

# Servant Leadership – A Personal Journey

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November 2005

The theory of servant leadership popularized by Robert Greenleaf and extended by the work of the Greenleaf Center, is a key concept in training and development throughout contemporary leadership thought. Much of Greenleaf's insight appears to be shaped by his own religious background and personal spiritual convictions. It seems clear that he had, at the core of his theory and practice, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as a significant influence.

Servant leadership demands a personal commitment that goes beyond mere pragmatic application and theoretical construct. Since servant leadership runs contrary to many leadership assumptions and applications, it requires of most who pursue it an intimate exploration. Such is my experience. This presentation is a way for me to examine, connect and describe my own personal journey. Given my commitment to take the claims, life and teachings of Jesus Christ seriously, the journey is deeply spiritual. I present this personal account in the hope that you will be encouraged to chronicle and examine your own journey as you explore the theory and practice of servant leadership. I begin with this parable.

The day had come – finally. He stood before the door of the manor house with a sense of profound thanksgiving. Long he had hoped and prayed for the opportunity to join the household of the one who rescued him from a life of destruction and then distraction. Nothing was more important than using the culinary skills and talents he honed so diligently for the benefactor who had done so much for him. The door opened. Standing before him was the Lord of the manor and the opportunity to fulfill the dreams of a lifetime.

“Welcome home”, the Master said, “We have your place ready. You are well equipped for the tasks of leading my banquet staff. However, I have great needs in my harvest fields. Will you serve me where I need you most - for as long as necessary – perhaps a lifetime?” The disappointment disappeared quickly; so quickly, he almost looked behind to see if someone else had spoken. “Yes” was his reply. In that moment he realized that he had learned an even more significant lesson as he prepared for this great house - serving to meet the needs of the one he loved was more important than serving to meet his own.

This story, which came to me at a crossroads in my career, remains a secure anchor point as I seek to understand and model what it means to be a servant leader. Those who lead want to use the best of their time, talents and abilities to accomplish meaningful purposes. I encounter a number of leaders seeking to go beyond popular perceptions of success to completeness. Personal fulfillment is

among the most treasured core values for those seeking significance within and beyond their vocations.

The way to significance, however, is influenced often by the popular wisdom that we must use the majority of our talents a majority of the time in order to attain satisfaction. Media-made and applauded celebrities, who purport to have found themselves by discovering and utilizing their giftedness, frequently become the primary luminaries along the path. As a result, many of today's leaders, and those who desire to lead, believe that if they just could find that place of service where their gifts are acknowledged and talents fully utilized they too could be fulfilled and possibly great.

This "be all that you can be by doing all that you can do" formula often stands in stark contrast to and conflict with the servant leadership models honored in the Christian Scriptures and demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ. God took delight in using the foolish and the weak to confound the wise and the strong <sup>1 Cor 1:27</sup>. Moses found that his inadequacies were the means for accomplishing God's greatest purposes <sup>Ex 3 & 4</sup>. The Psalmist was content to be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord <sup>Ps 84:10</sup>. John the Baptist knew that he had to decrease so that Jesus might increase <sup>Mk 1:7</sup>. Peter realized that only after his own resources of strength, freedom and determination were exhausted could he travel the highway to his life's ultimate destiny <sup>Jn 21:18-19</sup>.

Paul, whose resume begins with a chief of sinners' confession <sup>1 Tim 1:15</sup>, knew that his strength was perfected in his weaknesses - that earthen vessels hold life's greatest treasures so others will realize that the power and the glory were not his alone <sup>2 Cor 4:7</sup>. It was in that discovery that Paul found contentment in each state and circumstance that crossed his path <sup>Ph 4:11</sup>. That contentment empowered the Apostle to embrace life's final chapter with purpose and hope. Like a marathoner achieving a personal best, he keeps the faith and finishes the course <sup>2 Tim 4:6-8</sup>. His words echo across the centuries that we too will receive the crown if we will run and complete the race not in our own strength but in that of the One who declared, "It is finished" <sup>Jn 19:30</sup>.

Most people who seriously explore the life of Jesus Christ recognize that He is the gold standard for serving while leading. We are challenged by His willingness to wash feet and endure the cross – all because He loved the Father who so loved the world. Servant leadership has its ultimate definition and illustration in the life of Christ.

I am privileged to have spent much of my life in leadership roles – most of which I never anticipated. As a teacher, consultant, pastor, broadcaster and university president I desire to walk worthy of my callings following hard after the Christ's example. No portion of Scripture has provided me with deeper insights into the mind, heart and will of a Jesus-modeled servant leadership than Philippians 2:1-

11. While reading this Pauline hymn I found myself reflecting on a sobering question, “Whose needs are you meeting as you lead – your own or those of these I entrust to you?” In the capstone years of my calling, I return often to this question to evaluate my progress in both serving and leading.

The opening stanzas of Philippians 2 confront the motivations of the heart emphasizing the “why and who” of serving rather than the “what, when, where and how”. Those who desire to serve like Jesus must unite around a commitment to humility, self-denial and other-centeredness. Actions and attitudes, for those who follow the Christ, must be without selfish ambition and prideful arrogance.

Paul turns next to the ultimate case study, the core curriculum for the Master’s degree in Servant Leadership. The foundation stones of service, as Jesus’ life so powerfully illustrates, first must be established in the mind and heart. I applaud the exhortation popularized by the question WWJD (What would Jesus do?). However, as revealed in these next verses, we can only do as Jesus did as we see as Jesus saw and feel as Jesus felt. Servant leaders also wear bracelets that call us to WWJS (What would Jesus see?) and WWJF (What would Jesus feel?).

While much of serving and leading is motivated and evaluated by what we receive personally from the experience, Jesus was driven by the desire to be what we needed so that our greatest good might be accomplished. Laying aside His essence as Lord of all, He humbly moved from Creator to the created taking on our state in order to identify with those He came to lead. He came to serve and save and not be served or saved Mt 20:28. Jesus embraced our deepest longings, endured the pain of sin and finally paid the price for liberation and regeneration. The Son gave up what He was, identified with what we were, so that we could become all the Father intended – heirs and joint heirs with the Son for eternity Rom 8:17.

It is helpful to understand our strengths and employ them in the work before us. This can be important in knowing both our potential and limitations. Tools that assess and describe personality types, skill sets or spiritual gifts also help us realize that we are a unique and distinctive creation. We need to be good stewards of the abilities entrusted to us. I become concerned, however, when these assessments are the primary methodology for determining where, how and whom we should serve. We may be tempted to accept or reject opportunities based on perceptions of fit.

Strength assessments inadvertently can be used to set conditions on and criteria for service creating expectations that personal needs should be met, agendas advanced, talents fully utilized and dreams fulfilled. We need to be cautious about being driven always by how satisfied and fulfilled we feel. To lead as Jesus led is to be confronted regularly with opportunities to deny the self, take up the

cross and follow Him Mt 16:24. I find myself asking more frequently, “David whose needs drive your decisions about and methods of leading – the needs of those entrusted to you and the One you ultimately serve or your own?”

It is interesting to see servant leadership increasingly demonstrated in contemporary American culture. Mother Teresa usually tops the list of most admired people because of her sacrificial care for the least, the left and the lost. The wake of recent terrorist activities and natural disasters released the sense of, and provided opportunities to act on, this innate belief that our greatest achievements are tied to giving ourselves away. A growing list of unnamed first responders, rescue workers and the generosity of millions now join Mother Teresa’s witness. Extremity so often becomes the opportunity for the image of God, who so loves that He gives, to be revealed in His human creation. Christianity’s greatest hours come when Christians demonstrate what the world knows instinctively to be the servant heart of Jesus Christ.

As I thought about the story of the Chef, I received another insight about servant leadership. I was not a strong student. My Guidance Counselor told me that I had no natural abilities for the life of the mind. As a result, other endeavors were pursued as the means to self worth. Music and athletics became the center of my own identity.

For many Canadian boys the sport of hockey is the national religion. I anticipated the first hard freeze when the outdoor rinks would be readied and I could assume my self-declared identity as the Maple Leaf’s next great goalie. After the ice was gone, baseball became the substitute passion. However, unlike hockey, I did not have the same star qualities and abilities. I was a utility player. Many games I sat the bench “riding the pine” as some have called it. When I did play, it was in a position that either needed relief or required only a temporary replacement.

In my leadership roles, I longed to be a star goalie rather than a baseball utility player. So much of my energy was spent on an emotional roller coaster looking for that one specific calling where I would rise to prominence and personal fulfillment. However, I never found that all consuming call – my one true vocational destiny of service through which I might someday attain recognition and perhaps sainthood.

As I pondered the Chef’s lesson of service for the Master’s needs rather than his own, I was awakened to a life changing concept. There is at least as much need for utility players as stars in today’s arenas of leadership. Biblical examples like Barnabus, John the Baptist, Aaron, Hur, Caleb, Esther, the two Mary’s and a great cloud of witnesses including David’s mighty men and the unnamed of Hebrews’ Faith Hall of Fame are now my inspiration. They willingly served another’s mission so that those in turn could fulfill God’s call on their lives.

I believe there are unprecedented opportunities for servant leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These opportunities will be available to those who have a clear and compelling vision of service committed to “we for them and not just for me”. Many will be asked to use their distinctive gifts to full capacity and beyond in the work they undertake. Most will be required to pool their talents and availability with others because the work is too great to be done by an exceptionally talented few. Most will be required, at some point in that service, to work outside their giftedness and beyond personal resources.

Are you one of those who will serve whomever and wherever with whatever is entrusted to you? If so, let me suggest some things I am considering in my exploration of servant leadership.

1. Explore and give thanks for the unique person God is making you. Take advantage of the many tools available to help you understand your giftedness. However, do not be afraid to uncover your limitations – strength is made perfect in weakness.
2. Surrender the hurts and disappointments of not being fully utilized or recognized. The ancient wisdom that they also serve who only stand and wait has been a great help during my less active and fulfilling seasons. Use these times to celebrate God’s work in you, examining your primary motivations and supporting His work in others.
3. Look for opportunities to serve where needs are greatest even if you do not possess the skills and talents normally required. Get outside of your cultural and performance comfort zones. Mother Teresa had one thing to give – compassion for those who needed it most.
4. Expect to deploy fully the gifts you possess. Like Moses, the skills and experiences symbolized by the shepherd’s staff can become the “rod of God” rescuing the lost and delivering the bound.
5. Do not be surprised when you are required to serve out of frailty, inadequacy, inconvenience and discomfort.
6. Be prepared to “ride the pine” from time to time. The stops as well as the steps of servant leaders are both necessary and beneficial Is 40:31, Ps 37:23-24.
7. Soak up the character of servant leaders like Jesus Christ. Spend time in Philippians 2, the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount Mt 5:1-12 and the fruit of the Holy Spirit Gal 5:16-26. Servant leadership is more who you are becoming than just what you are doing.

Thank you for allowing me to share this glimpse into my personal journey of servant leadership. I look forward to hearing your stories as you pursue the theory and practice of this counter-intuitive and counter-cultural approach to leadership that seeks to serve rather than be served.