



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

— JEFF VANEK

Whether we are talking social or environmental justice, we are talking about people issues. Humanity and nature are inseparably intertwined, and servant-leadership is the perfect leadership style needed to address the challenges our planet faces. The term servant-leader, as used today, was coined by Robert Greenleaf in his 1970 essay *The Servant as Leader*.

The year 1970 was significant for the modern environmental movement. In that year alone, the Environmental Protection Agency was created, and the following Federal Acts passed: the Clean Air Act (Extension), Williams-Steiger Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Lead-Based Paint Poisoning Prevention Act, and the Environmental Quality Improvement Act (“Timeline of Major,” 2020). It was also the first year that Earth Day (2021) was celebrated.

As the decade marched on, other environmental acts (“Timeline of Major,” 2020) were added to the list of environmental laws. These include the Federal Water Pollution Control Amendments; the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act; the Marine Protection, Research, and Sanctuaries Act; the Endangered Species Act; Safe Drinking Water Act; the Hazardous Materials Transportation Act; the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act;



the Marine Protection, Research, and Sanctuaries Act; the Endangered Species Act; the Safe Drinking Water Act; the Hazardous Materials Transportation Act; the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act; the Toxic Substances Control Act; the Clean Water Act; the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act; and the National Energy Conservation Policy Act. For good reason, the 1970s are often referred to as the decade of the environment (Milano, 2017).

Besides being the beginning of the decade of the environment, I tend to think of it as the decade of clown-inspired fashion. I have the photos of what I wore as a child to prove it. Fashion may not have been at its best, but some very significant environmental movements were taking place not only at the legislative level but socially as well. I vividly remember the influence of the ecology movement during that time even though I was just a kid. It was the time in my life I was certain I was going to be an ornithologist when I grew up. I was very into birds, as pets and in the wild. At one point I built a breeding cage for my pair of parakeets. Unfortunately, that endeavor didn't pan out. My attempt at budgie breeding was a bust. Even so, it gives you some idea of how enthralled I was with birds at the time. In society at large, I remember the ecology flag and symbol being as prevalent as the peace sign or the yellow smiley face. Woodsy Owl implored (Fuller-Bennett & Velez, 2012) us to "Give a Hoot, Don't Pollute," and a television advertisement (Dunaway, n.d.) featured a Native American, who was actually Italian American (think of the layers of irony there) crying over a polluted landscape ("Iron Eyes Cody," 2021).

If you remember that time, you may also recall just how "cosmic" things were as well—pyramid power, ESP, UFOs, and astral projection were all topics of interest. Maybe you remember Uri



Geller bending spoons for Johnny Carson on the Tonight Show (Mdriver1981, 2016). It was, after all, the age of Aquarius.

Therefore, I find it quite fitting that someone with the last name Greenleaf, in the same year as the first Earth Day and the creation of a myriad of environmental protection laws, would be the person to bring us servant-leadership in its modern-day iteration. Servant-leadership is an approach to leadership that is well-suited to creating cultures committed to environmental and social justice—bad fashion notwithstanding. It’s all pretty trippy when you think about it.

Greenleaf wrote in his famous 1970 essay that, “The servant-leader is servant first” (p. 6). Not that leadership is an afterthought, but a conscious choice that emerges from a desire to serve others. He proposed that the “best test” of servant-leadership is to ask,

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (p. 6)

Wow. I am tingling. Talk about an approach to leadership that gets right at the environmental and social justice issues of today. We have some really bad relationship issues—with both nature and each other—that need to be rectified. Servant-leadership puts us on the path of rectification with our fellow humans. When we are able to heal our interspecies relationships, it will amaze us at what we can do, and what we will do for nature. Whole, healthy, fulfilled people naturally reach outside of themselves—to other people and to the environment.

Are you tingling now?



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Professionally, is a quirky and humorous look at life and career and won the League of Utah Writers' Gold Quill award for best nonfiction. Jeff has written magazine articles on employment, business, environmental, and legal issues—with other assorted topics thrown in the mix. He is currently working on a new book about creating cultures that drive environmental justice related missions through servant-leadership. Jeff's blog can be found at www.jeffvanek.com.