



FILM REVIEW: *AKEELAH AND THE BEE*

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*Dear Father,
We dream
While we may*

*Who are we to need?
We need
While we wait*

— Neil Diamond
From the soundtrack of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*

In searching for a film to review that expressed the nature and notion of servant-leadership, we viewed several films with threads of promise. However, few really encapsulated what we felt Robert Greenleaf or even Hermann Hesse would look for in a movie. Frustration was beginning to set in, when close relatives received a movie trailer in the mail from Starbucks, where they both are employed. The trailer held promise of a film that portrayed servant-leadership in a family-friendly context. Knowing of Starbucks's corporate commitment to servant-leadership, we were not surprised at this first entrance of their entertainment area into film. We began our conversations about how the notion of servant-leadership could be presented in such a mass market. Could a corporate-held value impact society? Does it even permeate the very company promoting the ideal?



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS CORPORATE ETHOS

Greenleaf (1977) shared the story of how John Woolman quietly and over a long time convinced the Society of Friends (Quakers) to rid themselves of slavery, whereupon they became the first American religious group to denounce and forbid slavery. Woolman accomplished this through persuasion. "Leadership by persuasion has the virtue of change by conviction rather than coercion" (p. 30). Most of the readers of this article are familiar with and have experienced leadership by coercion and top-down pronouncements. Many corporations and institutions have yet to test whether servant-leadership can transform the culture and behavior of their employees and leaders.

Corporations provide new employees with pages of orientation paperwork on their first day at work. Included with the forms I-9 and W-4 are the mission and values statements. A quick signature is all a new employee has to give before heading down the hall to provide a urine sample. Hmmm. . . how do corporate-espoused ethoses such as servant-leadership really play out in the work-a-day world? The purpose of this review is to explore the contagious aspects of servant-leadership as an agent for social change. The analysis also will provide a review of the film *Akeelah and the Bee*, showing how it portrays the contagious power of servant-leadership. Further analysis will examine the connections between the espoused corporate values and observable community experiences, providing a comparison that asks: Can corporate values drive social change?

Using film as a method to convey the concepts of servant-leadership would likely be applauded by Hesse (1956), who wrote in *Journey to the East* about a conversation with the character Leo regarding artists dissolving into their work, not unlike the nursing mother. The story returns at the end of *The Journey to the East* as H. H., the narrator, recognizes the importance of the concept as the tale of the journey ends. "The law of service. He who wishes to live long must serve, but he who wishes to rule does not live long" (p. 34). The subject of this paper and of the film is not longevity



or superiority, but whether it is possible to effect social change with the corporate value of servant-leadership.

AKEELAH AND THE BEE

Akeelah and the Bee was released on April 28, 2006. Rated PG for some language, this family/young teen movie fits into a new genre of spelling bee movies following the documentary *Spellbound* and the screen adaptation of the novel *Bee Season*. Set in South Los Angeles, the film shows 11-year-old Crenshaw Middle School student Akeelah Anderson (Keke Palmer) as a typically unmotivated, disenfranchised youth. Her unique talent for spelling is revealed when she wins the school spelling bee after registering under threat of detention by the principal, Mr. Welch (Curtis Armstrong). With one victory in hand, Akeelah begins preparation for the regional contest under the tutelage of Dr. Joshua Larabee (Laurence Fishburne). Akeelah's brother runs with a rough crowd and her single mother, Tanya (Angela Bassett), is none too pleased about Akeelah's new-found passion and a training schedule that includes clandestine trips to the suburbs.

Akeelah's hard work is paying off, but she is not alone. Certainly, her coach and mentor, Dr. Larabee, play a part, but it is the "50,000 coaches" that offer their assistance that make the difference. One scene depicts Akeelah sharing her deepest fears of inadequacy with her mother. It is her mother who encourages Akeelah to allow others into the process of preparing for the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C. Akeelah becomes the talk of the town as all the people in it suddenly count themselves as winners. Figuring prominently in this collection of coaches is Javier (J. R. Villarreal).

Javier is one of the competitors in the regional bee when he meets Akeelah and invites her to study with the team from his school, Woodland Hills. Taking the bus across town to a suburban school, Akeelah meets up with Javier and other spellers as they prepare for the next contest. The collegial group is presented in stark contrast to the stonefaced Dylan Chiu



(Sean Michael Afable), who is driven to succeed by an overbearing father. Javier is the connecting spirit between all the spellers, more focused on the relationships than on winning. Even in the national finals when he is eliminated, he brings Akeelah and Dylan together while cheering them on to a tie victory in the end.

THE ACTORS AND OTHERS

Building upon an impressive acting career that began when she was nine with a role in *Barbershop 2: Back in Business*, Keke Palmer stars as Akeelah Anderson. Keke has starred in the Emmy-nominated television movie *The Wool Cap*, which also earned her nominations for the NAACP Image Award and the Screen Actors Guild Best Leading Actress. Palmer plays alongside J. R. Villerreal (Javier), cast in the other main youth role. Also running up an impressive list of credits, Villerreal has been seen in guest lead roles in television dramas and is starring in the soon-to-be-released motion picture *Harvest of Redemption*. Look for Villerreal in the short film *Ay Mijo* as well (“Akeelah and the Bee,” 2006).

Veteran stars Laurence Fishburne as Dr. Larabee and Angela Bassett as Tanya Anderson worked together previously, playing Ike and Tina Turner in *What’s Love Got to Do With It?* Here they team up again as Keke’s coach and mom, respectively. Bassett has earned the Golden Globe Award and NAACP Image Awards, as well as nominations for an Emmy and Academy Award. A gifted and versatile actress, Bassett brought her experience in stage, television, and film into this production. The only drawback may have been the shortage of scenes with Bassett and Fishburne that would have captured some of the electricity of their previous pairing, for which the latter received an Academy Award nomination. Fishburne has a resume too long for listing in this review and brought a powerful force to the film. He has received the Tony Award for his role in *Two Trains Running* and Emmy awards for the television dramas *TriBeca* and *Miss Evers*. As a director, Fishburne debuted with *Once in a Life*, which he also produced.



Written and directed by Doug Atkinson, the film shares a glimpse of the youth experience of South Los Angeles and can be commended for the casting of a virtually all-minority cast. The roles portrayed break many stereotypes of minorities depicted in the media today. Positive relations are emphasized, sometimes glossing over the realities of inner city struggles. Atkinson's writing was recognized in 2000 when the screenplay won the Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting competition. No stranger to television or the stage, Atkinson writes from a depth of experience that sets the stage for the film well, even though the writing provides a familiar take on the "underdog wins the day" sports theme of many pictures.

Released by Lions Gate, the film is co-presented by 2929 Entertainment and Starbucks Entertainment. Lions Gate has begun an impressive repertoire of films already as a successful independent movie studio. Not afraid of controversy, Lions Gate was behind *Fahrenheit 9/11* and recently earned big notice through its production of the 2006 Oscar Award-winning film *Crash*, also set in Los Angeles (Palmer, 2006, p. 15). Adding a bit of the *Crash's* edginess would have provided a more realistic portrayal of *Akeelah and the Bee*, but would have risked losing the family rating and probably was not in the interest of corporate partner Starbucks. This was Starbucks' first foray into film production and promotion; the company saw it as an extension of its profitable music division that includes music sales and production. Extensive in-store promotional efforts coincided with the April 28, 2006 opening of the film. We found it an odd commentary that presenting a realistic depiction of the way many families need to live in America today means taking a risk of losing both "family-friendly" ratings and corporate sponsorship.

The producers included industry powerhouses Sid and Nancy Ganis, Michael Romersa, Daniel Llewelyn, and Laurence Fishburne. Executive producers included Todd Wagner, Mark Cuban, Marc Butan, Helen Sugland, and Lions Gate's Michael Burns, Michael Paseorek, and Tom Ortenberg (Gould, 2006).

Akeelah and the Bee is a wonderful family film with enough layers of



character portrayal and critical thought to hold interest for all ages. Despite being a reworking of a fairly predictable theme, the film reveals interesting aspects when looked at through the lens of servant-leadership. Three such elements are: vocation, the contagious nature of servant-leadership, and the transforming power of the same.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS VOCATION

Is one called to servant-leadership? How does one find his or her vocation? Jeffries (1998) concluded “that we all have a vocation, that we are all called to a unique purpose and certainty” (p. 31). Wheatley (2005) paraphrased T. S. Eliot’s poetry to express her understanding of calling. She reflected, “We do what we are called to do because we feel called to do it. We walk silently, willingly, down the well-trodden path still lit by the fire of millions. And the rest, I know now, is not our business” (p. 244). Greenleaf (1977) detailed this as the natural feeling to serve as opposed to the conscious choice to lead, fostering an environment in which others, “*while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants” (pp. 12-13, emphasis original). These understandings open the definition of leader to anyone who feels called to help another person—far more people than are usually considered as leaders.

The film seems to share the callings of many characters depicted at various points. Dr. Larabee is called to coach Keke, but it is more out of a “running from, than running to.” Tanya has already lost her husband; she has one son away in the military and another tangled up in the wrong crowd. Deeply concerned she might lose Akeelah to her passion for spelling, Tanya comes to her vocation reluctantly. Keke’s friend, Georgia (Sahara Garey), remains by her even when feeling lost in the hype. Most illustrative of servant-leadership as a calling is Javier. His character exhibits the natural being of a servant-leader who is called into the vocation. His character closely resembles that of Leo in *Journey to the East* in terms of his genuine concern for all participants. He looks to establish a community



of practice rather than competition, shrugging off his own loss in his happiness at seeing Keke excel.

THE CONTAGIOUS NATURE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

There is a pivotal scene in the film in which Akeelah and her mother are sitting with each other. Akeelah has just lost her coach, Dr. Larabee, and she is not feeling up to the daunting task of going on without him. Recognizing her loneliness, her mother reassures Keke by letting her know she has “50,000 coaches.” Suddenly, the whole of South Los Angeles is clamoring to assist, and everywhere Keke looks there is someone quizzing her on spelling words. The film depicts the contagious power of servant-leadership, often felt to be a quieter, more personal form of leadership.

Greenleaf (1977) also cautioned that the servant-leader may “stand alone, largely without the support of their culture, 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*” (p. 330). Many examples of ostracized servant-leaders can be noted throughout history: Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Jesus are often mentioned as servant-leaders who were not fully accepted by their cultures, yet remained committed and passionate about making the world better for others. Bach (1970) shared the powerful story of Jonathan Livingston Seagull’s being called to “Stand to Center for Shame. . . for his reckless irresponsibility, violating the dignity and tradition of the Gull Family” (p. 39). Yet Jonathan continued to fly with a passion in the face of those who wished to control his actions, finding Chiang would mentor him and in turn mentoring the young gull, Fletcher.

There appears to be an undercurrent of similar thought moving through the world today, struggling as it may against those who seek to hoard power rather than share it. John Woolman exhibited this contagious nature when he campaigned for the abolition of slavery among Quakers. Recent news articles in the press share stories of unparalleled philanthropy, volunteerism, and environmental concern. Jim Donald, president and CEO of Starbucks,



personally contacts twelve managers daily, and the significant film promotion encouraged spelling, followed by reading promotions and an essay contest. In contrast, a recent trip through a handful of other fast-food establishments garnered kid's meals filled with trinkets, action movies tie-ins, TV giveaways, and video games.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

The closing scenes of the film present the emotional climax of the Scripps National Spelling Bee in all its intensity. Throughout the movie the antagonist is played by Dylan, a young Asian classmate of Javier, and his overbearing father, Mr. Chiu (Tzi Ma), who are out to win at all costs. Javier's welcoming and gentle nature transform the naturally competitive situation though his love and encouragement for both Keke and his classmate. The result is a cliff-hanging duel between Akeelah and Dylan that uses up all the spelling words in the judges' reservoir, resulting in a tie between the two. It is tempting to shout the Hollywood theme, "Everyone's a winner," at the end of the film. The transformational metaphor of life flowing between Leo and H. H. shows that it is possible for all to win (Hesse, 1956, pp. 116-118). However, the deeper meaning portrays the possibility that an entire community can be transformed into servant-leaders, cheering for Akeelah, increasing its own self-esteem, and developing a cohesive spirit.

Greenleaf (1977) declared that it is possible to "start the movement toward a more serving society, one institution at a time" (p. 88) based on the dream of a single individual, just as Akeelah held the dream of winning the Scripps National Spelling Bee. Further, trust must be the basis of the relationship between the servant-leader and the ones who are empowered, as noted: "The only sound basis for trust is for people to have a solid experience of being *served* by their institutions in a way that builds a society that is more just and more loving, and with greater creative opportunities for all its people" (p. 70, emphasis original). In offering to coach Akeelah, her neighbors demonstrate their trust in her and their hope that they will be part



of the change in their society. Just as Woolman changed the perceptions of the Quakers toward slavery, Akeelah changes how South Los Angeles views itself. Whether a corporation like Starbucks can change the landscape of retail foodservice through promotion of spelling, reading, and writing, remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

Servant-leadership as a vocation may involve great sacrifice, as depicted in Martin Bell's (1970) story "Barrington Bunny." The little rabbit, Barrington, finds his vocation is to be "warm and furry. . . A gift. A free gift" (p. 6). Javier experiences this feeling of vocation by being friendly and encouraging even as he is eliminated from the spelling bee. For Barrington, it means keeping a field mouse warm in a snowstorm even though doing so means losing his life. Finding a vocation in servant-leadership does not always mean an easy path. Greenleaf (1977) forewarned seekers:

To be on with the journey one must have an attitude toward loss and being lost, a view of oneself in which powerful symbols like *burned, dissolved, broken off*—however painful their impact is seen to be—do not appear as senseless or destructive. Rather the losses they suggest are seen as opening the way for new creative acts, for the receiving of priceless gifts (p. 327, emphasis original).

When one gives of one's self in order to share one's gifts, the truth of Hesse's (1956) contention is experienced: it is through giving that one's life is fed (p. 118).

Akeelah and the Bee provides a depiction of servant-leadership as a vocation that is freely given and contagious. It is presented in an accessible form with resonance for all ages. This film is recommended for anyone wishing to explore how servant-leadership can be lived in his or her own vocation, how it can transform a culture or community, and how it can be related in a contagious love with family and friends.



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