



ANALYSIS OF EXAMPLES OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

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The award-winning film *The Grapes of Wrath*, obviously based on John Steinbeck's Dust Bowl-era novel, follows the Joad family in their travels from their homeland to the "Promised Land" of California, only to discover that their destination is not "flowing with milk and honey" but, instead, leaves them facing severe poverty, injustice, illness, and death.

The film opens as Tom Joad attempts to return to his family's home after he has spent time in prison. On his way, he joins up with Jim Casy, well known to the Joad family as a charismatic preacher. Tom and Casy quickly discover the pressing reality of the time: the Joad family has been forced by the banks to abandon their land, and the only hopeful option before them is to head to California where work seems plentiful. Despite the deaths of elders during their travels, their hope doesn't begin to crack until their arrival in the first "squatters' camp" brings them painful images of the life ahead. Hungry children from makeshift homes hover longingly at the Joad's first dinner, once-strong men mumble disturbed warnings or stare in defeated silence, and landowners and the law mistreat them and abuse their power. The harsh reality only continues as they press on in search of work. Even when they can find work, wages are low and they can barely feed themselves, and California residents band together to intimidate and degrade them in an effort to run them off, though there is nowhere to go. Tensions rise as the plot develops and Jim Casy emerges as a voice for the many voiceless farmers lost and stuck in this living hell. Throughout, Ma Joad, the matriarch, firmly asserts the importance of keeping the family together, but as her son, Tom, becomes infuriated and then inspired by the plight of the migrant farmer like himself, she accepts his pursuit of a cause and his departure from the family in the final scene of the film.



This film is one that I spend a lot of time with in my profession as a high school English teacher. I use this film as a teaching tool in working with American Literature classes and as a basis of a study in Biblical Allusion in my Bible as/in Literature course. In both situations, however, I routinely find discussions in my classroom centering on the nature of service to others. In the novel itself, it is in the end, when Rose of Sharon, a woman only just emerging in the adult world, and after having just lost the hopes and dreams wrapped up in a stillborn baby, breastfeeds a dying man to save him from starvation, where my students (usually alarmed and horrified) and I are able to really get into a discussion of the depths of the call to service. It is intimate. It takes sacrifice. It is uncomfortable. Yet, it is acting out the truth to the core of your being.

On a more personal level, I find that analyzing the characters' leader development in the story is informative for me in my own experience and journey as an individual and as a person for others in this world. I am exploring a topic—servant-leadership—that I have talked about a lot in my coming of age as a person in the world, as a teacher, as a mother, and as a partner in the creation of a family and home. But considering the way the characters in the story transition along their journey has forced me to consider my own development: to look honestly at the way that I approach service and leadership.

As a beginning to this analysis, it is interesting to consider what Greenleaf (2002) expressed as a “twofold concern”:

My first concern is for the individual in society and his or her seeming bent to deal with the massive problems of our times wholly in terms of systems, ideologies, and movements. These have their place, but they are not basic because they do not make themselves. The basics are the incremental thrusts of individuals who have the ability to serve and lead—the prime movers.

My second concern is for the individual as a serving person and the tendency to deny wholeness and creative fulfillment to oneself by failing to lead when there is the opportunity. (pp. 19–20)

Both of these concerns are applicable to this storyline, as there are many issues to be outraged at and focused upon changing. And yet, the characters show us the way that honoring their “wholeness” and seizing opportunity can begin great change.

Though many of the characters throughout the novel and film (as already revealed) demonstrate elements of moral strength and leadership, it



is the Prodigal Son of the family, Tom Joad, and the ex-preacher on a search for meaning, Jim Casy, who make significant transitions as they heed the call of leadership and vocation and develop as individuals. We see Casy, who echoes Freire's (2002) messages about revolution, transcend to more advanced stages of leadership on his own, but it is his influence on Tom's development that shows his ongoing significance as a servant leader, as defined by Greenleaf (2002).

When we first meet Casy, he is literally wandering, searching for meaning in his life. He has decided not to be a preacher anymore, as he has decided that the fact that he was getting women excited by the spirit and then going to "lay with them in the grass" was not acceptable. His understanding of his morals (or, I suppose, his lack thereof) was not fitting with his vision of his life as a servant to the people. He is clearly, and honestly, reflecting on his life and purpose. Even though other characters in the film repeatedly demonstrate their faith in and reliance on him and his identity as a preacher, he is open to the idea of what Palmer (2000) calls the "way closing." Palmer says, "[W]hen I consistently refuse to take no for an answer, I miss the vital clues to my identity that arise when way closes—and I am more likely both to exceed my limits and to do harm to others in the process" (p. 43). As we meet Casy, instead of hiding his "shadows" out of embarrassment, he is acknowledging them as a way to "face [his] nature and find out whether [he] can make something of both [his] gifts and [his] limitations" (p. 42).

We see this because, when he is invited to travel to California with the Joad family, he is anxious to go to see "what is going on with the people" there. In his awareness that there are "murmurings" of trouble, his statement of purpose, which is to go learn from the people, is different than a desire to solve the people's problem, and it is reflective of the way Freire (2002) says that a leader of the oppressed should act. Freire says,

It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their situation in the world. (p. 96)

In many ways, Jim Casy's simple desire to "see what is going on" is exactly the purpose of the film as a whole.

In the film, like in the novel itself, Ford invites the audience to "put a face on" the large-scale tragedy of the Depression and the plight of the migrant and



displaced farmer. “In terms of themes, Ford’s films focus on outsiders who find it difficult to fit into a community” (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 398). Though Ford is famous for the classic western (p. 398), in this film the “west” is California, and the “outsiders” are an honest, hardworking family displaced by drought, Depression, banks, landowners, big business, and fear. This story brings these harsh realities to the screen and accesses the audience’s emotions to create sympathy for the Joad family, disdain for those who refuse to help or make life harder for them, and enthusiasm for emerging heroes.

These heroes are Casy, a wandering “ex-preacher,” who graciously accepts a ride and whose reputation promotes him quickly to a place of prominence in the family unit, and Tom Joad. When we first meet Tom, he has just been released from a four-year prison term for homicide, though it was deemed self-defense. Tom is most concerned about preservation: of himself and his family. He does not hide the fact that he would have hit that man in the head with a shovel again, if prompted, and we see that later when he attacks a police officer who is mistreating one of the migrants. He is very closely tied to the security of his family, and his identity is rooted primarily in the fair treatment of himself, his family, and the other migrants like himself. In many ways, I, myself, identify with Tom. I, too, care first and foremost about the security and contentment of my own family, and even though I am aware of injustice and need in my community, my protection of my own family situation often limits my response to those needs.

Victor Frankl (2000) says, “[M]an is originally characterized by his ‘search for meaning’ rather than his ‘search for himself.’ The more he forgets himself—giving himself to a cause or another person—the more human he is” (p. 84). Along these lines, Casy and Tom grow from reluctance and modesty to a complete commitment to servant-leadership within the displaced, poverty-stricken migrant families once they have arrived in California. As an “organization” of sorts, these families are a group with a clear mission (survival), and their labor is used as a part of larger institutions, which are the small and large land and business owners. Ultimately, though, Ford calls on the audience to recognize that the true institution being exposed for its dysfunction is actually humanity itself. This, in turn, only reinforces the need for servant leadership because “the forces for good and evil in the world are propelled by the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of individual beings. What happens to our values, and therefore to the quality of our civilization in the future, will be shaped by the conceptions of individuals that are born of inspiration” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 28).



Desmond Tutu (1999) addresses this ideal of humanity and community by referencing a word, *ubuntu*:

It is to say, “my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life. We say, “A person is a person through other persons.” It is not, “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.” A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 31)

Such *ubuntu* is not demonstrated in the scenes of this film. In fact, oppressors of all sorts, operating out of fear and a focus on self, develop and work to “diminish” others instead of recognize them as part of the whole of their humanity. Throughout the film, the migrants are referred to or treated as less than human, as animals: a gas station attendant even explicitly states, “them Okies got no sense and no feelings. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live the way they do. A human being couldn’t stand to be so miserable” (Ford). This attitude is reflective of the way that people can disengage from problems in the world and rationalize their lack of involvement.

Fortunately, however, Jim Casy quickly emerges as a leader who sees the misery and wants to change it. Spears (1995) notes that

Greenleaf said: “All 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] own unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group.” (p. 7)

We see Jim Casy’s commitment to the service of this institution of migrants immediately upon their arrival to California. This is when the audience and the family are first introduced to the harsh reality and injustice of the misuse of power by authorities. The family sees these oppressors as roadblocks to their livelihood. The audience, some of whom may identify with the landowners and authorities, sees the way individuals, fearing a loss of their own privilege, seek to limit or reduce others’ “humanness.” Freire (2002) says,



The pursuit of full humanity...cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so. Attempting to be more human, individualistically, leads to having more, egotistically, a form of dehumanization. Not that it is not fundamental to *have* in order to be human. Precisely because it is necessary, some men's *having* must not be allowed to constitute an obstacle to others' having, must not consolidate the power of the former to crush the latter. (p. 86)

And, yet, this is *exactly* what we see in the first "squatters camp" scene in the film. Landowners and law officials limit the workers' ability to pursue livelihood or even dignity as they attempt to preserve their own.

This scene at the squatter's camp is also the scene when Jim Casy demonstrates his full embrace of servant-leadership. Greenleaf's (2002) Test of Servant-leadership asks,

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? (pp. 13–14)

When Casy takes the blame and allows himself to be arrested for assaulting a police officer, his actions stand up to this test. He is protecting Tom Joad, which, in and of itself, is an example of service to the institution. Tom, who is still not as aware as Casy of his leadership potential, and who is much more needed and depended on in the immediate family, could not have suffered that arrest. It would have, in no way, benefited the good of the group. Further, Casy knows that he wants to get into the thick of things, to find out about the realities of the injustice, and he is willing to sacrifice security in that pursuit. Greenleaf (2002) asserts that "the servant-leader is servant first....It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (p. 27). Casy makes this conscious choice, as evidenced by a knowing grin as he is taken away in the police car.

From this point, Casy is actually absent from much of the events of both the film and the novel. When he resurfaces, we find that he has been traveling around, learning of the plight of the migrants. He has fulfilled what he had told Tom earlier: "You gotta learn like I'm learnin'. I don't know it right yet myself. That's why I can't ever be a preacher again.



Preachers gotta know. I don't know. I gotta ask" (Ford). In this statement, Casy demonstrates an essential component of the servant-leader: listening and dialogue. Peter M. Senge reports that "Buddha is said to have spent a good deal of his life contemplating and writing about conversation. He said that it is the single most valued aspect of human existence" (Spears, 1995, p. 225). Senge also suggests that "The 'first impulse' of servant-leadership [should be] to listen first....[T]he job of people in leadership positions is to make sure that good ideas are brought into the open, are considered seriously and, where possible, tested, so that eventually shared visions develop" (p. 229). Casy's advice to Tom that he listen to what the people are saying follows these suggestions, echoes Greenleaf's (2002) assertion that "true listening builds strength in other people" (p. 31) and exemplifies Freire's statements about the significance of communication for revolution (which is, ultimately, what Casy commits to working for). Freire (2002) states:

The earlier dialogue begins, the more truly revolutionary will the movement be. The dialogue which is radically necessary to revolution corresponds to another radical need: that of women and men as beings who cannot be truly human apart from communication, for they are essentially communicative creatures. To impede communication is to reduce men to the status of "things"—and this is a job for oppressors, not for revolutionaries. (p. 128)

This statement, when considered in parallel with the purposeful depiction of the "subhuman" treatment and view of the migrants in the film, clearly identifies the extent of the community conflict and the need for a revolutionary leader. It is why this film does more than just show the extreme poverty of the Great Depression, it is also a call to action to any human beings who value the other humans in their world community.

Freire's statement above demands that dialogue is important, whether in revolution, union disputes, or other organizations, because it allows individuals' values and needs to help to inform the direction of the organization, which, in turn, helps them to feel valued and more likely to be supportive of the organization's overall vision and direction. This support and "buy-in" also helps to build credibility for the leader. Because of the earlier sacrifices that Casy had made for Tom, by the time they reunite Tom trusts in Casy's credibility. Kouzes and Posner (2003) assert: "Leaders who are seen as trustworthy are those who are believed to have their constituents' best interests at heart. In order to strengthen credibility, leaders explore others' aims and aspirations" (p. xxi). Further, as Casy has spent much of the time



traveling around learning from the people experiencing the hardships of the life of the migrant and learning from them, he has lived as a servant-leader, and he is ready to empower Tom.

In the dialogue that occurs here, Casy's inquiries about Tom's experience plant a seed that will cause Tom to later see Casy as a visionary. When the two characters reunite, they are outside of a peach farm where owners are paying excruciatingly low wages and people are taking them because they are starving, even though the wages are too low to feed their families. Here, we see a metaphorical demonstration of Tom's transformation and empowerment. He leaves his family to go investigate all the trouble at the gates (where people are rioting) and meets up with Casy, who is working to organize the people to strike. Tom wavers between protecting the family by accepting the wage being offered them, yet seeing the bigger picture of making a sacrifice for the good of all the people. As Senge states, "For each of us, only when we touch that about which we care most deeply does our genuine commitment come forward. Our commitment comes from what we care about" (Spears, 1995, p. 230). Tom begins to see that what he cares about (his family) stretches out to a greater community of people than just the Joads. In fact, Casy demonstrates this in a pivotal speech to Tom about the way that we are all part of one big soul. He advises that we are all connected and we need to work together to make a change in the world.

Of course, because Jim Casy is a classic Jesus Christ figure in literature, he is killed before his vision is actualized. Yet, his impact is similar to Greenleaf's (2002) reflection on Thomas Jefferson: "He didn't have to be around. He had done his work and made his contribution in the statutes already operating...such are the wondrous ways in which leaders do their work—when they know who they are...and will accept making their way to their goal one action at a time" (p. 45). Beyond this, though, Casy's vision and commitment to values and to the well-being of the institution, leaves a lasting mark on Tom. Thompson (2000) says,

Empowerment is the natural extension of the spiritual life into the world of work. People with a strong spiritual core...seem to have an abiding belief in the potential of others regardless of their rank or status and seem committed to helping bring that potential out into the open as part of their service to the world. (p. 190)

Tom clearly defines Casy as a prophet when he says, "That Casy. He might have been a preacher but he seen things clear. He was like a lantern. He helped me to see things clear" (Ford). This demonstrates the argument that



“what most effectively calls forth the members are the values and beingness communicated through word, relating and modeling of the servant leader” (Horsman, 2009, p. 11). Casy was a servant-leader in his words and his actions, and this impacted others. And, most significantly, he exemplifies the way that, as Lennick and Kiel (2005) assert, “If we do not work to serve others, we fail to act as morally intelligent leaders. Serving others is, in fact, a great way to show integrity and to encourage others to model it—in other words, to lead by example” (p. 100). This is why the cause and vision do not die with Casy. Tom picks it up as both a follower and developing leader.

In many ways, though, Tom is only beginning to understand that he can be a leader. Palmer (2000) suggests that

“[l]eadership” is a concept we often resist. It seems immodest, even self-aggrandizing, to think of ourselves as leaders. But if it is true that we are made for community, then leadership is everyone’s vocation, and it can be an evasion to insist that it is not. When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads. (p. 74)

However, he is heeding the call because he has awareness that he cannot ignore. When he is leaving his family to go work for the good of all the people, Tom tells his mother,

Well, maybe it’s like Casy says. A fellow ain’t got a soul of his own, just little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody, then.... Then it don’t matter. I’ll be all around in the dark—I’ll be everywhere. Wherever you can look—wherever there’s a fight, so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever there’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad. I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry and they know supper’s ready, and when the people are eatin’ the stuff they raise and livin’ in the houses they build—I’ll be there, too. (Ford)

In the exchange, a whispered discussion in the darkness of night, neither Ma or Tom seem to have a clear vision of where he will end up, but, as Palmer (2000) states, “Vocation at its deepest level is, ‘This is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling’” (p. 25). Tom would be denying a part of his true self if he did not pick up Casy’s quest.

Though the film ends with this speech, never giving us a clear picture of how the life of the migrants is improved by the service and leadership of these two characters, we are still left with hope. There is hope that the fight for unity and human kindness can make an impact. There is hope that the



commitment of individuals will influence change and inspire greatness in others. There is hope that, if even the “lowest” of the people in the world can keep a focus on values and relationships, good will still exist. Further, it is a call to action to being purposeful about listening to and giving voice to the voiceless in our communities. Casy’s empowerment of Tom is also encouragement to me that if my credo is centered on demonstrating love to others, then I am responsible to honor this true self and to risk the discomfort involved in giving of myself to serve my community.

[Y]ou, we—all of us—need active love beyond sentiment—love expressed through presence with others, made real by decisions that put people first. Love that incarnates by holding oneself and others accountable. Love that is mentor-minded, delighting in the healthy growth of others even if it branches off the path we prefer for them. That is how servants love. That is how Servant-Leaders lead. (Sipe & Frick, 2009, p. 44)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Dunfield is a high school teacher in Spokane, Wash., and has long wished she could teach an entire course about *The Grapes of Wrath*. Sue completed a masters degree in 2011, but she believes her greatest achievement will be watching her three young children continue to grow into kind and loving people in this world.

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