

The Wisdom of Robert Greenleaf

A Biographical Sketch

Robert K. Greenleaf was born 1904 and died 1990. He spent most of his organizational life in the field of management research, development and education at AT&T. He was Director of Management Research there and advisor to several AT&T CEO's.

As a lifelong student of organizations, i.e. how things get done, he has distilled his observations in a series of essays and books on the theme of "Servant as Leader" -- the objective of which is to stimulate thought and action for building a better, more caring society.

Getting "Lost" In Servant-Leadership and Finding Religious Roots

..."We want a guide who only has at heart our getting lost! This is the ground on which the greatest religious traditions of the world have always stood. The tradition built around the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the one in which I grew up and which has the greatest symbolic meaning to me now, seems especially emphatic on this point. Jesus seemed only to have at heart our getting lost; he was concerned with what must be taken away rather than what was gained."

So wrote Robert Greenleaf in 1963, six years before he authored his seminal article on servant-leadership. I believe that Bob has spoken a deep truth. Servant-leadership, at its best, is grounded in the soil of authentic religion. It is not a secular concept. It is also about getting lost, laying aside the conventional wisdom as a guide to how we should be and act in the world.

Some of Bob Greenleaf's Key Ideas

The Basics

The great leader is servant first.

The servant-leader expects to be served in the process of her/his serving. This expectation derives from a deep respect for the mutuality of community and is not reflected simply by external reciprocal exchange.

Authority deserving allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader.

The Test

"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, not be further deprived?"

The Challenge to Reform

"If a better society is to be built, one more just and caring and providing opportunity for people to grow, the most effective and economical way, while supportive of the social order, is to raise the performance as servant of as many institutions as possible by new voluntary regenerative forces initiated within them by committed individual servants."

Servant-Leaders of Tomorrow

"The signs of the times suggest that, to future historians, the next thirty years will be marked as the period when the dark skinned and the deprived and the alienated of the world effectively asserted their claims to stature, and that they were not led by a privileged elite but by exceptional people from their own kind. It may be that the best some of today's privileged can do is to stand aside and serve by helping when asked and as instructed."

His Benediction

"Love without laughter can be grim and oppressive. Laughter without love can be derisive and venomous. Together they make for greatness of spirit. May your days be blessed with love and laughter; and, wherever you are may you too find Mecca -- community where faith is generated -- as you work to create it for others."

His Humble Epitaph (self authored)

Robert Kiefner Greenleaf

1904-1990

Loving Husband of Esther Hargrave Greenleaf

Servant-Leader, Philosopher, Writer

"Potentially a good plumber, ruined by a sophisticated education" R.K.G.