



THE SERVANT-LEADER AS HEALER

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When the phone call from my mother came it made everything seem far away. She told me my cousin, Jacine, a beautiful and intelligent young woman, had been killed in a drug shootout in the streets of Billings, Montana. Jacie's life had been marred for some time by the hardened culture that haunts drug use everywhere, but of late she had emerged, married, and begun a new purchase on the kind of life she wanted. We all hoped so much for her, the shock of her death came like a cold dark undertow. But in the days ahead there would be little time to grieve or even gather to collectively remember her life. The man who murdered her had not been found and the event took the imagination of the city by storm, appearing in the local news for more than a year. It was not until after a long arduous passage that life seemed to return to a semblance of normalcy and the family began to come together again, though with a heavy underline of sorrow. We all tried to move on from an experience that had shattered us, but at the heart of it was something we stepped delicately around: our grief, our vulnerability...our brokenness.

When death comes to a family, a kind of fierce grip on that which transcends all of us can sometimes be a potent and unifying force below everything. From the dawn of time, spiritual understanding has influenced people toward meaning in the midst of tragedy; yet nothing can truly prepare a group of people for the life-altering dismay of a loved one's murder. Our family embraced a longstanding devotion to the contemplative and healing qualities of faith, but now we were severely shaken. In the life of the heart and spirit, we were at a standstill. Yet looking back, even in the dark of that time very small, very fine aspects of grace came to us as if to whisper, Be still. Grow quiet. Draw near to each other. Listen. I have found that in the great spiritual plurality of the contemporary world, many Christians, like members of other faiths, seek to live honestly and with hope. In my own personal



encounter with losing Jacie, some of the sacred words I had learned as a boy began to come alive in my daily experience and attend me in my dreams:

Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome the light.

—John 1:5

I wondered, How? How does light shine in the darkness? I wondered at the work of people and relationships, thought, emotion, and spirit, in warding off darkness. No answers came, but undeniably I felt a resolute sense of love and kindness in the company of family and friends. There would be no easy emergence from loss. There would be no replacing what had been taken away. Yet something of Jacie remained, like a healing presence in the family, an essence beyond words and irrevocable, even after death. Our journey together into the nature of shadow and light had begun—a journey into the great fires of loss—and here a premonition came: If we draw the loss near, if we let it break us open, it will lead us back to each other, deeper into love, and closer to our collective understanding of life together and life with God.

Sometime later, after years of FBI involvement and detailed detective work, Jacine's killer was apprehended. By then her death and the remembrance of her life had quietly taken its place in our midst. So much time had passed, and the desire to move on had been so tangible, I'm not sure we would even have heard of the events of the case if a friend had not called my aunt on a given morning, and told her the man's arraignment was set for that very day. My aunt is a tiny woman, five feet tall, vibrant and powerfully caring, with a delightful personality. She went to the arraignment with the same bravery with which she approaches all of life. Later, when I had the opportunity to ask her what it was like, her countenance softened. She spoke of how the man who killed her daughter was not angry or hard at the arraignment, but broken—perhaps as broken as the family had been broken. In my aunt's face I saw tenderness, and forgiveness...and despite all she had been through there was love, like light, luminous in her eyes.

To be alive is to know an ever-present cycle of recovery and loss. At times we are consumed by unfathomable grief, and yet as life progresses we also detect in the ashes a phoenix of possibility and the long-awaited affirmation of life in its most effervescent forms. Across the religious traditions the reach for the Divine has been colored by our collective inhumanity. Neither have traditions of nihilism, anti-faith, or atheism escaped the most horrifying expressions of human atrocity. Humanity, however, has also experienced



the uncommonly beautiful feeling of being fully restored and clothed in the vivid garment of forgiveness. Let it be known, faith that denigrates others denigrates itself, just as the person who denigrates others, denigrates self. On the other hand, as the true person strengthens others, faith that enlivens others fulfills itself. In my experience of the Christian tradition, forgiveness is the breath of life. Yet the work of forgiveness is long-suffering. Across time and place and religious belief, history declares that the movements of forgiveness often require more patience than we can bear, at times remaining dormant for generations, or even centuries.

In contemporary times, former American corporate executive Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term *servant-leader* in his essay published in 1970 called “The Servant as Leader.” Greenleaf believed people and institutions are responsible to overcome self-indulgence in order to deeply serve humanity. Rather than classical leadership models in which leaders tend to dominate or control others in order to subdue resistance, wield greater power, increase efficiency, or better the bottom line, Greenleaf proposed servant-leadership, a way of life in which devotion to the good of others takes priority and evokes greater integrity in individuals and in society as a whole. Healthy results follow. He believed the ultimate responsibility of the true leader is to serve, and his thoughts on servant-leadership were profoundly influenced both by the image of Christ washing the feet of the disciples, and by the integral character of Leo in *The Journey to the East*, Herman Hesse’s penetrating novel of ideas. For Greenleaf, a Quaker, faith or action that demeans others is degrading and dishonest, and in need of change in order to restore integrity. Servant-leadership requires a servant-first ethos in which the impact or legacy of one’s own relationships evokes self-worth, responsibility, and liberty in others. Perhaps the most ineffable aspect of servant-leadership is the subtle but very challenging mandate present in Greenleaf’s work: that servant-leaders must also be healers.

There is a barren land we encounter in life, and when we cry out I believe we find yearnings, experiences, and people who lead us from this barren land to a place of rest. Love and forgiveness are in that place, and as a good Kenyan friend of mine once said of seeking the center of life: “I was thirsty and I wanted to go to the deep well. I wanted to go to the source.”

In sincerely facing some of the shadows of our personal and collective history, we are given the opportunity to embark on a path of discovery, self-responsibility, and commitment to one another. I hope you find the research articles, essays, and poems in the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*



invigorating, life-affirming, and transformative. They are written by a wide array of thought-leaders from around the world: people with great depth of heart and soul, and healing in their hands. Having undertaken a pathway to find the deep well, I know I am being called to change in profound and sometimes very daunting ways. I hope you will join me in this journey and help us travel even farther, so that together we may find the source and return with water for all who are thirsty.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a poet and prose writer Shann Ray Ferch's (www.shannray.com) work has appeared in some of the nation's leading literary venues including *McSweeney's*, *Poetry International*, *The William and Mary Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Northwest Review*, and *Narrative Magazine*. He serves as Professor of Leadership with the internationally recognized PhD Program in Leadership Studies at Gonzaga University where he teaches leadership and forgiveness studies. He is the editor, with Larry Spears, of *The Spirit of Servant Leadership*, and the author of the story collection, *American Masculine* (Graywolf Press), winner of the Breadloaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize, and *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity: Servant Leadership as a Way of Life* (Rowman & Littlefield). He is the editor of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*.