



## SPIRITUALITY REVISITED

*Heeding Greenleaf's Call for the Spirituality of Leadership*

— CHERYL BROETJE

Many people are called to a vision for a more loving, more just society, but they are unprepared to hear it. As such, most calls go unclaimed. In Proverbs 29:18 we read “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” It is a deeply spiritual work to listen deeply enough to hear a vision, let alone trust it, while awaiting God’s timing for the vision to be born into the world. A birth of call in our lives takes a community of support, just as the birth of any baby. In our role as family, friends and neighbors, we help nurture the unique gifts and capacities given to each person, so that they may be invested in ways that bring blessing, healing, and transformation to the community and to Creation.

Yet, call is also born into specific contexts and must adapt in unpredictable ways to flourish. In a world currently beset by rising violence and disconnect, some of us are called to a deeper work as “spirit carriers,” a term Robert Greenleaf attributed to those who nurture the human spirit. Their work is to hear the call of others when sounded, and to rise up as a sustaining force when times are particularly hard so that the spirit does not go into hiding.

### THE BIRTH OF A CALL

Broetje Family Trust grew out of the seeds of a prophetic vision spoken through a missionary and planted in the heart and mind of



Ralph Broetje in 1960, when he was just 15 years old. Attending a youth retreat at his church, Ralph heard a missionary speak about a famine in India. He remembers telling his Sunday school teacher that when he grew up he would like to have an orchard and help kids in India.

The 1960s through the early '80s was a time of great upheaval, chaos and alienation in the United States. It was in this context that Ralph and I came of age, married, and began a family. The first year, we borrowed enough money to buy a small cherry orchard, which lost the next three annual crops – they froze out the first year, rained out the second year, and suffered a fruit fly infestation in year three! And yet a “dream team” emerged around us to keep our business going. Among them were our parents, the banker, the former owner of our orchard, who all continued to stand by us...and that Sunday school teacher, Harry Jamaica.

Not only was Mr. Jamaica present for God's initial calling to Ralph but, just as the priest Eli had been there to teach the boy Samuel how to know the voice of God (1 Samuel 3), Mr. Jamaica was instructional for us. As Ralph's partner, I had not heard a word about the call yet! But one day, Mr. Jamaica drove down to our farm to see Ralph. I saw them talking in the yard, so I went out just in time to hear him say:

Hey Ralph, do you remember that vision you shared with me that day when the missionary spoke at our youth retreat and told us about a famine in India? You thought it would be cool to have an orchard and help kids in India when you grew up. And here you are!

Hearing that call sounded again had a profound impact on our lives. In our fourth year at the orchard, we finally harvested a crop. By the seventh year, we were able to pay all our bills with some



profit left over. We expanded our acreage, buying and developing more land across the region, and found great success.

## UNDERSTANDING THE DREAM IN CONTEXT

In 1981, a recession hit the country and the economy plummeted. Interest rates sky-rocketed to 21%! The bank refused to extend any more operating loans to us, and we were forced to sell our home and all but one of our orchards. At the time, Ralph and I felt that maybe God was trying to punish us for living such a self-centered lifestyle. Time has allowed reflection, and we have since come to believe that we were being freed up to be prepared for our true calling and vocation, leaving behind many distractions of a consumer lifestyle and even some friends and family.

Because we didn't have the finances to pay our mortgage, we signed what property we still owned over to a mortgage company with a buy-back option of five years at 25% interest. We put up a small mobile home and began to work. Miraculously, those baby trees grew like crazy and produced several bumper crops. When an early spring freeze destroyed much of the fruit in other regions of the state, our farm was spared. In this short period, we were able to pay off our mortgage and reclaim our deed.

During this period, profound changes were happening within the agricultural labor market. White U.S.-based migrant families from the Midwest and the South used to drive across the country, following the crops for harvest. They would move from east to west, and then from California up to the Pacific Northwest before heading home for the winter. Thanks to at least two oil embargoes with Iran in the 1970s, the price of gasoline skyrocketed. Families began feeling *pulled* to look for jobs closer to home. About the same time, many economically poor families in southern Mexico were being *pushed* off their lands as privately held farms gave way to dropping



water tables, rising violence of land take-overs by powerful groups, and a lack of good roads to bring agricultural products to markets, largely in the north of the country. As a result, young Mexican men started arriving at our farm in Eastern Washington with little more than the clothes on their backs, urgently in need of work to support their families back home.

Meanwhile, Robert Greenleaf was a manager at AT&T and had been observing the growing alienation in the U.S. culture. In his essay “Servant as Leader” (1970) Greenleaf described what he called a leadership crisis. As he reflected on the war, the civil rights movement, and increasing alienation and violence raging in our country, he addressed the dysfunction, chaos and disconnect he saw between many of our institutions and those they were meant to serve.

We felt this disconnect that Greenleaf described. It was playing out on a daily basis as farmers like ourselves became more dependent on foreign labor. As more and more people fled hardships in their home countries and sought work in the U.S., their migration fostered growing fears that U.S. citizens might now be in competition for jobs, goods, and services. Furthermore, as the public became acutely aware that many immigrants did not possess proper work documentation, U.S. policies began to focus more on enforcement and deportation. Institutions became more rigid and alienating, from businesses and schools to churches and housing organizations.

We were business owners struggling to keep a reliable labor force, but Greenleaf cast a vision that reminded and illuminated for us the gospel stories we had heard all our lives growing up in the Christian church. Even though unrest continued to increase, Greenleaf expressed hope for the future – if only we could find enough servant-leaders to serve institutions in every sector.



In his essay “Spirituality as Leadership,” Greenleaf (1988) laid out three questions waiting to be claimed as a call to action by those who could see the need and felt the call to serve – particularly those doing the work of the world:

- 1) Can those who suffer alienation now be helped to nurture their servant natures;
- 2) Can those who now lead be helped to find a sustaining level of spirituality; and
- 3) Will some among us make a mission of assisting in the spiritual formation of established leaders?

Greenleaf was clear that this type of leadership formation must focus on learning how to awaken, energize, discipline, and mobilize the spirits of both participants and teachers alike in ways that serve the common good. He further provided a practical guide to help those interested in measuring the impact of their service among those served by offering his best test: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (Greenleaf, 1970). And by the way, how are the most vulnerable doing as a result of this service?

#### HELPING THE ALIENATED NURTURE THEIR SERVANT NATURES

*Can the large numbers of those who suffer alienation in our times be helped to find themselves at home in the world as it is, violent, striving, unjust as well as, beautiful, caring and supportive, by accepting and nurturing their servant natures? (Greenleaf 1988)*



This question was exactly what we were seeing and begging to be answered as we reflected on our farm! The souls and spirits of many of our new employees had long ago been put on hold. Could we offer real encouragement that generated enough trust and sense of security that their spirits would come out of hiding? Focused almost entirely on current urgencies, could strategies be found that would help them restore a sense of hope for the future while promoting compassion for others now? We knew that service from the heart cannot be coerced. There were language, cultural and religious differences between us. And, we were not trained teachers. So, where would teachers come from? What kind of learning context might best support participation? As the social educators Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) reminded us, “Without practice, there’s no knowledge.”

Greenleaf’s little book *Servant as Leader* was enough to give us some ideas. The story of Leo and the example he set as a servant-leader for the group he was accompanying offered light on our path. As people who had been raised in the Christian faith, the servant-leader Leo reminded us of Jesus, who also connected with people he met at the spirit level, sensing what those served needed to heal and flourish on their journeys towards spiritual wellbeing. Where would we find a few of these people to recruit and prepare as teachers? What kind of process would it take? Could a farm serve as a school in which to practice the development of servant-leaders?

We experimented by identifying potential leaders and giving them responsibility for small crews. Ralph invested his time in teaching these crew leaders how to do their jobs, working alongside them day to day. He recognized them as teachers themselves and encouraged them to likewise teach others in their crews the skills they needed to do their jobs throughout each season. These crew



leaders embraced a new leadership style based on servant-leadership. Each one was encouraged to nurture what Greenleaf described as “the servant motive in those who do the work of the world.” Once again scriptures shed light for us, as Paul instructed his young disciple Timothy to teach others: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to other reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

People who remained unseen and unheard by most housing, financial and educational institutions at the time worked hard to care for our orchard and the fruit it produced each year. To do this, they also worked hard to care for one another. If they weren’t doing the work of the world, we didn’t know who was! As they began to settle down with their families, we became aware of other felt needs in our area. Childcare and safe, affordable housing were non-existent for most of them. We learned that there was almost no housing vacancy, pushing many into unhealthy living arrangements. Further, working parents were often forced to leave their children at home unattended while they worked. They had left behind extended family networks in Mexico and had no one else they trusted.

We decided to build a housing community on our farm in 1990. It just seemed right to include a chapel and community center along with a small grocery and a daycare facility. The biblical story, from its first page, reminds us clearly that all people have been created in God’s image, each with their own special gifts and capacities to contribute to the common good. Most of our employees had become disconnected from their faith communities and families. They had forgotten or were never even told that they were loved and gifted children of God. It was then that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s (1939/1954) words spoke to us: “*Any community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish because of them.*” We began to



look for and create jobs that would help remind more people that they too had something important to contribute to the community.

Redemption – our own, others, and the land itself – became an important part of God’s call on our lives. As we learned how to ‘tend the garden’ in our care, the orchard flourished. While young immigrant families continued to be scorned by many in our country, we sought to redeem the dignity of their presence here. As the land flourished, the people began to flourish too – just like the effect Leo had on the band of travelers he had served. It seemed the more they sang together while working in the fields, the more joyful and fruitful the trees became!

The first residents who moved into our housing community named it Vista Hermosa, which means “beautiful view.” Though it wasn’t so much a beautiful view, being surrounded by sagebrush and miles from town, what they tried to express was the sense of safety and peace they felt in this place. As families settled in, remarkable things began to happen. Some began to reach out for help, to speak their truth and to trust their neighbors for support. Years of trauma from incidents of domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health issues began to surface, creating opportunities for them to move beyond victimhood and find resilience. Often for the first time, families began to stand in solidarity with one another and to advocate for change. A growing value of compassion brought people together as they embraced new ways of living and serving one another, becoming more open to the need for recovery from the spirit-deadening experiences they had suffered in life.

Omar was 15 years old when his family came to work on our farm in the early ‘90s. He was an angry young man. No one had asked him if he wanted to leave his home to come to the U.S., only to be scorned by so many once he got here. He walked around the





neighborhood with a huge boom box, spewing angry songs that expressed his pain. Not long after his arrival, Omar had attracted a large following of younger kids – a pied piper of sorts! It was then that Ralph realized something needed to happen before anger turned into action. At our gymnasium, we quickly organized a basketball program. Miraculously, it was the one thing Omar liked more than his boom box. Soon thereafter, Omar and other kids from the community formed leagues, and Omar began coaching them.

Eventually, Omar's family was able to purchase a home in town, and Omar went to work as a para-educator at the local school. With the enduring insistence of his principal, Omar further developed his gifts and became a certified teacher. Then he became a school principal and just recently completed a PhD! While his path was fraught with challenges, he never gave up. He also never forgot the place where he says his life was changed. The school he now shepherds is full of students just like them; he embraces his role as servant-leader to prepare the next generation as they imagine a preferred future for themselves. Just like Omar, they are learning to see where their "deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Buechner, 1973).

## HELPING LEADERS FIND A SUSTAINING LEVEL OF SPIRITUALITY

*Can those who now lead and carry the burdens and take the risks and absorb the tensions of showing the way for others, whether in large affairs or small, be helped to find a sustaining level of spirituality that gives them some detachment from, and perspective on their burdens so that they can carry on with clarity of vision, compassion, and*



*grace – qualities of life that only a lift of spirit is likely to make possible? (Greenleaf 1988)*

In our experience, Greenleaf's second question was crucial. As our vision continued to expand, we sensed that if strangers could be helped to feel at home on an apple farm, then it could happen anywhere – in churches, schools, neighborhoods, and board rooms. But leaders within those institutions would need to find a deeper level of spirituality to sustain them in their work of serving vulnerable people groups. It is one thing to recruit, prepare and send out people as servant-leaders, but what does it take for them to stay out there without giving up? The work is hard.

We saw a huge need everywhere to prepare called people to serve among the alienated: 1) to welcome strangers, especially those currently experiencing alienation, disconnection, exclusion; 2) to evoke their gifts and help them explore what they might have to contribute; and 3) to send them out as “spirit carriers” in service of the common good (1 Cor. 12).

Although we had heard the gospel stories all our lives, it was when we first read *Servant as Leader* in about 1985 that we felt challenged to see our work differently. Our work with vulnerable immigrants was not a short-term mission project but, in practical terms, a deeper call to community for us all – to do life together in more life-affirming ways. We began to see firsthand glimpses of the truth of Greenleaf's statement: “All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form...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.” But what spiritual training could we expect to offer that might lift and sustain their spirits?



In 1986, we began to imagine a new mission for called-based service in specific places – to help individuals identify their gifts and practice an emerging call to community amongst marginalized people groups. We established The Center for Sharing as a faith based non-profit organization and invited people to explore how they might serve. From Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., Pastor Gordon Cosby, Don McClanen and many others generously shared their vision and the structures they had put in place for those who believed that God was calling them to a specific work. We designed a simple curriculum with several important components.

Inspired by the writings of Elizabeth O'Connor (1975a, 1975b, 1987), we allowed time for sharing of personal stories with one other. We explored our past pain and trauma as a way to discern how we may be called to connect with and serve the needs of others now, while sustaining the spirit as we work to grasp new visions for our lives. We further adapted a structure for forming mission groups as a means for building more authentic community, sense of accountability, and mutuality. This began the process of healing for many people. We came to believe that God wants transformation from the inside, including the brokenness and the beauty of each, so that we may be about the real work of reconciliation. We learned that leadership is about learning to love ourselves as we are, finding meaning in our brokenness, and tending to the needs of others in a way that contributes to mutual healing and discovery of greater meaning, purpose, and connection. But then once that reality is seen, can they be helped to name a new vision for a preferred future waiting to be claimed?

We offered our first 9-month servant-leadership course in 1995 with 27 participants. As people began to claim their call to particular people groups, new organizations emerged out of those expressed



calls, including: Jubilee Leadership Academy, a residential home for struggling teens in Prescott, WA; Centro de Compartimiento, a leadership program for women and girls in Oaxaca, Mexico; Tierra Vida, an intentional housing community in Pasco, WA; and Shepherd's Home for Servant Leadership, a lived community in the Philippines. From these place-based contexts, where institutions were serving the common good, leaders found strength and support through their inward journey with its emphasis on soul and spirit. Spiritual practices in small groups were fundamental disciplines that included prayer, reflection and action, writing and story-telling about our lives together. Through ongoing dialogue, leaders explored their traumas together and, in turn, found motivation and healing to continue the difficult work of service. Over time, fruit began to grow from these practices, producing a network of small servant-led organizations who could support one another as spirit carriers – those who nurture the human spirit – like members of one extended family.

One of these groups emerged in the Philippines. In 2008, we were invited there to offer a one-month course to staff of a bible college. The college was contained behind a large wall that kept them intentionally separated from the surrounding neighborhood so that they could stay focused on their studies. During our time there, we encouraged participants to open the doors and engage with people on the streets as a way to explore both the inward and the outward journey. As they learned about the suffering of those in the community, their hearts were changed. Eventually, a new dream was birthed by a core group of staff, requiring them to move to another island where they built community from the ground up in the middle of a jungle. They named this community Shepherd's Home for Servant Leadership and began to focus more deeply on the spiritual work of being present to one another in that place.



Dinah is a founding member of Shepherd's Home. In her own spiritual journey, she reflected on her past experiences with poverty and isolation, often feeling alone, with no one to help her understand her own gifts or place in the world. This sparked in her a passion to create a special place where the poor and marginalized could be valued and listened to in her community. She sounded a call, and a small mission group formed around her to create a bakery and coffee shop. Parttime jobs were created for people in the neighborhood to start selling the bakery's bread. This gave the mission group opportunities to develop deeper relationships with those sellers as they drove their carts through the neighborhood, shared their stories, and connected with their families and neighbors.

In the coffee shop, neighbors now come to relax and engage in fun activities like Zumba and story-telling with each other. It has also become a place for women to share their struggles, knowing that they will be heard. They are starting to see new relationships and connections being woven between people throughout the community; they are talking about things they have never talked about before. It is the hope of the mission group that unused gifts and talents will continue to emerge in this place, and that new jobs will continue to be created as they engage the resources present in people throughout the neighborhood.

Greenleaf (1972) said that "caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built." He further addressed the need for this work at the level of spirit when he argued that: 1) as a low-spirit culture, we must look for ways to "*rouse the spirit*," as Nicolai Grundtvig believed, so that "*they will lead themselves*"; and 2) if we are to use our revived spiritual energy to help nurture a more life-giving and caring society for more people, then the process of spiritual



formation will need to reach those who do the work of the world. But to do that, we must become spirit carriers able to evoke that life-giving and sustaining spirit in others.

## ASSISTING IN THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF ESTABLISHED LEADERS

*Will some among us be open to receive the gift of spirituality as leadership and then, with that gift, make a mission of healing alienation and assisting in the spiritual formation of established leaders? (Greenleaf 1988)*

Finally, we came to Greenleaf's third question – the gift of spirituality as leadership. In our work at The Center for Sharing, we witnessed profound changes in world views, mindsets, and lifestyles as leaders embraced new styles of leadership based on opportunities for growth, healing and transformation in their specific places. We deepened our knowledge in many areas, including learning about the effects of childhood trauma on health, social connection, and capacity to trust and bond with others ([www.cestoohigh.com](http://www.cestoohigh.com)). This knowledge enabled leaders to build ever deeper relationships with people in the places they served.

While these leaders were well prepared with the teachings of servant-leadership and committed to spiritual disciplines and practices that we had learned together, we found they needed so much more. Many were called to serve in highly vulnerable communities impacted by poverty, dependency, discrimination, and isolation. They were forming what Margaret Wheatley (2017) refers to as “islands of sanity,” committing themselves to long term service in very specific places. But to stay strong and spiritually grounded in the face of increasingly devastating disasters in isolated places (everything from political violence, racism, earthquakes, and



pandemics), they needed a bridge – a way to connect with others who understood their call, could feed their spirits, and offer clarity about the work unfolding before them.

We found ourselves being called to stand in that space – to weave a web between the “islands” and nurture a new kind of sustaining community. This re-emphasized our teaching approach, which extends beyond the classroom and is a life-long process of action and reflection in community. Harry Jamaica was that for Ralph, as he reminded him of his dream and celebrated that vision in the midst of despair. This long-term approach is often a challenge to traditional training programs more focused on breadth than depth. At times, our own staff have been challenged by the desire to expand our reach and offer ever more courses to a broader audience. Again and again, we come back to the belief that this work must remain relational and slow if it is to be transformational. The insights and reflections we gain from each other emerge along the way, as we continue the journey, pause for reflection, and make the road together.

To nurture this deeper work, we formed a group called “Community of Servant Leaders” which gathers on a quarterly basis for fellowship and a renewing of spirit. These leaders are practitioners in a wide range of communities – from across the U.S., in Washington, Arizona and Kansas, as well as internationally in Mexico and the Philippines. We gather in person or online, drawing strength from seeing each other’s face, sharing stories, celebrating, and praying together. This time together feeds our spirits, and we share a common language and remember we are not alone.

Kristin was a newly graduated psychologist in Chicago and wanted to serve children. She saw that Latino students were some of the most vulnerable people in her community, so she looked around for a place to learn Spanish. She was directed to the Center for



Sharing and ultimately an orphanage in Oaxaca, Mexico, where she lived and worked for five years. She poured her love into each child and was committed to their well-being. But as the children grew up and continued to languish in that place, Kristin's spirit crumbled. The system couldn't envision a different future for them, and she knew she was not called to serve in that place.

During this time, Kristin participated in servant-leadership classes with The Center for Sharing and then moved into a new residential home for young women that we established not far from the orphanage. This place was named *Centro de Compartimiento* (CDC). Kristin helped to develop a program for middle school girls, and co-led the organization with Adela, a local teacher who was drawn to working with older girls preparing for high school and college. Together, they began to study servant-leadership principles with the girls and mentor them as they practiced these principles through community service projects in their neighborhood.

When repeated earthquakes hit Mexico in 2017, CDC was shaken. And then COVID-19 hit, again making it impossible for girls to stay on campus – they needed to be at home with their families in the rural villages. In those moments, Kristin has been able to stay connected through the Community of Servant Leaders with a growing and diverse network of servant-led communities for prayer and support. Both Kristin and Adela remain committed to their work in Oaxaca today; they have deepened their own practices and now teach servant-leadership courses in Mexico and the U.S. for Spanish speaking audiences.

In 2018, we transitioned away from the farm and created the Broetje Family Trust as an umbrella organization for our ongoing family of ministries. We named our new home “Leo Center,” in honor of Greenleaf's story of Leo and all the people we have known





to be Leos in our lives. It is clear to us that there is a process required to prepare those being called and sent out in the service of those now suffering exclusion and alienation. And it is in this space that we now stand. Our Servant Leadership School focuses on walking with those seeking to deepen their spiritual practices as they serve those on the margins. Through the gift of spirituality as leadership, we continue to walk this road together.

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Cheryl Broetje is co-founder of numerous for-profit and non-profit organizations. Broetje Orchards grew to be one of the largest privately-owned orchards in the country, employing thousands of people and using servant-leadership as a management style throughout the company, from senior executives to crew leaders in the field. With proceeds from the farm, Ralph and Cheryl co-founded



many non-profits over the past 35 years, including The Center for Sharing, Vista Hermosa Foundation, Jubilee Foundation, and Broetje Family Trust. Through these non-profits and their related programs, servant-leadership has remained foundational to the work of engaging staff and communities alike. As a Christian seeking to apply her faith in the workplace, Cheryl is a practitioner first. As a featured speaker and educator, Cheryl has also brought servant-leadership programs to individuals and groups throughout the Pacific Northwest, Mexico, Kenya, Egypt, India and the Philippines. Believing in our obligation to serve the most marginalized, Cheryl is particularly focused on individuals and communities in historically marginalized regions. For more information about Cheryl, the history of our organizations, and current programming, please see <https://broetjefamilytrust.org>.