

THE INSTITUTE FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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TURNING POINT

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The Institute for Servant Leadership is an educational ministry offered to the Church.

*We believe the Church is called to serve God's vision for the world according to the prayer the Church knows best
—that God's Kingdom come, God's will be done on earth as in heaven.*

*We teach that the power of Servanthood, derived from the life and truth of Jesus, energizes the Church for leadership in
God's work of personal and global transformation—where compassion rules relationships, creation is cherished and justice yields peace.*

WHAT IS SERVANT LEADERSHIP?

On Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865, just down the road from a now famous house in Appomattox, Virginia, a bearded Confederate general rode his horse 'Traveler' between two rows of exhausted soldiers. Until the general appeared, the soldiers had been camped disconsolately in tattered and hungry clusters along the dusty trail, waiting what they knew would be the surrender of the army they had served, a few of them from the first engagement at Bull Run four years before.

The general was returning to his tent, about a mile to the rear, after a brief surrender exchange with his opposite number in the main parlor of that house. As their leader appeared in solemn dignity, riding tall as he always did, a rush of troops rose to greet him, two solid walls of gaunt men forming along the whole distance. As he entered the avenue of soldiers wild cheers broke the stillness. Unprepared for this tribute in defeat, the general's composure slackened and tears started down his cheeks. Seeing their leader's emotion, the soldiers' shouts gradually turned to choking sobs. Each group in the mile-long corridor began the same way, with cheers, and ended the same way, with muted cries. At the very end of the line a grizzled sergeant reached out his hand and, touching the now-empty scabbard at his captain's side, said through tears, "I love you just as well as ever, General Lee."



UNIVERSITY PRINTS, BOSTON

A Quality of Soul

Servant Leadership is easier to see than to define, and it shines as a searchlight in the character of Robert E. Lee. But verbal concepts are important. In order to grasp essentials it seems critical to attempt definitions, and, as with many qualities of soul, it is easier to start a definition by describing what it is not.

Servant Leadership is neither an iron fist nor a limp handshake. It is the enduring form of power. All forms of leadership exercise power. Servant Leadership contrasts with conventional

forms of being in charge by the way it exercises authority. Conventional leadership varies widely, but bears the common stamp of using power to impose control and to limit the range of individual differences. This approach is natural because it appears to make things easier for the leader. But it's an illusion. When power is understood as control, the more it is applied the more it is resisted. The more it is resisted the more it raises frustration levels in the leadership, which in turn leads to more control. Thus the energy flow in control systems tends to become a loop of tightening rings of demand and resis-

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WHAT IS SERVANT LEADERSHIP? (Continued)

tance.

This is so because the human spirit is built for freedom within boundaries of accountability. Built as we are for freedom, our resistance to control mounts as control pressures increase. Increasing controls reduce human responsiveness and productivity, which in turn moves human feeling in two directions: satisfaction moves down for both leaders and the led, distancing moves up for all parties. Control systems discourage friendship. They are marked by grudging compliance and high turnover. Children leave home early in control-oriented families

At their worst, control systems are kept in place by violence — implicit violence in terms of coercion and threat, explicit violence in all the forms available to human passion and weaponry.

A View of the Universe

At their motivational base, power systems of control seem to rise from fear — fear that the arena for human life is essentially unfriendly. Down deep in the soul we make choices about the character of the universe. Having grown up in a culture shaped to so-called 'scientific' norms of what is true, it may be that the majority of us operate as if the universe is either indifferent or governed by moral stringency. A Sunday School boy was asked to tell the class who he thought God was. The boy pondered for a long moment and then said, "God's a huge policeman looking for people who are having fun and putting a stop to it."

If you press lots of us for our operating theology God is either absent or looking for law breakers. If God is absent, then humanity is on its own in a competitive power struggle for limited supplies of life's desirable goods. This is what prompts the anxiety that Jesus rebuked when he chided people about not trusting God who clothes the lilies of the field. If there is any constantly repeated admonition in the teaching of Jesus it is a simple challenge: 'be not afraid'. "If God so clothes

the grass of the field, which today is and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith. Therefore do not be afraid...." (Matt 6:30-31).

If on the other hand one's operating theology pictures God as prowling the human scene in an unmarked patrol car, then power is understood as Webster defines it: "the capacity to compel compliance" — which is to say, 'control of human perversity'. This is what prompts the proliferation of guns and prisons in favor of the infinitely harder work of enlarging the embrace of the capitalist system to include the poor in economic justice — the business of seeing that all who can work have work, or have access to human services and superior educational opportunities.

Whether the universe is viewed as empty of God or patrolled by a scorekeeper — God indifferently absent or God ominously present — either way, power will be exercised fundamentally out of fear. And the greater the fear the greater the quotient of implicit and explicit violence. The result is fear-driven lives for both the powerless and the powerful — the powerless fearing discrimination, injustice and oppression, the powerful fearing resistance, profit loss and mutiny.

A Religious Issue

If this analysis is true, then it makes leadership a religious issue. Whether acknowledged or not, one's conviction about the character of the universe directly affects one's use of power. Leadership is thus a theological matter — an issue of human belief about God.

Servant Leadership rises from a very singular kind of belief about God. It is the belief pictured in the etching at the top of this essay — an artist's version of what is probably the best remembered story that Jesus told. The story says that God is neither absent from the game of life, nor scowling from the owner's box in a celestial grandstand. The universe is neither

indifferent nor unfriendly. God is neither dead nor a menace.

The universe is for you! God loves you far better than you love yourself. God does not reject you for being short, or bald, or jug-eared, or old and paunchy, or for not being as good a writer as Annie Dillard. God laughs at all that as nonsense. God is far older than any of us, and may be quite double-chinned, paunchy and wrinkled. More than that, God allows ordinary people do all the writing for him/her. Imagine letting somebody as controversial, restless and high-handed as Paul write all those epistles! What this means is that God risks your freedom too, betting on your capacity to respond to love and to live lovingly, never violating your freedom to choose, ready at all times to receive you as you are, as you have been, as you will be.

Even the Laws of God are embracing boundaries of love — designed not for God's protection but for humanity's. And they are permeable membranes. The Commandments are not impenetrable walls; they are fences with gates that swing both ways. Though out, you can get back in — as when the Prodigal left home and broke all the rules, but returned a penitent and was banqueted in forgiveness.

Servant Leadership makes this leap of faith: the universe is not only alive with the presence of God, it is vibrant with grace. God gives and forgives. Servant Leadership approaches people with high expectation and sturdy compassion. It insists on collaboration, puts a premium on truthfulness and makes a behavioral norm of admitting mistakes and being forgiven.

Enhancement Not Just Employment

Servant Leadership understands power to be for enrollment in creativity, appreciating diversity in the work force as the soil of expanded creativity. Servant Leadership thus encourage the full range of human differences. It functions on the principle of inclusion,

not exclusion. Power is for participation, not for domination.

These convictions, while appealing as lofty leadership ideals, are difficult to apply in human systems for reasons of (a) fear and (b) centuries of hierarchical patterns of control in the use of power. Too much freedom in the ranks risks outcomes that defeat the production purposes of organizations.

But Servant Leadership does not see production as the first purpose of an enterprise. HUMAN ENHANCEMENT, not employment, is the aim of organizations under Servant Leadership. Human employment for delivering a product or service is important but secondary — in the same way that competition is inherent to human systems but is manifestly secondary in importance to collaboration. The reason is that meaning and joy in work, as in family life, derive more from collaborative relationships than from competitive achievement — far more from POWER WITH than from POWER OVER. In terms of human nourishment collaboration is the meat and potatoes; competition is the salt and pepper.

Collaboration NOT Competition

Like the popular theology that thinks of God as a rule-maker with a night stick, popular values put a premium on competition. My earliest remembered competitive reward system goes back to second grade. The teacher was a cunning child-motivator — a large woman of iron resolve. (All teachers are very large to 7 year old boys, so she may have been quite petite, but her determination made her towering figure). She had the class divided into three groups: bluebirds, busy-bees and fireflies. These were all happy words to disguise the real distinctions she had in mind. But there was no disguising the distinctions if you were cast into group three. If you were a firefly you were expendable — a classroom rag unless you could drag yourself to the next level.

Chester Funk was a firefly. (That

was his real name. Lord have mercy, I hope his life has turned out okay). I remember Chester as a pitiful kid. He may well have had a good mind, but his spirit was an empty bucket. He couldn't compete except for the lowest rung on the ladder in memory drills. There were other fireflies, of course, but I don't remember them. They may have been better protected in spirit than Chester. He didn't have an ounce of fight.

The teacher is not altogether indefensible. Her purpose was to get us all to fly with the bluebirds — or at least to do better. But a big counter-productivity was at work in that set-up. The system made it impossible for all but a few to make it to the bluebird nest since we were pitted against standards established by the lead group itself. The effect was to pit children against each other. It was a system that defined collaboration as cheating.

Only once did I make it to the bluebird table. For about a week I basked in the company of Lester Fellner who was born with a computer under his red hair, and Rose Schaufman, who could recite verses as if she had written them for breakfast. Lots of us in the busy-bee hive (we were the largest clump in the class) graduated from second grade convinced we were lame-brained, but still favored for not having to stagger into third grade as a firefly.

It took years and years as a certified busy-bee to discover three things that lifted my self-appreciation. First, self-worth has nothing to do with I.Q. (I found friends who blew the top off the brains-chart but who struggled more than I did with self-esteem). Second, it was anxiety, deep seated dread, and not inferior ability that kept me from the bluebird crowd. (Who didn't grow up scared, including Lester and Rose?) Third, human endeavor, when keenly understood and structured, relies best on a human preference for collaboration over competition.

Research has begun to prove this. (See *Psychology Today*, September 1986, pp 22-26). Careful studies indi-

cate that productivity is directly linked to the reduction of competitiveness, not to its increase. Robert Helmreich of the University of Texas has studied the relationship between achievement and competitiveness, concentrating on American business. He found an inverse relationship between competitiveness and achievement. Salaries go up as competitiveness goes down. Trying to beat others and trying to do well are two very different things; they actually work at cross purposes. The reason for this is clear: in cooperative situations others are depending on each person to succeed; in competitive situations others hope to see you fail.

Systems That Succeed

Servant Leadership knows this, trusts this. Collaboration makes its appeal to the BEST rather than to the BASEST of human motives, encouraging the offering of people's personal gifts for doing and improving the work. Systems so aimed and led are enlargers of life for their members. More than that, as enhancement factors prevail performance will almost always advance — factors like a shared vision, a keen sense of belonging, and the courage to tell the truth in all relationships.

The secret lies in setting and sustaining high purpose. This is true in all systems: families, business enterprises, schools, churches and nations in their domestic and global security. Systems succeed because they cherish their members and speak the truth. Systems fail because they exploit their members and practice concealment and deceit.

Leadership and Economics

Though Servant Leadership knows no party lines, and there are as many Republicans as Democrats who take its truth seriously, it seems to me that we have installed an Administration that sees far more clearly than the one just displaced that the nation is best served by understanding the USA as a community of vast mutual need, not as an aggregate of consumers and competi-

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tors in a fierce free-market system. The market we will have, whether a Republican or Democrat occupies the White House. But when the market economy is allowed to operate heedless of communal regard for one another Americans are put at racial, social and economic enmity all across the spectrum of national life.

What we appear to be moving into under President Clinton is a middle way between the sluggishness of bureaucratic socialism and the discriminatory cruelty of unfettered market forces. After the election economist Lester Thurow of M.I.T. said, "The

sound you hear is of the door being shut on laissez faire economics." Said Bill Clinton not long ago, "We have no sacred cows except the fundamental interest of people."

The American people appear ready to pay the bill for the shift. Popular support for the President's program of calibrated higher taxes and greatly diminished defense spending stood at 79% during the early weeks of his administration. It stands now at 62% — realism having set in. But this is still a formidable level of commitment to the common good as opposed to the strident tax-abhorring individualism that

seemed to be the governing ideology of the previous administration. We may be newly ready as a nation to heed Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Taxes are what we pay for a civilized society."

Whatever one's political views, it remains an undeviating principle of Servant Leadership, in all systems of our life, that the secret of health in any human enterprise is the setting and sustaining of high purpose — and that systems succeed because they cherish their members and speak the truth.

Bennett J. Sims

READER RESPONSE

As with the open letter to George Bush, so too the letter to Bill Clinton — more reader response has been aroused by these statements than anything yet published as essays in TURNING POINT. This may suggest that more of our editorial attention should be given to the public arena. We'll think about this. Meanwhile, it is important to quote two of the most sensitive responses.

The first is from a management consultant in California, Ken Macher, who was a participant in one of the earliest of our seminars while at Emory. Ken writes, "...your open letter to Bill Clinton moved me to tears. You put

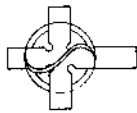
into words 'the inarticulate speech of my heart', my yearnings that our leaders do what is right and my knowledge that to do so means to suffer."

The second is from a great servant leader of the CME Church, a predominantly African-American denomination, Bishop Joseph C. Coles, Jr. of Atlanta, another participant of our early years. Joseph writes, "I share your appreciation of gratitude for the President's Inaugural Address. As an African American, I wish that your letter could have included an expression of gratitude for including Maya Angelou in the Inaugural proceedings.

Her participation was a recognition of the creativity that has survived oppression, the humanity that has survived inhumanity and the beauty that could not be conquered by the ugliness that is racism... Your letter revealed a compassion not as evident in [your book] PURPLE INK. I celebrate your growth."

To stay in touch with long-standing and almost never-seen friends is a deep joy. Thanks to Ken and Joseph — and to all who phone and write in response to TURNING POINT.

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