



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

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WHAT HAPPENS TO SERVANT-LEADERS
WHEN THEY GET TIRED?

Not long ago I was reminded of a quote—two quotes actually—which the noted author M. Scott Peck had shared with us as part of his 1993 Greenleaf conference keynote address. Peck, who passed away in 2005, and who is best known as the author of *The Road Less Traveled*, had admitted at the time that he was feeling tired, and he quoted T. S. Elliot, who had written: “Middle age is when they keep asking you to do more and more, and you’re not yet decrepit enough to turn them down.”

I have had the great honor of knowing some remarkable and notable servant-leaders, one of whom was Peck. “Scotty” and I spent time alone together on three or four occasions in the early 1990s, and I knew from previous conversations with him that he was, indeed, feeling tired.

As the audience laughter subsided back in 1993, Peck, who was 57 years old at the time, told us that he was beginning to feel both old and tired, and he posed the following question for us to think about: “What happens to servant-leaders when they get tired?”

“Life is difficult,” wrote Peck in the opening sentence of *The Road Less Traveled*, first published in 1978. Fifteen years later at our servant-leadership conference he posed the question: “What happens to servant-leaders when they get tired?”

I must confess that when I originally heard him ask that question in 1993, it made but a limited impression on me. I had come to the Greenleaf Center as CEO in 1990 as a 34-year-old possessing a seemingly inexhaust-



ible supply of both ideas and energy. I have always had an intuitive feel for making use of limited resources to maximum effect—nurturing and coaxing steady growth—and over the past seventeen years I have sought to make use of this gift in service to the servant-leader movement and the Greenleaf Center. On the whole, both my energy level and my creative spirit have remained high—especially for those aspects that represent what I feel to be my own special calling in servant leadership: encouraging others through the written word in their understanding and practice of servant-leadership.

However, having now passed the half-century mark, and having served for seventeen years in a very demanding role, I recently found myself personally wrestling with Scotty's question: What *does* happen to servant-leaders when they get tired?

SPEED BUMPS

In November-December 2005 my mother, Bertha Spears, spent many weeks in the hospital, during which time her heart stopped beating on four separate days and had to be shocked back into beating. We almost lost her at that time, but she surprised her doctors and others by rallying and eventually getting strong enough to return home. With the help of a phalanx of visiting caregivers for support she eventually returned to her apartment, and throughout 2006 I learned a whole lot about the ins and outs of congestive heart failure, Medicare, and the incredible support services that exist in organizations like Meals on Wheels, Senior Services for the Aging, Visiting Nurse Association, and others. These organizations and others in cities and towns across the U.S. help to make it possible for many people to continue to live at home in spite of major illnesses. I've observed that these caregivers are also, quite often, tired servant-leaders.

In early 2006 my wife, Beth Lafferty, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Many of you will no doubt understand the fear that comes with any kind of cancer diagnosis. If we are in need of a reminder of our own mortality, this will almost certainly provide us with a clearer wake-up call to that reality. Thankfully, Beth had been vigilant in getting an annual screen-



ing; and, the cancer was discovered early, it was small, and it had not spread into her lymph nodes. She had a lumpectomy in February, followed by a series of 33 radiation treatments in March and April. She will also be taking tamoxifen for the next five years and having frequent check-ups. At this point the long-term prognosis is excellent—something we are all so grateful for. Still, as anyone who has dealt with a life-threatening situation knows all too well, it can both be a source of worry and fatigue, and serve as a powerful reminder of the relatively short and unpredictable nature of our time here on earth.

In December 2006 my mother experienced a rapid decline in her health, and on December 21 she died following a short stay in the hospital. My mom had survived one life-threatening battle with tuberculosis as a teenager in the 1950s, at which time she lost a significant portion of her lung function. Then, as a young mother in her twenties, she faced an even greater illness in kidney disease. Thankfully, after six months in the hospital, she recovered from this second life-threatening illness and came back home to us. I was eight years old at the time; my mother was twenty-six years old. Mom's battles with tuberculosis, and then with kidney disease, were later followed by several other debilitating illnesses, including rheumatoid arthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and congestive heart failure. Yet throughout her life she remained positive and did whatever she could to help others. Even in death, and despite all that her body had been through in her 69 years of living, she was still able to donate her corneas to help two people facing blindness, and her skin tissue to aid burn victims. What a remarkable final gift of life she made. My mother is remembered by her many friends and family members as a woman who faced life's challenges with an upbeat attitude and a caring heart.

On top of all of this, during the past two years at the Greenleaf Center I had found myself in the increasingly difficult position of spending more and more of my time in the role of "operationalizer" (to use Bob Greenleaf's language) as I attempted to address some of the leadership and management challenges common to so many non-profit organizations. And



then there is the omnipresent challenge of accomplishing our organizational mission with insufficient financial resources. At the same time, my heart was increasingly calling me in the opposite direction of “conceptualizer”—to use Greenleaf’s counter-posing term. By the end of 2006 I had begun to understand the depth of meaning behind Peck’s question of 1993: “What happens to servant-leaders when they get tired?”

I found myself once again being drawn into re-reading most of M. Scott Peck’s books, including *A World Waiting to Be Born*, first published in 1993. I believe that this is the only book that Peck wrote in which he spoke about servant leadership, and he did so in a direct and powerful fashion. I was struck by the following observation by Peck in that book:

Greenleaf and I are in agreement that the civil manager must be a servant leader, and that the art of civil management is that of servant leadership. . . . While Greenleaf doesn’t do this, his term, servant leadership, calls up the Christian notion of “the suffering servant.” What he does do, however, is distinguish between two types of servant leaders. Both feel called to power and fulfilled by its exercise. Beyond this they differ. One enjoys crises and the experience of living on the brink of exhaustion. The other finds crises sapping and lives in fear of the depletion of his or her emotional resources. Without making any distinction between their effectiveness, it is clear that the latter type suffers the more in her leadership role. Insofar as I myself am a servant leader, I clearly belong to this latter type. I have no doubt that my personality affects what follows in this regard. For while I see glory in the role, it does not seem to me an easy glory, and I shall consistently speak of the suffering the civil manager needs to bear in the exercise of her vocation. May God have mercy on you. (p. 246)

I began to understand in a deepening way that, like Peck, I was also a servant-leader who found crises to be both sapping and depleting of my own emotional resources. Throughout my seventeen years in the role of CEO I had always viewed it as an exquisite burden to bear, but I now realized that I was feeling distressed. The fun in my work which had been



present for me for so many years had disappeared, and it felt as if all that was left was the grind.

“May God have mercy on you,” indeed.

ON THE ROAD TO FIND OUT

With the initial encouragement of friends at the Fetzer Institute, and with the support of the Greenleaf Center board, I was able to spend the second half of 2006 engaged in a creative sabbatical—my first in fifty years. It proved to be a hugely renewing and satisfying experience, and I found myself feeling incredibly energized. During that time, my friend Paul Davis and I completed the manuscript for a new book, and I started a second one; I began to work on several new essays; I traveled and gave talks, and I generally allowed myself to be open to new ideas and to new experiences. I also found that I was able to take the time to think about what it is that I hope to accomplish with my servant-leadership work in the future. Following much careful thought, and through conversations with key advisors and friends, I came to the conclusion that I might yet be able to make a meaningful contribution by stepping out of the active management role at the Greenleaf Center and into my new role, which took place on April 15, 2007 when Kent M. Keith joined the Greenleaf Center as our new CEO. I look forward to a strong and vital collaboration.

I feel deeply honored by the creation of this new full-time position as Robert K. Greenleaf Senior Fellow & President Emeritus, and I am most grateful to the board for making that possible. I am excited by the wide range of publications projects that I have begun, and I hope to be of even greater service to both the Greenleaf Center and to the servant-leader movement worldwide through my work in this new position.

At the 1993 Greenleaf Center conference Scott Peck said there was no simple answer to his question, “What do servant-leaders do when they get tired?” He did suggest that it was up to each of us to understand and to work through it with the hope of finding our own unique solutions. When



we become open to new possibilities, they can sometimes materialize in ways we cannot imagine.

I hope to meet you on the road less traveled.

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