Love and Work: A Conversation with James A. Autry

—Larry Spears with John Noble
Greenleaf Centre-United Kingdom

> On October 20, 2000, Larry Spears, president and CEO of The Greenleaf
> Center for Servant-Leadership in Indianapolis, and John Noble, director
> of the Greenleaf Centre-United Kingdom, met with James A. Autry in
> Des Moines, Iowa. What follows is a record of the conversation that took
> place.

Noble: Jim, you have had a profound effect on the attitudes and actions of
huge numbers of people through your work. What were the markers in your
life, the people and events that have helped shape your thinking?

Autry: I feel that everything is connected, every experience and relation-
ship is connected, and somehow they all point in the same direction. So I go
back to people in my childhood who were people of good values who had a
great influence on me in a very difficult situation—my parents were
divorced, and I lived in a federal housing project in Memphis with my
mother. These were some of the personal influences that shaped my values
along the way.

And then I learned in the Air Force—which we all think of as a hierar-
chical structure—that the best leaders, the ones who seemed to achieve the
best results, weren't the ramrod-straight, "kick 'em in the rear" sort, but the
ones willing to get out among the people to identify with them. The best
squadron commanders were the ones who regularly flew, who didn't just sit
behind a desk, who mingled with the pilots and had a more personal rela-
tionship with them. I also found that they didn't have any more problems

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with discipline than the ramrod-straight ones did, and that had an influence on me.

Later, when I went into business, it was very clear to me that the people who were the most effective managers were those who were thought of as the weakest by higher management. This always troubled me, because if the objective was to achieve results, why was there such an emphasis on behaving a certain way? It was as if the results themselves were worthless if the managers didn't conform to what was perceived to be a management attitude. I think I learned from that. When I became a manager—at twenty-nine, I think I was the youngest managing editor in the history of *Better Homes and Gardens*—I thought the way to do it was to adopt the hierarchical attitude. It didn't work for me. I tried, but it wasn't me and it didn't work.

Then along came a man named Bob Burnett, the CEO of the Meredith Corporation. In 1968 he made a speech about self-renewal. This was a top corporate manager—one of the most courageous ones I ever saw—and he made a speech to the management group about self-renewal. As he went through the list of all the things about self-renewal, he said, "The most important thing is love." That was the first time I had ever heard the word *love* used in the context of corporate life. This was 1968, and he spoke of love—love of what we do together, love of ourselves, love of our customers, love of our products. He said we could not renew ourselves without love. The company really was in need of renewal, and I saw his leadership turn the company around. He became a mentor to me, and that probably marked the beginning of the end of my transformation.

That's when I completely let go of the old ways. In the next several years I tried to integrate that love into the corporate setting. And it just kept working: I just kept getting results. We went from $160 million in revenues to $500 million; we went from four magazines to seventeen magazines during that period, and it was all about supporting people, being a resource to people and letting the vision evolve from the organization, rather than enforcing the "top down" vision. These were my markers. They started with

values. I'll tell you something else I've learned: there's something about being at the bottom of the economic totem pole, and it seems to me it goes one of several ways. With the grace of God, a good mother, and several other influences, I went in a good direction. I learned that if you can retain the feeling of what it feels like to be a "have not" in a society of "haves," to be down in the hierarchy, you can carry that with you into leadership positions. I think it makes you a more effective leader. So don't forget where you came from. In *Love and Profit* there's an essay called "Management from the Roots."

Spears: Can you tell us about three or four authors or books about leadership that you have found particularly useful?

Autry: I'm not just saying this because you're here, but Robert Greenleaf's work has had a great influence on me. Before discovering that, I was influenced a good deal by Warren Bennis, not just by his writing but by the man himself, in his seminars and workshops. I'm taken by Peter Block and Peter Vaill, especially Vaill's book *Managing as a Performing Art.* These are the people that just jump to mind. I have a library full of leadership books. And it's interesting—I get something out of a lot of them, and yet I find that the totality of the work often doesn't appeal to me, but something in there does. But Warren Bennis's work, Peter Vaill, and, although it's a lot to work through, Peter Senge's *Fifth Discipline* and his whole learning organization work I've found very helpful. I've used some of the exercises in Senge's books to help achieve some honesty in a community setting. I've never met him, but I've seen videos of him, and he seems to be what his work reveals. I guess that's what jumps to my head. Oh! Of course! Margaret Wheatley for *Leadership and the New Science,* that whole notion of everything in relationships and everything affecting everything else, the model from quantum physics. And then there are people who've not written on leadership but whose work has had an influence on me, like Joan Borysenko and Scott Peck. I've enjoyed Joan's work, and Scott Peck's original *The Road Less Traveled,* and subsequently meeting him and working with him, has

been a very positive influence on some of the things I've done on leadership.

Spears: Leadership concepts, including servant-leadership, values-based management, learning organizations, and similar ideas are being learned, taught, and practiced more than ever before. What do you see as the cultural changes that have caused these ideas to be more widely accepted?

Autry: Well, we have to qualify the answer by saying that there are still some industries where none of this is being done, like in Detroit, the oil industry, and some of the heavier manufacturing industries. I don't think it's because they have union people; I think it's just that the culture hasn't shifted. Now, it may be that within departments or within groups you'll find these values. I work all the time in companies you wouldn't think of as being particularly servant-leader oriented or values-based oriented, and yet within a group it's very much alive. So I see it as a positive virus in these businesses. But there are companies that are wholly committed. I am not a sociologist, only an amateur social observer, and anything I say on the subject will be obvious, but clearly one of the cultural shifts has been the increasing number of women in the workforce. There are two factors that come into play. One is the impact of motherhood and women's need to balance this, and the other is scientifically based, the idea that women socialize by affiliation, whereas men socialize by separation. That makes a profound difference on how their work styles will be manifested. These are generalizations, of course. You will find women who are hard-edged and tough, and men who are sensitive and supportive, so I don't want to overgeneralize, but I do think these differences have had a major impact in the development of workplace culture, especially in helping to create a medium in which concepts that are more affiliative and communal and more supportive of workers and less hierarchical can grow. I think the presence and influence of women is certainly a factor.

I think another factor is that so many people have seen that the old ways simply don't work as well as this stuff. There's been a feeling of frustration that "I can't get the results that I want to get" that leads to an

openness to writings and influences from the media about another way to do it, so that's been a factor. The challenge of how to get results has permeated management generally as compensation systems have shifted for CEOs and have created a downward pressure from CEOs to enhance stock price. *Stockholder value* has become the mantra, and in the end that is defined as stock price. So the emphasis on results has created fear and frustration on one hand, and a desire to try almost anything to get better results on the other hand. And that creates an approach to change that's phony: "Well, I think I'll try the soft approach now and get them to work a lot harder." You have to be careful about that; it's got to really come from the inside of a person. But it does seem to me that society is more open to it.

Many company leaders are concerned about loyalty and turnover. This also creates an interest in values-based leadership. What's been proved over and over again is that people are not going to work where they feel driven or unhappy. They work hard (and I think people are working way too hard doing unnecessary things), they're putting in a lot of hours, but they're not doing it because managers are kicking them in the rear and making them do it. What does that mean if you're trying to hang onto people in a highly mobile culture? How do you create culture, how do you do things that bind them, that make them want to stay someplace? What works is creating community, even if people say, "Yeah, but they're not going to be here very long." This is a lesson I learned in the Air Force: people rotate in and out of squadrons and highly intensive settings all the time. Personnel are changing all the time; in fact, the most you get is a three-year tour. There's a very intense and intentional imperative toward creating a community, then people come into these communities, they're brought into it, and immediately become a part of it. They may be only there six months, but they're no less a member of this community and they feel no less committed to it. I have seen it work in that kind of setting, and I know that it can be done. And the businesses that are building community are the ones who are holding on to employees the longest, regardless of what the compensation structure might be.

Noble: One situation I think we are familiar with is that in which the CEO of a company is very willing to make the change toward more values-based management. The junior managers are gung-ho for the whole idea, but it is in the ranks of middle management where the resistance, not surprisingly, exists. What advice or guidance do you offer companies in this situation?

Autry: I think the situation starts with an analysis. Part of the analysis is this: the reason is fear. So what are the middle managers afraid of? They are afraid of the loss of power, perceived power, the loss of their jobs. If everything goes well, they might not be needed. In order to make this change, you have to address the fear issue in the middle manager. Let's face facts—in the great wave of white-collar layoffs, it was the middle managers who got the axe, so they've got good reason to be afraid in view of what's been happening in the last fifteen years or so. If the CEO is gung-ho on it, it's on the CEO to bring it about.

I think it has to be done by building a sense of community based on trust. The middle managers have to feel that they are a part of bringing this about, that it's not being foisted on them. It's a huge education process for them because a lot of them got where they are under the old ways. "The old ways worked for me; why change?" So there's a re-education and a reorientation process needed, and at the same time there has to be a reaffirmation that they got there because of their knowledge and competence, not because of their management style, not because of authoritarianism. What we're going to change is the culture, the social architecture, the interpersonal relationships. We're not going to change the positions, the accountability. We're not going to change the results we want. But the fear has to be taken out, and that's an education process.

I've been involved in this in three companies and, I'll tell you, it's a tough nut to crack. Managers have been brought up in an atmosphere of—they don't trust people, they don't feel trusted, they don't trust the company. It's a long process and it's a difficult challenge. I think it takes community building, it takes personal attention and commitment from the CEO, because on the one hand he's saying, "I'm going to need these results," and

on the other hand he's saying, "We want to be this kind of company." He's got to somehow communicate that "I think that creating this kind of company is going to give us these even better results. Trust me on this—let's do it." This takes leadership from the top. You can't delegate this kind of cultural change.

Noble: Thinking more about these young leaders, what are two skills or characteristics you would wish them to have?

Autry: Let's call them characteristics, because I never try to tell people what to do—I try to tell them how to be. I think they have to be empathetic, that's one of the characteristics. Can I give you five? The five are: be authentic, be vulnerable, present, accepting, and useful. And by *useful* I mean, be servants. Those are the five characteristics. And underneath all that they have to be courageous, they have to show that vulnerability and authenticity, and empathize and listen—that's all part of it. One of the first things I say to groups when I speak to them is: "I'm not here to tell you what to do. You know what you should do much better than I could ever know."

Noble: One of the things I often find myself talking to colleagues about is the joy of what you once called leaving work and being able to say, "I did it well today." What were the circumstances that usually led you to be able to say that?

Autry: It's always been relationships. It's always been somehow if at the end of the day I've managed to create a sense of community, and have either resolved conflicts or created circumstances in which they got resolved. It's always been about personal relationships. Now, am I really happy when we start a new magazine, or we got a good sales result, or we turned the corner and made a profit? Yes, I really am, and that gives me an enormous sense of satisfaction. But I have always seen those results—even my own salary—as simply the tangible measurement of the real work. That's not the real work, making profits. This is one of the great distortions in American business life. The real work is not making profits; making

profits is the result of the real work. So I get enormous satisfaction from that, and great satisfaction from the doing that's done. But when I felt *I did it well today,* it's always been relationships, even if it was just convening a good meeting filled with ideas and energy. That could make me feel good because I realize that people felt confident enough to be able to say things, knowing that they might not work, without fear of ridicule or fear of being shouted down.

Lately, in the last several years, the greatest feeling of satisfaction I've gotten is when I've been called to go into a company to resolve conflict between people. I've done a lot of what's now called executive coaching and counseling, and a lot of this is listening to people talk about the things that trouble them most deeply in their personal relationships. But conflict resolution is getting people who are at odds with one another—vociferously and sometimes angrily at odds with one another—bringing them together and getting them to make a human connection. You realize that underneath the differences in ideas, they are more similar than dissimilar. They have joys, fears, griefs, and celebrations that are more similar than dissimilar. Because they have different views of how the work has to be done does not make them enemies.

And it's that old dualism, and we fight the dualism all the time—you know, "If you're not for me, you're against me." We know from Biblical scholarship that that's not exactly what Jesus meant, but it gets quoted all the time. "If you're not with me, you're against me." That dualism of defining myself by the other, by who I'm not, permeates business. People have disagreements over all kinds of things like budgets or sales presentations. Some things that require disagreements, perhaps to shape them to the most effective way of doing business, turn into personal warfare. Well, it gives me an enormous sense of satisfaction to help people accept one another as human beings, even uneasily at first, and know that they can disagree about ideas without demonizing one another as fellow human beings. Sometimes I let these discussions become heated because it's necessary to get some of the feelings out on the table where they can be dealt with.

Noble: I'd like to ask you about one of the old chestnuts, "I don't have to be liked to be an effective leader." What are your views on that?

Autry: The way you hear it in America often is, "Look, management is not a popularity contest." When a manager would say that to me, I'd say, "Well, to a certain extent, it is." It's not that you have to be the jolly, well-liked, hail-fellow-well-met, but if people don't respect you—and that's the operative word—if they don't respect you and your abilities as a person, it's not going to work for you. What I think and what I've often said is, we don't really have to love one another to work together. In fact we really don't have to like one another. We don't have to walk out of the building and commingle, have drinks or party or anything. But in this kind of place we have to care about one another. That's kind of an interesting concept, to say we don't have to love one another, just care about one another. Because you have to care about what we do together, because what we do together is interdependent. We need to care about one another in the context of what we do together. That's a difficult concept sometimes for people. If people like one another and care about one another—genuinely—outside, then so much the better. I've always promoted that sort of personal connection. I've always been against the idea that "I have to remain aloof from the people, and it doesn't matter if they like me or not, because I might have to fire one of them." So I may use a different vocabulary in saying this, but respect and caring in the context of what we do together is essential. Whether you have personal likes or not is neither here nor there.

Spears: In *Confessions of an Accidental Businessman* you wrote, "The commitment to act out beyond ego, to recognize when we are in denial, to retain humility, to correct our mistakes and to learn from others, regardless of their so-called status, is the commitment to grow personally and spiritually through the work we've chosen to do." To me that really captures the essence of servant-leadership, at least in my own understanding of what servant-leadership is about. Would you talk about how one goes about overcoming ego in a leadership position?

Autry: That's a good question: How do you overcome ego? The first step

toward overcoming acting out of ego, I think, is to recognize that you do it, and to be able to identify when you are doing it. I think the only way to get out of the ego is to get into yourself. You have to have some sort of spiritual discipline—meditation, prayer, yoga. I am always recommending to people that they do something to nurture the inner life, that they try to do something every day that is reflective or meditative, even if they do it while they're jogging or walking. In order to get out of the ego you have to somehow get deeper into your own inner life. And I think you do that through the spiritual disciplines of silence and prayer and meditation. Or by reflective and meditative action, and by that I mean you can jog meditatively. I do it. I walk that way. You could also do psychotherapy or counseling, or meet with groups or just meet sometimes like with these groups where high-level businesspeople meet to discuss their mutual problems.

Once you recognize it and begin to work on it, you have to stop throughout the day and examine what your actions are. In order to be able to admit mistakes and to learn from others, no matter what their status, the piece of advice I give to everybody—in fact, it's the same advice I offer every manager, new or old—is this: Whenever you attempt to make a statement, ask a question. Instead of saying "Here's what you should do," you say, "What do you think we should do?" That's a huge leap for a lot of people. It seems simple to say it, doesn't it? But it's difficult for us to fathom how challenging that is for some people who act out of ego. Because you are saying, "Put my ego in the drawer and I'm gonna ask how you think it should be done—you, who are seventeen layers down in the hierarchy from me."

The next step is to do that not just as a technique, but to recognize that you're open to learning, and that other person may know the thing to do. My attitude about this is, if an employee comes in and says, "Jim, here's the situation and this is the problem and I'm laying it out and what do you think we ought to do?" then I know that person already knows what to do. They've got the situation surrounded, they have the problem defined, and they, whether it's a group, or just a he or she, they know what to do—

probably. If not, they've got a good first step. And I may know what to do, too, because I've been in this long enough, I can see all the pieces, it fits together, and I know what has to happen. And I know they have a step. They know that I know. But as soon as I fulfill the expectation that I'm going to be "Big Daddy"—you know, I'm going to make a pronouncement and they're gonna go do it—I've destroyed any possibility, one, to learn something from them and, two, to recognize their own power, which is their knowledge and their skill and which is real empowerment. Empowerment is not about "I take some of my power and give it to you." That's the myth. Real empowerment is recognizing that you, by your skill, your knowledge, your commitment, you already have power. What I'm trying to do is take the leashes that I've put on, off.

So by that simple technique of asking a question instead of making a pronouncement, we can start to come out of ego. Another step toward acting beyond ego is to let go of my solution and embrace someone else's. Any number of solutions may work. They may not work as well as I think mine would work, but if one will work and achieve the result, then let go of ego and embrace the other solution. All our management structure traditionally is built on the basis of the person up here who has all the answers. What I keep saying is, don't be the person who has all the answers; be the person who has the best questions. And then you'll get better answers!

Spears: You mentioned doing work in the governor's office, and your wife is lieutenant governor of the state of Iowa. I was curious to know whether past experience, or even more recent experience, has led you to any sense regarding whether there are differences between leadership as practiced in politics versus business or organizations. You've written a great deal about effective leadership in the business setting. Do you see any differences when it comes to that kind of leadership within the political structure?

Autry: I think leadership in public service is more difficult. It is a good place to practice servant-leadership. American people seem to want a field general in their leadership positions, yet the most effective leaders have been the ones who really practiced community and consensus building. It's

really the only way to get anything done—I've learned that from the inside, just seeing this process. I realize that the most effective public servant-leaders are those who know how to get people together and build a consensus; who interpret and articulate what they are trying to accomplish; and who tell why and how they are doing it for the people, for the voters.

It's a much more challenging kind of leadership than in business, because in business, the objectives are very clearly defined. One, the most imperative objective is survival—not survival at any cost, not sacrificing your values for survival (though some have done that)—but survival. Second, you need to achieve the objectives of the business, which some people define as *stockholder value*. Once you define the objectives of the business, they are pretty concrete; they don't shift very much. There may be factors around market changes and things like that, but you're still trying to achieve these objectives. The constituency you have may be millions of stockholders, but they're represented by a board of directors of twelve or fourteen people, and they're the ones you have to convince. So finding the leadership of the employee group is, I think, less challenging in business because you have such flexible tools. You have compensation systems; you have hours and benefits; you can try all sorts of modes of structuring the office, from the virtual office to flextime. You find you have a vast array of tools that you can use, if you're courageous enough to use them and smart enough to use them.

In public service, all the employee rules have been set by legislation, and are managed by agencies and work under legislative oversight. It's a very complex management challenge. There are posts that the governor comes in and appoints, then these appointees hire more positions, and then agencies get permeated with people with one political philosophy. Legislation changes, political philosophy changes, and it's very difficult. We've heard that democracy's messy. Democracy's very messy! It's a good system—I like the checks and balances. I think that it generally serves the people, but it could serve them better if we could get better public perception and understanding of what the real objectives are, what we're really

trying to accomplish, rather than all the peripheral things. And in that, I blame my old business, the media. They are forever doing an injustice to the system by jumping on things that are of relatively little consequence when it comes to governance and the objectives of society. So, yes, I think political leadership is far more difficult. Yet there are some good people on both sides of the aisle. They're good leaders, they're good about the vision, they're good about consensus, they don't let their egos paint them into a corner, and they don't demonize others.

In politics there's a lot of demonizing. Having grown up a fundamentalist Christian, I understand those folks and what they want. But, as I say to my relatives in Mississippi, the U.S. Constitution is about equality and justice and opportunity. It's not about righteousness. There was no intention for us to become a righteous nation, but a nation governed by people whose values, perhaps even whose righteousness, was based on their faith—probably. Wouldn't have to be. You can be moral without religious faith, you can be an atheist, but for the most part, these values are based on faith. But the objective of the Constitution is not to be a righteous country; even George Washington said that America is by no means a Christian nation. But these folks say America is a Christian nation. When this kind of thing happens—when the objective becomes righteousness and not good moral governance—we begin to demonize people who don't agree with us. To me that's the great malignancy in American politics. It's not new, of course, but it seems to be particularly virulent right now. I don't think they'd put up with that attitude in companies, because the governance is much more tightly focused. Yet because of that tight focus, it does allow egomaniacal top-down management to have free rein, whereas that only goes so far in politics before you throw them out. There are shadow sides to both!

Spears: Do you recall when you first discovered Greenleaf's writings and what it was you first read?

Autry: I think it was in the mid to late 1980s, at the Foundation for Community Encouragement, which was Scott Peck's organization. I met several

people, and one of them, Will Clarkson was his name, first recommended Greenleaf's work to me.

Spears: Can you speak briefly to your understanding of servant-leadership and what it means to you?

Autry: First, understand that when I talk about servant-leadership, I usually pair it—because I'm bringing it to business audiences who may have never heard of it before, who don't know The Greenleaf Center—I usually pair it with these terms: *being useful* and *being a resource.* The leader's responsibility, or one of them, is to ensure that the people have the resources that they need to do the work to accomplish the objectives, and the principal resource of the people is you, the leader. You have to serve the people and to think of yourself as a resource, as a servant to them. That's almost exactly the language I use when I'm talking to them.

So I never stand up and say, "I'm going to speak now about servant-leadership." For one, I find that people who are biblically literate immediately think of the Bible, which is okay. Some, who are more literate than biblically literal, tend to think of it in ways that I don't think are particularly helpful. And others who connect it to the Bible begin to think, "Oh, it's going to be about religion." So I don't say I'm going to talk about servant-leadership. Instead I talk about leadership, and then I use what I think are the precepts of being a servant-leader.

The number one precept is, "I am here to serve, to create the community in which you can do the work that you do in order to achieve the objectives and results we are all trying to achieve together. My principal job is to serve you." What does that mean? That means, in my view, to be the kind of leader who does the five things I said before. Project authenticity and vulnerability, be present, be accepting, and see your role as being useful, as being the servant. I think it's all the techniques we talk about; it's always operating, making every decision from a basis of values, what's the right thing to do, not what's the expedient thing to do. Perhaps not even what's the most profitable thing to do, but what's the right thing to do. To me, it is a confluence of morality, which derives for the most part from my

faith. Incidentally, I often find that atheists respond to the word *spirituality*. So it's a confluence of spirituality and work.

I don't usually try to go beyond that. For one, I wouldn't know how, and two, the imperative of my work is always making myself useful to the people I'm presenting to. I don't think of myself as there to entertain them or tell them what to do, but to be helpful and useful. When people hire me, what I say to them is, "Look, I want to be useful, so I want to know what your objectives for me are." And I always say—and this is not bravado— "If at the end of it all I haven't been useful, don't pay me!" Everything I write about, everything I talk about in these books is servant-leadership, but I don't know if I can come up with a nifty, clean definition of it. But that's the general realm of vocabulary that I work in when I'm talking on these subjects. And I always recommend your books.

Noble: I wanted to ask you something about your poetry, and the process of writing your poems. How much is inspiration and how much perspiration? Do you have an idea that you write a poem about, or do the words form and you write the poem?

Autry: The answer is D: all of the above! Sometimes I get a good line and it just comes to me. Other times it's an idea, and other times it's a theme that I want to do something about that kind of percolates, percolates, percolates. It always emerges as an idea or a line. That's the inspiration part.

The greatest discovery that I made about poetry, back in the 1970s when I first started writing it, is that it yields to good craftsmanship, it yields to editing and to all the mechanics I learned as a journalist and a writer. For years I thought it just came, that it's very mystical, you get it down on paper, and you don't mess with it very much. But you do. You sometimes turn it upside down and write it in five or six different ways. I've thrown out whole sections of a poem. One of the things you learn about poetry is, the least said the better. It's not about how many words you can use; it's about how few words you can use, how can you get the message, evoke the idea, the imagery, the emotion in as few words as possible.

William Faulkner once said that the most difficult thing to write is poetry, and the next most difficult is short stories. The easiest is the novel. I've never written a novel, so I've not found that to be true. I sometimes carry slips of paper around in my pocket, and I'll write lines of poetry on them and carry them around. I work on a poem and carry it in my pocket. I write my prose on a word processor, but I always write poetry by hand. There's something about the click, click, click that destroys the rhythm of the poetry, the words. I lose the rhythm of the words. So I write poetry by hand.

Noble: What do you think are the poems that you've written that folk will remember you by?

Autry: Well, I guess I have to choose several. The poem I'm going to be most remembered by in business is "On Firing a Salesman." It's been anthologized in more books in more different languages, appeared in more settings than any poem I've ever written, and I always read it because it seems to grab people. Second in the business world would be "Threads." The one I'll be most remembered for in the South comes from my first book, *Nights Under a Tin Roof,* and it's called "Death in the Family." I think in the disability community, where I've written a lot of poetry, the one I'll be most remembered for is "Leo."

Noble: At the beginning of *Love and Profit* you quote Rabindranath Tagore. Has he been an influence in your work?

Autry: I wouldn't say he's been an influence. It's hard to say who is and who isn't, because almost everything I read has some influence, down deep somewhere. But Tagore I admire, his work and philosophy and a lot of what he's written and said. I love the mystical poetry. I love Rumi's work very much, I'm very taken with it. His work is both love poetry and mystical spiritual poetry, and he talks about the beloved. He's often talking about God, the mystery, and the ineffable, and he mentions Jesus by name in a lot of his poetry, even though he's a Sufi poet. He writes a good deal about religion. I love Rumi's work; it is so spare.

I continue to write poetry. I've gotten back into it a lot more lately, and I've written quite a bit about my son and his autism, as well as other matters. But my work seems to be moving very much more toward the spiritual relationship with God. It's not direct. I've written a new poem called "Death Bed Meditation." My beloved sister-in-law died this year very suddenly from cancer, and that poem is all I really know about life that I can say in a few words.

Death Bed Meditation

All I really know about life I can say
in a few lines:
In April the small green things
will rise through the black Iowa soil
whether we're ready or not.
The Carolina wren will make her nest
in the little redwood house
my son built from a kit.
Daffodils, tulips, irises will get the attention as usual
while purslane, pig weed, and lamb's quarters
will quietly take over a place
while no one is watching.
In June the corn shoots
will etch long green lines
across the dark loamy fields
and the greenest of all green grasses
will crowd into the ditches and line the roads.
In August the early bloomers
begin to burn themselves out,
but in September the late yellows appear,
luring the bumblebees and yellowjackets
into a frenzy of pollination.
You already know about October,
the color, the last burst of extravagant life.
And then all at once it seems
everything retreats, pulls into itself, rests,
and prepares for the inevitable resurrection.

Noble: Is there a song or a poem, or even a line that someone else wrote, that you wished you had written?

Autry: Oh, gosh. You know, it's popular to say, "I wish I'd written that" or "I wish I'd said that," but it gets a little close to envy. What I'm more likely to say is I wish I could write *like* that, I wish I could achieve that sense of excellence and the ability to polish my words, find the right word, put them together in such a way to evoke the emotional response in other people that that person has evoked in me. But sure, I've said, "Gosh, I wish I'd written that sentence" about Rumi's work, the work of Yeats, and my current favorite contemporary American poet, Mary Oliver. "The Summer Day"—now there's a poem I wish I'd had the talent to write. Genius stuff. So, yes, there are poets whose work and talent I immensely admire and I hope that I can achieve work that is of this quality.

Spears: Do you have a different approach in writing poetry rather than prose? And do you have greater satisfaction in doing one or the other?

Autry: I really don't. I get a great deal of satisfaction out of doing either one well. If I've crafted an essay that I think is particularly satisfying and good, I get as much satisfaction from that as I do from poetry. So I don't have a preference. Sometimes the message determines the form. I was going to write an essay about the experience of taking Communion to the shut-ins for the church. One of our jobs as elders was to take it out to the shut-ins, these elderly people, and I was going to write an essay about it, but it turned into a poem almost on its own.

Spears: You spent the better part of a lifetime as an editor. Did you have any kind of philosophical approach to the art of editing in a general sense that you have followed?

Autry: There are certain parallels with being a manager and being an editor, in that the fundamental objective is to bring out the best of people's own work, not to impose your own work on it. That goes right back to asking the question "What would you do?" So, there's that parallel.

But I think my philosophical approach as an editor was to do no harm,

to try to find the essence of the good work there, and to help lead people to making their work the best it could be without my rewriting. it. Sometimes I've had to just go in and rewrite something because the writer was blocked, or tunnel-visioned about it, or something, but my philosophy generally was to try to see the essence of what the work was and to bring this out. Sometimes it took a little bit of fiddling, or sometimes going back and conferring with the writer, and sitting down and discussing it and having the writer redo it. But always my objective was to have the writer himself or herself bring out the best that was in there. A good editor—and I think I was a competent editor, I certainly don't think I was a great editor; on the other hand the kind of editing I was doing was not heavy literature—I think the good editor has the ability to see into that work, has to get through the words and see what's there, and then determine whether the words are adequately bringing out what is there.

Words are filters, really. Once you put a word on something, you fix it. If I say something is superb or something is good, that may mean it's superb or good, but it also means it is only that. What else is it? Put more words on it, and pretty soon you put new words on it, and then it doesn't mean anything anymore. It's nothing because it's everything, and you can't be everything. It is a constant frustration for writers to realize that words are filters. Yet we don't have another way to get the emotions of my heart into your heart, except through words. So I've got to use words, realizing that they're always going to be inadequate for what I really want to achieve, but I'm trying to make them the best they can be. Oftentimes a writer falls so in love with his filters that the essence of what the writer is trying to accomplish gets mangled or camouflaged or overfiltered. The good editor will see through these filters, see what's really there, and help the writer bring it out. So my philosophy is that editing is very much like management: helping people do their best work. It's in there, look for it, give them the tools, help them, and on the rare occasions, do it for them. Sometimes I had to rewrite something. Most often it wasn't because of a writer's lack of talent; it was

frustration or blockage. Who knows? Writers are like everybody else—funny creatures!

Spears: What's your sense on how a leader gets better at developing a servant's heart, and how to view oneself as a servant to others?

Autry: To me, the road to servanthood has to be, almost by definition, a road away from ego. I think developing the servant's heart—you know if we want to, we could shift this over to Buddhism and say *path* of heart—that path of heart, that move to the servant's heart is a move away from ego. I think it has to be done in the context of one's own spiritual development, spiritual growth, the spiritual disciplines I mentioned before, and by reading other spiritual disciplines and picking heroes, picking people you think are the spiritual heroes, those who emulate how you would like to be, and following these models, letting them be mentors, even though they may have lived hundreds of years ago.

I think Jesus is a terrific model, but I think a lot of the interpretations of Christianity distort that model of servant-leadership. We see it manifest as judgment, manifest as trying to control people's lives, how they live, and what they believe. Here's what Jesus says to me as a role model: the strictures and structures of orthodoxy and hierarchy work against the human spirit, they work against the relationship with God, with the ultimate, with the mystery, the ineffable. And I think he said that, and lived that, over and over again, and he died for that. I like to tell the story of the Good Samaritan to people who want to listen because I want to tell it the way I really think it is, in a way I don't think biblical scholars might say it.

This person lying by the side of the road is ignored by the high priests and the church people, not because they're not compassionate people, but because the purity code prohibited even being in the same room as a dead person or touching a dead person, and you were unclean if you touched a dead person under the Hebrew purity code. Jesus was saying, "Look, you take the code so far, you lose all your compassion and connection. For fear of breaking the rule you won't even save a person's life." Along comes the Samaritan—and you know who the Samaritan would be today? The good

Samaritan could be the good Communist, the good Nazi, the good Ku Klux Klan member, the good whore: whoever you perceive to be the very opposite of you. The Samaritan was the very opposite of the people Jesus was telling the story to. This is a powerful message to me about not letting the rules keep you from doing the compassionate thing, the right thing, the thing from your heart.

I think there are lots of other examples of the beatitudes being a wonderful message for us all. I think Jesus is a wonderful role model for servant-leadership, and he was a teacher. That's another thing I've left out of being a servant-leader. You don't hand down the policies; you are a good teacher and a good mentor. Jesus was a teacher. He wasn't anybody's boss. He got angry a couple of times, said some sharp things, and I think that's proof of his humanity. You could also look to the Buddha, to the prophet Mohammed, or to Moses; there are leaders and role models in all these faith traditions. My point is, whatever your faith, whatever your spiritual orientation, whatever your interest in wisdom literature, there are heroes there, there are lessons there, there are teachings there. I think you have to be active and intentional about exploring them—in the right way—not to become indoctrinated, but to become educated. It's not about trying to find something to help you be a more effective leader. It's about trying to be a better person. The other will follow.

Any time people want to focus on my work, servant-leadership, or other values as a way to get better results, it's critical to start from the right place. You sincerely have to start with what *you yourself are wanting to become,* the being and becoming of you. To me that's what the servant's heart is about. I think it's like every other spiritual discipline or interest—I think it's all a matter of becoming. I like the scholars who say that if we really translated the first verse of the Bible, grammatically in English—it can't be done; there's no grammatical parallel. It's written in the present continuing tense, not the past tense. It's not "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth," it's "In the beginning God is creating the Heavens and the Earth." It changes the whole context when you think about it

that way. So I think that the path to the servant's heart is a never-ending path. You don't ever get there, but the journey is the objective.

James A. Autry is an author, poet, and consultant. Before retiring in 1991, he was president of Meredith Corporation's Magazine Group, a $500 million operation with more than 900 employees. During his 32-year career, Autry served as a daily newspaper reporter, editor of a weekly newspaper, and editor and publisher of various books and magazines. He is an author of many fine works including *Love and Profit, Confessions of an Accidental Businessman*, and *The Servant-Leader*, as well as two collections of poetry, *Nights Under a Tin Roof* and *Life After Mississippi*. He has been a keynote speaker at the Greenleaf Center's annual international conference.