



INTERRUPTIVE SYMBOLOGY

Servant-Leadership from Micro-Observation to Macro-Movement

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In the summer of 2020, against a backdrop of a global pandemic, a U.S. presidential election and the zenith of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, a hermeneutic phenomenological research study was conducted to establish the legitimacy and help define the theory of *interruptive symbology*. Despite the civil unrest in America, this was a serendipitous time for this type of research, as the mainstream and social media was rife with disruptive images.

The initial imagery of George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the hands of a White police officer in summer of 2020, served as a widespread disruptive symbol, influencing action in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The image of the White officer with his knee on the neck of a Black citizen proved to be an interruptive symbol that would influence many Americans to take action in ways such as widespread multi-racial protests, ongoing social unrest, increasing political divisiveness and violence in the streets (Silver et al., 2020, n.p.). In time “knee on the neck” became a common phrase in traditional, mainstream and social media to represent historical and widespread tyranny against Black citizens. This symbol continued to disrupt daily habitualizations of everyday Americans throughout the summer and beyond, communicating and illustrating racial oppression, and influencing the observers to seek



communities of practice and take action. Despite the horrific nature of the original image (see Figure 1), the result was an upward spiral of efforts toward the betterment of humanity. These efforts, I believe, had their roots in several of the key characteristics of servant-leadership.

Figure 1

George Floyd's Death



Note: May 25, 2020, file frame from video provided by Darnella Frazier, a Minneapolis officer kneels on the neck of George Floyd, a handcuffed man who was pleading that he could not breathe, in Minneapolis. (Darnella Frazier via AP, File). (Pane, 2020, n.p.)



While this image may be potentially traumatizing to a person of color reading this article, it was not this author's intent to cause emotional harm. However, it is important to note that a strong reaction to this image may be an example of a symbol which is "interruptive". Trauma origins of most interruptive symbols will be discussed later in this study, but at this point, a case should be made for trauma witness rather than erasure.

Interruptive symbols are often uncomfortable to the viewer. Historian Gorn (2020) wrote on the case of Emmett Till, a black man beaten to death in 1955, and whose mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, chose an open casket after viewing the brutalized body of her son. A staff photographer from *Jet* magazine was permitted to photograph Till's body, and those images were disseminated to other African-American magazines and newspapers. The mainstream press didn't reprint those photographs, and of course, they were too graphic for television:

Years later, many white Americans remembered — falsely remembered — the epiphany of Till's ruined face in 1955. [But] few white people saw the photos until thirty years later when the documentary *Eyes on the Prize* opened with the Emmett Till story. Only then did [his mother's] words, "Let the people see what they did to my boy" begin to be fully realized. (Gorn, 2020, p. 62)

The Till case is a vivid reminder of just how easy it is for people not to see things they would rather not see. This example reinforces the importance of interruptive symbols. Imagery needs to be experienced in order to disrupt daily habituations.

In my research, interruptive symbology is defined as:

The phenomenon by which an individual is influenced by an



image or symbol, and as a result of the observation, engages in sense and meaning-making of the symbol, comes to an epiphany, and chooses to intentionally act for the betterment of humanity. (Rorholm, 2021, p. 227)

The symbol acts as an interruption to our present circumstances and has the potential to be radically transformative. Many of the research participants described their transformation and subsequent action in terms of characteristics of servant-leadership, even if they were not aware of this particular leadership theory. As a student of servant-leadership, I recognized servant-leadership characteristics in the interview transcriptions, voiced in the participants' own language, and in their self-described personal agencies. Many times, their intentional action, which had occurred as a direct result of observing and being influenced by an interruptive symbol, took the form of servant-leadership characteristics such as awareness, empathy, and community-building.

I used intentional selective sampling to find 18 leaders who described their experiences in semi-structured interviews, tracing the genesis of their leadership work back to an interruptive symbol. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to find the essence of interruptive symbology as a phenomenon that leads to action.

Wondering gives energy and strengthens curiosity, propelling the willingness to investigate (Heinonen, 2015, p. 2). Among the traditions of qualitative inquiry is found hermeneutic phenomenology, an approach that deals with the exploration and interpretation of "texts" and is, therefore a logical research approach for this study. After completing transcriptions of my conversations with the research participants, I used hermeneutics to carefully scrutinize these transcribed "texts" looking for themes among the



participants' personal experiences. A phenomenological approach is taken when all participants have shared a common experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007) and when the researcher is seeking questions about meaning (Richards & Morse, 2007). When designing a study in the social sciences, it is important to ensure that the correct method for study has been selected in order to ensure the most accurate representation possible of what is occurring. According to Holloway (2005), hermeneutic phenomenology is the science of the interpretation of texts, in which the written or spoken form of language is examined to uncover meaning and phenomena. In essence it is "a form of phenomenology in which research is oriented toward interpreting the 'texts' of life (hermeneutical) and lived experiences (phenomenology)" (Creswell, 2007, p. 235).

The primary research question for this study is as follows: What is the essence of interruptive symbology, and how does it work in influencing observers to act as servant-leaders? This study is about gathering data on real-life human experiences of interaction with symbols to explore the essence of interruptive symbology. It is research that examines how the symbol observer makes sense, makes meaning, and ultimately perhaps chooses to act in the best interest of humanity using some of the key characteristics of servant-leadership.

INTERRUPTIVE SYMBOLS

In her thesis, Kelly Weingart (2011) referenced two important constructs, dangerous memories and interruptive symbols. Interruptive symbols evoke dangerous memories which, she argues, stop us cold in our tracks and make us aware of a reality that we often choose to ignore. Usually, this means an astonishing realization will take place that creates the opportunity for improvement (Weingart, 2011). German Political Theologian Johann Baptist Metz (2007) describes dangerous memories as those that challenge us to



examine human history, to re-evaluate our present circumstances, and that call into question our future:

These are dangerous memories in which earlier experiences flare up and unleash new dangerous insights for the present. For brief moments they illuminate, harshly and piercingly, the problematic character of things we made our peace with a long time ago

...Memories of this sort are dangerous and incalculable visitations from the past. They are memories that one has to take into account, memories that have a future content, so to speak. (Metz, 2007, p. 31)

This acknowledgement of the memory of suffering dares us to wrestle with the redemption of history and dangerous memories of society, which many consider conceived in violence (Copeland, 2004, p. 75). Copeland's (2004) premise is that attempts to evade dangerous memories are passive and block the resolute work of authentic peace. This past must call into question the present and may create the possibility for collective change for tolerance in the future.

Symbols have the potential to nurture solidarity and action against suffering in the present. They may also give hope to anyone working to achieve true social justice whereby all humans are given the opportunity to flourish. In addition, these symbols can "serve as the ground for criticism of the status quo and [are] the impetus to transformation" (Metz, 2007, p. 35). To conquer suffering, dangerous memories must be accurately preserved and acted upon collectively and mobilized in a practical and political way. Standing in solidarity with the voiceless and the marginalized may be the call to action of the interruptive symbol (Weingart, 2011).

Interruptive symbols should evoke a conversion of the heart as well as a concrete, practical conversion with the living, calling for



the disruption of every attempt to disregard the history of human suffering, or to deface the suffering of human subjects (Copeland, 2004, p. 75). Interruptive symbology is a tool in influencing servant-leader action towards the betterment of humanity.

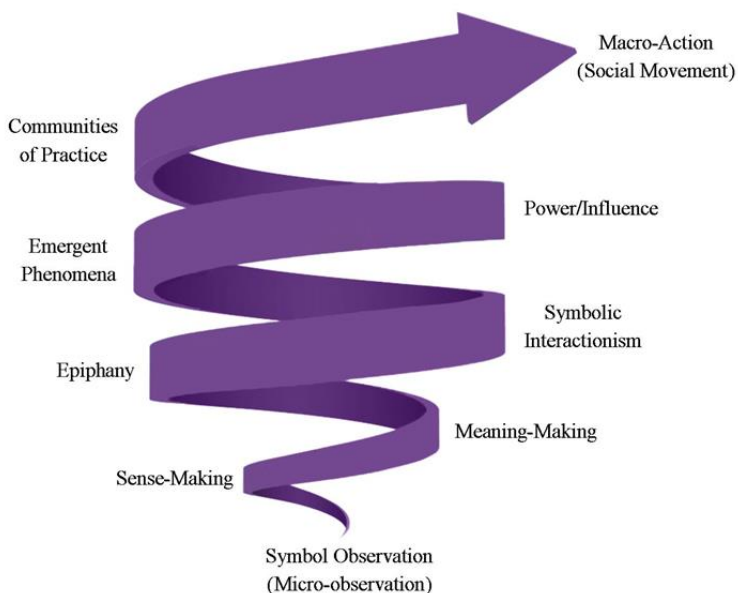
THE PROCESS OF INTERRUPTIVE SYMBOLOGY

How we learn is critical to making meaning of these symbols. In my 2020 research on interruptive symbology, I proposed a continuum through which a symbol observer may pass, from observation to joining a movement (See Figure 2). This includes sense-making, meaning-making, epiphany, power and influence of the symbol/image, seeking a community of practice and finally, deliberate action or social movement.



Figure 2

Proposed Interruptive Symbol observer continuum, from micro-interruption to macro-movement



Note: (Rorholm, 2021, p. 15)

Sense-making is the process of placing stimuli into some kind of framework. When stimuli are put into frameworks, this enables them to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate and predict. Extracted cues from one's environment provide points of reference for linking ideas to broader networks of meaning and are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring (Weick, 1995, p. 50). It involves understanding the message of the interruptive image. Sense-making is coupled together with the concept of transformation. Transformation occurs when one is able to step



back and reflect on something and make decisions about it (Berger, 2005).

Meaning is constructed when targets link received cues (such as observing George Floyd's death for example) with cognitive structures (such as civil rights, Black Lives Matter, or a vast spectrum in between or outside those movements). According to Weick (2001), definitions of meaning should vary from one group to another, and that different groups can define the same situation in different ways. Thus, interruptive symbols do not have the same meaning for different people in different periods of time and in different parts of the world. The symbolic environment from which definitions arise is a shared environment, and the outlook can be a shared outlook of collective memory.

Once an observer has made sense and personal meaning from a symbol or image, they may experience epiphany. Epiphany is an enlightening realization that allows a problem or situation to be understood from a new and deeper perspective (McDonald, 2008, p. 89). Observers of an interruptive symbol may have an experience which ruptures routines and daily habitualizations and provokes radical redefinitions of the self. In moments of epiphany, people can redefine themselves.

Power is the potential to affect outcomes (French & Raven, 1959, p. 259). It is the capacity of a symbol or image to influence the actions, beliefs, or conduct (behavior) of observers. However, it is only the ability to influence, and it exists solely through the perception of the symbol observer, who must ultimately acquiesce, or not, to the disruptive symbol. Influences are the ways in which individuals change their behavior to meet the demands of a social environment (Kelman, 1958, p. 51). In this case, it is a force exerted by the interruptive symbol over individual observers which may



structure the activities, mindset and relationships in a group or organization.

Finally, communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 1). While interruptive symbol observations may be a personal, isolated experience for the observer, finding other people who are equally disrupted by the same imagery, and who collectively act on those disruptions, may influence the lone symbol observer to join a community of practice and participate in their group activities. Through communities of practice, micro-observations may become macro-action, or even larger movements.

Micro-observation seems to be a solitary experience of social life at the intimate level of individuals and their interactions with their environments, including interruptive symbols. Individual observations unfold on local levels in real historical time. However, macro-movements are more large aggregate entities of society, whole societies, or even the interactions between whole societies working toward the betterment of humanity. Depending on the emergent phenomenon of the interruptive image, individual symbol observations can be transformed into efforts which may unfold on a global scale.

Interruptive symbols can be anything, such as an image, art piece, song, poem, or the like (Rorholm, 2021, p. 227). Interruption can occur anywhere in the physical or virtual world, and interruption can occur at anytime of life (Rorholm, 2021, p. 227). Furthermore, the period of time between interruption and taking action can vary greatly among observers, sometimes occurring years after the observation. Though the “action” may occur along a continuum, from something as small and personal as self-education regarding the symbol, to joining a community of practice whose mission is aligned



with the meaning of the interruptive symbol, the infinite possibility for a micro-observation to become a macro-movement is always inherently contained in the symbol. From my research, many times this “action” took on the key characteristics of servant-leadership.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Robert Greenleaf’s (1977) original definition and test of servant-leadership reads:

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (p. 35)

Later, Greenleaf scholar Larry Spears published his 10 characteristics of the servant-leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2010, pp. 5-8). It is these emerging characteristics that I sought in the data set from interruptive symbol observer-participants.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Though there are 10 characteristics of servant-leadership according to Spears (2010), three of those occurred most frequently in my research: awareness, empathy and community-building (Rorholm, 2021, p. 297). In this section, I examine how micro-observations can manifest these characteristics of servant-leadership, using examples from the hermeneutic interviews to support this argument.

Awareness



There must be a heightened awareness by the symbol observer to be disrupted in the first place, otherwise sense or meaning-making, epiphany, membership in communities of practice and even action will not result from the observation. Thus, servant-leaders with the characteristic of *awareness* are particularly susceptible to interruption. The daily habitualizations of those most aware and in tune with their surroundings, seem to be the most likely to be disrupted by symbolic imagery.

Habit and purpose give situational experience sustained direction, and habit implies an internal organization of activity that projects itself on further organization (Shusterman, 2010, p. 34). Disruption breaks this habit. The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response, not to particular acts. Berger and Luckman (1966) in their treatise on the social construction of reality put it this way:

Habitualized actions retain their meaningful character for individuals, although the meanings involved become embedded routines, and the general stock of knowledge is taken for granted. Habitualization carries with it the psychological outcome that choices to act are narrowed. (p. 53)

The background of habitualization is not conducive to opening up a foreground for deliberation and innovation in action. Symbolic processes, like interruptive symbology, are processes of signification that refer to realities other than those of everyday experience (or current experience) and make a call to action for the betterment of humanity.

According to Spears (1998), general awareness, especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader (p. 4). He went on to say that this awareness aids in understanding issues involving ethics and values, and that it lends itself to being able to view most situations



[or symbols] from a more integrated position (Spears, 1998, p. 4). Indeed, Robert Greenleaf himself addressed the susceptibility to interruption in conjunction with awareness, saying, “Awareness is...a disturber and awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 20).

Parker Palmer (1998) addressed the shadow side of awareness in servant-leadership, noting:

People rise to leadership in our society by a tendency towards extroversion, which too often means ignoring what is going on inside themselves. Leaders rise to power by operating very competently and effectively in the external world, sometimes at the cost of internal awareness. (p. 200)

It is the self-awareness and general awareness that allows servant-leaders to be cognizant of interruptive symbology in their environments, fostering a situation whereby a micro-observation can become action and/or a macro-movement.

Elizabeth Jeffries (1998), a registered nurse and author, also addresses awareness in terms of intuition, tying the concept to Greenleaf’s belief that servant-leadership begins with the “feeling that one wants to serve”. She suggested, “Our challenge is to be so consciously connected to our spiritual self that we can discern when something is right for us” (Jeffries, 1998, p. 34). Though she penned these thoughts years before my study on interruptive symbology, she was already in tune with the idea of symbols influencing observers to action as servant-leaders, when she noted, “The answer to how and where we serve is clear, if we but ask, listen and take action in faith. That is what servant leaders do” (Jeffries, 1998, p. 37).

Maren and Jamie Showkeir (2011) characterized the intentional servant-leader awareness as, “I want to be attentive to my surroundings, my actions, and the effect of my behavior on others. I



want to solicit and be open to feedback” (p.162). This again demonstrates that connection from awareness to action, but in the case of interruptive symbology, I would add that rather than simply being “open to feedback,” the servant-leader is also susceptible to powerful imagery.

To qualify as servant-leaders, Zohar (2002) suggested that some essential qualities of awareness must be present in the symbol observer. Among these:

They must have a deep sense of the interconnectedness of life and all its enterprises. They must have sense of engagement and responsibility, a sense of “I have to.” They must be *aware* that all human endeavor is a part of the larger and richer fabric of the whole universe. (p. 120)

It is the traits of awareness described by all these servant-leadership scholars that I recognized in the data set of my research participants’ hermeneutic interviews.

For instance, meaning-making may become a commitment to an increased awareness of the symbol and to the greater idea that the symbol represents. There are several examples of this dynamic from my study participants. Aiden has a military/security/law-enforcement background and was interrupted by the Lion of Lucerne in Switzerland in the early 1980’s when he was serving as a member of an Elite Guard. The sadness of the dying lion captivated Aiden, and forced him to think about, “sacrifice, how short life can be, honor, taking a stand for something, fighting tyranny too” (Aiden as quoted in Rorholm, 2021, p. 189).

Figure 3



Lion of Lucerne, Switzerland



Note: public domain

Aiden shared that the interruption of the Lion was the “start” in his life for consideration of servant-leader values:

How do I consider others more important than myself? How do I uphold the honor I’ve been given to be a member of the military? How do I uphold the honor of serving in law enforcement in the same way? How do I be the best I can be for those I serve? (as cited in Rorholm, 2021, p.190)

Though Aiden understands statues like this were created centuries ago, and “have a tendency to convey a message initially for the time they were created,” he felt this image was timeless, and has committed to living as a servant-leader as a result of observing it (as cited in Rorholm, 2021, p. 191).

Kenny was one of the unique participants whose interruptive symbol was not a visual one. She was particularly moved by the Macklemore and Lewis song, “Same Love” (2012), and the subsequent Grammy performance in 2014, where Macklemore and



Lewis performed the song live with Madonna, while 33 same-sex couples were legally married by Queen Latifah in the aisles of the Staples Center in Los Angeles. The song “Same Love,” Kenny says, was the genesis for this increased social awareness. “We shouldn’t have to fight for basic human rights, you know?” And yet, she has committed her life to exactly that, as a result of her interruption by this powerful piece of music.

Figure 4



Note: public domain

Nanette is an interesting case of an observer whose meaning in her interruptive symbol has changed over her lifetime. She has ascribed two meanings to the same symbol. The first, from her youth, is warmth, pride and family. The other, as she has grown intellectually aware with age, is a hate symbol. Nanette’s interruption comes from the Confederate flag, and it only interrupts her as an adult. By living through the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and seeing other racial injustice up to today, she has become intellectually aware that the confederate flag is a hate symbol, and she has come to acknowledge the vicarious trauma that Black people have suffered in this country.



Peter learned his sympathy for the racially marginalized from his parents. Though he had not experienced racism himself, he discovered that his parents had secretly painted over KKK hate symbols on some nearby highway columns when he was a boy. This made him aware of the powerful influence of symbols. Later in life, he began to hear of and sympathize with similar external reports of traumatic racism targeted at people of diversity. This made Peter aware of, and disrupted by, anti-Muslim graffiti on the exact same highway columns years later in his adulthood following 9/11.

Gregory's emotional response to seeing a production of Aesop's "The Ant and the Grasshopper", did not interrupt him out of a personal experience of being denied charity or experiencing a lack of compassion of some sort. However, he was aware of external stories of such behavior including racial bigotry. Empathizing with the plight and trauma of those in his community who had less, made Gregory predisposed to greater charity throughout his lifetime.



Figure 5

Black Power Fist



Note: Public Domain

Blanche was peripherally aware of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) fist logo since its inception in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's, but it never disrupted her until the aforementioned national BLM movements, marches and protests in the summer of 2020. For Blanche, the national outcry and subsequent change in culture is what made the BLM fist influential and disruptive to her. Blanche, with her extensive experience in marketing and branding viewed the fist prior to 2020 as a symbol of power, but even as a somewhat frightening symbol of violence and conflict. Her current meaning of the fist is much softer, and she is sympathetic to the plight of people of color in America. For Blanche, the recent national culture change influenced a symbol, with which she was already familiar, to become interruptive to her.

L.A. (his chosen pseudonym) was aware of the meanings of military symbols and imagery long before he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps (USMC). He understood clearly that the



symbols embodied the core values of honor, courage, commitment and duty, and in his heart was fully ready to defend his country and serve 20 years or more. After four years of service, and the suicide of his colleague, he became aware that the culture of the organization on which he had been sold during recruiting, was not the same culture in reality. While these occurrences are just samples of participant/observer awareness within interruptive symbology, the extent to which unconscious bias or self-awareness was exposed by interruptive symbol observation could be measured in all of my participants.

For some, being interrupted by a symbol may become a driving force, which becomes a motive for commitment to civil society. Or, there may be an increased awareness of life, its value and its limitations; a motive for inner reflection, for a review of life's priorities and growth, while accepting and transforming one's vulnerability into a quest for a more fulfilling life. Observers are also internally driven to act justly upon viewing an interruptive symbol because they link the action with their personal heightened awareness of the world around them (Barbuto, 2000, p. 371).

Empathy

The servant-leader strives to understand and empathize with others. People need to be accepted and recognized for their unique spirits (Spears, 2002, p. 5). As a former director of human resources at AT&T, Robert Greenleaf defined empathy as the imaginative projection of one's own consciousness onto another being (Greenleaf, 1970). All people are seen as beings to be trusted, believed in, and loved, and less as objects to be used, competed with or judged (Greenleaf, 1970). Whereas awareness is a servant-leadership characteristic component of the self, empathy is a component of relationships with others. Though leadership starts with the self, it is



also based on relationships where people are always considered more important than things.

Gunnarson and Blohm (2011) include the following in their “Welcoming Leader’s Promises”:

I am sensitive to your feelings, values and experiences. I want to see things from your perspective to understand how you can develop as a person. I demonstrate through my thoughts, words and actions that I empathize. (p. 70)

Similarly, the Showkeir and Showkeir (2011) defined the formulating intention of the empathy characteristic as, “I want to demonstrate to others that I am sensitive to their unique experience” (p. 162).

Finally, Greenleaf (1970) himself challenged:

Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted. (p. 13)

Interruptive symbology can be a gateway to better dialog. In meaningful dialog, the servant as leader submits to a higher perspective, one that can be pivotal to the development of the self in relation to others (Ferch, 2004, p. 235).

Some examples from my phenomenological research will help support this point, and illustrate how interruptive symbology influences action in empathy. Nanette’s slow, lifelong change in meaning of the confederate flag was borne from her “awakening” of racial injustice in the United States, or from seeing American history through a new lens as an educator. Her memories of “the help” as a



girl in the deep South was actually a positive one, so at that time in her life, she had no need for empathy towards people of color. As a result of her interruption, however, she has become intellectually aware that the confederate flag is a hate symbol, and she has come to acknowledge the vicarious trauma that Black people have suffered in this country.

Gregory, who was so deeply moved by a live performance of an Aesop's fable, quoted Hollywood Director Jordan Peele. In an interview for "Close Up with the Hollywood Reporter" on Sundance TV, Peele once said, "The power of the story is one of the few ways we can encourage empathy." As a theatre actor and author of fiction, Gregory agrees with Mr. Peele, as his interruption by Aesop's fable influenced lifelong empathy, compassion and generosity through a performing art piece.

Aiden's Lion of Lucerne in Switzerland is an art piece that elicits empathy in its presentation. The lion is tired or dying, with a stake driven into his heart. Peter learned his empathy for the racially marginalized from watching his parents paint over KKK hate symbols in a public place. Finally, though he recognizes the importance of the USMC as a critical branch of the United States defense forces, the deep feelings of pride and patriotism at observing military imagery have been replaced by a PTSD type reaction for L.A. Trauma, specifically the suicide of a fellow serviceman, initiated transformation and lifelong learning for him, and he will never see those symbols in the same way again. He will henceforth be interrupted, perhaps triggered, by these symbols and feel empathy towards fellow military service people.

Most of the symbols described in the participant interviews were rooted in some type of trauma. The symbols in this study fall into two main categories: (a) individual trauma, where they symbol



observer experienced trauma personally and directly, thus the symbol proves interruptive because of (or as a result of) this trauma, or (b) vicarious trauma, where the symbol itself has developed from or has roots in a traumatic event, unrelated to the interrupted individual, and the symbol observer is sympathetic to the damage vicariously caused. Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (Wilson et al., 2014, para. 1). Vicarious traumatization is a transformation in the [symbol observer] that results from empathic engagement with external reports of traumatic experiences (Courtois, 1993, p. 1). It is a special form of countertransference of understanding stimulated by exposure to outside traumatic material. Vicarious trauma is the emotional residue of exposure that [symbol observers] have from hearing trauma stories and becoming witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured (Perlman & Saakvitne, 1995, pp. 10-11). It is also called the “cost of caring” or “compassion fatigue.” The participants in this study generally fell into one of these two camps.

Perhaps my favorite development in this study actually happened during the recruitment process. Since I needed to switch to recruiting participants through social media due to the coronavirus pandemic, I posted relevant images, over several days, that I felt were interruptive to a broad audience. My caption along with those images stated my objective, asked the viewers to please set aside their normal reactions, feelings, politics, biases, ideologies about the symbol, and just consider whether it could be interruptive. For example, I posted clip art of the Trump administration’s red MAGA



(Make America Great Again) hat. Most users felt the immediate urge to comment on my post according to their own feelings and politics. But when they re-read my directive, most were able to calmly discuss how this symbol might disrupt another individual other than themselves. In this way, they considered the view of “the other” without automatically shutting down the conversation by immediately declaring their own biases. The conversation was much calmer, more scholarly and academic, and I could almost feel the commenters reaching Kegan’s (1994) fourth or fifth Order of the Mind as I followed the collective dialog.

The Fourth Order is the “Self-Authoring” or “Modern” Mind (Kegan, 1994, p. 99). Those at the Fourth Order have an internal set of rules and regulations—a self-governing system—which they use to make their decisions or mediate conflicts (Kegan, 1994, p. 102). They now feel empathy for others. The Fifth Order is the “Self-Transformational” or “Postmodern” Mind (Kegan, 1994, p. 312). Instead of viewing others as people with separate and different inner systems, symbol observers see across inner systems to look at the similarities that are hidden inside what used to look like differences. Adults at the Fifth Order are less likely to see the world in terms of dichotomies or polarities (Kegan, 1994, p. 317).

The discussion of interruptive symbols may prove to be a bridge over troubled political and ideological waters, by offering the potential to break down intellectual barriers in polarizing times. It is a phenomenon that tends to discourage self-centeredness, and encourage empathy through simple dialogic communication.

Community-Building

The final servant-leadership characteristic that was prevalent in my hermeneutic research is community-building. The servant-leader senses that much has been lost in recent human history as a result of



the shift from local communities to large institutions as the shaper of human lives (Spears, 2004, p. 16). This is likely exacerbated by the shift to online communication and commerce, and by the recent long-term quarantining that accompanied COVID-19. We simply do not interact societally in ways we once did. However, Greenleaf, clearly seeing the need for community, saw that shared purpose is the first step in creating community. He would say, “Do not tell me how new technology destroys community, tell me how it can be used to create community” (as cited in Bausch, 1998, p. 244). In addition, the aforementioned awareness causes the servant-leader to identify some means for community-building.

Servant-leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in institutions (Spears, 2004, p. 16). However, communities do not have to be large organizations. Ferch (2011) wrote:

A person to person view of relating infuses servant-leadership and becomes invaluable for people living and working in relational systems. A relational system is a community, be it a two-person community, a family-sized community, or larger communities such as business work or religion. (p. 42)

Furthermore, Showkeir and Showkeir (2011) formulate the intention toward community-building as, “wanting to create opportunities for inclusion and collaboration, embrace diversity, and acknowledge the innate freedom of others to choose accountability” (p. 163). This can happen in communities of nearly any size.

Bausch (1998) made the connection between imagery and community-building, stating, “For workers to commit to building a cathedral, they must have a vision of the cathedral. The work of the leader is to articulate vision and purpose in a manner that resonates” (p. 244). The servant-leader who has experienced an interruptive



symbol can more adequately convey that vision to a community of practice, and thus work towards the betterment of humanity.

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 1). A community of practice in this sense, as a function of ritual action, is a community of destiny, which shares a past, but where destiny spans both past and future. In other words, the influence of an interruptive symbol is the “critical event” or observation eliciting action from the observer. Or an “identity change,” from passive onlooker to active participant, may involve joining a “significant organizing framework,” or community-of-practice which may lead to new meaning structures (Armor, 2010, p. 465).

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 1). They may form or take new members from the influence of interruptive symbols. With symbolically interruptive suggestions, and appropriate sense and meaning-making of such symbols, community engagement and activism might become the popular and desirable way to act for future servant-leaders. Through disruption by a symbol, the observers may be called to positively act in their home communities. This might take the form of community engagement, socially just action, community activism, or any variety of leadership emergence.

Communities of practice, in brief, are groups of people informally bound together by shared experience and passion for joint enterprise (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139). This is an emergent servant-leadership phenomenon aimed at betterment of one’s community, organization and/or world. Because its primary output,



knowledge, is intangible, Wenger discussed three distinct modes of belonging in communities of practice: engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger, 1998, p. 174). These modes of belonging provide a framework for understanding various community types that have also experienced an interruptive symbol, particularly engagement. While imagination addresses one's image of the world, it does not necessarily result in a coordination of action. While alignment addresses coordinated discourses, it may or may not equal mutual engagement. Engagement, however, is active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998, p. 173). It is a threefold process, which includes: (a) the conjunction of ongoing negotiation of meaning, (b) unfolding of histories of practice regarding the symbol, and finally, (c) the formation of trajectories for continued action efforts. It is precisely the symbology that helps us move from imagination to alignment which makes our differences more manageable. Imagination, here, is the domain of abstract thought through this reified symbol, but all three modes of belonging become the tools for reconciling a local experience with a sense of the global horizon. If the symbol is effective and interruptive, this is the emergent phenomena of the interruptive symbology. Organized communication that occurs in a community of practice in today's day and age, can accelerate rapidly from technologically innovative communication flows. This new networked communication is central to a pattern for emergent phenomena from the personal to the universal.

Here are some examples from my research to illustrate how interruptive symbols influence servant-leaders to build communities, particularly by joining communities of practice. Kenny identifies as a member of the LGBTQAI+ community, a married mother of a baby daughter, and an active duty member of the United States military,



who has lived through the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT)” policy, which prohibited military personnel from discriminating against or harassing closeted homosexual or bisexual service members or applicants, while still barring openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons from military service. Once DADT was repealed, Kenny had an extensive community-of-practice which could now be “out”, and she had many examples where she intentionally provided support to other current gay military members, and her interruption by the song “Same Love” has helped her in recruiting.

The epiphany Peter shared was that the KKK and Muslim targeted graffiti, “made me feel more isolated in the neighborhood and the community,” and that, “the desire to paint over that graffiti was almost instantaneous.” Sophie (who has not yet been mentioned, but whose symbol is Rembrandt’s painting, “The Prodigal Son”) began to seek a community of practice whose membership were people seeking and giving forgiveness, such as studying with Benedictines, practicing the Spiritual Exercises, and even her work in hospice as her clients neared the ends of their lives. Gregory self-identified as retired, although he participates in community theatre, as the play inspired him to do, and like Sophie, he is a published novelist. Aesop was one of his inspirations. Gregory’s performing arts symbol obviously had an impact on his life and interactions with various communities of practice throughout his life. He noted, “Useful is being in a community, even if you want solace.” Contributing to the emotional and physical needs and the well-being of one’s fellow man is Gregory’s commitment to the betterment of humanity and an obvious example of servant-leadership.



Figure 6

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt



Note: (Nouwen, 1992, cover art), public domain

The Confederate flag's influence has urged Nanette to take many types of action. She has even sought a community of practice regarding the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, "giving money to them, marching if I can get to it." Other communities mentioned by participants included political parties and ideologies, churches and worship groups, survivor groups, philanthropic groups such as non-profits and charities, and even cross-cultural communities, borne out of an appreciation for foreign cultures.



Servant-leadership suggests that community can be created among those who work in businesses and other institutions. Greenleaf (1970) himself stated:

All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life from for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his own unlimited liability for a quite specific community related group. (p. 97)

Micro-interruption by a symbol can become macro-action or macro-movement toward the building of community and the betterment of humanity. The image of George Floyd and the BLM movement in the summer of 2020 is a perfect example.

CONCLUSION

As human beings, we may need to become aware of human condition that is different from our own. One way to do this is through interruptive symbols. Even when the symbol is trauma based, the notion of witness and disruption rather than erasure is inherently fundamental for the betterment of humanity. With this tool, we create meaning and a collective history that can help us avoid mistakes of the past. As Greenleaf (1977) stated, “Meaning is a stern taskmaster: one must aspire, one must persevere, one must accept the discipline of dealing thoughtfully with symbols” (p. 338). Through the use of symbology, even tragic or traumatic imagery, individuals may be able to increase empathy for humanity:

The power of a symbol is measured by its capacity to sustain a flow of significant new meaning. The substance of the symbol may be a painting, poem or story, allegory, myth, scripture, a piece of music, a person, a crack in the sidewalk or a blade of grass. Whatever or whoever, it produces a confrontation in



which that much of what makes the symbol meaningful comes from the beholder. (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 329)

The modern Renaissance person is globally aware and interested in the betterment of humanity up to and including the world. In addition to appreciating the global links in communication, economies and ecosystems, they are comfortable with different cultures. Racism, sexism, religious persecution, homophobia, and nationalism are viewed as vestiges of a primitive stage of evolution (Gelb, 1998, p. 19).

Observing a disruptive symbol might lead to ritual action with groups of like-minded individuals. It can provide a shared sense of empathy and create a shared space where the communal “could be” may become the basis of the ongoing experience. In ritual empathy, we subject ourselves to given categories of order, and through stories of a common past, we can allow a projection of a shared future.

Membership in a community of practice can be facilitated (or made easier) through dialog and experience-sharing of the symbol observer. In this study, the characteristic of community-building is an emergent servant-leadership phenomenon aimed at connecting the symbol observer to communities of practice for the betterment of one’s community, organization and/or world. The data in this study seems to suggest that when the participants shared their interruptive symbol experience, it brought them closer to community-building which was working towards a common goal for the betterment of humanity. In other words, experience-sharing served as a gateway to community-building, facilitating micro-observation to macro-movement. The emergent servant-leadership phenomenon was made easier when the participant shared their symbol experience.

Every participant in my study shared their experience with an interruptive symbol with other members of a community of practice.



In most cases, this moved them somewhere along the spectrum from being an individual outside the community, to membership on the periphery of the community, to legitimate membership in the community. My belief is that not only is their personal growth on that spectrum is still progressing, but that also the mission or the joint enterprise of the community of practice they have joined may still be evolving as well, influenced particularly by their new membership. For some of these symbol observers, servant-leadership with their new community may still be on the horizon. My participant Shoshana suggested that experience-sharing through this study itself is perhaps a doorway to a burgeoning community of practice of symbol observers, servant-leaders and followers of the greater theory of interruptive symbology.

As Peter Block (1998) asserts, “community is felt in concert...in convention” (p. 89). These shared symbolic meanings in a time of great social change, may be used to society’s advantage. In these early years of the 21st century, we are beginning to see that traditional, autocratic and hierarchical modes of leadership are yielding to a newer model, “one based on teamwork and community...one strongly based on ethical and caring behavior” (Spears, 2002, p. 2). Interruptive symbology may be a valuable tool in contributing to the betterment of humanity through servant-leadership.

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