



THE IMAGE OF GOD, SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND FORGIVENESS

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The image of the leader as servant has come to exercise a profound influence within secular organizations (Spears, 1995, p. 3). Yet one can argue that its antecedents are in the religious world. Servant-leadership is a major theme in the Judeo-Christian tradition, from the weeping Joseph embracing his brothers (Genesis 45:15, New Oxford Annotated Bible) to Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:5). The image also figures in Islam, Zen and Taoism (Vanourek, 1995, p. 300). Robert K. Greenleaf (1977), whose writings brought the image of the servant-leader into the public imagination, was a Quaker; his seminal essay on servant-leadership was inspired by Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*, in which the hero is ultimately revealed as head of a religious order (Spears, 1995, p. 3).

The image of the leader as servant also resonates for people who are not visibly connected to any religious tradition. Tom Peters (1982), whose writings on leadership are well-known, expresses suspicion of the contemporary movement to bring spirituality into secular arenas such as the workplace (Peters & Waterman, as cited in Lee & Zemke, 1995, p. 107). Yet Peters also urges managers to develop a caring attitude toward employees and to "shun the glory that feeds our insecure egos" (as cited in Tarr, 1995, p. 82; Vanourek, 1995, p. 301). His perspective is very near to Greenleaf's (1977), who insisted that "the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader" (pp. 9-10).

It is significant that a leadership model with religious roots could have settled so comfortably into the public imagination, especially given the



intense focus of many Americans today on preserving the separation of church and state (Boston, 2005, p. 1). I believe the success of this model has to do with its implicit commentary on the value of human beings. To voluntarily serve another person is to acknowledge that he or she is worthy of effort, attention and respect. As Spears (1995, p. 7) wrote, "Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers." Moreover, Greenleaf (1977) maintained that the value of service was not in the act itself, as much as in its effect on the recipient. He asked,

Will all (or almost all) of the people touched by that influence grow as persons? Will they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more likely themselves to become servants? And what will be the effect on the least privileged in society; will that person benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (1977, p. 27).

Greenleaf's (1977) call for leaders to consider the effect of their influence on the people they serve, especially the least fortunate, resonates with Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). In Greenleaf's words, "Caring for others, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built" (p. 49). Yet I would argue that the roots of Greenleaf's call to care for others go back even further in the Judeo-Christian tradition, back to the early chapters of Genesis. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). From the biblical point of view, to consider people as worthy of care is not just one possible anthropological stance among many. Rather, it is the only response commensurate with God's work in creation, in which God imprinted the divine image on Eve and Adam and, through them, on every human being.

Inherent in this biblical doctrine, however, is a paradox; for those who are made in the image of God do not always exhibit the beauty and splendor of God's character (1 Chronicles 16:29). As Greenleaf (1977) wrote, "Any-



body could lead perfect people—if there were any. But there aren't any perfect people" (p. 21). Therefore servant-leadership involves the acceptance of "the halt, the lame, half-made creatures that we are" (p. 21). At no time are "the vagaries of human nature" more visible than when communities are in conflict, whether that conflict be personal, familial, national or global (p. 20). In conflict, servant-leadership must grapple with the dark side of human nature and the reality that human beings, while made in God's image, have a long history of hurting one another. According to Greenleaf, the true servant "always accepts and empathizes, never rejects" (p. 20). Yet are people who have actively harmed others, ranging from manipulative co-workers to participants in mass atrocity, still worthy of acceptance and empathy?

In this essay I examine the biblical idea of creation in the image of God with particular reference to the practice of forgiveness. As Ramsey (2006) affirms, forgiveness is a logical extension of the values embedded in servant-leadership (p. 5). A leader who is dedicated to serving others naturally focuses on their healing, which Greenleaf defines as "making whole" (1977, p. 36). In the biblical tradition, the word *shalom* signifies the peace of God that is rooted in God's own wholeness or holiness, and is God's intention for human life (Feinberg, 1984, p. 833). To forgive is to acknowledge that, although genuine harm has been done, a return to *shalom* is possible if both victim and perpetrator can turn away from the wrongs of the past and begin a new relationship, one that is based on honesty and growing trust. The concept of human beings as made in the image of God can fuel the practice of forgiveness by reminding leaders of the transcendent aspect of human nature; by affirming the creation unity that people share, whatever their differences may be; and by encouraging us to view individuals and communities through eyes of hope. By practicing forgiveness, servant-leaders can lead persons in conflict, as well as the community around them, toward the *shalom* that is God's intention for human life (p. 833).



THE IMAGE OF GOD AND TRANSCENDENCE

The creation of human beings in God's image has been a subject of Christian reflection since the early days of the church (Motyer, 1984, p. 680). Theologians across the centuries have agreed that although God's imprint is on all of creation, humanity reflects God's character in a unique way; this reflection gives women and men permanent worth and dignity (Henry, 1984, p. 546). Christian theologians have, however, hotly debated the question of which aspect of human personhood particularly contains the divine image, be it rational intelligence, moral choice, or religious openness (p. 547). In recent years, a kind of consensus has emerged which highlights the human capacity for relationship as the best reflection of God's image in us, for that capacity involves and depends upon the other proposed answers of "rational understanding, moral obedience, and religious communion" (p. 548). In other words, humanity "is made for personal and endless fellowship with God" and with one another (p. 548). Frankl (2000) agreed with this consensus when he spoke of

that fundamental characteristic of the human reality which I have come to term its *self-transcendent* quality. I thereby want to denote the intrinsic fact that being human always relates and points to something other than itself—better to say, something or *someone*. . . Man [sic] is oriented toward the world out there, and within this world, he is interested in meanings to fulfill, and in other human beings. By virtue of what I would call the pre-reflective ontological self-understanding he knows that he is actualizing himself precisely to the extent to which he is forgetting himself, and he is forgetting himself by giving himself, or loving a person other than himself. Truly, self-transcendence is the essence of human existence. (p. 138)

The self-transcendence of humanity suggests that we are most authentically human (and, paradoxically, closest to the divine image) when we are stretching toward loving relationship with God and others. On these grounds, there is nothing trivial about the way in which human beings deal



with one another. To actively harm another person is to violate the image of God in that person and in myself; it is “like spitting in the face of God” (Tutu, 1999, p. 93). Both Frankl (1974) and Tutu spoke with authority on the subject of “man’s inhumanity to man,” having witnessed the atrocities of Auschwitz and apartheid-era South Africa, respectively. It is significant that, given their experience, both men strongly affirmed the existence of a transcendent element in human nature that remains, no matter how an individual’s actions may defile it. According to Frankl, the strange fact of human existence is that we are both bearers *and* violators of God’s image.

In concentration camps . . . we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man [sic] has both potentialities within himself. . . Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is the being who has invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who has entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or the *Shema Yisrael* on his lips. (pp. 212-213)

In situations of deep conflict, it is tempting for leaders to collapse Frankl’s (1974) paradox and consider participants in the conflict as either heroes or monsters (Tutu, 1999, p. 125). Leaders who identify themselves as servants may feel this temptation with particular intensity because of an orientation toward healing the wounded and creating justice for victims. The concept of persons as bearers of the image of God, however, suggests that leaders ought to consider the well-being of both victims and perpetrators as they strive to bring about healing in communities. According to Tutu (p. 83), the members of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission benefited from this theological perspective on offenders.

We . . . were quite appalled at the depth of depravity to which human beings could sink and we would, most of us, say that those who committed such dastardly deeds were monsters because the deeds were monstrous. But theology prevents us from doing this. Theology reminded me that, however diabolical the act, it did not turn the perpetrator into a demon. We had to distinguish between the deed and the perpetrator . . .



to hate and condemn the sin while being filled with compassion for the sinner. (p. 83)

Furthermore, Tutu (1999) recognized that creation in the image of God includes moral responsibility (Henry, 1984, p. 548). Therefore, failing to identify perpetrators as bearers of God's image was a way of "letting accountability go out the window" (p. 83). "If perpetrators were to be despaired of as monsters and demons, then . . . we were then declaring that they were not moral agents to be held responsible for the deeds they had committed" (p. 83).

The leaders of the TRC chose to extend compassion and forgiveness as a way of reminding perpetrators that they were in fact human beings, made for relationship with God and with others, with all the transcendent requirements of that identity. Some critics of the commission identified the TRC's approach as so-called "cheap grace" and a miscarriage of justice (p. 50). Yet I believe that reminding perpetrators of their essential humanity through forgiveness is (paradoxically) the most effective way of demonstrating how despicable their actions have been, and how great a responsibility they now hold for healing the damage that has been done in their community. In other words, because they offered amnesty to offenders, the leaders of the TRC made it safe for feelings of repentance and responsibility to emerge:

I say we are sorry. I say the burden of the Bisho massacre will be on our shoulders for the rest of our lives. We cannot wish it away. It happened. But please, I ask specifically the victims not to forget, I cannot ask this, but to forgive us, to get the soldiers back into the community, to accept them fully, to try to understand the pressure they were under then. This is all I can do. I'm sorry, this I can say, I'm sorry. (Col. Horst Schoberberger, as cited in Tutu, pp. 150-151)

In post-apartheid South Africa, Bishop Tutu (1999) and the other members of the TRC exemplified the caring that Greenleaf (1977) identified as the heart of servant-leadership (p. 49). Victims experienced the



TRC's care as empathy and support; perpetrators experienced it as empathy and forgiveness (Ramsey, 2006, p. 18). In both cases, the TRC treated their fellow South Africans as bearers of God's image and invited them to express that identity in a new relationship with one another and with God, for the healing of their nation and as a sign to the world that the *shalom* of God is possible (Tutu, pp. 273, 282).

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND CREATION UNITY

In the context of servant-leadership, the goal of forgiveness is unity between persons who were formerly enemies (Tutu, 1999, p. 280). Muck (2006) distinguished between three different types of unity that appear in biblical history: creation unity, affiliation unity, and relationship unity. Both affiliation and relationship unity have to do specifically with the Christian church; however, creation unity refers to the ontological oneness that humanity experienced in the early chapters of Genesis, prior to our expulsion from the Garden. This unity was based on the shared image of God and did not rule out difference; in fact, "to have unity, you must first of all have difference" (Symposium outline, p. 1). Muck asserted that beneath the many divisions apparent in today's world, this creation unity still exists and will one day be restored in the kingdom of God (p. 1).

Based on Muck's (2006) schema, one could argue that forgiveness is best understood not as the creation of a new relationship, but as the expression of an ontological unity that continues to exist among human beings, however great the apparent alienation between them. Tutu (1999, p. 31) referred often to this creation unity using the African term *ubuntu* (also called *botho*), which means "a person is a person through other persons." *Ubuntu* reflects *shalom*, or "the primordial harmony that was God's intention for all creation" (p. 263). It assumes that human beings were designed to live in community with one another. Even when that community is damaged by disrespect or violence, some vestiges of it remain: so much so, that whenever we harm another person, we also harm ourselves (Muck, 2006, p. 1). In other words, the concept of *ubuntu* parallels what Frankl (2000)



affirmed as the essence of human existence: our orientation toward relationship with God and with others (p. 138).

Greenleaf (1977, p. 37) identified servant-leaders as builders of community, since “only community can give the healing love that is essential for health.” Muck’s (2006) concept of creation unity suggests a paradigm shift for servant-leaders who are seeking to build and sustain community: from the superhuman task of creating unity, to the more manageable vision of restoring a unity that is already inherent in creation. In today’s world, however, servant-leaders must build community across divisions that seem nearly as ancient as the Garden of Eden. Some of these divisions have been solidified by centuries of persecution and violence, as is the case with the division between Jew and Gentile (Wiesenthal, 1998, p. 18). The brutalities of the Holocaust have had the double effect of making community between Jews and Gentiles unthinkable without forgiveness, while being so heinous as to make forgiveness seem impossible. In his book *The Sunflower*, Wiesenthal described an encounter between Jew and a Gentile that perfectly illustrates this double effect. Wiesenthal was a prisoner in a Nazi camp in Poland when he was called to the bedside of a dying SS officer who wished to confess his war crimes to a Jew. During the encounter, Wiesenthal expressed compassion to the dying soldier; yet when asked directly for words of absolution, he walked quietly from the room and never returned (p. 55). So unnerved was Wiesenthal by this encounter that he ended his narrative with the question, “Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong?” (p. 97).

In the symposium of responses that follows, many commentators expressed the conviction that Wiesenthal (1998) was justified in withholding forgiveness. He had no right to forgive on behalf of his fellow Jews, for one can only reasonably forgive sins against oneself (Alkalaj, p. 102, Bejski, p. 115, Heschel, p. 171, etc., in Wiesenthal). However, while he did not want to minimize Wiesenthal’s dilemma, Tutu (1999) took issue with this perspective (p. 275). He compared the SS officer’s confession with the



apology from Dr. Willi Jonker (representing the Dutch Reformed Church) to the victims of apartheid in 1990.

One could well ask whether [Dr. Jonker] could claim to speak for past generations of [the DRC's] members, though it would be an oddly atomistic view of the nature of a community not to accept that there is a very real continuity between the past and the present and that the former members would share in the guilt and the shame as in the absolution and the glory of the present. . . . They too are part of who we are, whether we like it or not. . . . That is what makes a community a community or a people a people—for better or for worse. (pp. 276, 279)

One can extend Tutu's (1999) argument even further on the basis of *ubuntu*. Deeper than the continuity between members of a community is the creation unity that extends between everyone made in the image of God, such that all of us belong to one community, the human community (p. 265). In this sense Wiesenthal and the dying SS officer were members of the same community due to "a certain basic human equality as common both to 'victim' and 'perpetrator'" (Pawlikowski, in Wiesenthal, 1998, p. 221). Stein (in Wiesenthal, 1998) argued that the compassion Wiesenthal displayed at the officer's bedside was an act of solidarity with him; for "he did not treat the man as a monster who had committed monstrous deeds. Rather, he honored the humanity of a man who had lost his humaneness" (p. 253). I respectfully submit that had Wiesenthal chosen to speak words of forgiveness, they would have been justified on the same basis.

No servant-leader will find it easy to encourage unity between persons who are divided from one another along ethnic or religious lines, especially when those divisions have been hardened by violence. Yet the concept of creation unity can inspire servant-leaders both to ask and to grant forgiveness, ideally allowing them to serve as models to others in their community. From the perspective of creation unity, asking and granting forgiveness begin with the acknowledgement that I too am, in Frankl's (1974) terms, both a bearer and a violator of the divine image (pp. 212-213). In other words, I forgive "because I fear not to be forgiven" (Cargas, in Wiesenthal,



1998, p. 124). Creation unity is a powerful spur toward forgiveness because it reminds us that all persons, myself as well as others, are capable both of the greatest heroism and the deepest depravity (Tutu, 1999, p. 85).

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND HOPE

According to Greenleaf (1977), hope for the future is an important aspect of servant-leadership—especially with regard to the next generation (p. 171). Servant-leaders are called to “raise the spirit of young people, help them build their confidence that they can successfully contend with the condition [of society], work with them to find the direction they need to go and the competencies they need to acquire, and send them on their way” (p. 172). Tutu (1999) maintained that in our divided world, one of the core competencies we need to instill is the ability both to ask and to grant forgiveness.

If we are going to move on and build a new kind of world community there must be a way in which we can deal with a sordid past. The most effective way would be for the perpetrators or their descendants to acknowledge the awfulness of what happened and the descendants of the victims to respond by granting forgiveness, providing something can be done, even symbolically, to compensate for the anguish experienced. . . True forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible. (pp. 278-279)

Tutu’s (1999) statement that forgiveness “makes the future possible” is based on the recognition that if violence continues to grow in our world, there may well be no future for our children to inherit. Yet forgiveness also expresses hope for the future in its assumption that both individuals and communities are capable of responding to “the better angels of our nature” (Lincoln, 1861, paragraph 35). As Tutu summarized, “In the act of forgiveness we are declaring our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to make a new beginning on a course that will be different from the one that caused us the wrong. . . It is an act of faith that



the wrongdoer can change” (1999, p. 273). For Tutu, the basis of this faith is the lingering presence of the image of God, even in the worst perpetrator (p. 83).

In calling the next generation to take up the discipline of forgiveness, Tutu (1999) was issuing a call for transformational leadership, of which hope is a necessary ingredient (Spears, 1995, p. 4). According to Northouse (2001), transformational leadership is the process by which a leader “engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower” (p. 132). It assumes that even in situations of intense conflict where persons have committed great wrongs, those wrongs do not prevent community members from embracing change (p. 138). The hope that characterizes transformational leadership has a firm foundation if one accepts the biblical idea of a transcendent aspect of human nature that is not defaced by even the grossest moral failure (Henry, 1984, p. 547). Forgiveness then can serve as a powerful expression of this hope, and a mechanism for transformation in which both leader and followers become “healthier, wiser, freer, more likely themselves to become servants” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27).

Finally, the concept of human beings as made in the image of God suggests that servant-leaders need not assign arbitrary limits to the transformational power of forgiveness. If there are no conditions under which God’s image in a person may be defaced, then forgiveness is appropriately unconditional (Enright, 1998). Ramsey (2006) found empirical support for this hypothesis in her study on the experiences of former perpetrators in post-apartheid South Africa (p. 26). She concluded that “in an environment where human beings practice the principles of servant-leadership, empathy, forgiveness, and healing, there is hope for redemption in the hearts of some of the most hardened persons, the most unrepentant perpetrators, and hope for the restoration of community” (p. 26). Interestingly, perpetrators experienced the most transformation when the forgiveness offered them was “not bound by the remorse or denial of the perpetrator” (p. 26).



THE DIVINE IMAGE

I began by observing that servant-leadership, a concept with roots in the religious world, has had great influence among persons who do not embrace any form of religious tradition. I end with a parallel observation. The concept of the divine image in human beings, which is an important cornerstone of Jewish and Christian theology, can be instructive for anyone who contemplates asking or granting forgiveness, whether or not that person is actively religious. It is instructive because forgiveness begins and ends with a recognition of shared humanity, and a sense that the *shalom* of the community is of greater value than one's personal well-being. Such are the core convictions of servant-leadership (Spears, 1995, p. 3).

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