



GREENLEAF ON SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term *servant-leadership* in his seminal 1970 essay, “The Servant as Leader.” The servant-leader concept has had a deep and lasting influence over the past three decades on many modern leadership ideas and practices. Greenleaf spent his first career of 40 years at AT&T, retiring as director of management research in 1964. That same year Greenleaf founded The Center for Applied Ethics (later renamed The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership). He went on to have an illustrious 25-year second career as an author, a teacher, and a consultant. Greenleaf, who died in 1990, was the author of numerous books and essays on the theme of the servant as leader. His available published books now include *The Servant-Leader Within* (2003), *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (2002, 1977), *The Power of Servant-Leadership* (1998), *On Becoming a Servant-Leader* (1996), and *Seeker and Servant* (1996), along with many other separately published essays that are available through The Greenleaf Center.

This essay titled “The Inward Journey” from Greenleaf’s *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* contains an elegant, artistic look at the nature of the servant-leader. Here Greenleaf relates how his reading Robert Frost’s poem, “Directive,” deepened his understanding of the courageous nature of the servant as leader.



AN INWARD JOURNEY

—ROBERT GREENLEAF

It was my privilege to see a bit of Robert Frost in his last years and, having a feeling for the man as a person, his poetry has a special meaning for me.

Philip Booth, in a review, said: “Poems like ‘The Demiurge’s Laugh,’ ‘The Road Not Taken,’ ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,’ ‘On a Tree Fallen Across the Road,’ ‘Desert Places,’ ‘Come In,’ and ‘Directive’ map, in sequence, the road Robert Frost took into the dark woods, and record the serial ordeal he survived by surrendering himself to the conflicts such poems dramatize.” Earlier in Chapter IX, “Servant Responsibility in a Bureaucratic Society,” I quoted from “New Hampshire” and “The Night Light” passages which suggest the contrast between the gay and light-hearted conversationalist I knew in face-to-face meeting and the vast inner world of both terror and laughter that he confronted in his poetry.

In a group conversation with him one evening, he digressed on the subject of loyalty. At one point I interjected with: “Robert, that is not the way you have defined loyalty before.” He turned to me with a broad friendly grin and asked softly, “How did I define it?” I replied, “In your talk on Emerson a few years ago, you said, ‘Loyalty is that for the lack of which your gang will shoot you without benefit of trial by jury.’” To this man who had struggled without recognition until he was forty, and then had to move to England to get it, nothing could have pleased him more in his old age than to have an obscure passage like this quoted to him in a shared give-and-take with non-literary people.

After Robert Frost died in 1963 I wrote the following engagement with his poem *Directive*, partly as an acknowledgment of his influence on me and partly as a sharing with those who are on the search for what I have now come to see as *servant-leadership*, and who, sooner or later—and in



their own way—come to grips with who they are and where they are on the journey.

Directive

Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.
The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
Who only has at heart your getting lost,
May seem as if it should have been a quarry—
Great monolithic knees the former town
Long since gave up pretence of keeping covered.
And there's a story in a book about it:
Besides the wear of iron wagon wheels
The ledges show lines ruled southeast northwest,
The chisel work of an enormous Glacier
That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.
You must not mind a certain coolness from him
Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain.
Nor need you mind the serial ordeal
Of being watched from forty cellar holes
As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.
As for the woods' excitement over you
That sends light rustle rushes to their leaves,
Charge that to upstart inexperience.
Where were they all not twenty years ago?
They think too much of having shaded out
A few old pecker-fretted apple trees.
Make yourself up a cheering song of how
Someone's road home from work this once was,
Who may be just ahead of you on foot
Or creaking with a buggy load of grain.



The height of the adventure is the height
Of country where two village cultures faded
Into each other. Both of them are lost.
And if you're lost enough to find yourself
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
Then make yourself at home. The only field
Now left's no bigger than a harness gall.
First there's the children's house of make believe,
Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
Weep for what little things could make them glad.
Then for the house that is no more a house,
But only a belilaced cellar hole,
Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.
This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.
Your destination and your destiny's
A brook that was the water of the house,
Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,
Too lofty and original to rage.
(We know the valley streams that when aroused
Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)
I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

—Robert Frost

If Robert Frost had a deliberate strategy of influence in mind when he wrote "Directive," he kept it to himself the one time I heard him asked about its meaning. His answer was, "Read it and read it and read it, and it means what it says to you." He read this poem in a way that carried the impact of its obviously great importance and meaning to him.



What one gets by reading and reading and reading this poem cannot be predicted. One gets what one is ready for, what one is open to receive. Of course, this is what the poem is about. Our problem is circular: we must understand in order to be able to understand. It has something to do with awareness and symbols.

Awareness, letting something significant and disturbing develop between oneself and a symbol, comes more by being waited upon rather than by being asked. One of the most baffling of life's experiences is to stand beside one who is aware, one who is looking at a symbol and is deeply moved by it, and, confronting the same symbol, to be unmoved. Oh that we could just be open in the presence of symbols that cry out to speak to us, let our guards down, and take the risks of being moved!

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, a poem or story, allegory, myth, or 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 much that makes the symbol meaningful comes from the beholder.

The potentiality is both in the symbol and in the beholder. But one does not read old crystallized meaning into a new symbol. One does not even look to an old symbol as the justification for old meaning. All symbols are potential sources of new meaning. Nor is meaning a product of the conscious intent of the creator of the symbol. The poet is sometimes as surprised by new meaning in his own poem as is anyone else. Meaning from an interaction with a symbol is a new creation. It can be new with each opportunity. Taking the opportunity may be the measure of one's growth.

If one views inward growth as a unique and personal journey, then what one makes of a symbol is to some extent unique and personal. A symbol may say something in common to all beholders, but the real lift and insight is beyond the range of verbal communication. Yet it is important that we try to share our symbolic experiences because, as responsible people, we need the check and guidance of other responsible people. All of us



encounter obstacles to growth. We may find new paths in the accounts of fellow seekers. It is in this spirit of sharing that I offer my experience with “Directive.”

Back out of all this now too much for us,

Those of us who undertake the journey must accept that, simply by living in the contemporary world and making our peace with it as it is, we may be involved in a way that blocks our growth. Primitive people may have suffered much from their environment, but they were not alienated; the Lascaux cave paintings attest to this. They probably did not articulate a theology, but they may have been religious in the basic sense of “bound to the cosmos.” With us, sophistication, rationality, greater mastery of the immediate environment have taken their toll in terms of a tragic separation from the opportunity for religious experience, i.e., growth in the feeling of being bound to the cosmos.

So we must go:

*Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,*

To go back, something must be lost. This is the key to the journey: something must be lost in order that something may be found. (*May be*, but not necessarily found.) And it is not an easy loss! *Burned, dissolved, broken off*. These are radical, searing losses. But they are the losses we must contemplate if the *time made simple*, spontaneity, the indispensable condition for progress on the inward journey, is our goal.

What follows in the poem after the *time made simple* has been achieved—an enigmatic symbolism, something to puzzle over, something that both is and is no more. A transmutation?

There is a house that is no more a house



*Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.*

Then we turn to the poem for direction.

*The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
Who only has at heart your getting lost,*

If you'll let a guide direct you who only has at heart your getting lost! This is a big *if*; who wants that kind of guide? Don't we ask for a guide who is certain of the destination, and then only after we are certain that it is a destination we want to go to? No, this is not the kind of guide many of us are looking for. We already feel lost. Why then would we want a guide who only has at heart our getting lost?

This is the ground on which the great religious traditions of the world have always stood. The tradition built around the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the one in which I grew up and which has the greatest symbolic meaning to me now, seems especially emphatic on this point. Jesus seemed only to have at heart our getting lost; he was mostly concerned with what must be taken away rather than with what would be gained. We find clues to what must be lost in such sayings as "Unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom," "Cleanse the inside of the cup, that the outside also may be clean," and "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

A few general terms describe what will be received: heaven, eternal life, salvation, the kingdom of God. The believers of the literal word know what these terms mean; they have to. But seekers who are responding to symbols don't know, don't have to know, wouldn't be helped by knowing. They are not too interested in meaning as bounded by the vagaries of language. Rather they seek a guide who only has at heart their getting lost.

*The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
Who only has at heart your getting lost,*



*May seem as if it should have been a quarry
Great monolithic knees the former town
Long since gave up pretense of keeping covered.*

Grotesque dream imagery perhaps?

And there's a story in a book about it:

Could it be the story of the search for the Holy Grail, that great legend from many ages and cultures in which the object of the search is that symbolic cup which holds the source of spiritual life? In the version that comes to us from Malory, the Knights who search for the Grail largely pursue their missions alone, although they are gathered for the consummation of the search.

*Besides the wear of iron wagon wheels
The ledges show lines ruled southeast northwest,
The chisel work of an enormous Glacier
That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.
You must not mind a certain coolness from him
Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain.**

*“Connecticut where I live is full of very real and concrete towns that are no more towns, places in the deep woods which are exactly as described in this poem, from the wagon wheel marks on the ledges uncovered on the old wood roads to the springs and the children’s playhouses and the cellar holes and the trees which have shaded out old apple orchards. I can show you three or four on my own property here. And there is a ghost town a few miles away, lost in deep woods, with at least a hundred and forty cellar holes which watch as you walk through it.” (From a letter from a friend commenting on an early draft of this chapter.)

Along the way, as your guide directs you who only has at heart your getting lost, perhaps you will be chilled to discomfort, but you must not mind.



*Nor need you mind the serial ordeal
Of being watched from forty cellar holes
As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.*

These may be the curious eyes from curious places that could add to your discomfort. In “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” the maid had gone to the shed at night to get oil for her lamp, but all but one of the firkins which presumably contained oil held, in fact, a thief.

*As for the woods’ excitement over you
That sends light rustle rushes to their leaves,
Charge that to upstart inexperience.
Where were they all not twenty years ago?
They think too much of having shaded out
A few old pecker-fretted apple trees.*

The immature and the superficial may flap their wings in a way that diverts and distorts with a seeming excitement. Pass them by.

*Make yourself up a cheering song of how
Someone’s road home from work this once was,
Who may be just ahead of you on foot
Or creaking with a buggy load of grain.*

Why would you need to make up a cheering song? Would you by chance be feeling lonely as you get more and more lost? Then you supply your own cheer. You imagine that you are following someone just ahead—a simple person, a workman on foot, or a tender of a small farm—symbolically, people who never had much veneer or from whom much of the veneer has been stripped as it is now being stripped from you. Believing this, the song you make up can really cheer!

*The height of the adventure is the height
Of country where two village cultures faded
Into each other. Both of them are lost.*



You are now at the height where the artificiality of culture has faded away. You are not constrained. There is no certainty. You are on your own. This is the real adventure.

*And if you're lost enough to find yourself
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
Then make yourself at home.*

You must be *lost enough* before you can find yourself The test, maybe, is: *If you can't find yourself, you're not lost enough.*

Pull in your ladder road behind you—this is interesting symbolism. Could this be echoing Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* when Father Mapple climbed to the pulpit to preach that great allegorical sermon? Ishmael, telling the story, describes how this venerable seafaring-man-turned-chaplain mounted to the pulpit on a rope ladder and then turned around and slowly pulled the ladder up into the pulpit. Said Ishmael, “Thought I, there must be some sober reason for this thing; furthermore, it must symbolize something unseen. Can it be, then, that by the act of physical isolation, he signifies his spiritual withdrawal for the time, from all outward worldly ties and connection? Yes, for replenished with meat and wine of the word, to the faithful man of God, this pulpit, I see, is a self-contained stronghold—with a perennial well of water within the walls.”

“Put a sign up *Closed* to all but me. Then make yourself at home.” You have lost some affiliations you once valued. But you welcome the separation. You are alone, and yet you are not alone because you are beginning to feel at home. But there is more, much more.

*The only field
Now left's no bigger than a harness gall.*

Is this the farm that is no more a farm?

First there's the children's house of make believe,



*Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
Weep for what little things could make them glad.*

Weep? Why weep? Perhaps because as adults little things no longer make us glad? Or have we lost the capacity to be glad?

*Then for the house that is no more a house,
But only a belilaced cellar hole,
Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.
This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.*

The thing that man built as his abode is but a hole closing like a dent in dough. How ephemeral are man's works.

*Your destination and your destiny's
A brook that was the water of the house,*

Destination and destiny—two interesting words. They could be synonymous. But if one may choose among many meanings, *destination* could be the end of the journey and *destiny* could be the ultimate (therefore unachievable) goal. Paradoxically, at one time one might be at the end and the beginning of one's journey.

Then *water*, the great symbol of wholeness. The house, the ephemeral, is gone but the water is here. And it is near its source.

*Cold as a spring as yet so near its source
Too lofty and original to rage.
(We know the valley streams that when aroused
Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)*

Cold, near its source, lofty, and original. Nothing old and shopworn here. This is new and fresh. It is not in doctrines and dogmas. It is not substantive and codified. To make the point clear we parenthetically note that we know all about the turbulent contention of historical ideas. But what



is before us now is too lofty and original to rage. It is not the confused and raging torrent of the valley stream after the waters (no longer cold, fresh, and original) have merged from many sources.

This is a painful confrontation for those who cling to the comfort and security of old ways, or who would like to remake the new world into an old image. Look at the past, yes; but don't expect historical ideas to have cool freshness, to be lofty and original.

This is powerful symbolism. Cold water, near its source, lofty and original. This is the kind of water one would like to drink—a long hearty drink. But who shall drink this water?

*I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)*

The cup, the Grail, that ancient symbol of the quest for wholeness, is a broken goblet from the children's playhouse. It has the imperfection of the rejected and the discarded. It was once one of those little things that make children glad, the kind of thing for which many adults, immersed in cumber and Martha-like involvements, no longer can be glad.

And it is under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it, so can't get saved, as St. Mark says they mustn't. What an awful injunction! What did St. Mark say?

Is it the fourth chapter of Mark? Jesus had just spoken the parable of the sower as he sat in a boat at the edge of the sea. Having concluded the parable, he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." *And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they*



may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven."

Here we have the inner and the outer circles. To the inner circle, to those who have the secret of the kingdom, he explains everything. To the outer circle, those who know not the secret, he speaks only through parables so *the wrong ones can't understand it*, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn again, and be forgiven!

Poetry, my friend has said, is a way of writing in parables so the wrong ones won't understand.

There are several "tests" suggested in other of the Gospel accounts. The one given in this passage in Mark is the most demanding, the most baffling. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew the test is one of *humanity*: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me—truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." And the reward to the righteous who meet this test is "eternal life." But here, too, the righteous and the unrighteous are separated by the vivid imagery of the sheep and the goats.

In the third chapter of John, in the conversation with Nicodemus, the test is *faith*: "Whoever believes in him (the Son) will have eternal life."

The requirement laid down in the fourth chapter of Mark is clearly one of spiritual growth; it is the route of initiation, of ordeal, a journey for which "Directive" is a guide. Could it be that such is requisite to being fully human, to the capacity for faith? Unless one perceives and understands, unless one is *aware*, can one, in fact, be human and believe?

All of this forces me to view this passage from Mark as symbolism in a particular way. Privately, to the inner circle, he explains everything. To those without he speaks in parables, symbols, symbols with which there must be a searching confrontation and a mutual response.

How, then, may we view Jesus symbolically at this point? I can see



two quite different possibilities and I find them both important. The first is Jesus as the greatest of the avatars, the symbolic consummation in one human being of the total Judaeo-Christian tradition—and what a tough and demanding tradition it is. Here is the one who could, with all gentleness, say to the woman taken in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” And who could answer the question “And who is my neighbor?” with the Good Samaritan story. Yet he did not say to the woman that because she was not condemned she was within the circle of those who have the secret of the kingdom and to whom everything is explained. Nor did he imply that the Samaritan was such a person. He was, of course, the great teacher, and when he was speaking in parables he was holding out the opportunity for his hearers to proceed on with the journey. But there is the suggestion that only the complete dedication of the disciple will make it to the inner circle.

The second view is to see Jesus in this passage in Mark as symbolic of an aspect of people’s understanding rather than as people in their entirety. I find this view also necessary because there is something in me that hesitates to accept him as a man who is wilfully condemning the ignorant and the befuddled to eternal darkness.

With this reservation, *what* then is Jesus at this point in the story? Can he be *meaning*? Could meaning be what is speaking in this passage? If so, on what terms is meaning available?

To those who are without, who have *not* lost what must be lost, it will be enigma, confusion—meaning does not come through. To those who are within, who have accepted the guide who only has at heart their getting lost, who have travelled the road of grotesque imagery, the coolness of the Glacier, the curious spying eyes, the flutter of frivolity, the aloneness and self-cheer, and who have reached the height of the adventure where they are lost enough to find themselves—they have joined that group to which all may aspire to whom meaning comes through and is clear beyond confusion. But *meaning* is a stern taskmaster: one must *aspire*, one must *persevere*, one must accept the *discipline* of dealing thoughtfully with symbols.



“Directive” offers a promise to those who do aspire: when we have gone back out of all this now too much for us, when we are lost enough to find ourselves and have pulled in our ladder road behind us—then we shall have the opportunity to drink of the waters of wholeness.

*Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion*

Yes, here is the water to drink and be whole *again*. Were you once whole? In your childish naiveté perhaps? Possibly in your own uniqueness which you have denied—the opportunity to live in the light of your own inward experience? And what is beyond confusion?

A measure of people’s wholeness will not bring them certainty or tranquility (although brief moments of these delights may be theirs). *Beyond confusion* is the promise. Their state may be moving, developing, uncertain, even dangerous. But they will not be confused because they will be at one with the circumstance, both far and near. In fact, they will *be* the circumstance; they will no longer be alienated. Rightness, responsibility, courage will define their character. They will be bound to the cosmos. They will be at home in this world as it is, as it always is.

For modern people this is probably not achievable, not wholly, but one can move toward it. Depending upon age, interest and drive, the deepness of the set of attitudes and habit patterns, and other factors (some unknown)—depending on such as these one person will move farther and with greater facility than another.

No one can judge, from where one now stands, how difficult the next step along the road of spiritual growth will be. Those of good works, the upright moral citizens, the pillars in the church may find the next step of staggering proportions. Their seeming opposites—the unsuccessful, the misfit, the unlovely, the rejected—may take the next step with ease. We cannot assume with assurance that we are relatively advantaged or disadvantaged for any stage of the inward journey.

To be on with the journey one must have an attitude toward loss and



being lost, a view of oneself in which powerful symbols like *burned, dissolved, broken off*—however painful their impact is seen to be—do not appear as senseless or destructive. Rather the losses they suggest are seen as opening the way for new creative acts, for the receiving of priceless gifts. Loss, *every loss one's mind can conceive of*, creates a vacuum into which will come (if allowed) something new and fresh and beautiful, something unforeseen—and the greatest of these is *love*. The source of this attitude toward loss and being lost is *faith*: faith in the validity of one's own inward experience; faith in the wisdom of the great events of one's history, events in which one's potential for nobility has been tested and refined; faith in doubt, in inquiry, and in the rebirth of wisdom; faith in the possibility of achieving a measure of sainthood on this earth from which flow concerns and responsibility and a sense of rightness in all things. By these means mortals are raised above the possibility of hurt. They will suffer, but they will not be hurt because each loss grants them the opportunity to be greater than before. Loss, by itself, is not tragic. What *is* tragic is the failure to grasp the opportunity which loss presents. I find these assumptions necessary for the acceptance of "Directive" as a guide

For those who, having followed thus far, would be on with the journey, I submit "Directive" as a dependable guide *providing* they will let something develop between themselves and the poem, a new level of meaning about the inward journey, something unique and personal for each reader, a continually evolving awareness.

Awareness, below the level of the conscious intellect, I see as infinite and therefore equal in every human being, perhaps in every creature. The blinders which block our conscious access to our own vast awareness are the uncompensated losses we have sustained; and the errors we have acquired from our cultural inheritance, from the undigested residues of our own experience, and from our conscious learning. "Directive" would seem to say: Remove the blinders from your awareness by losing what must be lost, the key to which no one can give you but which your own inward resources rightly cultivated will supply. Then set forth upon your journey



and, if you travel far enough, filling the voids of loss with the noblest choices, you *may* be given the secret of the kingdom: awe and wonder before the majesty and the mystery of all creation. Then, and only then, will the parables be explained (the drinking of the cold, lofty, original water). I submit this as a hopeful hypothesis when hope is dim. I will bet my life upon it.