

Modeling Meaning in Life: The Teacher as Servant Leader

Douglas V. Herman and Mike Marlowe

Troubled and troubling youth use their power in manipulative or destructive ways. In order to learn more caring and respectful strategies, they must observe these values in adults who have authority in their lives. This article applies the management principles of servant leadership to teachers and caregivers.

Example is more efficacious than precept.

– Samuel Johnson (1696-1772)

Working with a population of students with serious emotional disturbance is both challenging and rewarding. Unfortunately, it can be more challenging than rewarding, and many wonderful professionals leave the field due to burnout and frustration. A major source of burnout is the personal conflict that occurs between teachers with predetermined beliefs about their role of authority, and oppositional children who trust no one and have no direction or mission in life. The critical need to shift from a “classroom” mindset, where adults stress obedience to authority, to a “community” mindset, where leaders stress helping others, can be more easily communicated and facilitated by re-examining our greater role in humanity, that of “servant first,” as expressed in the writings of Robert Greenleaf (1977; 1998). We believe that by promoting Greenleaf’s idea of leader (teacher) as “servant first,” we can give direction to both teacher and student as we strive to change from a *classroom of order* to a *community of caring*.

Robert Greenleaf (1977) first developed the idea of the leader of an organization or movement as servant

when he read the novel *Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse (1956). In this beautiful tale of searching, the story is told of HH, a member of an apparently long-dissolved League of travelers who traversed space and time to absorb the wisdom, culture, and secrets of the ages to find peace and unity. As HH tries to recount this story, he reaches a great obstacle, the unexplained disappearance of Leo, the League servant. He cannot go on. The rest of the story describes HH’s own inner conflicts as he tries to find the lost servant. When he finds the servant, HH discovers that he, not Leo, is the one who has abandoned the journey and turned away from the values and practices of the League. Through the course of a fantastic trial, HH as self-accuser, discovers that Leo is actually the president of the League. HH is finally able to see that endless searching can blind us to what we already know, that one’s meaning is found in the values of humility and faithful servitude.

From this theme of man searching for meaning, Greenleaf (1977) develops his idea that a truly caring, giving, and successful leader is one who is called to serve in order to become complete and to make meaning through service to others. This is a remarkable notion. We believe that the implications it has for those called to serve troubled and aggressive youth are very exciting.

Human Motivation and the Need to Be Complete

According to Greenleaf (1977), "the servant leader is servant first, as Leo was portrayed. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (p. 7). Citing current nationwide teacher shortages in the field of emotional and behavioral disorders and comparatively low wages with other professions, we believe that teachers of troubled children and youth are people attracted to their vocation primarily out of a need to serve. Hesse, the prophet, announces through Leo's voice the law of service: "He who wishes to live long must serve, but he who wishes to rule does not live long" (1956, p. 34). We believe those "seekers" who choose to become teachers are manifesting their innate will to serve. The next step then is to recognize how to best answer the call. Greenleaf (1977), building on his idea of "servant first," provides us with a universal maxim to guide us in measuring our service. He asks: "Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p. 7).

Abraham Maslow's (1973) theory of human motivation identifies basic human needs that drive behavior. When these integrated needs are met, the result is a feeling of completeness or wholeness in an individual. He identifies these as: physiological, safety, love, and esteem. These needs form a hierarchical order beginning with the most basic bodily needs such as sunlight, water, and food, moving to safety and security within the environment, to belonging, and finally to strength, respect, and achievement. However, when these basic needs are met, "restlessness will soon develop unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for" (p. 162). For Maslow, this quest for doing what one is fitted for is "self-actualization." This tendency might be phrased as "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming." Or as Greenleaf (1977) states, "for the person with creative potential (the teacher as servant) there is no wholeness except in using it" (p. 6).

This notion that one gains wholeness from becoming a servant is further embodied in the work of E. B. White's classic children's novel, *Charlotte's Web* (1952). The hero of the tale, Wilbur, an angst-filled pig, finds himself feeling alienated by barnyard

existence, fearful of his fleeting mortality, and longing for direction in his life. Along comes Charlotte, a humble spider, who chooses to save Wilbur's life through clever propaganda in the form of webs with messages proclaiming Wilbur "terrific," "some pig," and "humble." Only later, as Wilbur learns that his dear friend will soon die, does he ask her why she helped him. She replies,

I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life anyway? We're born; we live a little while; we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you I was trying to lift my life up a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that. (p. 164)

Charlotte, as a "servant first," was motivated by her shared goal of saving Wilbur and simultaneously meeting a basic need for wholeness and meaning in her own life. She was making meaning of her life through helping another.

In his book, *The Power of Servant Leadership* (1998), Greenleaf thanks E. B. White for his insight and ability for "seeing things whole, or more whole than most, and the ability to tell us ordinary mortals what he sees" (p. 235). By examining the bigger picture, and looking at things as White and Greenleaf do, we begin to recognize a common and shared goal. This shared goal can be seen as two-fold. One side is our common goal of helping children in need, our calling to serve. The other side is our common human goal of becoming complete and making meaning of our life, our need for "self-actualization." In addressing the idea of a common goal, Greenleaf (1977) writes:

[a] goal ... is something to strive for, to move toward, or becoming. It is so stated that it excites the imagination and challenges people to work for something they do not yet know how to do, something they can be proud of as they move toward it. (p. 9)

Fostering a Caring Team of Servants

Leading a team toward change is challenging. Simply explaining to teachers that it is their role to empathize with and consider a child's feelings is one thing, but attempting to train the skills needed to attain this

degree of insight and awareness is another thing altogether. We believe that this is where Greenleaf's thought about "servant first" can be so beneficial in fostering change within the current education climate of conformity through coercion. A powerful model for change can be seen in the Circle of Courage, a model for empowering youth at risk (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). Like Greenleaf, Brendtro and colleagues provide a very nontraditional approach for working with students based on a value of service to others. These authors present us with wisdom drawn from Native American culture which stresses belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity, all values focused on helping those served "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 7). The teacher as "servant first" must act from the belief that all humans deserve to be surrounded by kindness. The "kindness" we speak of is an action, not a feeling. It should be driven by the call to serve the need to help others and the need to be whole as a person. The teacher as "servant first" must act from the understanding that the child who has long been "discouraged" is motivated by the same need for positive experiences and longing to be whole as all human beings (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002).

Teachers will find a role model for Greenleaf's "servant first" philosophy in the teacher lore of Torey Hayden's first person accounts of teaching children with emotional disturbances. Her first book, *One Child* (1980), focuses on Sheila, a silent, troubled six-year-old who has tied a three-year-old boy to a tree and critically burned him. Hayden has penned six others, including her latest, *Beautiful Child* (2002), the story of Venus Fox, a mute, nearly catatonic, seven-year-old girl whose unresponsiveness is interrupted only by brief, violent episodes of rage. As Hayden noted on her message board,

I find myself operating from a place that acknowledges everyone matters, no matter how different, how unappealing, or even, how evil, and to model myself on good souls who say things like: 'whatsoever thing thou doest to the least of mine and the lowest, thou doest unto me.' And just keep doing it, day in, day out. This, I've found, does in the long run, produce results. (Hayden, 2004)

Hayden's teacher stories emphasize the wholeness one gains from being a servant to one's students. In

her prologue to *Tiger Child* (1995), the sequel to *One Child*, she noted the powerful effect Sheila had on her: "This little girl[s] ... courage, her resilience, and her inadvertent ability to express that great gaping need to be loved that we all feel—in short her humanness—brought me into contact with my own" (p. 8). Hayden, the servant, gives of herself: of her kindness, her understanding, her knowledge, her respect, her acceptance. In giving, she enriches the lives of her children and that which she brings to life in them is given back to her. As Erich Fromm noted in his classic book, *The Art of Loving* (1956), love is a power that produces love.

Making Caring the Expectation

The role of teacher as servant has been examined, the need for finding wholeness has been discussed, but a central support to make both possible is the establishment of a caring community. In their work on the role of a therapeutic community, Blakeney and Blakeney (1996) stress the importance of moral development. They point out four tasks universal to moral development: caring, autonomy, truthfulness, and fairness. If servant leadership is to flourish and student dialogue to be fostered, the classroom community must stand on universals such as caring, empathy, and understanding. Not the arrogant understanding one gets from telling, but rather the realistic understanding one gets from hearing and listening. Greenleaf writes "any human service where he who is served should be loved in the process requires community, a face to face group in which the liability of each for the other and all for one is unlimited" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 29).

Hayden's writings describe classroom communities where the seeds of servant as leader are planted. A climate is created in which youngsters feel genuinely concerned for one another and become involved in helping one another. Morning discussion, closing activities, classroom meetings, peer tutoring, movement experiences, imagination activities, painting, skits and plays, cooking, caring for plants and animals, and field trips all nourish inviting relationships in a culture of belonging. What Hayden's children learn from being a part of the classroom can be applied to other settings, as they develop the skills to make new friends, become members of other communities, and to serve others.

Another outstanding model for creating what we are referring to as a community of caring can be found in the group-based therapeutic model, Positive Peer Culture (PPC) (Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985). PPC operates from a basic principle that crisis is an opportunity for value analysis, reflection, and personal growth. PPC also operates from the servant-first principle that youth in crisis can benefit from the caring service and understanding of other youth in crisis. It stresses the value of helping oneself by helping others. The teacher as servant is providing the student with the freedom to feel and the potential to improve by making caring the expectation, creating zero tolerance of put-downs, and making cruel actions unacceptable.

Go Forth and Serve

Many are called to serve others. Human motivational theory recognizes an innate need to make meaning of life. People feel good when they help another. With these things in mind, it is both possible and relevant to view the teacher working with troubled youth in terms of Robert Greenleaf's idea of one who chooses to be servant first in life.

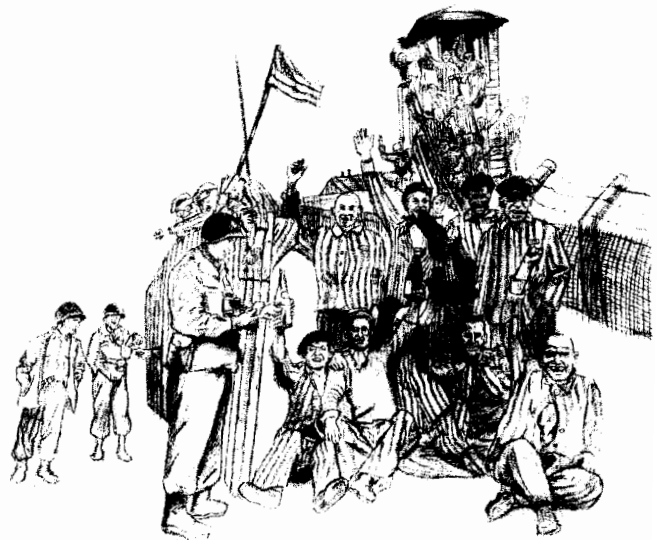
To assist those who wish to answer this call to serve, Larry Spears, current CEO of the Greenleaf foundation, identifies ten defining characteristics of the servant leader that can be used to aid servant leaders of today and help develop the needed servant leaders of the future. According to Spears (1998), servant leaders need skills in listening, empathy, healing, persuasion, awareness, foresight, conceptualization, commitment to the growth of people, stewardship, and building community. It is interesting to note that Spear's list of skills needed by a servant leader are the same universal behavioral maxims Buddha prescribed through the "noble eightfold path" to eliminate suffering and find serenity in one's life (Ozmon & Craver, 1990). Using these universal values and assumptions when dealing with those with whom you share this world will go a long way toward personifying the servant Leo and toward reaching the common goal of helping those we serve become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants.

Douglas V. Herman is director of the charter school at Grandfather Academy, Banner Elk, North Carolina. He can be contacted by phone: 828/898-3868 or e-mail: D.Herman@grandfatherhome.org

Mike Marlowe is professor of special education at Appalachian State University, Reich College of Education, Department of Language Reading and Exceptionalities, Boone, North Carolina. He can be contacted by phone: 828/262-6085.

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