



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP: CREATING AN ALTERNATIVE FUTURE:
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—PETER BLOCK

[Technician asks Peter if he needs technology.]

I don't need any of that, no. No power and no point; I'm a free man.

[Laughter.]

Anyway, thank you.

I like being here, I chose to come like you did, and so it's an honor for me to be here. I have great respect for you, Larry [looking over to Larry Spears]; somehow you've managed to advance things and bring an idea into the world without commercializing it. And in this modern day that's quite a miracle. Most of the ideas, once they get commercialized, lose their substance. They lose their meaning.

I always felt that once an idea gets popular it's not useful anymore because then everybody markets it, they change their old binder cover, and whatever was new in the idea is co-opted and lost. So when an idea becomes popular, I have to let go of it and move on to something else. But you've held on to the spirit of servant-leadership, you've kept it vague and undefinable, which I think is a great strategic advantage. People can come every year to figure out what the hell this is, and by not answering, they're forced to come the next year. So it's both a clever marketing strategy and a stance in support of the spirit of it rather than the substance of it. [Laughter.] So thank you for what you've created.

Also, Greenleaf was also a model for me, and the model he was is not so much the idea, it's just that he valued thought, he valued thinking; he



was a reflective human being. As time goes by the ideas matter more to me than the experience.

You say what's your life about now? It's about trying to change my mind.

The world doesn't value that; the world values *doing*, it wants to know *how*. How do we *do* this. Questions of methodology. This culture worships the god of efficiency, the god of productivity. The question everybody has is, "How do you make this work? How long does it take? Cheaper?" All that kind of thing.

And so the thought that the thoughts matter seems important. If there's something that symbolizes Greenleaf, it's that he was a thoughtful human being; he knew that an idea would change peoples' lives without specifying the form and nature and workshop and materials that idea requires. It's an easy Yes to be invited here. The answer's always going to be Yes.

So here's some thoughts about our time together. [Looking to the crowd.] You came here for a reason; so did I. There are a couple of thoughts I want to share with you. The first thought is this:

Change your thinking, change your life.

And that means something to me, so my intention for this hour I have with you is to offer some thoughts that will change *my* thinking and maybe offer you a way of thinking also.

Also, you come for affirmation. These are fragile thoughts. The world as I see it, gets increasingly commercialized. The conversations about love, about forgiveness, about hospitality and generosity have little place in the public dialogue; they're contained in small rooms. And so part of the reason to come to this is to say, well, I came for a conversation, a public conversation that in the rest of our lives becomes only a private one.

And so there's lots of reasons. You also come to be together, to network. I want to kind of pay attention to that; there's meaning to that. The ideas are useful, but without relationship or connection, they're not rooted. Consider what I've presented: "Change the conversation, change your



thinking, change your life.” And you say, “Well, how do I root that, how do I ground that?” And I think it’s grounded only in community.

So I think, well, what’s the work I’m doing in the world? It’s about the restoration of community, which in this world is quite fragmented. The fact that you’re creating Centennial Community and putting the Greenleaf Center in the middle of that—it’s a fascinating thought. Because most of us have lost our sense of community and connectedness. We’re deeply isolated. It stuns me, thirty-five years into this work, that people are as lonely and isolated as they were when I started back in the ‘60s, at the age of eleven. [Laughter.]

You have to imagine your life, and then before you live it, the act of imagination, the act of possibility is what creates the future, but it has to be rooted in community.

So I want to talk about both those things: changing our thinking, and building community. I want us to talk a little about what’s an alternative future. “What’s the nature of transformation?” is the question I keep struggling with. Most of my efforts at transformation have been mostly cosmetic; the questions I’ve always gotten asked are cosmetic ones of “How do we change the performance appraisal system?” and “How do we measure this thing?” I wrote an empowerment book years ago and Pepsi-Cola called me, and if Pepsi-Cola’s here forgive me for what I’m about to say, because I like your product, I like it better than Coke, and if Coca-Cola’s here, forgive me, because I like Coca-Cola also. [Laughter.] All right. So they call and they say, “We like empowerment; it’s become one of our core values. We’ve listed it as one of six values: teamwork, customer, economics. . . and empowerment. Would you help us know how to measure empowerment? Would you help us include empowerment in our performance appraisal program? Would you help us train for empowerment so we know what it is and we know our people are getting it and all that?” So those are all the signs to me of a cosmetic future. As soon as you start to go right to the practical, you say, well, this thing will pass too.

So the idea of what’s truly enduring is a great question.



What would really transform? My most successful consulting is with Portland Gas & Electric. That's a place where I spent almost no time and they had huge changes. Most of my clients I spend a huge amount of time with very little change. I think it's the power of an idea, and also just when it gets embedded in community, something changes. My intent is to both share the ideas and also get us connected.

One core idea is that the nature of assembly is what creates an alternative future. We don't have much consciousness about assembly. We still meet in rooms like this; we still meet in rooms that are unfriendly to community, they're unfriendly to aliveness. The walls are blank in most of the rooms in which I work. The walls don't like that. I've been talking to walls lately, and they are very depressed when they have no aliveness on them. Wall says, "I was not put up here not to have access to nature or some art on me." And so the walls are that way. They have no windows, so if you meet in a room with no windows you've just rendered nature obsolete. You say, "That's okay Nature, we'll take it from here." The idea is, how do you bring people together, in an environment, a modern society, a glass and steel building society, and help them inhabit it in a way that brings aliveness into the room? So this to me is the work. It's one thing to sit in a chair; it's another to occupy it. This is where I learn from improvisational theater. They say that once you stand in a place, then you occupy that space. You make a decision to occupy the space that you're in, which is another whole level than just standing there. The other thing improv teaches me is that when you're handed a line, you accept it. You don't turn it back; when somebody says you're in a jungle and there's a snake four inches from your nose and it's raining, you don't say to your improv partner, "I don't like that one. Could you send me something else?" Which means to me that whatever life hands you, you've got to say, well, how do I respond to what's handed to me, instead of wishing or demanding or hoping that something else comes along.

And so the room matters, and we have to figure out how to occupy this room and for us to occupy a room we have to get connected to each other.



Right now we're connecting to me. And this is the opening spot of every convening. Everybody could say, "Who called us together and what did you have in mind for us?" And we do it like this and I talk about equality and partnership and empowerment and I'm always four feet above everybody else, standing; you're sitting. I have a whole stage to roam on, this thing [microphone] comes off so I can move around, and so I have all this space, you have about two square feet, and so the whole issue is always one of land reform, all right? [Laughter.] And so before we can go any further, why worry about your connection with each other? Right now you're looking at me, which means that the people you came to be with have turned their backs on you. If you think about the opening moment of how we convened, "Oh, I came to be with. . . What did you come for?" When you go home you'll say, "The great part was the conversations we had in the spaces between presentations." I always feel these conferences are meaningful conversations interrupted by lectures and small group exercises. And so this is the default culture. This is what the world hands [us]—we don't complain about it; this is the way it is. You don't go to Mars and say, "Could I interest you in peace?" There are certain things that are just a fact, and the patriarchal nature of the culture is a fact. Every room we walk into is always organized for patriarchy. It's organized for presentation and display and PowerPoint and microphones. And so that's just a fact and every business I know began that way so the default culture is always predictable. I know just what's going to happen when I walk into most rooms. It would be lined up for order, for efficiency, for amplification of one person to other people listening; so you say well, I came here to turn that around, to invert the world. I've been thinking lately, I want to invert my thinking 180 degrees. Not 179 and not 181 but 180 degrees. And so one of the thoughts to invert is, maybe the audience creates the performance. Maybe the listening creates the speaking. Maybe citizens create leaders, maybe employees create bosses, maybe students create teachers and children create parents. Maybe the purpose for problem solving is to build relationship. In this culture we think the purpose of relationships is to problem solve. You hear people say, "Well, we don't have to like each other to work together,"



which means, “Screw the relationship, as long as we get work done, I don’t care who you are.” All that conventional thinking, that the speaker matters, the performer matters, the teacher matters, that I’m responsible, my parents explain who I became — which is always interesting because then I always wonder who explained what *they* became, and then we go back but you have to go back to the first amoeba to find cause, and so then we say, well that kind of thinking is the problem. The thought that the person on top is cause, is problematic. We need to invert boss-subordinate, teacher-student, parent-child, speaker-listener, performer-audience. And so the first inversion is to turn that around. Suppose I radically changed the location of cause by 180 degrees? So now we have thought number three and a half. [Laughter.]

You see if I care about transformation I have to change my mind about where cause resides. And you say well that’s not true, speaker does matter, parent does matter, teacher does matter, performer does matter. I know it matters, but what would happen if I inverted that, where would that take me? It’s not an argument about whether the speaker or the listener is cause, but you say if I treated the listener as cause, where does that take me? Well it takes me down a different path, which right now means you have to get connected to change the nature of listening in this room, because right now we’re organized for a patriarchal experience and the worst thing that could happen is that I would be good at this, and then you’d say “How was your first hour?” “It was great, Peter was great,” and then you’d be in trouble because you’d think that to have a great experience you’d have to have a great speaker. And so I’ve made a commitment to boring, dull, drawn out, and confusing keynote speeches, and I’ve built a reputation for that and I’m not going to give up on that easily. I won’t be talked out of my mediocrity! It took me a long time to even reach this level. We need to do something, so we need to do something to the tables, the tables are round. Most places at least. . . the auditoriums are the most patriarchal, where if you want to move a chair you need a toolbox. These rooms are lined up, usually the fire marshal wants us lined up, if the fire marshal had their way we’d meet outside.



But these rooms are lined up in chairs up and down and in really tight places the chairs are locked to each other because they get lonely and so they need to embrace each other (I've personified all objects, including myself in a way), and so you say well we don't want lines, let's do round tables, and then the next step would be no tables. So how would you really create a room easy for occupation and habitation? You create just a room with chairs with wheels that swivel, so the wheels mean I came here to move around, I didn't come here to stay in one place emotionally, spiritually, intellectually. And I need ones that swivel because I want to look in all directions; I don't want to spend my morning with my friends turning their backs to me.

So that's all a notion that the way we assemble has enormous impact on who we become, on our spirit. The spirit of servant-leadership values the idea of surrender; it says that the action and the orientation is not where we thought it was, the cause is not where we thought it was. The book *Journey to the East*, I love that book, and every time I get lost I read it again, except when I lose the book. So let's do something about that. You came by *choice*, and you say, well what creates an alternative future? To me the qualifying question of transformation is, do you want the future to be distinct from the past? If you say what's the most powerful question I could ask people in the beginning of anything, it's did you come for a future distinct from the past? We have funny thoughts about the future and the past; we think we need to honor the past, we think we need to respect the past, remember the past. . . we think we have to learn from the past. The inversion, I would say, is none of those are useful; all of those keep me embedded in the past. If I want to honor or remember or learn from the past, you say, "Let me complete the past. Let me complete it. Let it be there and have it done; then that creates a void and a space for an alternative future." The only way the future gets created in a distinct way is through invitation. Somebody decides to come up. The fulcrum, the hinging point on alternative futures is whether people are willing to exercise choice or not. And so the idea of bringing people together is to have every moment a choiceful



moment. And you say, “Well what’s the work of transformation or creating a world that works for everybody?” (or whatever language you would have), you say, “Well how do you confront people with their freedom?” And that to me is a powerful thought. It *only* happens through invitation. I’d rather have two people in the room who chose to be there than a thousand who were sent. And most of the places you work in, in organizations, people are sent. I always ask people, “Are you here by choice?” “How many people were here by choice?” I ask groups, and they all sit there like this, in the middle-aged white male learning position, arms crossed, leaning back, “This too shall pass.” “How many chose to come?” Most places, other than this, nobody moves. Then I say, “How many of you were sent or nominated for this session?” and they all raise their hand like this, and I always wonder why they’re so enthusiastic about their servitude, they could just raise their hand but they’re like this [waves emphatically], “I was sent and I’m proud of it. God forbid I should have chosen my life in any small fashion, like coming to this meeting on my own.” [Laughter.]

And so the idea of invitation is very powerful. What constitutes a powerful invitation? One that says, “Please come, and if you come here’s what’s required of you.” Most invitations are too soft, there are elements of begging: “Please come, it’s going to be great, nothing much will be required of you, it’s not going to take long, we’ll be fast, it’ll be organized, Robert’s Rules of Order, there’ll be food, there’ll be drink, the seats will be comfortable, and if you can come late, come at all, leave early, whatever, please come. God bless you.” A powerful invitation is one that says, “We want you to come! Now if you choose to come, here’s what will be demanded of you. You’ll have to show up. You’ll have to engage with your peers in powerful conversations. You’ll have to leave your interests at the door. We didn’t come together to negotiate; the future’s not created through negotiation, it’s created through imagination. It’s created from a dream, from. . . a *possibility* creates an alternative future. So we’re not coming to negotiate. Leave your interests at home. You’re coming to engage in the



primary actions between you and other citizens, you and other people who came. If you're willing to live by these requirements, please come."

To me that's a great invitation because then it gives you some traction with people. When you're working with the world you need traction, you need leverage. The idea's powerful but the experience is hard to create. So I like the thought that I only want to be in rooms where people have come through invitation, even if it's just three of us. And so if you say what's the strategy, step one is to say "organized by invitation." You live with the anxiety, especially if you work in communities, which is what I do. . . anxiety that nobody will show up. So it takes you about a year to get up the nerve to make that invitation. In organizations it's harder. You're never quite sure when people say they were sent or show up, because when people say, "Please come Friday at two o'clock" in an organization, everybody comes. And if you say, "This is an invitation, don't come if you don't want to," everybody still comes. So when they come you have to give them a second choice, you say, "Okay, thank you for coming, we're going to take a break in ten minutes, and if you come back after the break then you really want to be here." The idea is to pay great attention to the nature of the invitation.

So what I would like you to do at these tables is have a conversation. You need to get connected before I can speak. Until you're connected I can't talk. My words mean nothing. That's the thought. If I really believe that the listening creates the speaking, then I have to do something about the listening. You say, "What creates the listening?" Connectedness creates the listening. All learning is social. People cannot learn on their own. They can acquire information, but transformation, any learning that is life-changing, moment-changing, thinking-changing, has to happen in community, in connectedness, knowing that I'm not alone in this place. And every time I walk in the room I walk in alone. Even when you come to this conference sometimes. . . Every time I go to a conference or a workshop, as soon as I get to the door I think, "What am I doing here? I've got lots to do, my mind is half behind. Do I really wanna be here?" That's why the back of the room



fills up first, even in church. People come to experience God and they sit in the back of the church. Like, “I came to find God, but—maybe not. So I want to sit in a location where it’s easy to get out.” This is a life stance, right. How you do the mat in yoga is how you do your life. How you do every moment of your life is a microcosm of the whole thing. Rooms fill up in the back first, they fill up in the corners first. . . . so you have to deal with that in some way. The choreography of assembly is enormously important. We treat it as an afterthought; mostly we talk about content. We plan a meeting, we think, what do we want to say, what’s the goal, what’s the objective; most meetings are organized around problem solving. I’ve decided to make a commitment to postpone problem solving. This is what I’m taking a stance for in the world, the postponement of problem solving. The only useful thing about problem solving is it builds relationship, so I tolerate some of it. But you say “If I really want an alternative future, if I came here for the future to be distinct from the past, problem solving can’t get me there.” In this culture you’re not allowed to leave a meeting without a list. I’ve been trying that and if you want to make people angry, say, “Welcome, we’re meeting for two hours and we’re gonna leave here with no lists and no action plans.” People get very lost. “What is this, some kind of commie-pinko operation?” or they accuse you of being from California or at the last resort the “touchy-feely crap” injunction is made: “I don’t want any of this touchy-feely crap.” [Laughter.] Which means I don’t want to make contact with anybody, I don’t want to talk about my feelings, and I want nothing to shift. All of these are kind of the context to say, well, maybe the way we assemble citizens together has more power than anything we have to say to them. If I really want to replace cause and take it from here, if I’m interested in land reform and say there has to be a renegotiation of the social contract every place you go, be of service, or forgiveness or love or surrender is what I showed up for, you always have to renegotiate the contract, and you renegotiate that by paying careful attention to the nature of assembly. And the round table, the circle, is a symbol for that.



So what I'd like you to do is split the table in half, all right, so everybody gets a chance to talk, and I'd like you to share with the people around you: What are you doing here? What's the transformation that led you to come here? And another interesting open invitational question is Who's paying a price for your being here? It's no small thing to come to this, but somebody else is paying a price for that. And I like the thought that somebody else is paying a price for me. Because it ups the ante for me, that means I have to take really serious the fact that I'm here; I can't just be in the seat and be someplace else, I have to show up and occupy this seat, otherwise I can't live with the responsibility [that] they paid a price and I found no meaning. And so when you ask the people the question, "Who else is paying a price?" it ups the ante for our being here. It's designed to induce a certain amount of guilt, which is kind of a Jewish-Italian strategy. . . I thought it was just being a Jew but then every cultural group says, "No, I grew up that way. . ."—So how 'bout taking about 8 minutes. Find at least two other people. In the choreography of assembly, trios are very effective because they're unstable; it's always two against one, which creates a kind of energy, and say, "What's the shift you came here to experience and who's paying a price for your being here?" Small group interaction. Do it now. I'll ring the bell.

Now, let me ask you to stop. If you have any thoughts or comments you want to make, feel free to raise them. We have microphones that float; all you have to lose is the respect of your peers. [Laughter.] Not a big deal. So those are the two opening thoughts. One is a qualifying question. You say how. . . To me servant-leadership, the spirit of that, is a leadership that confronts people with their freedom. To me that's an act of love. Now I do it in an aggressive, edgy style. So I'm not a role model. That's a disclaimer. How I am with you is not a role model; I don't like the role models. So style is irrelevant. I'm off style. Most of the style development for all of us—it's over. I don't want to change myself. . . I want to become more of who I am. And so it's not about style. But the act of love is to confront people with their freedom, is to assemble, lead, in a way that says the



choice resides in all of us. What greater gift can you give somebody than the experience of their own power, the experience that they have the capacity to create the world? Which I kind of believe. When we say, “Let me create an alternative future,” well the act of creating is to say that I’m responsible for the world that I’m in; I’ve helped create this. Most of our public conversation is about blame. If you look at the media, it’s all about how do we find fault with somebody? Who did this? We don’t care what happened, we don’t care about the suffering, we want to know whose fault it was. And so the public conversation is about retribution. To me the idea is that public conversation is the conversation held with more than three people in the room. Whether it’s the media, the large community conversation, or our way of being together is 331 people, I want to change the nature of the public conversation. Well the way you do this is to confront people with the fact they have choice over all these elements, how we come together. Some people say I want to respect the past, I want to honor the past, I want to learn from the past, I’m determined by the past. . . Some people don’t want an alternative future, that’s fine, but then what are we doing together? Find another room to be in; we want to be in a room where the future is waiting to be created. It’s always created out of nothing. There’s a void. Every time you complete the past, every time you figure out well let me create an alternative future, there’s always an empty space. The reason I choose safety is that empty space frightens me. The reason I stay busy, the reason I now have my cell phone wired to my body, implanted in my body, is what would I do? I’ve been thinking lately. . . now when we hold meetings you say, “Why don’t we put the cell phones on silent. Why don’t we turn *off* the cell phones? Either turn it off or let me answer it.” I’ve done that a couple of times: “Can I answer it?” “Sure.” I answer it and say, “Can’t you leave this person alone? All they want is a couple of days by themselves. Is your grubby little need so central?” (Like I say, this is not a style issue.) [Laughter.] You say, “Well I keep busy, cell phone, lists, Blackberry. . .” Now you see all these guys with their hands below the desk going like this [gestures], I can’t help thinking when they’re doing that it’s got something to do with something more than a Blackberry, but they’re



going like this all the time. . . I'm afraid of the empty space, afraid of my own silence, afraid of the void.

What you're selling to the world in servant-leadership is allowing people to experience the act of creating something on their own. To create something I have to be willing to tolerate the anxiety that comes with that empty space. Well what do you mean? Every time if you advocate servant-leadership people are gonna want you to define it. They want to find safety even in the midst of adventure. You say, "I'm here to serve you," and they'll say, "What do you mean by that, could you define exactly what your role is and what my role is in your service? And what's expected of me, what do you have in mind for me?" Then my answer for that is to say, "I have nothing in mind for you." Now people feel abandoned when you do that. They want you to have something in mind; they want their Mommy, they want their mentor, they want their Daddy, that's what leadership's all about is an escape from freedom, and they want you there so they can project qualities onto you. And then we collude with it by training people. The water bottle is the symbol of that for me. You can't go to a meeting without water bottles. I don't see them here; must be a special meeting. They have nipples on them, if you noticed them, and I say what the hell is this about? [Laughter.] If I'm Lance Armstrong in the Tour de France maybe I want to suck on a water bottle and I need a nipple on it to keep it from spilling. But the path between meetings is usually not that hazardous. And at the end of the day they're still sucking on 'em long after the water's gone. So I think something else is going on here: it's a wish to be dependent. I say, "Look, I came here to give you choice," and most people say, "That's not what I came here for. I came for safety, I came for leadership, I came for comfort, I came for a predictable future. I want you to take the uncertainty out of the future." That's the path. And so in some ways you're pulling all these supports out from people the moment you take servanthood seriously. It's not that you don't have to show up. I still have to show up, I'm not giving up the mike, I'm not saying okay we're all in this together, what's happening baby. You still have an intention that you're going to live out, and so you



can say “Here’s the intention *I* came to live out, now what do *you* have in mind?”

And so to the question “Peter, what do you have in mind for me?” the answer to that is nothing. I have nothing in mind for you. You are not someone I’m thinking about at night before I go to bed, and if you are it’s not a good thing, okay. Because the night is the hour of the wolf and I don’t have kind thoughts in the hour of the wolf; they’re dark thoughts, and so you don’t want to be in another’s mind between 2:30 and 4:15 at night. You’re supposed to be up then, if you’re choosing adventure you’re supposed to be awake in the middle of the night; lots of us are, I know that, because television programming at that time of night’s gotten better. [Laughter.]

You say, “Well how do I confront people with their freedom?” By getting them connected to each other through powerful questions. The skill of servanthood to me is to get good at questions that no matter how you answer them, you’re guilty. No matter how you answer this question you’re on the hook for being a creator of the future. You’re on the hook for being accountable. You create questions so people will choose accountability. We can’t *hold* each other accountable. We think we can *legislate* accountability. We can do performance management, we can have rules of the road that we’re gonna enforce, but people talk about empowerment when all they really want to talk about are boundaries and limits, what will happen to me, we talk about consequences, there’ve got to be consequences; all of these are forms of patriarchy and they have no power. They have no power to create an alternative future. They have no power in the world. The question is, “How do I engage people so they choose to be accountable?” Well, questions *do* that. There are certain questions that if you start to answer them, you’re in trouble. No matter what you answer, you are responsible for creating an alternative future. The task of servant-leadership, in my mind, is, “Change the conversation, change the future.”

The work is to be a convener of new conversations organized around questions and entailing citizens engaged with each other. All right? And the



questions have to be ones that have embedded in them the notion that choice resides in the world. It doesn't reside in leaders, it doesn't reside in the cause. It's not in the performer, in the parent, in the teacher; cause resides in people's connectedness to each other, in individuals. Start collecting questions. People ask, "What am I showing up here for?" Well it's to have a conversation I've never had before. "Well what is that conversation?" I mean the subtlety in wanting direction is just phenomenal. So you say, "I don't know what that conversation is; I came here to be surprised." All of that to me is part of the work.

The operational expression to me of transformation is to create a future distinct from the past. You say the act of love is to confront people with their freedom through the conversations they have with each other. Most of our organizations and communities are parent-child, boss-subordinate, mayor-citizen conversations — we think that matters. We think the boss-subordinate relationship matters, but I don't think it does. I'm going to spend the next ten years thinking that maybe the subordinate-to-subordinate, the peer-to-peer relationship is the only thing that counts. I'm going to spend the next ten years of my life fussing over how to have an impact on how peers and citizens deal with each other, and let the bosses be. We put a burden on leaders and bosses that's unbearable, literally unbearable. We make them the cause of everything. We think bosses are responsible for the emotional well being of their subordinates. If they have a depressed, low-morale team, it's their fault! I would like to be in a world where the boss comes in and the subordinate says, "I'm depressed. I'm down. Things aren't going well," and the boss says, "Far out. Tell me more about it, I'm interested." And after the conversation they say, "Well lookit, if you're committed to being depressed let me know how I can support you. If I start to see you cheer up, I'm gonna remind you that you came in today with depression as a goal." [Laughter.] I'm exaggerating slightly. Maybe people are responsible for their own emotional well being. What would it be like to be in a world where individuals were responsible for their own emotional well being, and we didn't pretend that the boss was cause and



subordinate was effect? We didn't think that the subordinates were waiting every morning for somebody to come in and light their fire. I always have this image of everybody crouched over kindling all over the world, waiting for the boss. "So what are you waiting for?" "I'm waiting for the boss to come in and light my fire, leave me alone." And so that's the kind of shift. And so you as leaders become conveners. You become social architects. And you get good at the nature of convening. And so that's that.

Certain conversations have more power than others. What do you mean, "have a conversation we've never had before." Well certain conversations have no power. Reporting has no power; explanations have no power. All my explanations are fiction. Even my story about myself is fiction. Certain facts happened in my life. I was born. I have evidence of that. My father died when I was 14. That's true. Most of the rest is fiction. I was abandoned, I felt bad, I was lonely, I was lost; all the explanations I have about my life to me are fiction, they're stories that I manufactured in order to ease the pain. That's disturbing in a way, but for me it's liberating. It means if those stories are fiction, I can make up a new story any time I want. And so explanation treats the story as if it's true. Let me explain why I feel that way, let me explain what got me here, let me explain my history as a predictor of the future. I want to let go of that. Reporting, explanations, analysis, community studies, summits, all those things have no power. They're interesting, and they give us something to talk about, but they have no power.

Here are some thoughts about conversations that have the power to create an alternative future. One's the conversation of possibility. What's the possibility I came here to live into or to create? Possibilities have to be unreachable. Most of us only set goals. I've worshiped too small a god in my life: to be efficient, to be successful. . . the first half of life I just wanted to make a living, have a relationship that I could screw up, have a couple of kids that wouldn't be too hurt by the fact that my relationships have been a little volatile. . . . Carl Jung says that what's true in the morning is a lie in the afternoon. I love that thought. What's true in the first half of my life is a



lie in the second half of my life. And so the question of possibility is a great conversation. There's a conversation of ownership. Take whatever you're complaining about and say, "What have I helped do to create that situation?" Beautiful question. "What's my contribution to the problem? What have I helped do?" It means I'm an owner. Whatever I complain about, let me turn that question and say, "How have I created that thing?" So it's a conversation of ownership. There's a conversation of commitment. Commitment means, what's the promise I'm willing to make with no expectation of return? That's a commitment. Most of the commercial world, most of the living existing world, is organized around barter. What's in it for me. Entitlement. The cost of patriarchy is entitlement. If you find people entitled, it's not who they are; it's their response to a high-control world that has something in mind for them, and their contribution to that is the wish for safety and protection. I want my Mommy, I want my Daddy, I want my boss, I want my mentor, I want my executive coach. You know, anybody who's anybody's got their own executive coach now. The dinner table's getting larger and larger. I've got a financial counselor, I have a personal trainer who keeps me fit without my having to exert any effort at all. You can get yoga machines now that will put you into yoga positions where you don't have to exert any effort. I mean this is the ultimate in arrival toys. I have a yoga machine, I have an SAT coach for my 3-year-old child; as soon as they're out of the womb, they scream and you get them coaching for college, because everyone knows it's always more competitive now than it was when I was 4. . . So there's all this professionalization of care, professionalization of intuition, professionalization of love. And so you say that commitment is a promise with no expectation of return, that virtue may be its own reward. What a thought that would be. And so that's a great question: "What's the promise you're willing to make with no expectation of return?" Beautiful question.

Now who do I make the promise to? To peers. If you're in a leadership spot and you want to create choice, engagement among people working for you, then you say let them make promises to each other. Let them sit



in witness of those promises, peers, and say, “Okay, is that enough?” and that shifts the focus from boss-to-subordinate to peer-to-peer.

There’s a conversation of gifts, an incredible conversation. Most of my life is organized around deficiencies. I’m deficiency-minded. I’ve been working on my deficiencies all my life, and I’m unfortunately working on the same deficiencies now as I was 25 years ago. That’s how effective working on deficiencies is. I have a small problem with finishing peoples’ sentences. I don’t know why, but when somebody starts to speak I always think, “I can finish this sentence, if not better than them, quicker than them.” [Laughter.] I don’t know what that’s about; it may have something to do with arrogance, control, self-centeredness. Perhaps; but again, those are just explanations. And so I’ve got this problem, I think I own the periods. I rent out commas, I rent out colons, I am in charge of when this sentence ends, and I have to do it personally. I’ve been working on this for about 25 years with only marginal effectiveness. And so you say well, how effective is deficiency work? What’s that about? Why do we still do that organizationally? Why do we still work on weaknesses, why do we still give lectures on feedback, effective feedback? It’s got to be timed right, they have to be open to listening, it’s got to be specific, concrete, and measurable. It’s not about the person, it’s about the action. We’ve got people making a living on feedback. And mostly the feedback we’re thinking of is our disappointment in others. Why package my disappointment in the label of feedback? People always come to me and say, “Peter, would you like some feedback?” I say, “No!” because I know that they’re mad at me. Nobody expresses love, introduces love, by saying, “Peter, would you like some feedback?”—they just give it to you.

You want to say something? Give that man a mike.

John here: I was afraid we weren’t going to take your invitation. I wondered what might happen if you just let us think for a minute.

Peter Block: That’s a good idea. That never occurred to me. So why don’t we all think for a minute. It’s gonna leave me feeling useless, but I can



handle it. [Very brief pause] Minute up yet? [Laughter.] Thank you, thank you John. [Long pause.]

I like the notion that without a vision the people will perish. What would it be like if I was not only committed to your success, but dependent on it? See for the first 20 years of life cooperation's called cheating, in school. And for me to succeed someone else has to fail. Because we have the normal curve. So if I got an A or a B somebody had to get a D or an F. And if I'd have been honest I would have gone up to that person that got the D or F and said, "Thank you. I'm a B student, you got the D or F. Because you took the hit, my getting a B was much simpler. I just want you to know your sacrifice did not go unnoticed." [Laughter.]

I like the notion without a vision the people will perish, but usually that means somebody else's vision. That's a funny thing, so why not ask each individual, "What are you here to create? What's the vision you have?" Now people get nervous: "Suppose we don't have agreeable, compatible visions," but I've never heard a vision that wasn't embraceable. I've never heard an individual say, "The possibility I'm living into is to walk over people. To succeed at the cost of others."

What's caught me lately is the notion that the future is *caused* by imagination. An imagination of the life causes a leading of the life, rather than the leading of the life causes my way of thinking. And I just know it's powerful, I never quite know how to get at it. I like the language of possibility. 'Cause it's hard. It's the possibility I'm living into. . . A lot of this stuff I got from Werner Erhard's stuff with Landmark and EST, you probably recognize it. . . But the idea that if I hold a possibility, or a future, of the way I want the world to be, then I bring that into the room with me every time I show up. I don't have to work on it. . . it works on me. Now that to me is beautiful. The possibility works on me so I can get off my list, my New Year's resolutions; I have no faith in my New Year's resolutions. Lists I make are only things I don't care about. If I care about something, I don't have to write it down. And so the idea that I create a possibility and that we're here to support each other in living out each other's possibil-



ity. . . We don't have to negotiate imagination, we don't have to negotiate possibility. It works on me. Now how do I activate the imagination? By going public with it. It doesn't count if it's not expressed. It's a daydream if it's kept silent. And so you say well I bring people together to publicly share their possibility, or the future they want to create, and the act of sharing it brings it into being. It is an action step. We have a small notion of what constitutes action. We think if you don't build something or tear it down or spend money or save money or order somebody around, you haven't done anything. "Let's have a meeting." "Well I want action!" "Good, we're going to have action, you're going to get a new thought out of this meeting. You're going to be clear as a result of this meeting about the future you're trying to create." That's an action step. And so there's a lot in the notion if my possibility is the restoration of community, which it is.

The possibility you hold always grows out of your own woundedness. It's not by accident that this is the world you want to create. It's out of our woundedness. Now the wound doesn't go away, but it loses its power. And so only an isolated person would imagine the possibility of community. Some people are born into community; they're extroverted, they've had context, they know where they're from, they know who they are; they never come up with that as a possibility, because they're living it. And so it's another dimension, you say, "What's the woundedness I have experienced in my life?" And then that's what I bring into the world, usually the possibilities of that nature. And then I let it work on me. I don't have to make a list or remind myself, I just have to go public with it. Going public means that two other people have to hear it. As soon as I tell two other people, I'm accountable. If I tell five other people I'm *really* accountable, and if I stand up in this room and say it, then I'm in real trouble. And the reason is because if you say it to the world you can't control the response. And so there's something about the verbalization of possibility that brings it into being, makes it powerful, makes us accountable. And so that's that thought.

You say, "Let me stop working on deficiencies; what I see is what I get. What I exercise gets stronger. If I keep working on my deficiencies, or



if I think I'm going to help you with your deficiencies, I'm just making those deficiencies more comfortable and at home in the world." Even the *thought* that I'm going to work on your deficiencies is a colonial act. Every colonial nation justified their taking over with the notion that "We're being helpful to the people we're colonizing." Now we do this in small ways in our organizational life. We want to be helpful. "These are my people!" We have this funny language. "These people work for me, they're my people. And God, I love them! They're so great! You wouldn't believe it." They go on and on about how beautiful they are. "And I grow people! That's what I do!" This is the conventional. . . "I grow people! I prepare the soil, I water them, and I protect them from the harmful rays of those above, and I'm a people kind of person." Well that's loving, family, parental colonial talk. I don't want to be owned by you. I don't want to be "your people." I don't want you to have something in mind for me, because that's an act of claiming sovereignty over me. Every time I say I have something in mind for you, it's a claiming of sovereignty. You say, "Why do we do these performance appraisals? Why do we institutionalize that kind of a process?" Nobody would go home and do it, nobody would say, "Cathy, honey, it's time for your performance appraisal." I wouldn't do that – well, I'd only do it once. [Laughter.]

Would you say that "I'm doing this for the good of the family unit. It's not something pleasant, but. . ." You don't suggest to them that they develop some stretch goals. "Maybe, Cathy and the kids, maybe you could work on some stretch goals that we would then talk about." And then we'd have our family gathering and appraisal. At the end I'd say, "In case of possible future legal action, would you sign this document?" What is this about? This is about sovereignty; it's not about help, it's not about love, it's not about care. My suggestion is if everybody wants to give you a performance appraisal, just say, "I pass." "But I have to do it!" "Go ahead and do it, I don't have to be there."

The point is, what would happen if servant-leadership had one simple



intention, which was to bring the gifts of the margin into the center? Suppose it was just that.

Now the beautiful thing about these conversations is, any one will do. If I held any one thing in my life wholeheartedly, I wouldn't need to do all the other ones. They are all leading to the same center; they're the same soul, the same love, the same spirit, the same source, whatever language you want to use. And so you say, "Well, suppose my only purpose in leading would be to bring the gifts of the margin into the center. I just love that thought. I have no idea what it means, but I love the thought. And suppose when we come together we agree for the next six months we're only going to talk about gifts. And we do it in the moment. We do it with each other and say, "You know, here's the gift I've gotten from you in the last ten minutes." And you teach people to breathe that in. Most people, when they're given love or given a statement of gifts, exhale. And they begin a story. And so that's the thought. And then you devise ways of doing that. So the gift conversation has a lot of power to it. Why don't we end meetings by saying, "What went well in this meeting?" Usually we end meetings by saying, "What can we do better next time?" I think, "Well there's not going to be a next time. The six of us are not going to meet this way ever again." And if we do meet this way again we'll have different outfits on, and everybody knows that clothes are decisive. You get out of this notion of a scarce world. You say servant-leadership is an abundant world. It's the economist that loves scarcity, and you say, "For that world of commerce it's great, but why would I let the economists define the nature of our way of being together?" And so there's just a lot in the gifts conversation.

Let me ask you, why don't you share with the two other people you talked to, the question that matters most to you right now? It's another great question. Let me give you a way to set up the questions, all right? Because when you break people into small groups they want to be helpful to each other, and that's a huge problem. A huge problem, because help is just a subtle form of control. People want to give advice to each other. They want to tell you what they did when they were at your stage of life. They have an



answer for you, and it's called generosity; for me it's mostly a conversation stopper. And so whenever you engage people in powerful questions you have to set them up very carefully and tell them, do not help each other. Do not give advice. Do not mask your advice in questions: "Have you thought of this, have you thought of that?" Do not tell them what you did at this stage. Do not ask your daughter when she's going to get married. This is not helpful. Do not ask your daughter who's married, "When are you going to have children?" This is not helpful. These are devices. So most of my help is about control. I want you to substitute curiosity for help. Every time you have the instinct to be useful, helpful, to have an answer, to give advice. . . "But people want my advice!" I know, that's even more pathetic. That's the problem. You're not only gonna give advice to the world, but you're going to find people that act as if they can use it. And so that's the setup for the question. You say, I want to change the nature of peer-to-peer engagement in a very detailed way. I do that by inoculating people against advice because advice stops the conversation and imbalances our relationship. And you say, "Substitute curiosity." What does that look like? Ask the other person, "Why does that matter to you? What's the meaning that that has to you? What's at stake for you?" In a deeper sense you say, "I came here to serve you by valuing meaning over speed. Meaning over efficiency. Meaning over problem solving." People say, "I'm a problem solver." I know you are, but it's only a part of who you are. You have to inoculate people against the search for the quick answer, by asking them: "What does this mean? Why does it matter to you?" Take about five minutes in a group and ask the question that is important to you. What's the question I have that's present for me right at this moment? Could be about your life or about this presentation or lack of presentation or whatever. Do it now. Act as if you understand this assignment, and I want you to feign enthusiasm. [Laughter.]

Now, let me have your attention. Let me give you a taste of the gift conversation. Let me ask you to stop. What I'd like you to do in the next minute is tell those two other people what gift you received from them in



the last five minutes. I like the notion that it's all a microcosm. How do I change the world by changing the room I'm in at the moment? If I can create the world I want to live in in this room, I've done all I can. You say that's too small, I know that's too small but that's all I have to work with, the room I'm in in this moment. Every time we get in the thought of how do we take this to scale you give up the aliveness, you give up the organic nature of living. Even though you're only together five minutes you know each other much more than you thought, so just take a minute. . . Now when someone says something nice to you, just say, "Thank you; I like hearing that." Don't do your number on it. Don't tell them that you were lucky that they evoked it in you, or that it's an issue for you and you're really happy you worked it through, and it means so much to me that you said that. . . . All those are just talk. Just say, "Thank you, I like hearing that." Got it? So make it real, and tell the other two people, "Here's what you did in the last five minutes that touched me in some way." Got it? Do it now.

My transformation is marked by the shift in my questions. So it's not that the old ones ever got answered; they just stopped mattering to me. It creates a more human notion of what transformation is. It's not that something gets answered or resolved forever. It keeps coming back; your life is lived spirally, so you keep coming back to the same issues, just in a deeper way. But in a very short time you say, "What is the question that matters to you?" And then you do the second thing, which is you say, "Here's what you just did that touched me."

What's strange is that we don't know how we touch each other. I'm blind to my gifts. And I have no way of knowing if you don't tell me. And every time you tell me, people say, "Oh, you've heard this before," and the answer is "No, I've never heard it before." Every time you hear that you touched another human being it gets to you; in fact, it's embarrassing. At your age you should be over that. It's a mindset. To create an alternative future, a new conversation, to change the nature of the room only takes about ten minutes. This notion of time, and how long it takes. How long does it take to go deep? How long does it take for us to touch each other in



some way? Ten minutes? Eight minutes? Twelve minutes? So it's all a matter of design and intention. And so that to me is very hopeful.

Any thoughts you have before I end with my strong close? [Laughter.] People always wait for me to get dynamic, and I always have to warn them, this is it. I am a role model for how introverts give keynotes. Create space for us all. Any thoughts, things you want to say?

Thank you for being here. Thank you for coming for this conference. The fact that you're here more than anything gives support to whatever this notion of servant-leadership embodies. Showing up is everything. Thanks for the invitation and all you've created, Larry. God bless you and thank you very much.

Larry Spears: Thank you, Peter. You know one of my favorite titles by Bob Greenleaf for one of his articles is "Seeker as Servant," and for me the talk we just heard and your life's work is something that evokes the idea of seeking, and the way you serve all of us as a servant. I thank you for that and thank you for coming.

Peter Block's work is about empowerment, stewardship, chosen accountability, and the reconciliation of community. He is the recipient of the first place 2004 Members' Choice Award by the Organization Development Network, which recognized *Flawless Consulting* (1999) as the most influential book for OD practitioners over the past 40 years. He helps create workplaces and communities that work for all. His books offer an alternative to the patriarchal beliefs that dominate our culture and his work brings change into the world through consent and connectedness rather than through mandate and force.