



THE QUESTION OF LOVE AND POWER

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Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

These words, penned by poet Mary Oliver, are a fitting place to begin a conversation on servant-leadership and the possibilities that exist in the space created by the paradox of justice and forgiveness. The tension of human conflict can be likened to a great bonfire whose tongues reach the heavens through the enduring gifts of human goodness, but the heat of which can also be a reminder of the hell we so often create by our relentless capacity for evil. In receiving the gift of life, each person is confronted by forces that are undeniably nuanced, subtle, powerful, and unwieldy. If the profound nature of our daily encounter with existence could be captured in a question, it might be precisely the one Mary Oliver has given us: What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

The answer is of ultimate importance.

I recall walking as a boy with my father in the Beartooth Range along the eastern front of the Rockies in southern Montana. We wanted to catch the beautiful and elusive golden trout, a delicacy of high mountain lakes and streams. The only problem, as I saw it, was a five-mile climb, nearly straight up, along steep, rugged switchbacks, rocky and unforgiving. I was ten years old and when my dad told me of the hike, and how hard it would be, I wanted nothing to do with it: too much work, too much pain, and in the end we might not even catch any fish. My thoughts were consumed with excuses and even anger at my father for suggesting we go for golden



trout, rather than the rainbows that filled East Rosebud Lake (no hike at all) or Mystic Lake (a comparatively easy hike over relatively flat terrain). But my father convinced me not only to go with him, but to make the trip worthwhile, to enjoy the challenge together, to engage the beauty of the Beartooths with awe and respect, and not give in to everything in me that wanted to complain or blame. His own spirit of delight pervaded the air. . . he was in love with every aspect of encountering the mountains. He was present: mind, heart, and soul.

We began and he took me with him, keeping me in stride, waiting for me when we rested, helping me progress again. The hike was far and away the most difficult of the hundreds we had taken together, and many hours passed before we crossed a final hard up-slanted swath of mountain grasses, grabbing at the roots of windblown trees, scrambling slowly on all fours. At last the destination came into view and we pressed our hands into the earth, dug in our feet, and went step by step until finally we crested the lip of a massive rock bowl and stood and looked down on Silver Lake, a blue gem encased in the heart of the mountains, reflecting the heart of the sky.

The right journeys are worth all the toil.

Servant-leadership is just such a journey, a journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness, one that at the outset is often marred by daunting obstacles, steep swings of overdone ego or lack of self-confidence, the pernicious sense of anger and blame for self or others. But when we approach the life of the servant-leader with awe and a deep sense of willingness, a graceful and disciplined pathway opens itself before us.

By the time we crested the jagged lip of the mountain, my thoughts had changed. Even now, decades later, when I think of my father and of the mountains of Montana, I think of gratitude, affection, confidence, love.

Servant-leadership helps us to navigate dark canyons of individual and collective personhood, to find our way to vistas of understanding and excellence from which we can give ourselves in wholehearted love and service to others. In the majestic mountains of Montana, the sun is big and shines bright in a seemingly endless sky. Our thoughts, too, are expansive and



imbued with a natural capacity for grandeur. Often, when the life of the mind receives the right illumination, our thoughts lead us to a sense of humility, and the will to sacrifice for the good of others.

Illumination has historically symbolized deeper knowledge, greater discernment, or a better approach to a circumstance formerly viewed as irresolvable. Illumination is a sure and present light, the steady glow of a candle in darkness, the majesty of the sun at dawn. Our manner of thinking, too, can be blessed by illumination, and in this context, our thinking becomes vital to how we choose, and how we envision what we will do with this one wild and precious life. Natural logic says that the way we think is the type of thinking we are okay with, or willing to entertain; otherwise we would change our thinking. In other words, the essence of our thinking is what defines us. Certainly thought is elusive, and before training our minds toward more legitimate thought, even the notion of developing, honing, or transforming one's thought seems slippery or beyond reach. However, a significant truth reveals itself if we follow the typical trajectory of our everyday thoughts. If our thoughts are low-level, our minds tend toward an unconscious but sinister self-focus—unconscious because we have not called attention to the thoughts we think in order to change them; sinister because unexamined thought results in actions and impacts that often do pervasive harm to oneself, to others, and to the world.

If, on the other hand, we engage a depth of thought that resonates with transcendent values such as truth, mercy, goodness, beauty, and love, then our own way of life becomes self-transcendent and we are given the grace to be a part of helping to heal the heart of the world. Our way of thinking results in the actions we take in the world. Therefore who we are (in other words, our character) is directly tied to how we think. In light of this connection, good thinking becomes as vital as oxygen.

Czech playwright, former dissident, and eventual president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, gives credence to the importance of our thought life not just as leaders, but more importantly, as people. Just as our thought life equates to the nature of our character, our personhood equates



to the nature of our leadership. Havel's underground leadership of a nation bound by the negation and degradation of communism eventually led to the Velvet Revolution, the massive nonviolent Czech resolve that struck a chord in the collective soul of humanity, unseated a totalitarian regime, and gave the world a sense of hope hard-won, of freedom delivered by women and men of courage. Consider Havel's focus on the crucial nature of quality thinking:

Consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic, or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable.

Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good.

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

Servant-leadership echoes Havel's refreshing sense not only of hope, but also of the holy, the sacred with regard to consciousness and being, and provides a thoughtful and active developmental progression toward mature personhood. Servant-leadership consciousness can help us ascend toward what Abraham Lincoln called the better angels of our nature. Contentment, grace and ease, gratitude and humor, love, wisdom, inspiration, forgiveness, legitimate power—these are some of the hallmarks of true personhood, true consciousness, and true leadership from the beginning of time. Not surprisingly, the word *truth* comes from the root word “troth,” or betrothal: to be



faithful, devoted, loyal, and true; to love another person in the depths of his or her being. True leadership is love.

From this place we come back to Mary Oliver's initial question:

What do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver's own answer is resonant with Havel's conception of the consciousness that precedes being. In her poem "When Death Comes," the poet concludes her reflections on existence, courage, and death itself, in this way:

When it's over, I want to say:
all my life I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

I hope you find in this year's collection of essays, science, and poetry the consciousness that precedes being, and the joy that accompanies a life willingly devoted to servant-leadership. In this life, we can enter together the crucible of human existence, with all its immanent capacity for good and evil, and emerge on the other side with a sense of refinement, wholeness, and holiness.

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