



INSIGHTS AND INSPIRATION

—LARRY C. SPEARS
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The term “servant-leadership” was first coined in a 1970 essay by Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990), entitled *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf, born in Terre Haute, Indiana, spent most of his organizational life in the field of management research, development, and education at AT&T. Following a 40-year career at AT&T, Greenleaf enjoyed a second career that lasted 25 years, during which time he served as an influential consultant to a number of major institutions, including Ohio University, MIT, the Ford Foundation, the Mead Corporation, the American Foundation for Management Research, and Lilly Endowment Inc. In 1964, Greenleaf founded the Center for Applied Ethics, which was renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in 1985.

I am grateful to have met Bob Greenleaf, and to have served as President & CEO of The Greenleaf Center from 1990 to 2007. In 2008, I launched The Spears Center, where I strive to continue to carry forward the idea of servant-leadership as defined by Greenleaf.

Over the past two decades, I have devoted myself to the joyful task of encouraging a better world through expanding our understanding and practices of servant-leadership. Much of my work has focused on communicating these ideas through a series of books, journals, articles, newsletters, essays, interviews, the internet, radio and television appearances, and hundreds of public presentations around the world. Thousands of people the world over now carry on this work. Slowly but surely, public awareness and practice of servant-leadership have grown.



DISCOVERY AND INFLUENCE

In 1990, I had the most unusual experience of discovering nearly one hundred previously unknown writings by Robert Greenleaf when I went through his personal papers following his death. Greenleaf had found writing down his thoughts to be a useful way for him to understand better his own thinking on many topics. Over a period of almost fifty years, he would occasionally put down on paper his thinking about something, and then he would simply file it away. Following Greenleaf's death in 1990, I went through his personal papers and found dozens of files containing documents and manuscripts that ranged from a mere one or two pages to one that was over one hundred pages long. The existence of many of these writings had not been known to either his family or friends. Eventually, several of us edited many of these papers, and they were published in two books of new writings by Robert Greenleaf in 1996 (*On Becoming a Servant-Leader* and *Seeker and Servant*).

Robert Greenleaf's writings have influenced several generations of people. Part of Greenleaf's great contribution to the world was the simple act of bringing together the words "servant" and "leader" in an innovative hyphenated word, "servant-leader." In providing us with a name for something that many of us intuitively understand, he has helped to link together many who might otherwise have felt even more isolated in their beliefs and in their workplaces. I believe that leading others can be quite meaningful. Serving others is better yet. However, both serving and leading others, at least for me, is the best. It offers opportunities for wholeness, for making a difference in the world, and for helping to fulfill Bob Greenleaf's "Best Test" of a servant-leader: Is one healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely oneself to serve others? And what is the impact on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?

SERVANT-LEADERS KEEP TRYING

Call it what you will (walking your talk, practicing what you preach,



or simply acting in a consistent manner), it is generally desirable to hold oneself accountable, and to be true to yourself and your values. At the same time, we are each of us fallible human beings. Try as we might, as caring servant-leaders each one of us will at some point do or say something that falls short of our own expectations as a servant-leader. Even more likely: We will do or say something that falls short of someone else's expectations of us. The great challenge for anyone who embraces an ideal like servant-leadership is to try to recognize those times when we fall short. Sometimes that may involve our saying so, or apologizing to someone. It nearly always suggests the importance of understanding and learning some personal lesson for the future.

It has been said that we learn far more from our mistakes than we do from our successes. I believe that is true. There is nothing wrong with making mistakes—ideally, they are not the same mistakes. My point here is that there are no “perfect” servant-leaders. Nor is servant-leadership an all-or-nothing proposition. As individual human beings, we tend to move forward in fits and starts. The same is generally true of organizations, countries, and humankind. The trick is to keep trying.

A RISING TIDE

Some organizational leaders have concluded that practicing servant-leadership is the right thing to do, and have subsequently embraced it. This has certainly been an important way in which servant-leadership has grown and advanced over the past forty years.

However, I think it is vitally important to note that Greenleaf titled his essay *The Servant as Leader*, and not *The Leader as Servant*. While encouraging leaders to act as servants was a *remarkable* idea, asking servants to act as leaders was (and remains) a truly *radical* idea! It is also an idea that goes against our expectations of contemporary culture. It is this fact that makes servant-leadership such a unique and potent philosophy. Servant-leadership challenges leaders to serve others. Even more radical: Servant-leadership challenges those whom Robert Greenleaf called “natural



servants” to look for opportunities to provide leadership in their organizations, communities, and elsewhere. Leaders-as-servants, and especially servants-as-leaders, are gradually improving the quality of commitment and caring toward one another throughout many communities. Nowhere is the saying, “A rising tide lifts all boats” truer than in servant-leadership.

ON GRACE AND GRATITUDE

In this year’s *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, the tide keeps rising, and we all receive the grace and power of this rising tide. I am deeply grateful to serve as Senior Advisory Editor of the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, and in my five years in this role, the friendship and intellectual curiosity shared with the servant-leaders at Gonzaga University have provided a life-affirming essence, a presence of great vitality that has been a real treasure to me and to the work of servant-leadership everywhere.

From the readings in this year’s journal, may we all be better equipped to serve and lead in ways that help us dream great dreams, and in ways that draw others to a greater sense of wisdom, health, autonomy, and freedom.

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