



CULTIVATING VOLUNTEER LEADERS IN THE FERTILE CLIMATE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

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A blossoming field of interest in public life, corporate endeavor, and academic inquiry is the cultivation of leadership. Peter Northouse (2019) began his seminal review of scholarly leadership study saying, “People continue to ask themselves and others what makes good leaders” (p. 1). As I take in his work on the landscape of leadership theory a popular folk tune plays in my mind: “Inch by inch, row by row, gonna make this garden grow. All it takes is a rake and a hoe and a piece of fertile ground” (Mallett, 1997). The variety of theoretical models identified by Northouse present like rakes and hoes for growing a garden of healthy leadership stock. Yet, as those with green thumbs will attest about horticulture, climate and soil composition matters as much, if not more, than tools. Similarly with leadership, more overarching factors such as the human wills to power, to love, and to meaning may prove more determinate of what grows or fails to grow than the tools used in the process. In this article I want to draw attention to the cultivation of a unique variety of leader, the volunteer leader.

THE CLIMATE OF VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

Popular media acknowledges the public opinion that volunteerism is beneficial to community life; a recent Associated Press article by Roxy Todd (2018) bears this out. Citing a study of



420 counties conducted by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Foundation for Kentucky Health, the article said, “a culture of sharing and volunteering were found to be essential” (para. 2). The changing landscape of volunteerism, however, raises some concerns for those with a closer eye on the trends. Episodic volunteerism, in which individuals only give time sporadically, is on the rise while long-term committed forms of volunteerism are on the wane (Nunn, 2000). Regarding this trend Michelle Nunn (2000) wrote, “The reality of the changing needs and interests of volunteers is clear, but the effect on nonprofit organizations, and the volunteers themselves, is less certain” (p. 119). How will such intermittent volunteer activity impact the personal growth, community mindedness, and leadership development of participants? Leadership from wise and dedicated, yet financially uncompensated, people from a diverse set of vocational and ethnic backgrounds forms the trellis that upholds the nonprofit sector of society. With a fearful look into the future, Nunn (2000) extended this plea: “What is still lacking . . . is a study on episodic volunteerism that uncovers . . . the threshold of volunteer activity necessary to influence and transform participants” (p. 120). While I cannot in this article answer that plea for new research, I do plan to address the leadership issues that are foundational to cultivating strong, healthy, committed volunteer leaders and to suggest that the concept of servant-leadership provides a conducive climate for promoting their emergence and growth despite recent trends.

THE HARD ROW TO HOE—SELF-AWARENESS

I daily encounter this challenge of raising up and supporting volunteer leaders. I am professionally employed as a parish pastor where as the paid executive I work primarily with volunteer leaders



to accomplish the organizational mission. I also serve as a volunteer leader on two nonprofit director boards. A fellow board member, from one of the nonprofits, recently approached the chairperson and I concerned that his skill set was underutilized and that he had no clear purpose on the board. Unfortunately, interactions with the organization's chief executive led him to that impression. While attempting to creatively offer his assistance, he was told, "that is not your role" with no alternate empowering role presented to him. That simple interaction unearths a significant stone that volunteer leaders stumble over. It also challenges all who desire to engender a generous spirit of leadership in the present culture, myself included. Instead of blaming the trend of fickle volunteers for the demise of faithful volunteer leadership, leaders presently serving (both volunteer and professional) do well to begin looking within themselves for root causes. Shann Ferch (2012) in *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity: Servant Leadership as a Way of Life*, said that awareness of self and others, "leads though an often fearsome doorway into a crucible that burns away chaff and results in one's own healing and inherently also the healing of the world around us" (p. 144). As prime example Ferch offered Ignatius of Loyola, whose gift to the world was not in "his personal leadership qualities: it was the way his self-understanding allowed him to discern and bring forth in others their own latent leadership potential" (p. 144). This awareness is a fundamental characteristic of servant-leadership that takes intentionality; it stems from a willingness to listen empathetically to others and to look deeply into one's own shadow (Ferch, 2012).

TILLING IN MY OWN VOLUNTEER GARDEN

Subsequent to that conversation with my disenchanted fellow board member, I set up appointments to meet with three former



volunteer chairpersons of the congregation that I pastor. I wondered what impression I leave with volunteer leaders who serve alongside and under me. I told each that I was inviting them to discuss their understanding of leadership in terms of power, meaning, and love, and I asked each to share with me what they viewed as my relational and leadership weaknesses. All three, Barry, John, and Diane are accomplished leaders. Barry and John are former military with long secular leadership careers following their military retirements. Diane holds a PhD in leadership from Gonzaga University. In *Crucial Conversations*, Patterson et al. (2002/2012) spoke of the “Fool’s Choice;” that is, “the choice between telling the truth and keeping a friend” (p. 22). I did not want these dear colleagues to feel the need to make that choice; my growing awareness relied upon their forthrightness. Patterson et al. (2002/2012) said, “*When it’s safe, you can say anything*. . . . Dialogue calls for the free flow of meaning—period. And nothing kills the flow of meaning like fear” (p. 55). Maintaining a safe atmosphere in that conversation meant attending to our mutual purpose of dialogue about leadership, offering mutual respect by receiving their words without defensiveness, maintaining emotional control, and discussing any differences with humility. I pledged to them that I would receive their words graciously, if they would be willing to share candidly.

As it turned out there were no differences in view; their assessments of my relational and leadership deficits were apparent to me as soon as they voiced them. Busyness stemming from inadequate delegation topped each person’s list. Barry advised that busyness leads to avoiding, or at least delaying, necessary conversations. John warned that busyness prevents the leader from considering the preferred future of the organization because the leader is mired in the day to day. Diane cautioned that the lack of



margin inherent in a busy schedule causes the leader to avoid adaptive change, which takes time and effort, because it is easier to maintain the status quo.

FERTILIZING WITH HUMILITY AND FORGIVENESS-ASKING

All of these insights, offered by my friends and colleagues, were invaluable to my self-awareness, yet one continued to reverberate at the core of my being. As a follow up Diane asked me to consider, “What does being busy, or un-busy, do inside of me? What is the hook that draws me into busyness?” As I reflected on her query at least one answer surfaced in a board of directors’ meeting. In what became a serendipitous irony, it was my turn to open the meeting with a devotion and I choose the words of scripture: “In humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not to his own interests but also to the interests of others” (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, 2001, Philippians 2:2-4). To illustrate this I quoted Patterson et al. (2002/2012) from *Crucial Conversations* as they described the importance of each person’s contribution to the “shared pool of meaning” (p. 24). In reality, once I completed the devotion and the chairperson, Brian, began to lead, it was not long before I interrupted him to rearrange his agenda. Shortly thereafter I interrupted him again to introduce a new item to it. The board elected Brian to this position only three months before; still, he began in confidence leading with eagerness to facilitate board conversation. However, with each interruption from me he became more reserved. By the end of the meeting I was facilitating; his leadership had wilted. My sense of it arrived too late to salvage his dignity in the meeting. The full awareness of what I had done to choke his goodwill leadership settled in shortly after all left for the night.

What happened within me during that meeting was a desire to see things done in a certain way, my way. When I perceived items



were overlooked, I imposed myself to provide course correction. In retrospect, this tendency pervades numerous facets of my leadership. I justify it as a desire for quality, but at root it is an issue of power. It is the nemesis of my desire to delegate. I take back tasks to control quality, to steer process, or to improve outcomes. This undermines the dedication of those around me, especially volunteer servants and leaders, and leaves me busy.

It was time for another crucial conversation, this time one of forgiveness asking. In the opening chapter of *Servant-Leadership and Forgiveness: How Leaders Help Heal the Heart of the World*, Jiying Song (2020) introduced a quote from Larry Spears, who said, “one of the great strengths of servant leadership is the potential for healing one’s self and one’s relationship to others” (Spears, 2010, p. 27). Song (2020) admitted that the link between healing and leadership is not readily apparent until one recognizes how leadership is a socially constructed relationship between flawed people. Song (2020) explained, “leadership is broken or imperfect people coming together and searching for wholeness, for oneness, and for rightness” (p. 57). Since forgiveness is essential to healing, this she posits “challenges servant-leaders to forgive and to ask forgiveness” (p. 57). I did ask, first in an e-mail and again in person the following evening. Brian was grateful for my apology. He shared how it felt for him in the meeting and why he so graciously allowed me to take over the lead. He accepted my request and forgave me. It was a healing moment that lifted a burden from my shoulders and empowered him in his new position.

Dung Tran (2020), in a powerful portrayal of servant-leadership characteristics seeding restoration, examined a more heinous type of clergy misconduct, sustained sexual abuse and cover up. To highlight the role that empathy played in fostering forgiveness and healing in



the aftermath of that scandal he included the following quote by Robert Greenleaf, “people grow taller when those who lead them empathize” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 35). The act of clergy abuse I committed seems inconsequential in comparison to Tran’s topic, yet if sustained without correction, the effect of my simple power assertions would leave their own devastating mark on volunteer leadership. On the other hand, Maduabuchi Leo Muoneme (2020), a Jesuit Priest, wrote about the role forgiveness asking plays in raising up servant-leaders saying, “Forgiveness asking has the power to transform a person, leading them to adopt the attitude of a servant-leader” (Muoneme, 2020, p. 347). It is quite possible that volunteer leadership will not thrive, or even survive, unless professional and positional leaders learn to *listen with awareness*, practice *empathy*, and engage in the *healing* art of asking, receiving, and granting forgiveness. These four characteristics, listening, awareness, empathy, and healing, when combined with persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth of persons, and community building are identified by Larry Spears (2010) as the marks of servant-leadership. Having experienced at least four of these, Brian and I each walked a little taller after that day.

A POWER PARADIGM THAT MELTS THE FROST OF COERCION AND CONTROL

In his allowing me to usurp leadership of the meeting, instead of asserting his positional authority as chairperson, and in his forgiveness for me afterward, Brian exhibited the servant-first nature of a servant-leader. Many leaders in contrast, volunteer and career, relish power and seek positions of authority from which to exercise it. Northouse (2019) defines power as “the capacity or potential to influence” (p. 9). He goes on to describe three basic types: *personal power* that derives from a leader’s likability, knowledge, and ability



to inspire, *positional power* that is conferred upon a leader by rank or office, and *coercive power* that influences others to do what is against their own will by force, threat, or manipulation (Northouse, 2019).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1901/1968) saw the desire to accumulate power as a natural state more innately human than generosity or altruism. For instance, he quipped, “one would make a fit little boy stare if one asked him: ‘Would you like to become virtuous?’ – but he will open his eyes wide if asked: ‘Would you like to become stronger than your friends?’” (p. 485). Nietzsche presumes that the more base a desire, the more natural it is, and the more it ought to be embraced. So he proclaims, “I teach No to all that makes weak—that exhausts. I teach Yes to all that strengthens, that stores up strength, that justifies the feeling of strength” (p. 33). Not that people need to be taught this by Nietzsche. As in his little boy example, a leader unaware of this dynamic operating internally may act out of this will to power without realizing it. Nietzsche is right about this; it is natural.

The trouble is that this will to power is inherently self-centered; it contains no balancing concern for others. Therefore, when personal power is lacking, or if the self fears that it is, coercive power becomes an easy antidote for those operating by the will to power. While assessing the patriarchal notions pervading American society, bell hooks (1984/2015) notes that this internal mechanism of the power drive breeds not only command-control relationships in the public space but abusive and controlling relationships in the home. Playing out this scenario for the average working-class man hooks says, “Men are fed daily a fantasy diet of male supremacy and power. In actuality, they have very little power and they know it” (p. 121). To compensate they turn to positional authority in the home,



which hooks says they “expect will restore to them their sense of power which they equate with masculinity” (p. 121). This is short lived satisfaction for as soon as positional power fails to influence the person driven by a will to power turns once again to the easy antidote of coercion using verbal, emotional, or physical means to control by fear (hooks, 1984/2015). Rather than lay this solely at the feet of men, hooks (1984/2015) acknowledges that women too are complicit in using these power plays as they defer to, and themselves act out, the patriarchal mindset embedded in the culture. So, she bids both “men and women to resist the sexist socialization that teaches us to hate and fear one another” (p. 71).

At stake is the impact that this will to power has upon others. It cultivates people who, as Ferch (2012) said, “use, degrade, and diminish others” (p. 20) leading to “a decline of the relational environment” (p. 19) and “a pervasive malaise” (p. 19) in society. Working with leaders who rely upon positional power or resort to coercive power is demeaning. When these leaders exist within nonprofit organizations it acts as a deterrent that weighs heavy on many a servant-hearted volunteer, who may already bear scars from previous run-ins with will to power leaders. This poses a serious disincentive to dedicated volunteerism and to the cultivation of a new cadre of volunteer leaders. Promise of a new possibility emerges, however, from cultivating volunteer leaders in the climate of servant-leadership, which Ferch (2012) said, “opens a new paradigm of power” (p. 15). Instead of the frigid weather patterns of coercion, manipulation, command, or control, servant-leadership offers power in the warming light of listening, persuasion, surrender, and example. George Patrick Murphy (2020), who spent most of his career as a corporate executive in the cold and cut-throat climate of global enterprise eventually discovered the concepts of servant-



leadership and then said without reservation, “servant-leadership, with its inherent empowering, inclusive, collaborative, and liberating elements, is an approach whose time has arrived” (p. 110).

A VALUE CHANGE IN THE LEADERSHIP CLIMATE: NONE TOO SOON

The time for a servant-leader approach has arrived because the “pervasive malaise” (Ferch, 2012, p. 19) that Ferch spoke of is impacting all areas of the workforce and volunteer endeavor. Yet, it is not simply a product of the will to power run awry; it is simultaneously perpetuated by a growing depletion of the rich nutrients of meaning and value. Already in the nineteen-sixties Victor Frankl (1969/2014) diagnosed this saying western society had arrived at an “age of crumbling and vanishing traditions” (p. 44) where rather than “new values being created by finding unique meanings . . . values are on the wane. That is why more people are caught in a feeling of aimlessness and emptiness” (p. 44). Not surprisingly Nietzsche (1901/1968) promoted this nihilism. He argued, “all ‘purposes,’ ‘aims,’ ‘meaning’ are only modes of . . . the will to power” (p. 356). Again he said that any aims people might use to project value into the world they should “*pull out* again” (p. 13) and so leave the world “*valueless*” (p. 13). A lifetime of research and using logotherapy to aid patients caught in this existential vacuum allowed Frankl (1969/2014) to untangle what Nietzsche continually twisted around, namely that “the will to power, on one hand, and . . . the will to pleasure, on the other hand, are mere derivatives of man’s primary concern, that is, his will to meaning” (p. 20). Trapped in a void of meaning, Frankl (1969/2014) said, people pursue pleasure directly, manipulate for money – a form of the will to power, and oscillate between professional over activity and centrifugal leisure. Caught in the dizzying spin of power and



money without meaning to hold them steady people struggle to center themselves. Frankl says, “Today centrifugal leisure is predominant. Flight from the self allows for avoiding a confrontation with the void in self” (p. 73).

Wrapped up in the chase for money and pleasure, running from and attempting to ignore the gnawing discontent of nihilism, few dedicate time to engage in volunteer leadership. This is increasingly so even though Frankl (1969/2014) posits that transcending self to reach toward other human beings in love’s extension and toward meaning through an awakened conscience are the primary means of restoring value to life. Conscience, Frankl notes, “is that capacity which empowers [a person] to seize the meaning of a situation” (p. 6). In his conclusion to *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy*, Frankl (1969/2014) describes the despair that gripped him while he, a new arrival to the German concentration camps shivering from typhus fever, suddenly realized that the complete unprinted manuscript of his first book was lost. His apparently imminent death would ensure that none of his life’s work would live on. He finally asked his inner self, “what sort of meaning could depend on whether or not a manuscript of mine is printed. . . . if there is meaning, it is unconditional meaning and neither suffering nor dying can detract from it” (p. 120). Only this lifted him out of despair; so, he rounds out the book calling for “unconditional trust in ultimate meaning” (p. 121) and “unconditional faith in ultimate being” (p. 121). His sentiments are echoed by bell hooks (2001), who observed, “our nation has gone so far down the road of secular individualism, worshipping the twin gods of money and power, that there seems to be no place for spiritual life” (p. 71). Neither hooks nor Frankl are proselytizing for a particular religion. They are inviting people to



open themselves towards, and to live for, what lies beyond their comprehension and which unites their loving contributions to this world in a fullness of purpose.

Poets like Mary Oliver are purveyors of this type of meaning who churn the hard-crust soil that makes callous the hearts of people today preparing it to spring with this new life. In her *Song of the Builders* she presents her offer in the activity of

a single cricket;
it was moving the grains of the hillside
this way and that way.
How great was its energy,
how humble its effort.
Let us hope
it will always be like this,
each of us going on
in our inexplicable ways
building the universe. (Oliver, 2004, p. 60)

For it now and always to be like this, people, desperately more so than crickets, need to find value in their contribution. Even though it seems like moving a single grain inches across acres of hillside, this is indeed how the universe often operates. It is built not with monumental shifts but with the steady collection of individual contribution offered not for self-benefit but for others.

Corazon “Corey” Aquino was married to a senator in the Philippines when Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law over the country in the early nineteen-seventies. For her husband Ninoy’s outspoken opposition to this Marcos detained him as a political prisoner. Eventually released to the U.S. under a deal orchestrated by the Carter administration Ninoy later chose voluntarily to return to the Philippines for the sake of restoring democracy and freedom. He



was assassinated at the airport on the day of his return. Corey Aquino, although not a politician and admittedly out of her element when it came to discussing the dynamics of international leadership, was called upon by the people of her nation to run against Marcos in an upcoming election (Mentorsgallery, 2011a). Referring to conversations with her husband and his colleagues she said, “certainly I knew that I knew so little compared to all these people” (Mentorsgallery, 2011a, 3:21). Yet, she could not turn her back on the plea of the Filipino people. She recalled Ninoy’s reason for returning to the Philippines even with the looming likelihood of his arrest or assassination; he could not forgive himself if he did not do whatever he could for the Filipino people. She said, “That stayed with me . . . even if it were such a monumental task to challenge the dictator at a certain point I said, I have to do as Ninoy did” (Mentorsgallery, 2011c, 3:06). It is this type of aim, purpose, and value that pulls one beyond oneself into a life lived for others. For Corey Aquino, this was a spiritual endeavor. She said of herself and Ninoy, “the two of us naturally had to turn to God” (Mentorsgallery, 2011b, 3:56) and “I am grateful to the Lord that he did not allow us to despair; in fact he made us better people” (Mentorsgallery, 2011b, 7:15). Not only did they each grow in the process, but through the sacrificial suffering of the Aquinos freedom was restored to the Filipino people in a non-violent revolution that stands today as a legacy to what the persuasive power of servant-leadership is capable of achieving. There is no other word for such a compassionate offering of life, but love.

LOVE-LIGHT GERMINATES SERVANT-LEADERS

The person who learns by example to transcend-self, no longer living by the will to power, but instead pulled outward by a will to meaning wields a unique variety of power. Ferch (2012) speaks of it



this way “Power, in the context of love, is not power over others, or the power to enforce, but power *with* others and power *for* others” (p. 7). Corey Aquino lived by this variety of power with others and for others. She said, “Power is a gift from the people. So you owe the people and you have to be responsible enough to think that the power should be used in order to improve their lives. . . . It is good to remember that power is temporary. . . . It is not yours” (Mentorsgallery, 2011d, 0:39).

Power set in the context of love, such as this, may appear to be an oddity in a world so caught up in the will to power. However, if paying close attention, one may find it in the most unexpected settings. In my conversations with the former congregational chairpersons, both Barry and John spoke of exercising power tempered by love in military service. If any setting appears tuned to command and control leadership, it is the armed forces. Yet, John said that he tried never to appeal to his own rank or to his commanding officer to motivate those under him. He said, “I always sought to utilize only the power given to me by those I led.” Barry admitted, “when offered power, it is difficult not to accept it and let it feed your ego.” Still, he said, “my goal was to confront when necessary those above me and to be compassionate with those below me.” Both spoke of visiting airmen in the hospital and attending to the unique family needs of men in their charge. On another occasion I visited with Clyde, a retired paper company CEO. He told how he would arrive at the mill before dawn to greet all the workers at shift change. He made a point to know each of their names and to ask about their families. One day an employee caught him off guard saying, “Are you mad at me?” He said “No, you’re a good friend, and a model employee, how could I be mad at you?” The employee replied, “Well, yesterday when you came in you didn’t say hello to



me; you always say hello.” Clyde said he then realized how much that small gesture meant to each mill worker. A small act of care, in a setting bureaucracy, speaks volumes. These glimpses of power tempered in love suggest that servant-leaders may be found in most any setting. Where they are their presence is transformative. When Larry Spears and John Noble (2005) interviewed Margaret Wheatley and asked her how servant-leaders can encourage love in the workplace, Wheatley replied,

It’s simple: *just be loving!* Why has expressing love become such a problem when it’s a fundamental human characteristic? This is where I think we have overanalyzed and overcomplexified something that is known to everyone alive. Babies know how to unleash love. (Spears & Noble, 2005, p. 62)

Similarly hooks (2001) sends a summons for people in all facets of life to live by love: “Culturally, all spheres of American life—politics, religion, the workplace, domestic households, intimate relations—could and should have as their foundation a love ethic” (p. 87). Under the conditions of a love ethic like hooks (2001) describes volunteerism can thrive. Volunteers who are eager first to serve are welcomed into the place of leadership by compassionate positional (and/or professional) leaders willing to surrender their will to power and transfer power into new hands. Outside of such a loving environment the situation is too risky and the vulnerability to frightening for many, who desire simply to serve for a few hours here or there, to accept the more arduous commitment of offering their time, energy, and emotional capacity to serving as a volunteer leader. Who will critique me if I do it wrong? Will people respect my lead since I am not paid to do this? Do I even know what I am doing? These questions, and more, stoke



fears in volunteer leaders. The challenge hooks' (2001) writing sets may quell them; "return to love . . . surrender the will to power. . . . We cannot know love if we remain unable to surrender our attachment to power, if any feeling of vulnerability strikes terror in our hearts" (p. 221). Not doing so, she says, is a problem that haunts; "lovelessness torments" (p. 221).

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS OPTIMAL CLIMATE FOR SPROUTING AND GROWING VOLUNTEER LEADERS

I have thus far unashamedly presented servant-leadership as an optimal climate for sprouting and growing volunteer leaders since it is marked by power operating in a context of love, since it thrusts leaders outside themselves through a will to meaning, and since it endues empathy, awareness, healing, and a listening ear into leader-follower relationships. Still, I have not yet touched on two of the most significant features of servant-leadership, its hallmark and its test. The hallmark of servant-leadership is that servant-leaders begin not with a desire to lead, but in attitude are, and remain, servants first. This makes servant-leadership unique. Ferch (2012) remarks, "for Greenleaf, the true leader aspires first to serve, and this simple revolutionary thought has unseated the entire historical foundation of most leadership traditions" (p. 63).

The test of servant-leadership was defined by Greenleaf as well and Ferch (2012) comments that it is "not momentary; it endures throughout the lifespan" (p. 187) of the leader. The test is:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and 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? (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27)



Thus servant-leadership is committed to the wellbeing and personal growth of the volunteer even more so than the tasks and goals of the organization itself. Paradoxically such a focus need not hinder those goals. If Greenleaf's tests can be answered affirmatively, it is likely the organizational mission is being fulfilled to boot.

ONE CLIMATE: A VARIETY OF GARDEN TOOLS

A legitimate critique could be mounted against the thrust of this article so far. There are numerous other leadership theories, any one of which might be useful for the cultivation of committed volunteer leaders, yet I have not compared or contrasted servant-leadership with any of these. To this add Northouse's (2019) critique of servant-leadership: "researchers have been unable to reach consensus on a common definition or theoretical framework" (p. 242). Add again Alvesson and Einola's (2019) challenge that servant-leadership research falls in the realm of "feel-good studies," which "work as Prozac . . . for practitioners, aspiring leaders, and perhaps also leadership scholars," but "don't facilitate our understanding and they are hardly helpful for . . . real life situations rich with dilemmas" (p. 392).

Allow me to humbly suggest that the trouble confronting these scholars is category error. When categorized as one theory among the list of leadership theories, such as the situational approach, path-goal theory, adaptive leadership, or appreciative inquiry servant-leadership seems to lack coherence and specificity. Its concepts are too far ranging to condense into one theory. Indeed that was one of Northouse's (2019) critiques; he acknowledged that conceptualization is important to all kinds of leadership, yet he asked, "What is the rationale for identifying conceptualizing as a determinant of servant leadership?" (p. 243).



To answer this critique allow me to return to the garden image. One might have all the right tools for planting the garden, the rake and the hoe, even the rototiller, however, if the seed to be planted does not grow well in that climate, all the best tools are for naught. Most of the leadership theories that servant-leadership gets compared to are on the categorical level of tools. They have specific use in a particular context. Consider adaptive theory; it provides prescriptive concepts for organizations encountering adaptive change (Northouse, 2019). Servant-leadership, by contrast, did not begin as a theory to address a situation or element of leadership. Jiying Song (2020) reminds her readers “servant-leadership was not a leadership theory developed through empirical studies but a philosophy of life” (p. 47). As a way of being, servant-leadership resists delineation into a neat theoretical package. Instead, it gives an approach to all interactions and informs how one acts in both personal and public life. Sought after business consultant Ann McGee-Cooper said, “It changes everything about who you are and your values, how you think, your priorities, how you live your life” (Mentorsgallery, 2010a, 3:45). She spoke of servant-leadership informing her personal choice to eat vegan; she also used it to reorient multi-million-dollar companies. She was not even concerned to teach her clients the term servant-leadership because: “It’s not the word. . . . It’s what you are doing” (Mentorsgallery, 2010b, 0:14).

To understand where servant-leadership fits in relation to other leadership models it is helpful to review the thinking of Nietzsche (1901/1968) who said, “Life . . . is simply a will to accumulation of force. . . . Life . . . strives after a *maximal feeling of power*” (p. 368). To approach leadership from a will to power vein is as all-encompassing as servant-leadership only it operates in an alternate direction that tends toward coercion and manipulation rather than



meaning and love. Nietzsche’s view is self-centric not servant-first. It diminishes, degrades, and dominates, rather than making others freer, healthier, and more likely to be servant-leaders. Servant-leadership and will to power leadership could be viewed as opposite ends of a continuum with the spectrum in between representing a transactional approach (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptual Spectrum of Leadership Approaches



Note. Servant-leadership and will to power leadership are displayed in this figure as opposite ends of a spectrum while transactional approaches to leadership occupy the center.

Northouse (2019), articulating the ideas of George MacGregor Burns, described transactional leadership as the exchange between leaders and followers where outcomes are bartered for rewards. In a transactional mode Northouse (2019) explained, the “leader does not individualize the needs of the followers or focus on their personal development” (p. 173). By this alone it fails the test of servant-leadership described above. It also is distinct from pure will to power leadership as it exchanges a measure of power and control with the follower by mutual contract. Northouse (2019) said that in Burns’ estimation, transactional leadership “refers to the bulk of leadership models” (p. 164). For Burns this set up the introduction of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2019). Rather than follow Burns’ model, I suggest that servant-leadership, with its embrace of the will to meaning and the will to love, is a philosophy of life



opposite Nietzsche's will to power and that transactional leadership is the middle ground between. I see these three as distinct climates in which leadership emerges. Into these climates one may bring other theories as tools. A servant-leader may, for instance, take up the "5-D cycle" of appreciative inquiry (Hammond, 2013, p. 26). So also might a will to power leader or one with a transactional mindset. The three leaders will have very different ideas about what to define, discover, and dream and starkly different results from enacting that theory.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP PRODUCES A UNIQUE YET BEAUTIFUL GARDEN

A number of years ago the church I serve connected with a Nepali speaking refugee community, who lived nearby. They were seeking host space for a community garden. We gifted the use of our church property, water, and infrastructure. During a couple of joint dinners and work parties with their community members the plots were laid out, beds built, and waterlines installed. It seemed a great partnership. There were, however, some challenges. Volunteer church leaders had the idea that Nepali families would garden like Americans; that is, they would plant in neat rows and use sprinklers rather than hand water. Church garden leaders even became a bit manipulative about it. The Nepali families disconnected the hoses from the sprinklers to water by hand, so church leaders took away the hoses. The Nepali families sowed vegetables in mixed array with climbing pole beans planted to engulf corn stalks as they grew, so church leaders invited Washington State University master gardeners to give gardening lessons. It took a season for the church leaders to realize that serving meant relinquishing control and allowing the Nepali folks to emerge as volunteer leaders within the garden shifting power through an ethic of love.



Ferch (2020) noted, “the old leadership model in which leaders directed others toward increased productivity at the expense of personal meaning often concentrated on correcting problems and maintaining the status quo” (p. 175). In its place he speaks of what we need. We need “leaders who . . . can foster a deep sense of community. Such leaders embrace diversity rather than insisting on uniformity. They understand what it means to develop the freedom, health, wisdom, and autonomy of others” (p. 175). It is a new model such as this that will cultivate not only gardens but the next generation of volunteer leaders as well. If loved and served into leadership by humble persuasion and example they may just turn out to be the most dedicated generation of volunteer leaders yet excelling not only in service but in stewardship. Stewardship is yet another prime characteristic of servant-leadership, which this article has not even mentioned. That is a topic for another article; after all there is still plenty to learn and discern when it comes to servant-leadership. It is, as I have said, an entire way of life.

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