

Learning Servant-Leadership from Native America— Again

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One grandfather spends his life creating daycare centers while another is a history mentor. A couple works with a dozen volunteers to feed the elderly. Although these people are spread across the continent, and were raised in different cultures, they share two common attributes: They are all Native American leaders, and they are all *servant*-leaders.

Four decades ago, Robert Greenleaf changed the map of the business world after reading Herman Hesse's account of an indigenous servant-leader named Leo in *Journey to the East*. I have found many such leaders in the First Nations of Native America, and they have much to teach us about how we govern ourselves: who leads, who follows, and why. Perhaps more important are the lessons they can teach us about how to create a servant-led society. As our children grow, the leaders will rise to the call, and the followers will know exactly whom to respect, a direct result of the group-led, generational education model used in traditional Native America.

I am not suggesting we forsake modern society, selling everything we own to go live in the mountains. Rather the opposite: I propose we blend indigenous wisdom into the way we lead our society. We can also learn better methods to teach servant-leadership. If we study these lessons, we can embrace their secrets to create what Greenleaf hoped for: a more just society. But in order to look at the similarities between servant-leadership and traditional Native American leadership, we have to get beyond a few differences first.

A Clash of Cultures

Since Columbus first landed in North America, the dominant culture has found it difficult to understand the Native American Nations, and the reason is simple, if not obvious: the Nations were governed by servant-leaders. Far greater than the language barrier, servant-leadership was the broadest cultural chasm between two radically different cultures, rivaling the Grand Canyon in magnitude.

Imagine the confusion when the leader of an expedition, holder of title, rank, and power, steeped in European feudalism, asked to speak with the leader of a Native village. This lordly fellow and his entourage

were led to a poorly dressed grandfather of a man, living in the smallest hut in the village. Often the explorer was led to a group of a dozen or more elders, and this only compounded the problem, increasing the explorer's disbelief and frustration. *What madness is this?*, he might wonder. *I want to speak to the leader, not the village pauper.*

Obviously language was a significant barrier, but it was a hurdle the explorers eventually overcame, if only a little at a time. Once the explorer could communicate, he would seek to conduct his business. But harder than language to translate was a psychology of community considerably more foreign in nature. Pleading his case for use of land, or fishing and hunting rights, he hoped for a positive response. Instead, he was often asked to return in a few days or weeks because the leader must seek consensus among the villagers before any action could be taken. All of the elders must confer, consequences must be assessed. The explorer might return in a few weeks or a month, only to be introduced to a different spokesperson for the group, instead of the previous leader. In a later interaction, still another elder might speak for the group, then another. The overall leadership was the same, but different leaders would accept responsibility for various issues or projects, each supported in their turn by the whole.

A direct result of European confusion with this fluid, service-based government was the attempt to force a single "king" or "chief" on the community, which is why we read about Cherokee Princesses even today, something that traditional Native Americans find amusing, or worse, derogatory to their culture. It saddens me to consider that our government did its best to destroy the excellent forms of servant-government in the First Nations. Native Americans have been forced to accept a more "modern," more "civilized" form of government. This may well be the most damaging action ever committed against them, made even worse by the savage irony that Jefferson and other founding fathers learned so much about representative democracy from the Iroquois Confederacy before destroying the communities that conceived it.

Searching for Common Ground

I was drawn to servant-leadership for the same reason I was drawn to return to my Native American heritage and traditions. At its core, servant-leadership is a very spiritual way of leading, and traditional Native American culture is a spiritual way of life. Robert Greenleaf often focused on the moral and ethical aspects of leadership. He, and the disciples who continue to follow him, frequently offer examples of

true servant-leaders among spiritual or religious communities. Yet it is done in the same soft way as in traditional indigenous cultures. No heavy-handed salesmanship, very little quoting of scripture; simply a "walk the talk" attitude supported by stories that emphasize service to others. This "soft-sell" approach, a product of Greenleaf's Quaker roots, made it easy for me to digest and assimilate the essence of servant-leadership, refining and codifying concepts I had been working with for years. It also made it easy for me to find numerous role models in the history of the First Nations.

While reading my "background material" and preparing the original draft of this essay, I spent time reflecting silently as Greenleaf advised—another activity that mirrors the traditional mindset, another link between two worlds. My original intent had been to simply connect the dots between servant-leadership and traditional Native American ways, to show the similarities. But as I delved deeper, I discovered differences between the two cultures. I began to see that it is not just what, but *when and how*, we teach our children that matters. I have come to believe that indigenous societies can show us how to steep our children in the ethics of service, one generation after another. As I asked myself how we might better match our culture to theirs, I did not come up with many "final answers," but I think I have found some ideas we can consider, and perhaps engage in dialogue over, in the servant-leadership community.

Keep in mind that this is a broad-stroke discussion of servant-leadership in traditional societies and may differ in details from what you might learn from any individual First Nation, or from the indigenous history of your distant ancestors. There are more than five hundred separate nations within "Native American" culture. Contrary to the new-age desire for a "pan-Indian" mono-culture, which is more easily marketed, it is impossible to lump them all together into a single set of cultural models. Each group of communities translated servant-leadership to their specific circumstances. With that said, let me tell you what I discovered when I superimposed the maps of two different cultures.

Two Maps of the Same Terrain

In his essay *On Character and Servant-Leadership: Ten Characteristics of Effective, Caring Leaders*, Larry Spears offers the traits crucial to success as a servant-leader, which perfectly mirror the nature of a traditional indigenous leader. If you have not already done so, it is well worth a visit to the Spears Center at www.spearscenter.org to read the full essay. I am grateful for Larry's permission to summarize

his points and filter them through a Native American lens to illuminate my thoughts. On a personal note, I admire Larry's genealogical research and his efforts in uncovering his own Native American heritage through tracing his roots back some 350 years to Virginia.

For the sake of clarity, I have italicized his ten traits, and one sub-trait, in the following paragraph—

A leader who *listens* carefully to the community, and with *empathy*, can understand the will of the group. This leader actively seeks opportunities for *healing* in interpersonal, and inter-communal, relationships. *Awareness*, including *self-awareness*, is critical to understanding the most important issues facing the servant-leader, especially concerning ethics and values. *Persuasion* rather than coercion is paramount if the servant-leader is to build consensus in the community. *Conceptualization* requires the servant-leader to think beyond the short-term, considering the consequences of all actions upon the long-term future of the community. Servant-leaders cultivate *foresight* in order to apply the lessons of history to the realities of the present and to a compelling vision of the future in such a way as to recognize the probable outcome of the actions about to be taken. Native Americans know well that *stewardship* means actions are taken only in the best interests of those to come. Their leaders are committed to the *growth of people*, actively seeking to understand each person's special gifts, and providing the means to nurture them. Finally, the servant-leader knows that *building community* will result in a synergism that will benefit every individual.

As I look back on the great servant-leaders throughout Native American history, it is clear to me that each of them possessed most, if not all, of these traits. Robert Greenleaf taught that service was the foundation for true leadership. This famous quote is one of the cornerstones of his philosophy: "The servant-leader is servant first ... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*).

Greenleaf's chant of *servant first, servant always*, echoes the words a healer or holy man might sing. The history of Native America is filled with servant-leaders for one reason: no one could lead until they proved their willingness to serve. This included their village leaders (government), holy men (clergy), healers (doctors), hunt leaders, farmers and herders (businesspersons), warriors (military), and more. Their young were raised in this environment of service; it was part and parcel of daily life. They constantly saw the adults serve, and as the

children grew, they were encouraged to actively seek their own ways to serve the community. Their first forays into leadership might come when, having conceived a project too large or difficult to handle alone, they asked their peers to help them. If the youngster enjoyed some standing among his age group, based on his willingness to serve others, he would receive help. If he didn't, he was on his own. You can see how a child in that environment would learn quickly that service is of the utmost importance, and as they grew, they would naturally serve in larger ways, some as leaders, and some as followers. From cradle to grave they are *servants first - servants always*.

The servant-leaders who work tirelessly to preserve Native American culture today continue to demonstrate these same traits on a daily basis. One modern-day servant-leader has spent his entire life teaching Native communities how to set up daycare services for their children. When I met him, he was paying his bills by delivering pizzas thirty hours a week and spent another sixty hours each week on the centers. Barely making enough to survive, he refused to work more hours because it would take time from the daycare programs. In his spare time, he visits elders in his community, often bringing food, clothing, and other necessities. He chops wood for them and does other heavy chores so they won't have to. When asked why he spends so much time helping others, his answer simple. "This is what life is about: service to others." And, yes, he is regarded as a leader in his community, having gathered many followers from those he is mentored in daycare operations, from the children who have grown up in the centers and the communities they support. And they are servant-leaders as well as servant-followers.

Another anonymous friend has spent his life protecting the original teachings. Focusing on pre-contact beliefs, traditions and ceremony, he has amassed a volume of material that would make any anthropologist green with envy. This mission takes most of his time, and most of his money as well. He spends countless hours each week patiently instructing the next generation, inculcating them in a culture of service. Again, he is growing servant-leaders and servant-followers.

Each week, a thirty-something couple travels a circuit hundreds of miles long to deliver food, clothing and other supplies to elders in their widely dispersed community. They live simply, preferring to invest their time and money into caring for the elders that protect and perpetuate the ancient ways of their people. Over the years, they have gathered dozens of followers who help them in their work and

learn from the elders. Studying this group's relationships reveals several complex and fully realized levels of servant-leadership and servant-followership woven into the tapestry of community.

These are just a few of the servant-leaders among the Native American traditionals living on the edge of our modern, technological society. They are proof positive that, even in the most difficult circumstances, it is still possible to pass the torch of servant-leadership to the generations to come. I believe servant-leadership is similar to the traditional Native American leadership model, the two following many of the same general contours, and that Native American success with passing servant culture from one generation to the next deserves investigation. If so, we can look beyond the actual subject matter being taught and consider what else we can learn. We can do that best by now looking at the *differences in topography*.

Teaching Servant-Leadership

One major difference between the two cultures is *when* servant-leadership education begins. Currently our children begin to learn about it in college, if at all. Some children receive a brief introduction to the concept in high school wrapped in encouragement to investigate further. In contrast, Native American children begin to receive training at a year or two of age; it continues throughout their lives. The benefits of this seem obvious, so how can we emulate this? Let's start with what we have.

We have made significant head-way at the university level in the past several decades. For example, I am very pleased to report that the University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership Studies not only weaves servant-leadership throughout their entire undergraduate program in Leadership Studies, it also features a specific course on service to society. The Jepson School has been working to introduce servant-leadership to high school students. This program runs during the summer months. In addition, Jepson students visit high schools during the school year to increase awareness of servant-leadership and its importance to our society. Their first-of-its-kind degree in Leadership Studies and their drive into high schools place the Jepson School at the vanguard of servant-leadership education.

There are many other schools addressing socially responsible business practices, and we should commend each of them for their efforts and cheer their successes. But shouldn't *every* institution of higher learning, *especially schools of management*, be teaching

servant-leadership? Wouldn't it be wonderful if every management school in the country offered such a curriculum by the end of this decade? But that still wouldn't be enough, even though it would complete work that has been going on for more than two decades. It isn't enough because it's not *early* enough.

We can improve our results by actively seeking more ways to promote servant-leadership to high school students as the Jepson School is doing, and to teach our children at even younger ages the value of service to others, reaching all the way back into grade school and before. Numerous possibilities exist, from school activities such as student government, honors programs, sports, music, arts, and clubs, to outside activities such as spiritual programs, athletics clubs, martial arts training (another hidden treasure trove of servant-leaders) boys and girls clubs and more.

We can emulate Native American successes by teaching our children, from the time they can walk, that service to others is the highest calling to which one can aspire. Teaching servant-leadership to children in their earliest school years is not as far-fetched as it may seem. Six Seconds, a non-profit organization that promotes Emotional Intelligence education, has programs that reach children of all ages. Research supports the success of their programs, and the teaching methods are flowing across the nation one school at a time. What's more, because emotional intelligence is an integral part of servanthood, and the two are so obviously compatible, it seems that the methods required to teach them would be compatible, as well. At the forefront of learning a life of servant-leadership, I envision many teachers taking up the challenge to develop curriculum that spans all schools, all ages.

Finding the Right Teachers

We can't leave this critical education to our schools alone, however. Nor should they be the sole foundation of our efforts. Teachers polish and add to the lessons our children learn, but are not sole providers. But if it is true that teachers are just one part of the collective of educators, then *who else* will teach our children servant-leadership? The adage "it takes a village to raise a child" has a distinct indigenous flavor but let us go one-step at a time to get there. First, children need to see service in the proper light, and that begins with the parents. How we act while we perform service for others and how we interact with those who serve us teach our children lessons every day. Individually, and *as a society*, how many of those lessons do you think are the right ones?

When serving the family, we can practice without preaching, walking our talk in bold steps every day. Often, when I speak to groups about finding fulfillment through service, I talk about the joy we can feel by holding our daily chores in a slightly different light. Doing the laundry or washing the dishes, mowing the lawn or taking out the trash—all of these are acts of service to the family as a unit, the most basic unit of community. This is one small secret to my own personal happiness and I think it is helpful to anyone who wishes to try it. But my point here is that our children see, hear, *and understand*, far more than we give them credit for. So when they hear us grumble about making dinner, or see us scowl our way through any of the dozens of tasks required to maintain our home, *our community*, they're learning an entirely different lesson than we intend to teach. In order to do what indigenous communities do, we must offer impeccable models to our children as much as possible. *We* are the most important teachers of the lessons of service. We can then build on this early, basic training so that, as our children grow, they will be immersed in a life of service to others, coming to know and even thrive on the fulfillment that service brings.

Finding the Time to Teach

In general, the amount of "hands-on" time an indigenous parent gives to children is significantly greater than in modern society. This is a critical lynchpin of success for the program, and thankfully, many parents are already making changes that will help. In the workplace, we have seen a marked increase in parents of all ages and both sexes actively seeking ways to mold their careers around the responsibilities of holistic family life. We are seeing a dramatic shift in perspective back to the belief that family should be the focus of our lives and that means it deserves more energy, and *more time* than we have allowed ourselves in the recent past. (Remember, it wasn't so long ago that parents had twice as much time for their children than we do today.) The business world is beginning to respond to this trend, experimenting with telecommuting, in-office day-care, floating shifts, and other techniques.

Having spent much of my time in the world of retail, there is another growing trend that is dear to my heart: businesses that voluntarily close on Sundays, even though they lose significant amounts of business. In central Texas, McCoy's Hardware stores brag that they do a different kind of building on Sundays—that is when they build families. I remember standing near the front of my local McCoy's listening to a customer comment about that very policy, and to the

manager's patient explanation that their employees needed time with their families, too, and that their children were in school during the week, and their spouses at work, just as the customer's were. Two years later, I listened to the same discussion in a Ukrops grocery store in Richmond, VA, with different actors in the roles. The owners of these two chains sacrifice profit to provide a great service to their employees, proving that servant-leadership can be practiced—and taught—on many levels, in many ways.

After briefly addressing parental time priorities, we may again ask *who e/se* will teach our children. In a traditional society, there are numerous elders to teach, to guide, *to demonstrate* servant-leadership beginning at the child's birth and continuing throughout his or her entire life. Supporting the parents, the second line of teachers are other adults within the extended family. These might include aunts, uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents, and cousins to several degrees. Supporting them are the adults of the other extended families in that village. The interesting thing is that, for the most part, the adults within a specific community all follow the same guidelines and the same methods to teach service as the basis of all relationships. Therefore, while a child might spend time with numerous adults or groups of adults learning different skills, the child was constantly learning about service from *every teacher*. This continuity seems to be a crucial aspect of generational education. Perhaps part of our answer lies in returning to child-rearing as a community effort. We are beginning to see parents gathering in unique ways to share responsibilities among several families, creating instant "uncles" and "aunts" for the children involved. Home schooling networks deserve consideration. Imagine sharing educational responsibilities with a dozen other families, all of whom teach *and live* servant-leadership. We might also reconsider the benefits of a multi-generational family living very close together. An extended family inhabiting a series of houses in a subdivision, or a collection of apartments in a building, would be a modern-day equivalent to ancient village life.

Where We Need Servant-Leaders Most

Imagine an entire generation rose from the cradle on servant-leadership. Furthermore, with each successive generation, their numbers will grow until, after several generations, we will have raised an entire society as servants to themselves. What might the changes be in our government, education, religion, and business? And while servant-leaders benefit all types of institutions, it is in the realm of politics that we will need them most, if this vision is to succeed to

its fullest. Because our elected officials are among our most trusted servant-leaders, holding our essential liberties in their hands, these positions require servants with only the best intentions *for the whole* in their hearts and minds. And there is much to learn about this from Native Americans; the entire Native American system was designed to attract only those who were willing to sacrifice everything for their community. That is why the lordly explorer, his court and soldiers, were led to a group of impoverished elders to conduct community business. These elders had given away almost everything as part of their daily practice of sacrifice for others.

Imagine that level of surrender to the whole somehow blended into our current political arena. What the founders of this country learned once, we must learn again. For the most part, what Jefferson studied so well, quickly vanished like a wisp of smoke on the wind, and took its own time coming back. Pockets of it remained, such as in the Society of Friends, who ultimately grew a modern-day prophet of humanistic business management and communal service. But if the servant-leaders elsewhere in our society are to succeed, they will need likeminded individuals in the city, state, and federal halls of politics. How else to put an end to the negative energy of destructive competition and in-fighting that paralyzes proper action? What better replacement than a positive, cooperative sense of doing what is right for everyone in the community, no matter how large or small? If you agree, then the question again becomes one of *how*. And the answer is simple: we do what Native American societies did for thousands of years; we grow a society of individuals that will only accept servant-leaders.

The Benefits of Servant-Followership

If we are to enjoy true servants in our governments, *servant-followers* must elect them. As Greenleaf pointed out, in order to create a servant-led society, true servant-followership must emerge. And perhaps their most important service is to choose the right leaders. Servant-leaders will not help society nearly as much if that society does not understand their importance. This next generation (and those beyond) must learn to avoid the mistake of "settling." Our society has learned to settle ...we settle for the lesser of two evils, we settle for a coarser society, we settle a dozen times a day and don't even notice we're doing it. But our children can't afford that, if generational education in servant-leadership is to work. The followers must support the right people, thereby doing their part to serve the interests of society. In politics more than anything, we can't afford to

settle for a person who isn't right for the job. And it will be up to us to elect the right person.

As we are raising a generation of servant-leaders, we can teach that same generation about the true nature of *servant-followership*, teach them whom to follow and why. Certainly, the potential for gain in other institutions is as great as it is for politics, and these other centers of leadership will benefit from an entire generation raised in the ethics of servant-leadership. However, it is in the realm of politics that the most altruistic leaders can do the most good, that the least altruistic can do the most damage. In this, I agree with the Nations.

A Cause for Reflection

We've looked—*very briefly*—at servant-leadership through the filter of Native America, repeating Jefferson's studies, and perhaps seen a new way of educating our young to become leaders and followers in service. Will any of this be easy? Absolutely not. But the rewards are great. Depending on how long it takes the concepts to be discussed, expanded upon, refined, and put into process in communities around the nation, we could see the first gains by the end of this decade. I can think of no better way to open the new millennium, than to bring the ethics of servant-leadership to an entirely different audience, a younger one, in a new way. It will take a few generations, even several, to achieve the proper mass and momentum. Our society will need to learn a new definition of *long-term* in order to make these ideas work to the fullest. Rather than thinking about tomorrow, or perhaps our children's future, we need to think about the lives of our grandchildren's grandchildren and beyond. The rewards to society are more than worth the long-term planning; the effort repaid many times over in so many ways.

The leaders will come, I am sure. Many will come if we teach them young and teach them well. The rest will be servant-followers and will be just as important because only they can choose the best servant-leaders. We can learn again from our Native American brothers and sisters, their model of servant-leadership, their teaching methods, and their way of bringing it to their government.

In closing, I invite you to join me in my next activity. Having finished writing this, I am going to reflect on these thoughts as I watch the sun set. I think—I *hope*—that both Greenleaf and the Grandfathers will be pleased.

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