



## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP: LOVE, HONOR, AND COURAGE

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This talk was delivered by Myrlie Evers-Williams as a Keynote at the 2006 International Conference of the Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Good morning. Good morning to each and every one of you. I am delighted to have been invited to share this morning with you. A few months ago, as a matter of fact, I was in Chicago and had a chance to meet with Jeff Miller and others from the Greenleaf Center. We had an absolutely marvelous discussion and in a moment of weakness, when I was asked if I would speak, I said, “Of course I will. I’d be delighted. I’d be honored.” Those things are still true. But time has a funny way of slipping up on you, without you realizing that what you just promised is just around the corner. And then other things happen and it’s like, “Did I really say that I would do that?” Yes, I did, and I’m pleased to be here. I do have friends in this audience, and I wish to thank them for helping me to physically make it here this morning. I would love to shake the hand of each and every one of you, but I will not do that, since I seem to have a non-contagious cough. So don’t stay away, don’t stay away, but be aware of what is happening with me.

Servant-leadership, and your theme, Love, Honor, and Courage, is as important today, or more important today, than it has been throughout the time of the universe. For certainly in this highly technical world that we have, those very basic things are so important to our civilization. To be able to communicate one with another, we have to be able to understand what



the other is saying, and hopefully to realize where that person is coming from, particularly if their viewpoint is not the same as yours. So communication is key, in whatever it is that we do.

I remember years and years ago when I was a child, there was a little game that would always appear in the newspaper: “What’s in a Name?” I doubt if there are any of you in the room old enough to remember that, but it was a kind of thing that we toyed with, we played with and we could attach labels to. What’s in a word? Servant-leadership happens to be a term that raises questions in the minds of some people. I happen to have been one of those persons. I’m pleased to put it in the past tense. In a discussion about corporate leadership, in a discussion of community leadership, the word “servant” came up. And I recall saying, “Absolutely not. I can’t deal with the term ‘servant.’ Why does that have to be there?” I think it was a little surprising to other people in that discussion that I would say that. But so much of what we say, so much of what we do, so much of what we look at is based on our own personal backgrounds, where we come from, what has happened to us, and in my instance, “servant” took me back to my home state of Mississippi. And I could only think of “servant” in the terms of bowing, scraping, yessuh, yes’m, kind of in the slavery context. And “servant,” in the highest level of what it means, could not penetrate into my mind, into my being. So I found myself rejecting servant-leadership because of my own personal background. I had to cut loose all of those feelings. I had to remove that misunderstanding of what “servant” actually meant. I won’t go through the entire process that it took, but I’m pleased to say that it has been some time now, and thanks to you, Jeff Miller and Teresa Hogue and others, I embrace that fully in the sense of what it truly means.

It is wonderful to sit and see all of the flags representing the different nations here, who understand and who practice and who promote servant-leadership. But once again we must be aware of how people that we are reaching out to, to come into the fold of servant-leadership, truly understand what it means, that we must be able to interpret what servant-leadership is



to an even broader community. I think of what is happening today in terms of how far we have come in America in terms of terminology. I recall, and maybe some of you do, too, when the word “Ms.” was first used in corporate America. We did not want to be Miss, we did not want to be Mrs. We women wanted to be represented for who we were, our skills, our abilities, what we could do. Somewhere along the line, the word “Ms.,” or the abbreviation, came up. That created a problem for women in the corporate world, women of color, because we could not identify with Ms., M-S, because it sounded too much like M-I-Z, Miz, which we had to deal with in a segregated community. And then, lo and behold, the understanding came of that, and we began to embrace that, too. These words, or the meanings, are ever evolving. But they all have something substantial and sound that we find that we can embrace.

Servant-leadership, love, honor, and courage. I thought about those things, and I could not help but reflect back on where those elements enter into our lives. Hopefully, it begins in the home. It does not necessarily begin in a lecture hall on a university or college campus. It begins at home, the appreciation and the understanding of those words. Someone said to me, “Oh, you know you are a wonderful leader.” And I said, “Of course I’m not. I don’t see myself as a leader. I was forced into the role.” And the argument was, “You may have been forced, but you’re still a leader.” I finally said, “Okay, I’m a reluctant leader.” It was not something that I set out to do or something that I wanted to do. And I thought about my grandmother, a woman with great wisdom, and as a little child she would always pray with me each and every night to be sure I said my prayers. And I would do what I had to do, and okay, I’m up and through with it. And she would always say, “But, Baby, come back, come back, come back.” Well, what is it that I left out, I would think. And she would say to me, “You did not ask God to make you a blessing. You must always ask Him to make you a blessing.” That became habit, habit without understanding. And then finally, habit because I believed that it was something that I should do, that I should embrace because I lived in a family, I lived in a community where people



were servant-leaders, even though they did not know that that's what they were at that time. Of seeing the commitment, of needing to come together, educated, uneducated, but all caring, hoping, working to make this a better place, this universe a better place in which all of us could prosper and enjoy.

So, hopefully, servant-leadership is something that we begin to instill in our children at home and at school, and we work in the different programs to help them understand that it is a commitment that they must have, not only to themselves and their families, but the community as a whole. Today, we look at what is happening in our corporate communities, in our nation, in our world as a whole. And so many things are troubling. We just had a court case that we're all familiar with, the Enrons and others, and we say, what happened? What happened to social responsibility? What happened to corporate America's leadership in terms of not only being in business to make a profit, but to help those employees to have a stable life, one where they could grow, one where they could retire, one where their trust was held closely to the corporate structure? I think we're going to find a number of young people coming out of the schools of business in our colleges and universities who are going to see lessons in what has happened here recently. And hopefully they will change their direction to at least embrace responsibilities that they have, not only in their communities but in their companies as well.

I'm a firm believer that whatever appears to be negative is basically a challenge, and that if we embrace it as a challenge regardless of how terrible it may be, we can learn from the experience, we become stronger, and we can go forth. We are constantly looking for leaders, my friends, either at ourselves as a leader or potential leader, or for those who say that they are. The media in America has had a tremendous influence on our determination of who our leaders are. I shall not forget that when Dr. King was assassinated, and about a year had passed after the mourning, the media began to ask the question, and up until the last couple of years it still asked the question, "Who is your leader?"



Must we have just one leader? Can't there be more than one? Cannot the approach to the same issue be different? Is there not an opportunity for those who represent different positions of coming together and finding a way in which they can work to solve the problems, to address the problems of the day? I say, Don't tell me that I have to have one leader. Expand, for in variety there is strength.

But hopefully around the issues that really matter, we will be able to come together with different opinions, different approaches, but be able to enhance each other and tackle the same problems that we have. In all of these things that we call problems, that I prefer to call challenges, I think of some of the positives that have come from it. Women in particular who found it difficult to move up the corporate ladder, even though we talked about the possibilities as being endless, but corporate America said those possibilities would be endless in about twenty to thirty years. Lots of women decided they didn't want to wait that long. It was a negative, yes, but what happened? Around this country women began to come together, show their leadership skills. Men who were in leadership positions began to understand and support, and today we have more businesses headed by women than we can probably count, not only in this country but throughout the world. And it continues to build in that way. There was a saying, "If I cannot—if I cannot become a vice-president here, if I cannot use my leadership skills here, then I will form my own company. I will be the CEO, I will be the president, the secretary, the treasurer, any of those or all of those if I choose to do so, and I will be able to reach out in my leadership to embrace others and to bring them into the fold as well."

But think of our leaders, and I think we have more than one kind of leader. We have leaders who are appointed; we have leaders who are reluctant, but they are leaders; we have leaders who are self-appointed, who think that they know it all, they demand it all, they wish to be covered each and every time by the media—it becomes a very selfish, self-centered type of leadership. That is not servant-leadership. It is not, "I am who I am, I am



the best. I'm over here, lights. I'm over here, reporters. I speak for these people. I do this and I do the other."

I don't believe there are too many "I's" in servant-leadership. I thought about the number of people who fall in that category, those known and those unknown. If ever there was a servant-leader, one who did not intend to be, it was Rosa Parks. Look at what that life of giving and doing has done, and that will continue to live over the years, that will continue to impact young people, and hope that they will develop some of those same strategies and the love and the honor and the charisma that she had. And she didn't want anyone to bow before her. I think about Dr. King, of course, a man who did not seek out leadership, but a man whose wife said, "You have the strength, you must lead." And they became partners as servant-leaders. I think about Bill and Melinda Gates as servant-leaders. You may or may not agree with me, but that's okay, too. But they had the billions of dollars, and people began to ask and say, "It's unfair for them to be so rich. What are they going to do? When are they going to begin to give?" And in their time, their time, their planning, their research, they found an area, or a couple of areas, in which they could make an impact with their money, not for the glory of themselves but to help people throughout this world. I put them in the category of being servant-leaders, too.

And of course I cannot stand here without saying that the man who was the father of my children, my husband Medgar Evers, was perhaps the epitome of servant-leadership to me, a man who fought off his wife's pleas to leave the Civil Rights movement to be safe some place in California, Chicago, or elsewhere, and his word was simply, "I can't do it. I'm doing what I have to do." And I would ask the question, "Well, why you? Why not someone else? We need you." And his answer was, "I'm doing it for the other people there, my people, all people. It is so that you and my children can have a better life." And I had a difficulty trying to understand that, because all I could see was the danger that was involved in that, and that as a leader, he was going to be taken from us. His heart was big. He'd invite people in. I'd say to him, "You invite them to the house and you give them



food, and we don't have enough to eat. You give them clothes off of your back, and you don't have enough clothes." And he would always say, "We'll make it." And we always made it. But at last sometimes we have to make decisions. And I said to him, "I can't deal with this anymore." And he said to me, "Either you're with me, or you aren't. I'm doing what I must do. I have no choice. You have a choice. You can stay with me and work with me, or you can leave." And I reached a point where I said, "I'm not so sure I can stay. I'm not so sure I *want* to stay. I'm not sure I want the children growing up in this." And he said, "Well, you have an option. You can leave." And being a young wife, that was quite a blow, because I wanted him to embrace me and say, "My darlin', I love you so, I can't live without you. Don't you dare think about going. I'll quit." He knew what he had to do. I knew what I had to do. And that was to stay there, and to support him in a role that he had not defined for himself, but that of a leader.

And to fast-forward, I made a promise to him that if anything happened to him and I was still around, that I would see that justice prevailed. I did not say that thinking I was going to be a leader, would impact any change. But it took thirty-plus years of being called all kinds of names, of being told that nothing would happen. And this is where courage comes in, my friends, of believing in something strongly enough where you will not turn back regardless of the circumstances. And it took courage, I will have to say that, to continue to push for evidence and what-not, not knowing what would happen. In His time, things were revealed. And in His time, justice was served. And the man who pulled the trigger and took my husband's life was convicted.

But that was not the glory of it all. It opened up some twenty-two-plus old Civil Rights cases, of which there were eighteen convictions. And people said, "Why did you bring up the past? Why do you do that?" There is such a thing called cleansing. And it helped to cleanse not only my native state of Mississippi, but the South and America as a whole. And it sent a word, I believe, abroad, for those who were looking at America, and saw



this blemish on it, said, “Well, perhaps things are going to happen there, too.” We never know, in what we say, in what we do, what good can come from it.

I appreciate the attention given to the fact that I was Chairman of the Board of NAACP at a time when the organization was bankrupt physically, financially, and morally. And I just want to hit on that part, a non-profit organization that had deteriorated to a point where it was almost a laughing-stock, where when we said that it was the strongest, the oldest civil rights organization in the nation, people said, “Ha ha, yeah.” That’s it. And someone said to me, “You must run.” And I said, “Absolutely not. I’m not a leader. I don’t want to be involved in that. It’s dirty, it’s low-down, it’s time-consuming. I have other things I have to do.” And I did, because my second husband was terminally ill with cancer at that time.

But speak of servant-leadership. He said to me, “This is something you must do. It is the last thing I will ask you to do for me. You run and you win.” To fast-forward, I won by one vote, *one vote*, into a leadership role that I did not want, but one that I came to embrace, to take all of the things that my community had given to me and hopefully point it into that one direction of healing and of growth. It’s necessary when we are put in leadership roles, or we are leaders, that we expand our horizons, that we include others who are much more proficient in managing, in outreach, in technology, whatever it takes to make this thing work. And that is what happened. I have never, my friends, been on my knees and begged as much as I did for money to help save that organization. But money alone, and you know that, does not solve all of the problems. There are other things that have to come along with it. Yes, we had no code of ethics. That was promptly installed. Many who were leaders throughout the area said, “How dare you ask me to sign a code of ethics!” Well, how dare I not demand that you sign a code of ethics, because look where we are now. We have to build something that’s strong and stable so that the larger public will know that we’re on the road to recovery.

Those people were servant-leaders, too. They gave, they did, they did





not look for compensation, but they were insulted because they were asked to do that. Most of them did, some did not. You reach out to those who are knowledgeable and who can help you, as we did with Harvard University, the School of Business, and asked them to come in and please help us to set up guidelines for this organization to continue to be, and continue to flourish. There were no guidelines, ninety-plus years of operation, no guidelines for operation. An operating plan is critical in whatever it is that we do. Because regardless of whether we are a non-profit organization or a for-profit organization, it's a business and should be run as a business.

I'm looking at the time here, and I know you have a full agenda, but I want to just touch briefly on an institute, the institute named The Medgar Evers Institute. It was founded in Jackson, Mississippi. We're now based in Bend, Oregon. And it grew out of the need, a very personal need if you will, for me to see that Medgar and his work would be remembered. Our youth today, so many of them, see leaders, or leadership, attached to dollar signs. (coughs) That's a sure sign that it's time to stop talking. . . Sports, music, there's nothing wrong with any of that. Oh, yes, it is too, yes it is. I'll take that back. It depends on the kind of music. It depends on the kinds of words that are sung. Perhaps it's a generational type thing with me. But for some of it I find it utterly disgusting. Utterly disgusting that we would allow our young people to be soiled, if you will, by so many of the words that are used in the songs. I don't know what I can do to bring that to the attention of many publics who are not already addressing that, particularly the young. But that's a part of servant-leadership, too, of seeing things that are demoralizing and being strong enough to speak out against it. But not only that, but to have solutions that we can present to those young people to help them understand their potential. But in The Medgar Evers Institute, the concept came about primarily because of meetings with youth. And I would ask, "Do you know who he is?" "No." "Well then, you certainly don't know what he did." "Well, yes, he played basketball, didn't he?" "No. Do you know about a movement that helped shape things so you can enjoy yourselves as you are now?" "No, and I'm not sure I'm interested.



Everything is okay.” For those of a little older generation than the very young, there was an attitude of, “I don’t care. I’ve gotten mine. I did it by myself. All of that’s old. It happened in the past. There’s no need to deal with it now.”

A group of us came together and said, “How can we combine these elements and others? How can we reach out in the community? How can we get our young people involved in what we call today servant-leadership? And it was through those exchanges that we came up with the concept of The Medgar Evers Institute. It is young; we are growing; we are still looking to increase the impact that we have not only in Mississippi, but throughout the country. We are calling it “the journey to stewardship” where young people are valued as resources, not as objects. When provided skills and opportunities to contribute, we believe that young people will engage for the greater good in their communities. And we hope to build a strong sense of ownership with those young people and their communities, and responsibility to build quality, to engage in service, and to engage in reaching out across the generations to determine the needs in those communities in which they reside, to become volunteers, to work with others in the group, to help bond between the very young and the very old, or the aging, the experienced ones. I like that best of all—“the experienced ones.” But in so doing, Medgar’s name and his work can not only live on, but it can grow. That we can join in partnerships with other groups and organizations who are of like mind, pool our resources and see that not only the spirit, but servant-leadership continues to grow.

We hosted a group of young people from seven states, in Mississippi, who came together for two days. We asked them to develop for us a group of objectives—something that we adults had sat down and worked with and worked with and worked with for a month or two. At the end of those two days, within two hours, they had come up with a list of objectives that just blew us out of the water. It was amazing what their thinking, their insight on the challenges of that day—not that specific day, but of the day—what they were!



And they said, “We don’t want to just point out the problems, we want to be involved in finding solutions from it.” They put my generation in its place. They said, “You fought for this, you fought for that. We don’t want to sing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ You did that. We want to take all of the good and positive things and all of the good minds, and come up with solutions and be able to implement them. We want to be leaders of a different kind, embracing all that you were, but adding to it.” And they left us with this one message: “Don’t let this be the first and the last time that you embrace us and bring us together. For your generation too often does that, brushes us aside; we never hear from you again.” That was one heck of a challenge to us, something we’ve had to work very hard to try to see that we kept our promise to them, because they were already leaders in their schools and in their communities. And that is how we build: one on top of another, reaching out to include all.

I embrace, wholeheartedly, the whole concept of servant-leadership, whether it be in the community, whether it be in corporations, whether it be in institutions of higher learning, whether it be in every country that makes up this world in which we live. For, indeed, if we care, these are the skills. And there are always the opportunities to be, in the best sense of the word, a servant-leader.

I thank you.

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Myrlie Evers-Williams was the first full-time chairman of the NAACP and is the widow of murdered civil rights leader Medgar Evers. She met him when they were students at Alcorn A&M College in 1950. They married in December 24, 1951 and she left school before finishing her degree. Evers-Williams went back to school after Evers’ death and graduated from Pomona College, in 1968, with a degree in sociology. She served as director of consumer affairs for Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO), where she developed the concept for the first corporate booklet on women in non-



traditional jobs. This booklet, *Women at ARCO*, was in great demand throughout many printings and revisions. 1975, Evers-Williams married her second husband, Walter Williams. In 1987, Evers-Williams was the first African-American woman appointed to serve as commissioner on the Los Angeles Board of Public Works. Evers-Williams was chairman of the NAACP from 1995 to 1998. She is credited with spearheading the operations that restored the association to its original status as the premier civil rights organization in America. She is the author of *For Us, the Living* (1967) and *Watch Me Fly: What I Learned On the Way to Becoming the Woman I Was Meant to Be* (1999). In the best seller, *I Dream A World: Black Women Who Changed America*, Evers-Williams states that she “greet[s] today and the future with open arms.”