



SEEKERS ANONYMOUS

On Being a Seeker in the Twenty-First Century

—RICHARD J. LEIDER AND LARRY C. SPEARS

The term *servant-leadership* was first coined in a 1970 essay by Robert K. Greenleaf, entitled *The Servant Leader*. Greenleaf defined servant-leadership this way: “The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived?”

While Greenleaf is best known for his writing on servant-leadership, he also wrote briefly but powerfully on other concepts. One of these ideas that has been near and dear to our own curiosity is his call to create a “Seekers Anonymous,” and the central focus of this essay.

In 1975, *Friends Journal* published an article by Greenleaf titled, “On Being a Seeker in the Late Twentieth Century.” In 1996, Larry Spears included that essay in a posthumous collection of writings by Greenleaf titled, *Seeker and Servant*. It was in this article that Greenleaf postulated the idea of creating a Seekers Anonymous.

As was the case with other powerful concepts postured by Greenleaf, he wrote a total of three paragraphs on this idea, which are included in this essay. He didn’t say all that much about it; rather, he shared what inspiration and insight he had; and, we believe he did so with some hope that his ideas might be picked by others and made real in some fashion.



HUNGER FOR COMMUNITY

While Greenleaf was a Quaker who rarely drank alcohol, he both understood the misery associated with alcoholism and admired the work of Alcoholics Anonymous. Growing up, he experienced firsthand the reality of having a parent (his mother) who had a serious drinking problem. That early experience from childhood may well have been key in his personal decision to avoid the use of alcohol.

In our view, the creation and establishment of Alcoholics Anonymous ranks as one of the most powerful and effective social movements that began in the twentieth century. It has helped countless millions of people around the world to reclaim their lives, and to take greater personal responsibility for their actions.

In a little-known essay, Greenleaf wrote, “The means of recovery offered by AA is the immediate assumption of responsibility for oneself, for others, and particularly for other alcoholics.” Over the past seventy years, the fundamental approach taken by Alcoholics Anonymous has been expanded to groups dealing with other kinds of addictions as well, including drugs, sex, and food.

Much has been lost in recent human history as a result of the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shapers of human lives. This shift has prompted a pervasive hunger for creating community. Servant-leadership suggests that true community can be created. Greenleaf wrote that “[a]ll that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant leader demonstrating his or her unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group.”

It is our belief that those who belong to Alcoholics Anonymous and similar groups are, in no small measure, also servant-leaders creating community for others in recovery. We think this approach can also be a meaningful one for the countless millions of spiritual seekers seeking a new depth of community.

“PRIMITIVE UNSTRUCTURED FEELING”

Greenleaf wrote, “One brilliant night, when I saw the fantastic image of one of the great nebulae in the 100-inch mirror on Mount Wilson, I had a deeply religious experience. I shook with awe and wonder at the majesty and the mystery of all creation. This primitive unstructured feeling, the powerful sense of awe and wonder, is to me the source of religious feeling at its greatest depth.”



Greenleaf's experience speaks to the deep yearning that many of us feel as seekers. Our search for meaning often carries within it the unspoken yearning for that "powerful sense of awe and wonder" that Greenleaf experienced that night while looking through the telescope at Mount Wilson.

The search for truth and enlightenment often takes many forms. We may read poetry, pray, travel, meditate, or commune with nature. For many of us who are attracted to servant-leadership, our spiritual seeking may also be inextricably linked to our desire to serve others. If we are lucky, we can sometimes sense that we are making incremental steps in the right direction. And yet, it is rare, if ever, that we experience the "primitive unstructured feeling" that Greenleaf mentioned.

What of the seeker who spends a lifetime looking for spiritual enlightenment, but doesn't find what they were looking for. Does that mean that their search was a meaningless waste of time? We think not. Yes, the search for meaning is, in part, a search for answers. But it is also an experience of living in the questions. This leads us to this idea of "Seekers Anonymous."

"HOW WOULD SEEKERS ANONYMOUS DO FOR A NAME?"

Greenleaf wrote, "How would Seekers Anonymous do for a name? And could the model be taken from AA: that no one will be paid and only funds contributed from active seekers will be used? For those who participate, healing, in the sense of being made whole, will come from deep involvement with creative work on the structural flaws in our society, work that has both ameliorative and society building consequences."

As Alcoholics Anonymous helps in the healing of body, mind, and spirit, the establishment of a Seekers Anonymous may have a similar impact. Of course, one might say: "We already have many churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples: Why do we need a Seekers Anonymous?"

To begin to answer that question, it is important to recognize that the definition of being a seeker means that one has not yet found what he or she may be looking for. Most religious institutions are founded upon the understanding of questions which they believe have been answered. Traditions, texts, dogma, and structure have also been established by most religions and denominations in response to the questions of earlier seekers. The original questions are presumed to have been answered; and the focus is on deepening the understanding and practice of a particular set of beliefs surrounding



those answers. Using Greenleaf's definition, Seekers are on a journey of discovery and have not yet found what it is that they are looking for.

Another reason for a Seekers Anonymous is that the world is full of seekers who have left these same religious institutions for all kinds of reasons. Many of them did so because they did not find the answers that they were looking for within a particular religious tradition. Others leave their home institutions feeling wounded or disenchanted. For those who have left their churches, mosques, or synagogues, and who carry on their search for spiritual meaning, the life of a seeker can be very lonely. Just as Greenleaf's coining of the term "servant-leader" has helped to create a movement of people who once did not know that there were others who shared their hopes and dreams: So, too, is the coining of Seekers Anonymous.

"HI, I'M MARY AND I'M A SEEKER"

Imagine a Seekers Anonymous meeting that was modeled on the AA meeting model. By implication, it could be self-directed, low-cost, low-tech, and made up of a group of equals. It could serve as a source of hope. It could be a place where one might share their questions, while supporting others as caring listeners of their own questions. Meetings could be held in simple rooms, and without the need for purchasing property, or paying either professionals or staff. Imagine a Seekers Anonymous meeting where one might start by saying: "Hi, I'm Mary, and I'm a Seeker." One would listen to others as they shared their questions around their own journeys, and one would be listened to as they shared their own search with others.

Greenleaf wrote, "Seekers Anonymous will be religious in the root meaning of that word, *re ligio*, to rebind: to bridge the separation between persons and the cosmos, to heal the widespread alienation, and to re-establish men and women in the role of servants—healers—of society." Seekers Anonymous is a search for the answer to the spiritual question, "For the sake of what?"

SEEKING IS LIKE ART

Seeking is like art. We know it when we feel it. It comes through us as an "unstructured primitive feeling" as we gaze at the Northern Lights in the clear, cold fall sky. It is the primitive core we feel as we warm ourselves around a fire on the plains of East Africa. It is the natural high we feel when



we make a difference in another's life. We both seek and sense our place in the grand pattern of life. We feel a part of the whole of life.

Some people claim that there is no need to seek. We should not argue with these people. They are the people the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu observed when he wrote, "A frog in a well cannot be talked to about the sea."

If we sense a call to the sea—the hunger of seeking—it's time for Seeker's Anonymous. We must leave the well to those who enjoy debating the temperature of the water in the well in which they are trapped. Their well is a place that they have chosen for a sea which is not yet seen.

Seeking is a path to the sea. There are many paths. Tennessee Williams wrote, "There is a time of departure even when there's no clear place to go." How do we know when it's time to depart? How do we find the path to the sea?

"FOR THE SAKE OF WHAT?"

Today, when we think of seeking, we might recognize that we are more personally vulnerable and that life is more difficult than we had been led to expect. On September 11, 2001, the world absorbed a devastating act of darkness. Suddenly, we were forced to think hard and to think deeply about what matters most in our lives. When faced with a crisis this immense, seeking could seem trivial. But the truth was that the question, "For the sake of what?" became the operative question of the day. Seeking was not trivial but essential. The events of September 11 called us to the sea. They called us into the big questions, not only so we could cope and heal but so we could make sense of the new world we're living in. The tragedy brought forth the question in firefighters, rescue workers and ordinary people who dropped everything to simply serve. Their deeds were a witness to our innate quest to answer the question, "For the sake of what?" A great irony of many lives is that the big question is never put to us but by crisis.

Seeker's Anonymous is a laboratory for exploring the "quest"-ion, "For the sake of what?" Our answer is crucial to our longevity, health, and happiness. Our bodies need messages of meaning from the brain to cope and to heal. Seekers have always known this. They have understood that a meaningful life must somehow involve curiosity and quest.

After twenty-seven years in prison, Nelson Mandela knew this. He demanded dignity for himself and his people and got it because he was a seeker. Despite his stature as one of the most admired people in the world,



Mandela never lost his sense of the African tradition of *ubuntu*, described by retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu as: “A person is a person through other persons.” Nelson Mandela embodied *ubuntu*.

Heeding the call to become president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela said of himself: “I was not a Messiah, but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances.” Surely time and circumstance favored Mandela in distinct ways. He takes with him a legacy like few others in world history. But, the power of his seeking mindset places him beside twentieth-century giants such as Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Like them, Mandela risked his life for the sake of dignity as he sought to overthrow a white police state with a well-equipped army. Unlike Gandhi and King, however, he lived to see his legacy. No one will be able to deny Mandela his legacy: “I want to sleep for eternity with a broad smile on my face. I want those who remain behind to say this man has done his duty.”

The transparency of Nelson Mandela reflected a deep seeking of spirit. Being a seeker allowed him to reflect and speak the truth in a simple way. There was no need for him to exaggerate his own importance in order to win approval. He knew very clearly that who he was, was enough.

How will we know we’re enough? The world is a great and mysterious place and it contains more paths to the sea than our minds can conceive. The single most important step we can take is to live transparently enough to be tested and challenged by the seeking life question—“For the sake of what?”

Perhaps we were placed on earth to meet the challenge of a single day; perhaps, like many ordinary people in New York City, to respond to a devastating disaster. Or perhaps, like Nelson Mandela, to change a country.

ON BEING A SEEKER IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Seekers such as Nelson Mandela have made three simple, yet profound, choices in their lives. First, they sense their part in the scheme of things. They sense their special place in the grand pattern of life. They do their part by choosing to leave the well and follow their own path to the sea. It’s their unique path. It’s the historic path Greenleaf captured when he wrote, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve.”

Second, they see that no problem ever comes to them that do not have a teaching in it, which cannot contribute to their spiritual growth. They choose



to see problems as “master teachers in disguise.” They know that if they did not have challenge—creative tension—they would drift through life. They recognize that they need stress to live.

Third, they see that the path to the sea is a path of service. Serving others is what they choose to make their lives about. Our motive, if we are to be truly happy, must be a purpose motive—it must be service. It must be giving, not getting. When we live to give, instead of to get, we step onto the seekers’ path to the sea.

There is in each of us, no matter how humble, a seeker. We are all part of the human family. We all have a place on the planet. There is no tragedy so great, no life so small, that we cannot seek to answer and to live in the big question, “For the sake of what?”

No amount of seeking will reveal for certain our place in the world. Seeking demands hope. It requires mystery. Robert Greenleaf wrote, “What may be needed, and perhaps now it is a possibility, is a new initiative from some seekers in which (1) they take responsibility for finding and responding to the contemporary prophet who will help them find their ways out of their individual and collective wildernesses so that they will become more effective servants of society, and (2) they respond less to the kids of cafeteria offerings which seem not to dispose them to become servants.”

When we come to the edge of the sea, and the issues that so consumed our lives recede from us like waves from the beach, it will be our seeking that will define our lives and become our gift to the universe.

TIPS ON CREATING A SEEKERS ANONYMOUS GROUP

Session 1: Seekers Anonymous

Read: “Seekers Anonymous: On Being a Seeker in the Twenty-First Century,” Richard J. Leider and Larry C. Spears.

Do: Before the first session, answer the following question: What is it that you hope might come out of organizing a Seekers Anonymous Group?

Discuss: Decide who will be the facilitator for this session. If possible, arrange chairs in a circle. Perform group introductions. Discuss the question: “What is it in your life that has brought you to Seekers Anonymous?” Allow one minute of silent reflection between each participant’s responses.



Session 2: The Seeker as Servant

Re-read: “Seekers Anonymous,” Richard Leider and Larry Spears.

Do: Before the second session, answer the following question: “What ways seem to work best for me as I search for greater understanding?”

Discuss: Decide who will be the facilitator for this session. If possible, arrange chairs in a circle. Perform group introductions. Read aloud the following—Robert K. Greenleaf wrote, “Seekers Anonymous will be religious in the root meaning of that word, *re ligio*, to rebind; to bridge the separation between persons and the cosmos, to heal the widespread alienation, and to re-establish men and women in the role of servants—healers—of society.” Discuss the question: How might I heal myself through seeking; and, how might I help others to heal through my own role as a servant? Allow one minute of silent reflection between each participant’s response.

Session 3: For the Sake of What?

Read: “Savoring Life Through Servant-Leadership,” Richard Leider and Larry Spears (free download at www.spearscenter.org or www.inventuregroup.com).

Do: Before the third session, answer the following question: “How does listening first to others strengthen me and honor others?”

Discuss: Decide who will be the facilitator for this session. If possible, arrange chairs in a circle. Perform group introductions. Read aloud the following—Robert K. Greenleaf wrote: “The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived?” Discuss the question: “What does Greenleaf’s description of the servant-as-leader mean to you as a seeker?” Allow one minute of silent reflection between each participant’s response.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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