



## FASCISM AND FORGIVENESS

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*Leadership* is a term often used in education and in the workplace. But the concept of *servant-leadership* “is often forgotten, and its principles are directly applicable to those who wish to lead” (Spears, 1995, p. 79). According to Robert Greenleaf, “servant-leadership begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (Spears, 1995, p. 4). When I thought about the word *leader*, there were several words that came to mind. Words such as powerful, assertive, and manager. These were the words traditionally found in a resume, listed on an employment application, or used to describe one’s self during an interview. But these words do not describe the servant-leader. “The servant-leader is a listener, is task-oriented, has a strategic sense, is eager to understand, to empathize and to collaborate, and does not escape becoming the target of many challenges and tests” (Spears, 1995, p. 81). Although it can be difficult to empathize with others when their situations seem unfamiliar to ours, a servant-leader finds a way to understand, to serve others. And when a strategic plan is overturned by something unexpected, it would be easy to claim ignorance. But a servant-leader cannot escape challenges or tests, even if she tries to. For this reason, Larry Spears (1995) claims that “servant-leadership falls into the category of one of those ‘impossible things’” (p. 79). I believe servant-leadership derives from a feeling, something with which the servant-leader is born. It is an instinct to serve and lead others, even those she does not know or understand. This is the beauty of servant-leadership.

For some people, such as myself, this instinct had to be awakened. It took me awhile to realize that servant-leadership had always existed in my life. It had been exemplified in many of my teachers, priests, family members, friends, and even in me. But it was not until my graduate studies that



I came to understand the concept of servant-leadership. As cited by Spears (1995), according to Carl Rieser (1988) “servant leadership serves both you and me. Not just you *or* me. Us. It is the key to a relationship with self, with other humans, and perhaps with creation” (p. 49). Servant-leadership has taught me how to serve others and myself, and in doing so, I learned how to accept others and myself. “The great power of the servant-leader idea is that it releases us by giving us permission to serve others” (Spears, 1995, p. 56). This is what servant-leadership did to my life. It released me. Through servant-leadership, I was empowered and able to confront a haunting experience from my past.

During my early teenage years, I became an “employee” for the first time. My brother and I were active in sports and joined a basketball camp for the summer. When we completed the camp, I was offered the opportunity to serve as one of the assistant coaches in the fall. Since then, I have worked at a hospital cafeteria, a stable, and for major corporations in the entertainment industry. Now, I am fortunate to work in education, and I believe it is where God wants me to be. People often ask me about my experiences working in entertainment, but my most memorable profession was working at the hospital cafeteria. I was sixteen years old and would consider myself a sheltered teenager. Until this point I had only known how to be Greek—Greek school, Greek Church, Greek family and friends, and no boyfriends. My parents had enrolled me at an all-female liberal arts Catholic high school. We wore uniforms, and my mother picked me up every day after school.

My mother and father have always been exceptional parents and great mentors. Thus, when I decided that I was in need of a job that offered more hours and more pay, I turned to them for help. My mother worked at a hospital and arranged an interview for me with human resources. I had hoped human resources would find a place for me at the hospital, and they did. I was offered the opportunity to work the tray line at the hospital’s cafeteria. I contemplated the position for about a day. I remember walking downstairs to the cafeteria with my mother during her breaks. It always offered the aroma of fresh coffee, and there was a kind cashier. These warm thoughts guided me toward accepting the position at the cafeteria.

On my first day, I remember thinking that I never again wanted to wear scrubs or a hairnet. I was assigned to work the fried food station on the tray line, while other people worked in the milk, bread, soup, coffee, and dessert sections. All of us were needed in order for the tray line to function



effectively. When a tray had been delivered to every patient, on every floor, the tray line stopped. Then, I would tidy up my station, as quickly as possible, so I could take a short break before clean-up duty. I usually received about ten minutes to eat a snack or chug some fountain soda. Then it was back to the cafeteria and to our assignments on the clean-up line. Each tray would come back to the clean-up line, and depending on where I was assigned, I would have to strip trays of coffee cups, plates, or silverware. The leftover food was thrown into the garbage disposal. Many of the trays would return soaked in vomit or blood. Some would still have needles on them. I used to pretend my easily torn, latex gloves were more like protective armor. By the end of my first week, I was regretting my decision. The cafeteria was always cold, and it resembled what I imagined a slaughterhouse would look like. My co-workers did not assist in making work more tolerable either. Everyone was miserable. People often arrived at work inebriated, and they used profanity frequently. This was the first time I had African American and Hispanic co-workers. In fact, this was the most interaction I had ever experienced with people of other races and cultures. I remember feeling timid and fearful of them, but I did not know why. A couple of months had passed, and I continued working at the cafeteria. From a young age, my parents instilled a strong work ethic in me. Once I had committed to something it was rare for me to quit. The hours felt like days, the days like weeks. I officially dreaded going to work. Then something unexpected happened at the cafeteria. A new supervisor was hired.

Tim was shy and often hid under his baseball hat. He did not seem more than a couple years older than me, and I found him attractive. He was always fair-minded in the workplace, unlike his predecessor who used to assign the most coveted jobs to her closest friends. Most of the employees were much older than Tim and me. Perhaps this is why it seemed like I had nothing in common with them. Each time I arrived at work I would greet Tim with a hello. I thought it was the courteous way to treat your supervisor. Then we began to talk more, and before I knew it, we were spending our breaks together. Sometimes I would sit outside with him while he smoked a cigarette. Other times we would have a snack inside. Our co-workers began to question our friendship, but Tim never commented on anything that was said. He rarely spoke to any of the other employees unless it was necessary.

One night I was on floors. This meant that when everyone was finished with their work, I had to spray down all of the cafeteria floors in preparation



for the breakfast tray line the next morning. Tim could not leave until all employees were gone, so he helped me. He also offered to drive me home since I only lived a couple blocks away from the hospital. My mother was waiting in the driveway when I arrived home. Tim introduced himself to my mother and was very respectful toward her. My mother was impressed by Tim. She agreed to let him drive me home whenever I needed a ride. Tim began calling me at home, and inviting me out on the weekends. It seemed like our friendship had quickly escalated to a relationship. My parents were very strict and did not allow me to date. But I had access to a family vehicle and agreed to meet Tim at his friend's house one night. When I entered the home I was taken aback by all of the people. I recognized some of the girls from high school. One of them sat next to me in French class. She always wore white laces in her shoes. When I asked her why she changed her original laces she said it was to represent white power. When I told my mother about the girl in French class, she said, "Don't be rude, but don't be too friendly either." At that moment I was reminded that I had lied to my mother, and I was alarmed by being in the same home as the girl with the white laces. My conscience started to feel heavy, and I explained to Tim that I felt ill. He walked me to my car and gave me a peck on my cheek. I never spoke to him about why I really felt ill that night.

A few days later I learned that two of my friends had been assaulted at a party. When they had arrived at the party they noticed a Confederate flag hanging on the wall, the band Skrewdriver was playing on a radio, and swastika tattoos were displayed on the arms and legs of the people there. My friends immediately sensed danger and rushed out of the apartment. Beer bottles were thrown at their heads as they raced down flights of stairs and out the front door. One of my friends fell to the ground, and he was kicked repeatedly. Eventually, they got away, and thankfully they were fine enough to share their experiences with me. When I asked why they were attacked they explained that they had unknowingly gone to a party hosted by one of the town's greatest white power advocates. They told me his name.

An immeasurable number of thoughts surrounded my head. I was in denial and wondering how common it was for people to share the same name. Determined to find out for myself, I made plans to visit Tim's apartment over the weekend. I went alone, and as I walked up the flights of stairs, I thought about my friends running down them while darting beer bottles. I knocked on his door, and he welcomed me inside. Ironically he had been





watching *Eye for an Eye*, a somber film focusing on retributive justice. Then I saw it—the flag, the CDs, the swastika tattoo on his leg, accompanied by a tribute to the SS. I was in *the* apartment. I searched for a reason to leave, but regardless of how sick I felt, I knew that excuse had been exhausted. I spent one hour with Tim in his racist, white power–infested apartment and told him I had to be home before curfew. He walked me to my car, and I drove home feeling restless. That night, I called Tim to confront him about his lifestyle and to accuse him for what had happened to my friends. He admitted that everything my friends told me was true, but he denied having any part in it. “Those accused of horrendous deeds almost always try to find ways out of even admitting that they were indeed capable of such deeds. They adopt the denial mode and take refuge in feigned ignorance” (Tutu, 1999, p. 269). Tim apologized for allowing the incident to occur. He expressed his feelings toward me and assured me that if he had known they were *my* friends he would have stopped it. This comment did not sit well with me. How could I forgive someone who willingly allowed another person to be assaulted in front of his own eyes? The only wrong Tim saw in the situation was that *my* friends were harmed. I could not understand how this was the same person who was fair-minded in the workplace and who cared about me.

Our conversation intensified as we talked about Tim’s childhood, his beliefs, why he was so angry toward other races, and the horrible things he had done. I learned that the scar on his head was from a lead pipe—and a fight he had picked with some Hispanic men in his neighborhood. I learned that the reason he never spoke to our co-workers was because he hated them. He went on to inform me on how Hitler was an intelligent person, deserving of respect and recognition. I was furious, but I kept Tim on the phone long enough to ask him to consider the millions of innocent people who were tortured and killed during World War II. Then I heard a click. The conversation had ended.

The next day, I was sitting in my backyard, soaking up the sun and listening to music, and I could not help but think about the conversation I had had with Tim. I wondered if I was in trouble. What about my family? Would I find crosses burning in our front yard? I heard the phone ring from inside the house, and my mother called me in to answer it. It was Tim. He apologized, and said he would change. I begged him to change, but I could not accept Tim’s apology. Desmond Tutu (1999) believes that “it is and has



always been God's intention that we should live in friendship and harmony," but I did not know how to continue a friendship with Tim (p. 263). I had never had a problem forgiving my friends, but what Tim had done, and who he was, was greater than anything I could comprehend. A few weeks later, Tim quit working at the cafeteria, and I never spoke to him again. But Tim became a recurring presence in my mind.

During my graduate studies, I enrolled in a course focusing on servant-leadership, justice, and forgiveness. I read Holocaust literature and watched *The Diary of Anne Frank*. And I began to think about Tim. I wondered if he truly had changed. After conducting a minor Internet search I discovered that Tim was the leader of a racist skinhead organization. I instantly felt saddened and resentful toward him. I thought about my family who had died in World War II, the genocide of the Jews, and of Elie Wiesel. When Wiesel was finally liberated from the Nazis his "first act as a free man was to throw himself onto the provisions. Not of revenge" (Wiesel, 2003, p. 99). How could he face the atrocities of the war and not seek revenge on the Nazis? But I sought revenge on my German?

Tim had not changed, and I blamed myself. I could not help but wonder whether the outcome would have been different had I forgiven Tim years ago. If I had accepted Tim's apology for his past, maybe he would have changed his future. He would have treated others differently. He would not serve as the leader of an internationally recognized racist organization. When my mother arranged a meeting for me with human resources I had hoped I would get hired for a job. I had no idea I would come face to face with racism.

As a result, I was left with a challenge. Something inside me wanted to contact Tim and offer my forgiveness. "Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. In the act of forgiveness we are declaring our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to make a new beginning on a course that will be different from the one that caused wrong" (Tutu, 1999, pp. 271–273). But I was scared of what repercussions could come from this powerful and freeing transformation. And I was scared of Tim.

Racist organizations are notorious for violence and hate crimes. Thus, there was a monumental amount of risk associated with contacting Tim. Risk is defined as "exposure to the chance of injury or loss; danger, hazard, peril" (Spears, 1995, p. 135). Contacting Tim would have been perilous, but "risk taking is integral to both leadership and living" (Spears, 1995, p. 135).



“When you embark on the business of asking for and granting forgiveness, you are taking a risk” (Tutu, 1999, p. 269). “Risk taking becomes your servant when it is part of a plan—part of a powerful picture of the changes, a vision of the future” (Spears, 1995, p. 135). It “can fuel enthusiasm and expansion, which leads to doing even more” (Spears, 1995, p. 145). The risk I felt was reminiscent of what I had felt years ago, when I went to Tim’s apartment, confronted him for his actions, and challenged his beliefs. What I realized was that I had always wanted to forgive Tim. But forgiveness is a key characteristic of the servant-leader. And the servant-leader inside me had not been awakened.

Once the servant-leader within is awakened, “it can expand human potential. It offers the individual a means to personal growth—spiritually, professionally, emotionally, and intellectually” (Spears, 1995, pp. 11–12). Leadership is important in education and in the workplace, but I believe it applies to all aspects of life. And servant-leadership involves living life in a way that will positively benefit others. “It is a long term, transformational approach to life and work, in essence, a way of being that has the potential to create positive change throughout our society” (Spears, 1995, p. 4). By forgiving others, we empower ourselves and positively influence our society. I want to offer Tim my forgiveness in hope of releasing myself from the past and “raising the quality of life throughout society” in the future (Spears, 1995, p. 12). This hope is what caused me to share my story.

Previously, the fear and anger I harbored from my experiences with Tim had justified my reasons for avoiding him. And, in order to prevent endangering my family or myself, I will not contact Tim. But eventually, when I do see Tim again, I will not avoid him either. I will respect him for the fair-minded and caring way he had always treated me. And I will offer him my forgiveness. There is no future without forgiveness. I am optimistic that forgiveness can heal my negative feelings. I can only hope it will heal Tim too.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleni J. Kametas-Hicks received an undergraduate degree in communication from Valparaiso University and a graduate degree in communication and leadership from Gonzaga University. Her research interests



are in nonhuman life, environmental ethics, human rights, and rhetoric. She currently resides in Illinois with her husband and companion animals. Eleni is an avid horseback rider and music enthusiast.

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