



REACHING OUT TO A RACE: MARCUS GARVEY AND MASS COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE LENSES OF SERVANT- LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

In light of the career and work of Marcus Garvey, the leadership skills he employed help to amplify Robert Greenleaf's description of the true and genuine servant-leader. In his classic book published in 1977, *Servant-Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, Greenleaf identifies a series of attributes and virtues necessary to fulfill the role of "the great leader" who is "seen as a servant first" (p. 7). In his eyes, the concept and dynamics of leadership need an urgent re-definition and conceptual realignment if collective entities are to reach the noble goals to which they aspire:

A fresh critical look is being taken at the issues of power and authority, and people are beginning to learn, however haltingly, to relate to one another in less coercive and more creatively supporting ways. A new moral principle is emerging which holds 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)

The following pages will be an exploration into the leadership methodology of Marcus Garvey against the backdrop of Greenleaf's servant-leadership themes. The first part will be a historical examination of Garvey followed by a context analysis of servant-leadership.



GARVEY'S BACKGROUND

Marcus Garvey was born in Jamaica in the late 1800s. He resided in the United States from 1916 to 1927, never becoming a U.S. citizen. Yet in this brief span of time Garvey left a lasting impression upon the African American struggle for freedom and equality (Salley, 1993, p. 175).

According to Franklin (1994), African Americans began a major migration out of the South during World War I. By answering the Northern call for more laborers, many blacks were able to leave an economically depressed region for a "land of promise" (p. 376). As a result, hundreds of thousands left with high hopes, not only of securing gainful employment, but also of bidding farewell to a social and political life of second-class citizenship. The unrelenting onslaught brought on by the anti-black court systems, segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching "served as important stimuli for blacks to move out of the South" (p. 376). Unfortunately, racial discrimination did not dissipate as many African Americans had anticipated. Valiant military service abroad did not alleviate the oppression either. Post-war race riots throughout the North and South only amplified this one frustrating fact: that the ideals of true democracy were elusive to people of African descent, no matter what region they lived in (pp. 380-381).

Many groups took up the cause for black equality, as a result. Organized labor and numerous organizations such as the Division of Negro Economics and the Associated Colored Employees of America tried, in vain, to enhance the black man's lot economically, socially, and politically. The "wheels of change" appeared to grind with unbearable slowness; and the majority of black Americans, who realized this, were reluctant to be mobilized into action (Franklin, 1994, pp. 376-381).

THE GARVEY THEME AND ORIGIN

It was just before this critical juncture in time, 1916, that Marcus Garvey arrived on the American scene. He displayed a unique ability to com-



municate and reach a great number of disillusioned African Americans. The secret to his success was an emphasis on racial pride “at a time when African Americans had so little of which to be proud” (Franklin, 1994, p. 395). As the father of modern black nationalism, he captured the imagination of a downtrodden people with his new inspiring message:

Garvey exalted everything black; he insisted that black stood for strength and beauty, not inferiority. He asserted that Africans had a noble past, and he declared that American blacks should be proud of their ancestry. (p. 395)

Along with this message of racial pride, Garvey established the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) among the black urban masses. This was an organization which he founded in Jamaica in 1914. Its eight-fold purpose conveyed the theme of Garveyism which sparked black interest nationwide:

- 1) to champion Negro nationhood by redemption of Africa;
- 2) to make the Negro race conscious;
- 3) to breathe the ideals of manhood and womanhood into every Negro;
- 4) to advocate self-determination;
- 5) to make the Negro world conscious;
- 6) to print all the news that will be interesting and constructive to the Negro;
- 7) to instill self-help; and
- 8) to inspire racial love and self-respect. (Bute and Harmer, 1997, p. 166)

The response in the black urban setting was, uncharacteristically, very favorable. By mid-year 1919, the association had more than thirty branches across the country with a membership reaching tens of thousands (Franklin, 1994, p. 395).



COMMUNICATING PRIDE AND IMAGE BUILDING

A series of inner convictions provoked Garvey into his role as a leader. Acutely aware of the lack of black pride among people of African descent, he set out to create a black world based on a black value system and rooted in black consciousness:

Where is the black man's government? Where is his King and Kingdom? Where is his President, his country, and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs? I could not find them [throughout his global travels], and then I decided, I will help to make them. (Salley, 1993, p. 80)

This "helping to make them" took on many forms. Black pride needed to be embodied in something visual, something impressionable, and something touchable; this is where the genius of Marcus Garvey began to stand out. Black Americans were stirred by his frequent use of pageantry, ceremonies, and parades which exalted black themes and accomplishments. He instituted grand titles and imperial uniforms among his devoted followers. In 1921, the New York branch of the UNIA proclaimed him "Provisional President of Africa" and created the "dukes of the Nile" among his lieutenants. "Black Cross" nurses were established and adorned in uniforms which bore decorative orders such as the "Sublime Order of the Nile" and the "Distinguished Order of Ethiopia" (Wesley, 1976, p. 162). Although the UNIA has received sharp criticisms over the years from scholars in this regard, historian Sean D. Cashman (1991) has conceded that Garvey's organization was indeed the "first truly mass movement of African Americans, [and] a predecessor of later African-American organizations, especially those advocating black power and black pride" (p. 39).

Garvey also used literary and artistic channels to instill black pride into the masses. Literature and the arts played an important role in the UNIA from its inception. Its weekly newspaper, *Negro World*, was considered the most influential black publication of the 1920s and '30s. It single-handedly gave the movement (and the black struggle in general) a newfound sense of



literary legitimacy. Each publication contained poems, short stories, book reviews, articles of literary criticism, and inspiring accounts of historical research. Its all-black authorship served as a powerful source of pride and identification for its subscribers. The paper employed endless graphics and forms of art to promote religious themes with African roots, such as a black God and a black Savior. At its height, the weekly publication reached a circulation of over 50,000 in the U.S. and over 200,000 worldwide (Martin, 1983, 133).

Finally, Garvey's methodology reached a zenith in 1919 with the launching of the "Black Star Line" (BSL). The BSL, composed of three UNIA-owned and -operated steamships, was the project that "could carry the weight of its [the UNIA's] goals," in that ships were the "predominant symbol of national power" (Stein, 1986, p. 64). And since all funds raised for the enterprise were raised through selling stocks to blacks only, the ships would be a genuine trophy of the "economic prowess of blacks" (Shelly, 1993, p. 81). Although it would eventually fail as an economic venture, the Black Star Line elevated Garvey to a noted international leader of black communities on three continents (Stein, 1986, p. 149). Racial pride and image promotion had proven to be an effective means of mass communication, domestically and abroad.

THE EFFECTS OF GARVEY'S APPROACH

Garvey experienced success because of his ability to reach the unlettered, working-class black. He filled a vacuum for those African Americans who had fled from an inhospitable South to a disheartening North. He struck their imagination with his unique touch of magnetism. As Caheman (1991) has concluded, the Garvey movement "represented a new black consciousness in which millions of African American citizens could sublimate their despair and disillusionment in the promise of a better and more fulfilled future" (pp. 40-41).

His methodology had an "overwhelming impact on the self-esteem of African Americans," influencing their political behavior and creating a



“legacy for black leadership” (Conniff and Davis, 1994, p. 260). What makes him unique is that he instilled not only a “philosophy and ideology of freedom, but also a *psychology* of liberation” (Anderson, 1993, p. 26). Upon visiting his grave in 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the man who reached out to all races, acknowledged the legacy of Marcus Garvey with these words:

He was the first man of color in the history of the United States to lead and develop a mass movement. He was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel that he was somebody. (Salley, 1993, p. 82)

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND MARCUS GARVEY

First and foremost, the servant-leader, according to Greenleaf, must be one who goes to any measure to ensure that “other people’s highest priority needs are being served.” The evidence of such a phenomenon is seen in the individual growth and personal development of those being led, which makes them “healthier, wiser, freer, [and] more autonomous” (1977, p. 13). Garvey, being the true visionary of his day, took on the burdens of a subjugated segment of society due to racial discrimination and attempted to address its members’ most basic need: a sense of pride, dignity, and self-esteem. As referred to earlier, Garvey reached out to and connected the masses in a way unlike that of any leader before him, by turning the people’s highest need for identity into the centerpiece of his work.

Painter (2007) agrees, contending that through his creation of such items as the black nationalistic colors of green, red, and black, Garvey was able to empower a large number of people, turning them into a community of camaraderie and pride never imagined before. Garvey’s genius at public relations via the parades, uniforms, nurses’ corps, and flair and pageantry gave a boost to black Americans where they needed it the most: collective black esteem. Thus, individual productivity as well as creativity flourished



among African American artists, writers, musicians, and entrepreneurs at a level that was hitherto undreamt of (pp. 203-205).

Secondly, another prerequisite of the servant-leader cited by Greenleaf is the ability to take the initiative as a pattern for others to follow in one's footsteps. He relates this unique attribute of "going out ahead to show the way" as the "very essence of leadership" (1977, p. 15). Again, Garvey seems to follow suit in this regard. The appointing of himself as the "Provisional President of Africa" was not a mere exercise in self-aggrandizement, as it may seem at first blush. He took a bold step to embody and articulate a definitive sense of black consciousness and black self-awareness that gave a leader the authority to mobilize a previously disoriented and aimless people. Garvey himself now stood as the very symbol of this newfound black self-determination. Large numbers of African Americans were magnetized by the potential and possibilities of their own race for the first time in American history (Painter, 2007, p. 203).

As a third item, Greenleaf (1977) proposes that a servant-leader must be one who promotes a goal that captures the imagination of others and thereby compels and propels them into committed and convicted action:

Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams. Much more than a dreamer is required to bring it to reality; but the dream must be there first. (p. 16)

The creation by Garvey of the Black Star Line steamships clearly fulfilled this aspect of Greenleaf's captivating dream. The newfound pride and allegiance to Africa that he had promoted fostered a sense of possibility and practicality. The pilgrimage and emigration plan known as "Back to Africa" was now seeming realistic. Painter (2007) contends that such an innovation literally "galvanized the black masses" as a whole (p. 204). It is also worth noting that commitment to this "dream" would demand at least an economic participation in buying of shares even for those not daring to go overseas. As a result, Garvey was able to mobilize an entire race behind a collective



aspiration that uplifted a people right out of their history of disillusionment and despair.

A fourth trait of the servant-leader highlighted by Greenleaf is the ability to listen. By his estimation, genuine listening bears fruit in one's followers that is both constructive and measurable, in that "true listening builds strength in other people" (1977, p. 17). This virtue was a trademark of Garvey's work in the United States. For the first time the plight of black Americans' condition and status under racial oppression was being not only heard, but also understood, articulated, and addressed. By tapping into that "significant level of meaning in the hearer's experience" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 17), Garvey's voice and leadership brought forth a collective thrust of pride, self-esteem, and validation never witnessed before in African American history.

The fifth attribute cited by Greenleaf (1977) is the crucial ability of the servant-leader to articulate a vision that evokes commitment on the part of others. This skill in "tempting the hearer into that leap of imagination" (p. 18) seems to be one of the signature qualities within Garvey's leadership style. This is especially evident in his rallying cry to create a new African nation via the Black Star Steamship Line. This concept was ingenious in that it took the pride of African Americans to an unforeseen level of distinction, credibility, and even stateliness. As Hine, Hine, and Harold (2003) point out, this exclusively black enterprise was to crystallize in a political entity that would constitute a beacon of black entrepreneurial genius and autonomy (pp. 407-410). The willingness of the black masses to take "that leap of imagination" Greenleaf referred to was phenomenal, as evidenced by the total of \$750,000 in donations from Garvey's followers (Painter, 2007, p. 204).

The sixth trait of a servant-leader is that of empathy. Greenleaf's (1977) articulation of the impact and evidence of true empathy upon those being led seems to mirror the legacy and influence of Garvey upon his followers:

People grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they



are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted. (p. 21)

Garvey, despite being typical of a black person at that time in lacking education and social prominence, was granted a newfound level of acceptance and respect never accorded to the typically disadvantaged African American. The end result, as contended by Clayborne, Lapsansky-Werner, and Nash (2007), was that Garvey's "bold programs—so popular that even Garvey [himself] was astonished—challenged traditional black leaders and their black intellectual followers by appealing to poor black people, desperate for a ray of hope" (p. 349). In Greenleaf's terms, the black masses indeed "grew taller" under the acceptance and empathy of a genuine servant-leader.

The seventh and final attribute of a servant-leader I want to highlight is that of creativity. As Greenleaf (1977) states:

Leaders, therefore, must be more creative than most; and creativity is largely discovery, a push into the uncharted and the unknown. Every once in a while a leader needs to think like a scientist, an artist, or a poet. And a leader's thought process may be just as fanciful as theirs—and as fallible. (p. 23)

In light of this, Garvey's creation of the newspaper *Negro World* embodied the thematic essence of Greenleaf's observation. Trotter, Jr. (2001) concludes that as a result of the weekly's promotion of black art, black literature, and black theology, Garvey was able to literally "transform blackness into a symbol of beauty" (p. 412). This innovation successfully elevated the notion of black self-assertion to that of an expression of art and cultural legitimacy. "Black America"—redeemed and redefined—had come of age.



GARVEY—THE “EARTHEN VESSEL”

Marcus Garvey, like all of us within the family of humanity, had several imperfections and flaws that can cast a shadow upon his legacy of servant-leadership. First and foremost, as noted by Dudley (1997), was Garvey’s abuse and mismanagement of the UNIA’s funds that totaled a conservative estimate of at least one million dollars. Second, the Black Star Line steamship company went out of business with debts of \$750,000 to investors and stockholders (p. 197). A third failing, according to Hine (2003), was Garvey’s arrest, indictment, and eventual deportation for twelve counts of mail fraud involving the selling of Black Star Line stock (p. 367).

In Greenleaf’s own deep appeal to the humanity evident in all, the imperfect life of Garvey can serve as a richer illustration of servant-leadership on a more profound level and in a more personal and reflective manner. Greenleaf spoke of unlimited liability, the idea that our approach to others can be unconditional, and in a sense, ultimately graceful. Garvey’s story is what Parker Palmer (2004) refers to as a “divided life. . .not a failure of ethics. . .[but] a failure of human wholeness” (p. 7). Garvey, to a certain degree, lived a divided life, as several areas of his outer world were not in harmony with his inner world. His life serves as reminder to us all that the pursuit of genuine wholeness is a noble matter and that no individual—and especially, no leader—is an exception to this human tendency to live a divided life. Rather than nullifying Garvey’s special gifts of servant-leadership, however, his personal shortcomings afford a means for the servant-leader deep within to shine out more clearly as we look back on his life. This principle is what the Apostle Paul referred to in 2 Corinthians 4:7: “But we have this *treasure* in *earthen* vessels that the *excellency* of the power may be *of God* and not out *of us*” (Recovery Version of the New Testament).



CONCLUSION

Garvey's effectiveness as a leader and innovator in mass communication is clearly an undisputed matter among the many historians cited in this study. Yet, in light of the principles of servant-leadership, there remains a new level of insight into what Greenleaf calls the conversion of common leaders into "affirmative builders of a better society" (p. 10). Marcus Garvey, in the face of intimidating odds, reached, uplifted, and mobilized the black masses as a servant first—secondarily, as a leader. According to a recent assessment by Azevedo (2005), Garveyism had a "profound political and psychological impact on the black world [as a whole]" (p. 233). Marcus Garvey, when considered in the light of Greenleaf's theory, shines as the epitome of servant-leadership in action—which very well may explain his remarkable legacy and efficacy:

Servant leaders differ from other persons of goodwill because they act on what they believe. Consequently, they "know experimentally" and there is a sustaining spirit when they venture and risk. To the worldly, servant leaders may seem naïve; and they may not adapt readily to prevailing institutional structures. . . . servant leaders may stand alone . . . as a saving remnant of those who care for both persons and institutions, and who are determined to make their caring count—*wherever they are involved*. (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 329-330)

Garvey's life of service to his people stands out in the chronicles of American history and leadership studies. He had a fire within that could not be extinguished by the daunting obstacles before him and the oppressed people he sought to serve. His sense of liability for his fellow people of African descent was unconditional in nature, producing a strong registration of self-responsibility within. As a result, he was motivated to sacrifice without any notion or fear of the cost at hand. In light of this, Greenleaf's (1996) brief explanation of the hallmark traits of a responsible leader sheds further light upon Garvey's effectiveness as a servant-leader:



As I see it, responsible people build. They do not destroy. They are moved by the heart; compassion stands ahead of justice. The prime test of whether an act is responsible is to ask, How will it affect people? Are lives moved toward nobility? p. 306

This was clearly Garvey's legacy—moving lives “toward nobility.” His personal sense of responsibility radiated into the masses and produced what Greenleaf has framed as the building of communal responsibility out of which rises an enduring love that heals and makes the world whole. Garvey's life is a resonant echo of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so profoundly stated in life-affirming beauty and simplicity: “Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?”

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