. I don't claim to be a servant-leader myself—I try and work on it, too. What I wonder is what do you recommend to somebody who wants to grow their servant-leadership skills? How do they best go about that?

**Larry:** Well, Robert Greenleaf wrote about a number of characteristics related to servant-leadership, sprinkled throughout his writings. Then, in 1991, I began to notice certain keywords and phrases that were appearing over and over in Greenleaf's writings. And so, I eventually did a comprehensive read-through of his published work at that time, and I wrote down a list of 40 or 50 different terms, mostly characteristics of servant-leaders that he was writing about. And then I went back through and began to make little tick marks every time I saw the word or phrase in his published work. And it was through that process that I brought together these top ten characteristics of servant-leaders. These were characteristics that Greenleaf, himself, had included in his writings, but he just hadn't brought them together in any way. I did that because I was, from time to time, hearing from people



who said to me that they were they were drawn to servant-leadership, but that they found reading Robert Greenleaf's writings sometimes hard going. And it can be. You have to be committed to understanding what Robert Greenleaf is writing about.

So, I was looking for other ways that people could also enter into a personal exploration of servant-leadership and then, hopefully, once they got to a certain point, they would feel ready and prepared to go back and read or re-read what Greenleaf had written. Those ten characteristics of servant-leaders include: Listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, foresight, conceptualization, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. These aren't the only characteristics, just the ten that he mentioned most frequently in my analysis of his writings. And so, these characteristics came together that way, and with that purpose in mind. Over the last thirty years they have helped many people to develop an interest around servant-leadership and particularly to find ways in which they can grow and develop as servant-leaders. I believe that they are helpful as a means of communicating the power of servant-leadership and how one can go about personal development as a servant-leader.

The one characteristic that was clearly head-and-shoulders above the others in terms of the frequency in which Greenleaf mentioned it was, "listening." There's a lot that can be done around trying to become better listeners. One of the graduate courses I teach at Gonzaga University is focused on listening



(Listen-Discern-Decide), which is grounded in Robert Greenleaf's writings. I believe if we seek to understand and practice listening, persuasion, healing and the other characteristics that Robert Greenleaf wrote about, it helps us to become more effective and authentic servant-leaders over time.

### **What is the Difference Between Management and Leadership?**

**Ben:** The other big question we get a lot is, you know, it's not just in servant-leadership but really in all circles around leadership development, leadership training, is the big question of the difference between leadership and management. How do you define the difference between the two?

**Larry:** Well, I have to say I am sort of a one-trick pony. I've always had a single focus on servant-leadership and have had little interest, frankly, around other approaches to leadership, leadership theories, and management. Over the past thirty years I have tried to serve as a continuing voice in the world for Robert Greenleaf's ideas.

In general, I think that leadership is about people, and management is about systems and other things. Servant-leadership is about relationships between people. I think it's a philosophy of life. But it really is something that finds its greatest effect in serving others and then looking for ways to lead.



## Tell Us About Your Work at Gonzaga

**Ben:** One of your many servant-leadership advocacy hats that you wear is, is with Gonzaga University, right? I believe it's as Servant-Leadership Scholar? Give us a little about that and the work you do at Gonzaga University?

**Larry:** Sure. Sometime in the 1990s, I came into contact with several faculty members at Gonzaga University who had been coming to Greenleaf Center conferences. One of them was Shann Ferch, and the other was Michael Carey. Over the next few years, we became acquaintances, and then friends. I published an essay by Shann in the "Voices of Servant-Leadership" essay series that I had edited during the years in which I headed up the Greenleaf Center. Eventually, I asked both Shann and Mike to facilitate the Leadership Institute for Education, one of the programs that we operated in those years as well. Then, at some point I was asked if I might like to do something with Gonzaga and I said I'd be very interested in that possibility.

The starting point was the founding of the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership* in 2005. It was an idea which I had tried to get off the ground on two separate occasions in the 1990s, but had lacked funding. Then, in 2005, and independent from my earlier unsuccessful effort, Shann Ferch approached me and asked if I would be interested in working with him on the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, serving as



Senior Advisory Editor and I said, “I’d love that.” To my surprise and delight, Shann also said that he already had the funding lined up. I was just sort of agog with the fact that he already had that taken care of, and his vision of what the journal could be was so clear. And so, I jumped at the chance. *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership* is a joint publication of Gonzaga University and The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership.

Later, I was invited to come out and speak with undergraduate and graduate students at Gonzaga. Then, in 2008 I was asked to serve as an adjunct faculty member, and to teach graduate classes in servant-leadership, and in listening. And in 2010, the servant-leadership scholar position was created. In the past decade I have taught over 70 graduate courses for over 1,500 Gonzaga University grad students.

**Ben:** Wow!

**Larry:** I mostly teach online graduate courses in servant-leadership for the Masters in Organizational Leadership program, and some for the Doctoral program of Leadership Studies. I also go out to Spokane once or twice a year and teach intensive classes and give some talks and meet with anybody who is interested in servant-leadership. I’ve discovered that I really enjoy teaching—something that I had never had much experience with prior to 2008, but I really feel like, particularly in the online environment, it taps into my writerly instincts and allows me the time to craft thoughtful responses to questions,



to post announcements that go into some detail about different aspects of servant-leadership. And teaching has become one of the great joys of my life.

**Ben:** Wonderful! I know their students are very fortunate to learn from you. That's fantastic!

### **Review of Larry's Books**

**Ben:** You mentioned about your writerly instincts. You know there's nobody I know who's gotten more written words out there about servant-leadership. How many books is it that you've written, edited, and published at this point?

**Larry:** Well I've curated and edited fifteen books on servant-leadership since 1995—some edited by myself, and others with various colleagues. I have also contributed chapters to all of these books, and to an additional seventeen books edited by others. Altogether, I've had chapters on servant-leadership in about three dozen books.

**Ben:** And you have some of them here today. Why don't you just take us through each of the books and tell us a little about what each one focuses on?

**Larry:** Okay I'd be happy to do that. Part of my personal practice of servant-leadership over the years that I think has really found some of its best expression is through the



collaborative work that I've done with hundreds of writers, contributing authors, and co-editors of volumes. In many ways, I have felt best about my own work as a servant-leader in training through the work that I've done on books, journals, and other publications. And, also as a teacher.

Just some brief comments on the books. They fall into three broad categories: One is a collection of five books of Robert Greenleaf's writings which I put together and then edited and had published. I created these books to ensure that Greenleaf's original writings on servant-leadership continued to remain available to the reading public.

The second category of books is a group of six servant-leadership anthologies that I've done over the past thirty years, which have been collections of anywhere from fifteen to thirty chapters by a wide-range of contributing authors looking at servant-leadership from various perspectives. Part of the work with that has involved wanting to make sure that the idea of servant-leadership gets fleshed out and expanded upon by many people who also have important ideas about the understanding and practice of servant-leadership.

The third category has been a collection of four other books that I've done in more recent years, plus the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*.

The first two collections of Greenleaf's original writings came about after Robert Greenleaf's death in 1990. A few months after Bob Greenleaf died, his family sent me three or four boxes of papers that he had kept in his files. I remember sitting down and opening these boxes and looking through



them. Very quickly, I began to see that the first few pieces of writings were not familiar to me. These were mostly typed, manuscript articles that Robert Greenleaf had written. As I went through the first box, and then into a second box, I kept finding more of these unfamiliar writings. Soon there were dozens of them that I had stacked on the floor. In the end, there were nearly a hundred pieces of unpublished writings that I pulled out of Robert Greenleaf's personal papers. Virtually no one was aware that Greenleaf had been writing these pieces over a period of fifty years, mostly done as a means of his own personal understanding of ideas and themes. These writings were anywhere from two pages, to nearly a book-length manuscript of about a hundred pages. Greenleaf wrote as a means of understanding an idea, which is how he learned best, and when he was done, he filed it away. He probably did not have any intention of publishing most of these writings. I got excited because here were so many new ideas and thinking by Robert Greenleaf that had been unearthed.

And so, I wrote a grant proposal and we received some money from Lilly Endowment. We put together a kind of blue-ribbon panel which read through the hundred different pieces of writing. Ultimately, we published two books of writings by Greenleaf in 1996. One we titled, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader* (Jossey-Bass, 1996), which is a collection of his writings on organizations and leadership practices, which I did with Don Frick. Peter Drucker wrote a foreword to that book. Then the second book was *Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 1996), which Anne Fraker





and I co-edited, and Parker Palmer wrote a wonderful foreword for that book. That one a collection of his writing on spirituality and faith-related issues. So, two new books emerged in 1996 from this discovery of Greenleaf's unknown writings.

In 1998, I put together a series of essays that had been published by the Greenleaf Center but had never been collected into a book, and it became, in many ways, a sequel to Greenleaf's original 1977 book, *Servant Leadership*. This book was called, *The Power of Servant-Leadership* (Berrett-Koehler, 1998), and it had a foreword written by Peter Vaill, and an afterword by James Shannon. It collected together many of his later essays and is kind of a companion volume to *Servant Leadership*.

In 2002, I put together a 25th anniversary edition of Greenleaf's best-known book, *Servant Leadership* (Paulist Press, 2002), first published in 1977. I invited Stephen Covey to write a foreword, and Peter Senge to write an afterword, and each of them did a fantastic job in what they had to share about servant-leadership.

In 2003, I put together a book of Greenleaf's writings which contained, *Teacher as Servant*, which had been out-of-print since 1979; plus the original, "Servant as Leader" essay from 1970, which Greenleaf had revised by about 50% in 1973, and which he had originally addressed to an audience of higher education students, and faculty administrators. Interestingly, in the original 1970 edition he quoted a recent graduate from 1969 named Hillary Rodham, who is better-known today as



Hillary Rodham Clinton, and so she has a paragraph or two in the original 1970 edition of the essay that Robert Greenleaf wrote. That book was titled *The Servant-Leader Within* (Paulist Press, 2003), and it is about servant-leadership as it relates to education. I worked on this one with my colleagues Hamilton Beazley and Julie Beggs.

So, those are the five books that are available by Robert Greenleaf, today. And, all of them were published some years after his death. I have said before that this is proof positive that you don't have to be alive in order to have new works published. You just need somebody who's interested in your work and willing to put it together. [Laughter] So that's the first batch of books—those five containing the original writings of Bob Greenleaf, and with significant supplemental content in the form of Forewords and Afterwords.

The second batch of books have been the anthologies of servant-leadership writings. I originally envisioned, and have continued to see this play out year after year, that there was a real interest in knowing what other people had to say about servant-leadership on a wide range of topics; and, that the best way to do that was through collecting together a series of essays and articles by a wide range of folks. So, in 1995, I created and edited the first book to be published, *Reflections on Leadership* (John Wiley & Sons, 1995). Scott Peck and Peter Senge contributed essays to that one, along with two dozen other authors, and Max DePree wrote the foreword. That book sold well, and so I was asked to prepare a follow-up volume, which I did.



Three years later, in 1998, I produced a second anthology titled, *Insights on Leadership* (John Wiley & Sons, 1998). Stephen Covey wrote a foreword to that one, and it had some incredibly wonderful content. The subtitle of that book was, “Service, Stewardship, Spirit and Servant-Leadership”, and I think those four words and phrases really appealed to people. *Insights on Leadership* has been the number one-seller among the six servant-leadership anthologies that I’ve put together.

*Focus on Leadership* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), was published in 2002 and that book, I did with Michele Lawrence. It has a foreword by Ken Blanchard and great essays by Stephen Covey, Margaret Wheatley, John Bogle and many others. Those first three volumes had distinctively colored covers and were a kind of trio of books. Over the years, both I and others have sometimes referred to them by their color covers. *Reflections* is blue; *Insights* is purple; and, *Focus* is green!

*Practicing Servant-Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) was next, and it’s a collection of essays, many of which had first appeared as separately published essays in the essay series that I edited during the 1990s and early 2000s called *The Voices of Servant-Leadership* essay series. Michelle Lawrence also served as co-editor on that book. It’s a great source of thought on servant-leadership.

Seven years later, in 2011, Shann Ferch and I produced *The Spirit of Servant-Leadership* (Paulist Press, 2011), which included a foreword by Peter Block. It contains some amazing chapters, including “Cesar Chavez: Servant-Leadership in



Action,” by Maria D. Ortiz; and, “Learning Servant-Leadership from Native America,” by Lane Baldwin.

And most recently, *Conversations on Servant-Leadership* (SUNY Press, 2015) was published. It’s a series of interviews that I and others have conducted over the years with folks that include Jim Autry, Margaret Wheatley, Parker Palmer, George Zimmer, Ken Blanchard, Frances Hesselbein, and many others on servant-leadership. This one was done in collaboration with Shann Ferch, Mike Carey, and Mary McFarland. So, those are the six servant-leadership anthologies done to-date.

The third category of books that I’ve worked on has been a series of four books. The first one was published in 2008, and is called, *Scanlon EPIC Leadership* (Scanlon Leadership Foundation, 2008). EPIC stands for Equity, Participation, Identity and Competence. My friend, the late-Warren Bennis wrote a foreword to this book, and Max DePree wrote a wonderful afterword for it. Scanlon relates to Joe Scanlon, who coined that work and the Scanlon Plan, as it ultimately came to be called, which many companies practiced for decades. Paul Davis and I created that book—the first-and-only Scanlon anthology. Servant-leadership is also frequently mentioned in that book.

In 2009, Paul Davis, with whom I co-edited the *Scanlon EPIC Leadership* book, approached me and told me that he had rescued from the dumpster at the last moment the papers of a man named John Donnelly, which were about to be thrown out. Somebody who worked in the company and who had found out about this was horrified and thought that Paul was the person to



call because he would understand what was happening and might be able to do something. Paul got in his truck and he raced over to the company and rescued John Donnelly's papers. Donnelly had been the CEO of Magna Donnelly company in Michigan. He had an early death in 1985, and so the company was finally disposing of his personal papers after twenty years. Paul thought there might be something in these papers of possible significance, and he asked me if I would work with him in examining these archival papers. Together, we went through these rescued boxes, in many ways similar to the process that I had done with Robert Greenleaf's papers years earlier. Sure enough, we soon discovered a whole lot of writings that Joe Donnelly had written on leading, serving and caring for others. We decided to call the book, *The Human Treatment of Human Beings* (Scanlon Leadership Foundation, 2009). John Donnelly is not well-known as a writer, but anybody interested in learning more about this business executive's thinking around issues involving community and servant-leadership would do well to explore that book.

My friend and colleague, George SanFacon and I had a dear mentor, Bill Bottum, who was CEO of the Townsend and Bottum family of companies for many years, and who served on the Greenleaf Center board in the 1980s and 90s. Bill was really the person who brought George and I together, and which resulted in our developing both a friendship and collegueship around a number of publications. Bill Bottum, who died in 2005 on Valentine's Day, had published three pieces of writing that were known to us, but neither of us were



really aware of anything else that he had written. Unlike any other publication that I've ever done, in this instance I had a series of odd dreams that proved to be the real impetus for this book coming into being. In the first dream, I was in Bill's basement and was looking for something, but I didn't know what I was trying to find. Then, a few days later, I had a similar dream in which I was once again in Bill's basement and I now realized that I was looking for writings by Bill.

Now, I've never had that experience, before or since, but in this case, you know, I puzzled over what it meant. I frankly tried to ignore these dreams for six months. I ignored these dreams but they kept nagging at me, and I would return repeatedly to thinking about it. One day, I called Bill's daughter, who was living in his home after Bill's death, and I asked her if she knew of any other writings that Bill had done, besides the three that we were aware of? She said no, she wasn't, but that he had tons of file cabinets and boxes down in the basement and she didn't really know what was in there. I told her about the dreams I had had, and I asked whether she'd be willing to have me come up and maybe spend a weekend down in the basement, going through Bill's files. I talked with my friend George SanFacon, and we agreed that we would go over to his home together and spend a weekend going through the basement. Again, you know, I should not have been as surprised as I was, given my previous experiences with the papers of Bob Greenleaf, and with John Donnelly; but, sure enough, we began to unearth from file cabinets and boxes all of these unknown writings that Bill had done.



There was ultimately about 1,100 manuscript pages of talks, essays, reflections and many other things that Bill had written over a half-century. And so, we determined, in consultation with his family and friends, that we would try to put together a book of Bill Bottum's writings as a testament to his commitment to servant-leadership and related ideas. In particular, Bill had a lifelong commitment to raising awareness and practice of the Beatitudes in the workplace. So, this book was titled, *Within Your Reach: The Beatitudes in Business and Everyday Life* (Lulu Publishing, 2010), and it is a rich collection of writings on the Beatitudes, servant-leadership, and related themes, written by our friend and mentor, Bill Bottum. George SanFacon, Dorothy Lenz, and I worked together on collecting and editing that one.

The last book in this third catch-all category is, *Fortuitous Encounters* (Paulist Press, 2013), which grew out of the initial work and thinking that DJ DePree of Herman Miller company had, around the notion of fortuitous encounters. Once again, my friend Paul Davis, and I collaborated in gathering together a series of brief stories—true stories, by people in which they shared their experiences around fortuitous encounters in their own lives. I'm very pleased with the stories that are in that book. Nearly all of the chapters have servant-leadership woven within them as well, and so this is an interesting volume called *Fortuitous Encounters: Wisdom stories for learning and growth*.

Altogether, these comprise fifteen books, created and published since 1990, which was also the year of my one-and-



only visit with Robert Greenleaf. It is no understatement when I say that my time spent with Bob Greenleaf, and my thirty years of reading and re-reading his published and unpublished work, private papers, dream journals, and so much more have touched me deeply.

A fourth category of publications has been the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, which was started in 2005. Shann Ferch is the editor of the journal. I serve as a senior advisory editor, and together we have created thirteen volumes to-date. Part of our thinking in starting it was to encourage international understanding and practices of servant-leadership, to bring in voices that were not being heard from outside North America around servant-leadership. It's a refereed journal, so there's a blind-jury process used to read through manuscripts and then make selections. *IJSL* has been a particularly effective means of spreading servant-leadership ideas and themes throughout higher education, in particular.

In recent years I have found great joy in collaborating with a series of co-writers in writing of numerous essays, articles, and papers. My work on all of the books and journals has been highly collaborative. The editing side of my work has found me working with several hundred authors over the years. For decades, when it came to writing, I simply wrote essays, articles, etc. on my own. However, beginning in 2008, I started to work with folks like George SanFacon, Richard Leider, Paul Davis, Ralph Lewis and others on collaborative writings related to servant-leadership, and looking at it from very different perspectives. So, for anybody who's interested, you can go to





the Spears Center website: [www.SpearsCenter.org](http://www.SpearsCenter.org) and find many of these essays. Together with my co-authors, I've written on many different themes, including the understanding and practice of servant-leadership; servant-leadership characteristics; a series of three or four pieces with Richard Leider which we've done looking at seekers and servant-leadership; philanthropy and servant-leadership. Ralph Lewis, Beth Lafferty, and I collaborated on a piece on Myers-Briggs and servant-leadership; and there are others, too. Recently, a colleague of mine at Gonzaga, Joe Albert, and I collaborated on a piece on Bruce Springsteen as a servant-leader, examining his music and lyrics as well as the way in which Springsteen has collaborated with his band mates. Anybody who's a fan of Bruce Springsteen, as I am, might find that piece to be of particular interest. Josh Armstrong, another GU colleague, and I have written an interesting essay titled, "The Accompanying Servant-Leader." There are other collaboratively written essays that you can find there, too.

The books, the journals, and the essays that I've written and edited around servant-leadership have really been such a major focus of my work and has brought great joy to me. More importantly, I think it has also helped to spread the good news of servant-leadership around the world.

### **Dateline Piece on Servant-Leadership**

**Ben:** Thank you for walking us through that Larry. Now, in addition to the books, I know that you've also gotten some



other press, like when you were at the Greenleaf Center some years back, there was that really big television segment by NBC Dateline. How did that impact servant-leadership? That was probably the biggest single audience that servant-leadership has had.

**Larry:** Well I think certainly with helping to expand the servant-leadership movement, it was a pretty big deal. Of course, there's not a lot that can be done or even learned in a seven-minute segment. But you know, back in 2004, I was contacted by the producers of NBC Dateline and asked to come out to New York City, where they taped an interview with me by Stone Phillips who conducted the interview; and, I provided them with contacts to a number of other folks, including John Bogle of Vanguard Mutual Funds, whom they interviewed. It was a very intensive three-day experience. The program aired on a Friday night and was seen by ten million people. So, it was kind of a big thing, insofar as ten million people were introduced to the concept of servant-leadership in a seven-minute video segment.

Interestingly, at the time, it had a big impact on the Greenleaf Center. We were inundated for a couple months after that with lots of inquiries of people who wanted to order books, or to find out more about the Center, and we gained a number of new members as a result of that. We also had more people at our conferences for several years that followed that airing. I admired the fact that NBC Dateline, and in particular Stone Phillips, had enough interest to want to do a segment on



servant-leadership. He was the driving force that helped to make that happen, and I am eternally grateful for his personal interest in servant-leadership.

**Ben:** Absolutely, and again, for those watching, I'll put a link in the below, to the footage from NBC Dateline so you can see it there: <http://spearscenter.org/about-larry/interviews/dateline?id=65>. Yeah, well thank you Larry. Is there anything else that I haven't asked you today, that you'd like to talk to the subscribers and readers of Modern Servant Leader about?

### **Council of Equals**

**Larry:** Well, I would simply like to say that one of the growing edges for me around servant-leadership and my own exploration, particularly in recent years, has been my work with George SanFacon. We've collaborated on several different publications and presentations having to do with servant-leadership and the Council of Equals idea. For thirty years George has had a deep commitment to the idea of the "Council of Equals," and I know you'll be interviewing him for another segment in your series. Through my friendship with George, I've come to understand more clearly what Robert Greenleaf meant when he focused upon "primus inter pares" or the "first among equals" concept as a pivotal way in which organizations can practice servant-leadership. So, I guess, if I had a closing statement it would be just to invite viewers to read what Robert Greenleaf had to say about the Council of



Equals, particularly in the “Institution as Servant” essay, and to read George SanFacon’s own book on *The Council of Equals*, which you can find here: <https://www.georgesanfacon.com/publications>. Then, if you’ve developed sufficiently around servant-leadership within an organization, look carefully at the Council of Equals model as one which might speak to you.

**Ben:** I like it. Thank you. And, and yes, if the video is not out there, soon there will be an interview with George SanFacon as well, on the Council of Equals, so thank you!

**Larry:** Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

### **How Do People Contact Larry?**

**Ben:** Larry if there’s anybody who wants to follow up with you or learn more about your work at Gonzaga University and the Spears Center, how do they find you?

**Larry:** Well. I’m on the internet at [www.spearscenter.org](http://www.spearscenter.org). There’s a website there with lots of free articles and essays that you can download and other information on servant-leadership as well. I can also be reached by email at [spears@gonzaga.edu](mailto:spears@gonzaga.edu), and at [lspears@spearscenter.org](mailto:lspears@spearscenter.org).

**Ben:** Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for your time today, Larry. It’s really an honor and a pleasure. We appreciate you taking the time for Modern Servant Leader.



**Larry:** Thank You, Ben. And thank you for the work that you do. I really appreciate it.

**Ben:** Thank you. Until next time, keep serving.

---

Larry C. Spears is Servant-Leadership Scholar and Adjunct Faculty for Gonzaga University's School of Leadership Studies (Spokane); and, President & CEO of The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership (Indianapolis). He is editor-author of fifteen books on servant-leadership and contributing author to seventeen books edited by others; and, he serves as Senior Advisory Editor of the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*.

Ben Lichtenwalner is founder and author of the top servant-leadership blog, according to Blog Rank, ModernServantLeader.com. His passion is expanding servant-leadership awareness and adoption. Most of his work focuses on public speaking, blogging, authoring books, while helping organizations fix and avoid bad bosses. Ben has a bachelor's degree from Penn State University and an MBA from Lehigh University. When not advancing servant-leadership principles, he enjoys wrestling his 3 young boys and wrecking mountain bikes.