

Lessons You can Use from the Life of Robert K. Greenleaf

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What a pleasure to see so many old friends here, and people who will quickly become new friends. If this is your first conference, you will find that you have much in common with everyone you meet.

You are fellow **seekers** who were drawn here because you wanted to better understand an idea that resonates deeply within you, something that whispers possibilities beyond the theories and principles you have learned in dozens of seminars on leadership and management; beyond ideas you have read in books that offer the latest fads and fashions on how to lead and succeed. Perhaps you seek something that is congruent with who you are and what you do to make a living.

When I meet new friends, I always remember the traditional Zulu greeting that my friends in South Africa taught me: “**Sawubona!**” which means, “**I SEE** you.” Not just that I’m looking at you, but that I SEE you – and in you – right here, now, in this time and place.

So, sSawubona! Good afternoon, and welcome to Indianapolis, in Robert Greenleaf’s home state.

I’m especially impressed that you chose to come here to downtown Indianapolis on a day when about 45 miles south of here the annual Bill Monroe Bluegrass Music Festival is in full swing in Bean Blossom, Indiana. Bill Monroe, of course, pretty much invented bluegrass. For those of you not from these parts, Bean Blossom is not far from Gnawbone, Indiana. In case that’s not enough to orient you, both of those little towns are north of French Lick, home of the Indiana basketball god Larry Bird. (By the way, when you say his name within these state borders, you say it with awe and deep respect!)

Before we jump into the fascinating and complicated life of Robert Greenleaf, I'd like to tell you a quick story about Larry Bird because it illustrates a key idea about servant-leaders. Besides, this is, after all, Indiana.

After his Hall-of-Fame playing days, Larry ended up as coach of the Indiana Pacers on a 3-year contract. His first year as coach during the 1997-98 season, the team went to the conference semifinals and just missed making the championship series because a guy named Michael Jordan jumped higher than the moon and shot the basketball clean and true and with breathtaking grace.

A week or so after the Pacers lost that series, a reporter asked Bird what changes he was planning to make to the team next year. Larry said, "Well, I don't know if I'll be the coach next year."

"What do you mean?" the reporter asked? "You have a 3 year contract."

"Oh, that doesn't mean anything," said Larry. "I haven't talked to the players about it yet."

The reporter was puzzled. "What do they have to say about it?" he asked.

"Well," said Larry, "unless they want me back as their coach, I can't be a real leader for them, can I?"

This was a new idea, so the reporter tracked down Reggie Miller and several other players on the team and told them what Larry had said. "Are you kidding?" said Reggie. "We'd be nuts not to want him back. Yeah, he's tough, but he's a player's coach, a coach's coach. We'd follow him into hell!"

Larry Bird had figured out that even a professional sports coach was not just a manager who could draw up plays or a person with a title; he or she was a LEADER. And an authentic leader

is given moral authority by the followers, after earning trust by demonstrating that the leader was there to serve individuals on the team as well as the overall vision of the team's excellence.

So, how would things be different in YOUR organization if that was the prevailing attitude of designated leaders?

I was sitting here remembering the first national servant leadership conference held in Atlanta in 1988. After my friend and mentor Ann McGee-Cooper told me about it, I dragged myself down there a few days after getting a cast removed for a broken leg. Boy, am I glad I went! Around 100 people attended. Most of them knew Bob Greenleaf personally, and I met amazing souls who quickly became personal heroes. Greenleaf attended by speakerphone from his home in Pennsylvania. But he had pre-recorded a video greeting to attendees, and I think it is as relevant today as it was 25 years ago, so here it is...

[Play Greenleaf's 1988 Conference Greeting]

Bob continued to be gracious and sharp as a tack as people later asked him questions by speakerphone. You know, that Conference changed my life, and this one can change your life too.

In the next few minutes I'll be sharing some lessons you can use from the life of Robert Greenleaf, and whether this is your first servant leadership conference or you're an old hand like me – with the emphasis on OLD – who's been to almost every conference, they are ideas you can use in the next 2 ½ days. First, it's fair to ask the question, "Why should we care?"

Why Care About Robert Greenleaf?

Well, why should we care about this guy Robert Greenleaf anyway? After all, his IDEAS were the important thing.

What's interesting is that Bob would have agreed with that. Even though he made a number of notes about his life experiences in his last 10 years, he did not really want a Robert Greenleaf biography. He wanted a book titled "The Autobiography of an Idea" that traced the sources and applications of the servant-leader idea. It wasn't that he had anything to hide in his own life. But he was a natural introvert; he was genuinely humble and never wanted the focus to be on him. He was also a *pragmatist*, and for him the point was whether these ideas made a difference in the lives of individuals and organizations.

First, though, people need to *understand* Greenleaf's ideas, and here's the problem with that.

The terms "servant-leader" and "servant-leadership" are catchy phrases, partly because they represent paradoxes. It's easy to hear them and think you know what they mean because they create a blank slate ripe for projections. Maybe you've heard some of these projections...

"Servant leadership is only a religious phrase and may even be part of some kind of spooky sect."

"The word 'servant' means it's about being a martyr, or being servile. It has bad references to the history of slavery in this country."

"Servant leadership just another paternalistic idea hatched up by men to keep women in their place."

Then, when you hear the core capacities associated with servant leadership, you think you know what they mean too.

Listening is about *active* listening, which you can learn from multiple sites on the Internet.

Foresight is just another way of saying you should read the latest books by futurists.

Reflection simply means you logically analyze an idea.

Ethical use of power is about staying legal while you persuade someone to adopt your point of view.

But if you actually READ Greenleaf, you realize that he had a different take on all of these skills and capacities. For example, **Listening** – for a servant-leader – means that you are *present* to the speaker’s words and inflections and body signals and, even more importantly, that **you** are open to being transformed by what you hear, not just that you are thinking about what to say next.

If you don’t read what Greenleaf actually *wrote*, you may think that your quick assumptions about what he means are just a repackaging of tired old truisms. You will be looking at your own projections on that blank slate and not gaining the richness and fresh thinking of an American original.

If you are new to servant leadership, I urge you to attend one of the sessions that cover the basics of servant leadership, taught by Isabel Lopez or Jeff Miller and Shirley Rivera, and others. And, whatever you do, dive into his essays for yourself. Some are denser than others, but Bob always had his reasons for constructing them carefully so they could crack open the reader’s mental models and lead to

Lessons You Can Use...

As you enjoy the conference in the next three days, keep in mind some of the lessons from Robert Greenleaf’s life. These are not just lessons from his *writings* – even though you’ll find those a’plenty – but from his life experiences and learnings.

Nurture Friendships with Astonishing People

First, **Nurture Friendships with Astonishing People**

Yesterday I again read through some of Greenleaf's correspondence and schedule books in the archives and was still amazed at the range of people he kept in touch with. Here is a *very* short list:

- The Foreign Minister of India
- Derek Bok, President of Harvard University
- Norman Vincent Peale
- Authors ranging from Laurens Van der Post to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
- Robert Frost
- Jan and Olga Erstazek, founders of the Olga bra company
- The Menninger brothers
- Alfred Korzybski, the father of modern General Semantics
- Eileen Garrett and Arthur Ford, the most famous psychics of their day
- Patch Adams M.D. – yes – the guy played by Robin Williams in the movie. Dr. Adams credits Greenleaf with giving him hope and encouragement when the medical community thought he was nuts.
- Marshall Gilula, M.D., neurologist, pioneer in biofeedback, and first editor of the Journal of Holistic Medicine
- Peter and Doris Drucker
- Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous
- Douglas McGregor, who proposed the Theory X and Theory Y explanations of human motivation in his classic management book *The Human Side of Enterprise*
- James McSwinnery, CEO of the Mead Corporation, a friend who helped edit every one of Bob's early essays
- Hundreds of students and ministers and teachers and just plain seekers

This is quite a list for a dyed-in-the-wool introvert, but it is safe to say that Greenleaf learned from every one of these people, and judging by what *they* say in their letters, they also looked to him for wisdom.

You are in luck this week because astonishing people are all around you at this conference – world-class authors, wise elders, razor-smart researchers, CEOs, profound souls who are famous and not famous.

Spirit Carriers

At the top of the list of those you should seek out, Greenleaf would put those he called “spirit carriers.” Who are they? Let me quote Greenleaf:

“In my view of the world there are people whom I would call “spirit carriers.” Servants who nurture the human spirit are spirit carriers. They serve to connect those who do the work of the world, or who are being prepared for that role, with vision from both past and contemporary prophets. Those servants find the resources and make the intensive effort to be an effective influence. They don’t just make speeches or write books as the prophet does. They are **spirit carriers**; they connect the prophecy with the people so that it changes their lives. The spirit is power, but only when the spirit carrier, the servant as nurturer of the human spirit, is a powerful and not a casual force.”

This room is packed with *spirit carriers*. Find them. Better yet, become one yourself.

Be Alert to “Openings”

The word “openings” was used by Quaker founder George Fox to describe insights that can enlarge our understandings, or even be transformative.

Insights are usually shy. They can flit through the mind and then disappear like the vapor of a dream you begin to forget when you first wake up. Be mindful, be open to these openings because I guarantee, many of them will visit you in the next three days.

Robert Greenleaf had an *opening* one day when a wasp landed on his hand. He had never got along with stinging insects. He had kept a bee hive during World War II and was regularly stung by the rascals. But on this day, he didn't brush away the wasp. He felt it was curious about him, and he became curious about it. From then on, he *enjoyed* his encounters with stinging insects and was never stung again.

Now, that may not seem like a profound insight, but Bob did describe it as an "opening" that enlarged him in some way, even if he didn't fully understand it.

Greenleaf considered his dreams as sources of "openings." He wrote them down and did two years of Jungian dream therapy work to help him understand them. As you become mindful of openings this week, consider these short accounts of two of his dreams...

Greenleaf took the train to work one morning and immediately entered that hypnogogic state that is halfway between wakefulness and sleep. He immediately entered into a light dream, and in the dream a friend who had died two years earlier stopped and had a conversation with him. Some of the conversation was about practical matters at work, but most of it was about Bob's spiritual development. Along the way, Bob's friend said that we shouldn't be concerned with ideas about – or from – the unconscious. We should accept that there is a mysterious realm that serves us, but we'll never have full comprehension of it.

When the train reached its destination 30 minutes later, Bob woke from his reverie and noticed that, in his words, "The world was brighter and more sprightly and attractive than usual. My step was light and I was in a state of euphoria." He reported that some of the altered state dropped away as he became engaged in routine matters, but he retained some of the glow all day, maybe because he had been assured that these little *openings* as natural and trustworthy sources of wisdom.

Here's a report of another dream...

“We are having a large party at our house and I am standing with a group of people on the lawn. I am making a speech about how our *experience* stands in the way of our *perception*.”

A short but profound opening, as relevant today as it was in 1958. Pay attention to it; don't let your *experience* stand in the way of your *perception* at this conference. In fact, at this conference you are likely to have openings that come in the form of new questions, rather than answers to old ones. And, by the way, if you have any dreams in the next few days, write them down. Share them. Sit quietly and let them speak to you because they are usually coded messages of something that is important for your development.

Research is Necessary but not Sufficient

It is safe to say that more remarkable research about the efficacy of servant leadership will be presented at this conference than has ever been shared anywhere, at any time. Greenleaf would have been amazed, because he oversaw scores of research studies at AT&T, as well as during his consulting days, and the findings were used to inform policies that affected thousands – even *millions* of people.

The man was a world-class researcher. He had been a math major and knew how to generate, interpret and validate quantitative data. But he was also adept at qualitative research. In fact, he the U.S. government gave him a secret clearance during WWII, which he used in part to help to conduct and interpret social science research about issues on the home front.

But research alone was never enough for him. Time and again he saw his findings partially or totally ignored by decision makers because they were inconvenient or went against – quote, unquote – “common knowledge.” I'm sure that's never happened to you! He learned that

research didn't matter if it was ignored, or if it wasn't backed up by people with the courage to live the results in their lives and organizations.

I well remember a trip I took 40 years ago to a national art educator's conference. Ann McGee-Cooper was in charge of the program that year and she invited me to accompany her and some of her students on the adventure. There was a clear left-brain, right-brain split in that crowd – the left-brain academic researchers versus the wild and crazy-creative right brain artists.

Well, there is a place for people who simply love to do research, *and* for those who simply love to create and couldn't care less about quantifying the results. But one of the things that Ann taught me on that trip was the importance of being WHOLE-BRAINED, to straddle the paradoxes, to find freedom by giving yourself *choices* about how to respond to what's happening around you instead of always being “on automatic.”

One of the wonderful things about the cutting-edge researchers we'll be learning from this week is that they tend to be practitioners first, people who are also living the ideals of servant leadership. You will view the research in that context, but when you take it back to your workplace, it will be easy for a few bosses to learn that servant-led companies tend to average a 30% to 50% higher profit margins and say, “Boy, that's for me! Tell me, what do I **do** to get those numbers?!” But, of course, that is the wrong question. The right question is, “What are some new *questions* and concrete steps I can take to help *me personally* and this *organization* develop a new vision of who and what we can BE?” Because, THAT is what is *sufficient* to complete the research that is *necessary*.

Be Faithful

Like Abraham Lincoln, Robert Greenleaf had a peculiar ambition. Lincoln wanted to earn the esteem of his fellow citizens, and being President was just one way of doing that. He thought that the memory of his actions was his only shot at immortality, rather than the more traditional route

of embracing a particular religious doctrine that promises immortality if you just do the right thing.

Robert Greenleaf 's ambition was to be *faithful* to his work, without needing to know whether it would make him famous or rich, or even if it would make its own way in the world.

In 1960, Greenleaf was struggling to finish his first book manuscript about the concept of Strength. In his journal, he documented a breakthrough. After viewing some rock formations that he thought were transcendently beautiful, he suddenly saw his work on the book as something enjoyable to do for its own sake. It was no longer drudgery, and his goal was not to simply see a book published with his name on it. He wrote:

“I have no feeling that I need to live to finish this work. It is something I feel the urge to work on. Whatever it turns out to be is OK. If nothing emerges, that is OK too.”

I thought I felt that way when I worked on the Greenleaf biography for seven years, but I was still disappointed when the world didn't stop the day it was published and I received no congratulatory letter from the President of the United States. That's when I realized that I had harbored some personal grandiosity all along. Even though the book was about Robert Greenleaf and not me, I thought the universe had made a deal with me: If I did the work, the universe would automatically take care of all my needs. Wrong! The impact of the book would be exactly what I hoped for. Wrong! It would generate enough income to do a whole series of books on Greenleaf and servant leadership. Wrong again. That was my small self speaking, my own ambition that wasn't nearly as selfless as I told myself it was.

I was the victim of what is called in theology, “Name it and claim it theology.” It's like an automatic slot machine. Put in the money and you'll get your reward in multiples. I realize this is an attractive and common notion, and there is enough truth in it that it bears considering.

Your experience may be different, but I learned that the real deal was this: **My job was to be faithful, period, and that effort offered grace enough.** I'm not powerful enough to control all

outcomes. Sure, I had to be involved in marketing the book but I also learned that if people needed to read it, they would find it.

In her 2012 book *So Far From Home*, published by Berrett-Koehler, Margaret Wheatley talks about how important it is to give up the notion that you, personally, are going to change the world. Maybe you will, but expecting it opens the door for a kind of grandiosity and disappointment that can lead to bitterness and burnout when the world doesn't change, or changes too slowly for you to notice.

She recommends we adopt the attitude of what she calls a “*spiritual warrior*,” and Dr. Wheatley describes what that means...

“The term “warrior” is used from the Tibetan tradition of “one who is brave,” brave enough to never use aggression, whose only “weapons” are compassion and insight.) As warriors for the human spirit, we discover our right work, work that is ours to do no matter what. We engage wholeheartedly, embody values we cherish, let go of outcomes, and be vigilant with our relationships. We learn how to persevere, to remain focused and confident in service to the issues and people we care about, focused not so much on making a difference as on *being* a difference.”

So, how about you? Are you ready to be faithful? To let go of outcomes? To be a spiritual warrior? If so, you can start today. At this conference.

Enjoy the ride!

When you look at the famous picture of Robert Greenleaf, in contemplation, you might think that he was a kindly Quaker saint who never had much fun in life. Not true! He *was* serious about the work he was born to do, and about living into what he called his unique “legitimate greatness,” but believe me, he had a lot of fun along the way!

Here is what his AT&T colleague Douglas Williams said about him....

“He had an ever-present, chuckling sense of humor. He was one of the most enjoyable men to be with I have ever met. I keenly remember that talking with Bob in his office at 195 Broadway was a stimulating, gratifying experience. He would pull out the lower drawer of his desk put a foot on it, lean back, put his hands behind his head and look at the ceiling. He was a person with whom you could engage in participatory thinking. I always felt the better after partnering with him.”

I remember my first day at work at the Greenleaf Center back in 1992. The staff went out to lunch together and I said, “Hey, does anyone know any servant leadership jokes?” One person said, only half-kidding, “Servant-leaders don’t tell jokes!”

That wasn’t true about Bob Greenleaf, who loved to tell and hear jokes. Some of them were a little bawdy, too, but he never told those in mixed company.

Bob and Esther enjoyed the ride and squeezed all the juice they could out of their time together.

They climbed mountains. They camped out. They rode tandem bicycles and attended every classical concert, lecture, play and public reading they could fit in while they lived in Manhattan. In fact, that’s how Bob came to know Robert Frost.

They were organic gardeners before it was cool. Esther was especially interested in healthy food and looked up nutritionist Adelle Davis after she read her books, and they became friends.

Around the Greenleaf household, Esther called chocolate by its proper name – “sin.”

Soon after his marriage to Esther, Bob received some advice from his father. First, George urged Bob and Esther to “stay sweet.” Second, like a good father, he dispensed practical advice on health insurance that had a little humor involved.

“The very best kind of insurance,” said George, “and the cheapest, is to take care of yourself. Watch your step, watch your health, don’t overwork and don’t worry. Also vote the Republican ticket – at least nationally.”

By the way, the Republican Herbert Hoover was running against Democrat Al Smith that year. While the Republicans were identified with the booming economy, Smith was tainted by the Tammany Hall scandal, and lack of integrity in public officials did not sit well with George Greenleaf. Lest you think he was a political ideologue, George went on to say that he was voting Democratic in the state and local elections because “we need a housecleaning over here and the Democrats put out a good ticket.”

So, while you are listening to serious ideas this week, take time to enjoy the ride. Don’t overwork and don’t worry. Who knows; maybe *you* can create a servant leadership joke that starts with this line: “So Robert Greenleaf and a platybus walked into a bar...”

Just a thought.

Answer Tragedy with Beauty

I dearly hope no personal tragedy befalls you this week, but all you need to do is open this morning’s paper to see evidence of it in every part of our round world. Sometimes it can simply get you down. Did you ever think of responding with beauty?

In 1939 Esther Greenleaf went to the hospital to give birth to a beautiful, healthy little girl named Anne. But Anne immediately caught one of the infections so common in hospitals those days. Had it happened 10 years later, penicillin would have cured it right away, but that miracle drug was not yet available.

The doctor told Bob and Esther that little Anne would only live a week and there was nothing that either medical science or her stricken parents could do to help.

Bob brought a vase of flowers into the nursery and put it on the windowsill by the radiator. Then he wheeled his daughter over by the flowers where she could catch the heat of the radiator and the light of the sun and took one picture after another, desperate to preserve on film as much of this precious, waning life as possible.

But the doctor was right. In this case even all the love in the world couldn't save Anne.

Just after she died, Bob's father George sent this note...

Dear Robert and Esther,

I am deeply grieved on account of our loss and as usual under such circumstances am weighed down by a feeling of complete helplessness.

The beginning and the end of life are beyond my power of comprehension; but I know that time is a great healer and that the here and now hold many compensations. Courage and hope still live and every night of storm and stress is followed by the dawn of a new day.

Lovingly, Father

After receiving that letter, Bob finally went into the darkroom to develop his hospital pictures. Imagine how, as he watched each print slowly come up in the developer tray, in a darkroom illuminated by a red, eerie safe light, he realized that all he and Esther had left of Anne were memories and these images...

They grieved mightily. As soon as they could, they both threw themselves into the work at hand. Esther took care of their son Newcomb and Bob went back to his job as one of the top people at the world's largest corporation. But both of them also wisely did their personal art.

Esther created her paintings, which were beginning to look like the abstract expressionist canvases that other famous artists would show in another 15 years.

Bob built a chair. He worked on his ceramic pieces. He played his recorder and sang baritone with a group of harmonizing friends, and he also *wrote*. He wrote this entry in his journal a few months after Anne's death, which seems to say that the small, short drop of life that was Anne COUNTED, and it was beautiful....

“Spend all you have for loveliness. Buy it and never count the cost for one white, surging hour of peace. Count many a year of strife well lost, and for a breath of ecstasy give all you have been or could be.”

A few months later, after he had begun to reorient his life without the daughter he had held, he wrote this entry in his journal...

“This day I saw an objective clearly. Always I have wondered about the verse, “Ask, and it shall be done unto you...seek and ye shall find.” It has not seemed reasonable that I should ask for wealth or power or great accomplishment. Today I resolved to make a rich life out of what was now in hand – my family, my home, my friends, my job, my present abilities and my present limitations. Ask for nothing that is not here and now – merely ask to make of them a harmonious whole – to create attitudes and energies to control and utilize.”

And what about you? Are you willing to trust the wisdom of beauty to answer tragedy? And, how could that principle make a difference in your workplace?

Conserving Opportunity for the Human Spirit

We don't have enough time to delve into some of the other life lessons a study of Greenleaf's life offers. You'll find most of them scattered in his writings. Let me leave you with this final quote

from a journal in 1942. No one except Greenleaf freaks like me has ever seen it before. As you hear it, please try to remember that it is NOT about politics, especially modern politics.

“Conservatism is not the preservation of something old – even if it is still good or still has some validity. It is the cultivation of the opportunity for the human spirit to flower. This is never preserved – it must be won anew by each generation. Conservation in the natural world is maintaining the optimum conditions for growing things. It is not what is done in museums, which is useful, but secondary.

Thank you.

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