



Thoughts from Linda:

The Servant as Leader

Robert K. Greenleaf  
1970, 2008

Leadership is a big responsibility. I stepped into leadership early in life thanks to Tommy Skinner, who in the 8th grade nominated me for a class leadership role at East Paris Elementary School in Paris, Texas. Thanks to that 'nudge,' my leadership experience spans over 60 years.

In business and the world of education, I have often held leadership roles and can speak from experience on the topic, certainly having made my share of mistakes and (I hope) learned significant lessons along the way. I have spoken to many organizations and groups on 'Collaborative Leadership,' which has been my own 'mantra' for my approach to leading.

The one book that has most influenced my own thinking/feeling and approach to leadership is this one: *The Servant as Leader*.

It was originally written by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 as I was just entering the working world, having graduated from the University of Texas. The original booklet mentioned a person who he identified as a strong example of a young woman with a heart of service: Hillary Clinton. Subsequent editions have not included her anymore, but I greatly appreciated this example in his early work and was interested in this young woman from Wellesley who seemed to show such servant leadership in college.

I found the booklet to be revolutionary in many ways and have been inspired by the insights that I gleaned from it. I suspect I have owned over 500 copies over the years and have given many away, and I would guess I have re-read it every year for the last 30 years. So, I want to encourage everyone to get a copy of this and explore your own role in stepping into leadership—which has never been more necessary than today. If

you have read it before, I encourage you to re-read it in light of today's global context, and answer the call, as we are able.

While you will find many books on the topic, Robert Greenleaf was the founder of the modern Servant Leadership movement and the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. His original booklet created the paradigm and foundation for exploring the relationship between 'servant' and 'leader.'

Greenleaf was born in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1904. After graduating from Carleton College, he went to work for AT&T. For the next forty years he researched management, development, and education. All along, he felt a growing suspicion that the power-centered authoritarian leadership style so prominent in U.S. institutions was not working, and in 1964 he took an early retirement to found the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (first called the "Center for Applied Ethics"). He wrote about the topic and provided a series of essays, such as *The Institution as Servant, Trustees as Servants, Servant Leadership in Business, Servant Leadership in Education, and Servant Leadership in Churches*. He continued writing and speaking until his death in 1990.

In this original, profound work, he tells the story of his own inspiration, later in life, to write the first booklet, noting that it was based on insights from Herman Hess's *Journey to the East*. Greenleaf noted that he had read the book and yet, the idea itself lay dormant for some 11 years, until he began reflecting on a leadership crisis in this country and realized his own calling to action.

The key discovery of this story was that the primary character was actually originally perceived to be a servant, but at the end of the story was revealed to be a great and noble leader, and in fact, a guiding spirit. As Greenleaf said, "Leadership was bestowed upon a man who was by nature a servant...this was who he was deep down inside. His servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away. He was servant first."

He goes on to explain distinctions between those who seek leadership from a need for power first and service later, and those who approach leadership callings from the need to serve first, acknowledging that the true and honorable leaders fall into this category. The booklet was written over 50 years ago but reads as if it were conceived yesterday.

He asserts that many who could lead, in fact, do not step up to leadership, for a variety of reasons. His key thesis is: "that more servants should emerge as leaders, or should follow only servant-leaders."

His key message on how to determine if indeed you are a servant leader, or have freely chosen to follow one is: *"The best test, and difficult to administer, 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, will they not be further deprived?"*

He lays out his case and argument for this approach to leadership and calls for leaders to step forward. He is an optimist and explains why. This is a personal journey of thought and inspiration by a most qualified and ethically-driven leader to state the vision of and the case for individuals who are indeed servants-- to step into the cauldron and lead.

He gives intriguing and illustrative examples of just these types of leaders from three previous centuries. First is John Woolman, an American Quaker, who almost single handedly eliminated the practice of slavery from the Quaker institution. He follows that with Thomas Jefferson, of course noting his contributions as author of the Declaration of Independence. But he notes as importantly, Jefferson's work with the creation of new statutes for the new nation as reflected in his work in the Virginia legislature, where he wrote over 150 statutes, getting 50 of them passed into law, including the statute that established the separation of church and state. Finally, he gives the example of Nikolai Grundtvig, the Father of the Danish Folk High Schools. In this obscure and most inspiring example, he finds many elements of the servant leader.

The re-worked booklet has 48 pages and is a rich and stunning read. Each time I re-read his work, I am amazed by his insight and his spirit.

Just this week, as I was exploring the Time Magazine *"World's Most Influential People"* 2021 edition, I thought of Robert Greenleaf and how optimistic he would have been had he been here to read it.

Edward Felsenthal, the Editor in Chief & CEO of Time, quoted Ursula Burns, the former Xerox CEO noting her willingness to fight for justice, as she said she was "hoping to stand on the shoulders of giants and help create a better world for future generations."

He goes on to state, in a comment that Greenleaf himself could have uttered, "This year, we are all receiving that call. We all have an opportunity to help create a better world. And we can choose to be among those who pick up the phone, and ... run toward the struggle."