

Introduction: Love and Forgiveness

The Cornerstones of Servant-Leadership and Social Justice

DUNG Q. TRAN

Investigating the intersection of servant-leadership and forgiveness is an inherently humane and interdisciplinary endeavor. Although both concepts are paradoxically perplexing and painful processes, scholars, practitioners, and public intellectuals across many academic disciplines, art forms, organizational sectors, and wisdom traditions have examined each phenomenon (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018; La Caze, 2018; Rushdy, 2018; Selladurai & Carraher, 2014; Voiss, 2015). While the broad array of insights on servant-leadership and forgiveness has furnished a vast and varied corpus of perspectives, it has also generated conceptual confusion and ambiguity (Eva et al., 2019; Letizia, 2018; Smith, 2017; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Despite this perceived limitation, “The large metropolis of the human sciences exposes its inhabitants to opportunities of exotic travel” (van Manen, 2014, p. 13). On behalf of this anthology’s diverse tapestry of thought partners, we thank you for the opportunity to explore with you the canyons of the complex yet interconnected human phenomena of servant-leadership and forgiveness. We hope (y)our travels take you to new and uncharted territories that disturb, awaken, and hopefully heal your heart and, in turn, the heart of humanity.

In their book *Love and Forgiveness for a More Just World*, noted humanities scholars, Hent de Vries and Nils Schott (2015) highlighted the importance of innovating enduring ideas: “In an age of ever exponentially

expanding economic markets and technological media, in which exchange and information, commerce and communication form the real currency of the day, novel approaches to old concepts and practices become more and more operative . . . [and] necessary” (p. 7). Exacerbated by the economic and technocratic paradigms of our era are myriad insidious and systemic social ills that have consumed our world (Francis, 2015). They include widespread poverty, homelessness, mental illness, emboldened racism, sectarian violence, environmental degradation, ethical scandals, political polarization, cyberbullying, the sexual abuse of minors, and so much more. Reflecting on these realities from the intellectual vista of leadership studies, it is our view that every planetary creature has a vested interest in the development of a more innovative and comprehensive understanding of servant-leadership and forgiveness. These life-affirming ways of becoming more fully alive “go hand in hand” (Ferch, 2012, p. 7) and belong to the same family as joy, wisdom, and love (Ricoeur, 2006). Underscoring the urgency for further investigation of the intersecting and “interconnected issues” (Griswold, 2010, p. 547), Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963/2010) contended, “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. [The one] who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love” (p. 44).

Although a relatively unknown figure, Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan (1928–2002), a nephew of the slain South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–1963), is one exemplary servant-leader, among many others, who concretized King’s call to (re)develop and (re)discover the capacity to forgive and love within the isolating confines of a damp, windowless, and narrow prison cell (Nguyen, 2003). Following the Fall of Saigon in 1975, then Archbishop Thuan was arrested by the Vietnamese government and subsequently held without trial for thirteen years, including nine years spent in solitary confinement (Nguyen, 2001).

Although Thuan was a Catholic leader who believed in the notion of (Christian) forgiveness, prior to his arrest and imprisonment, Thuan found it difficult to forgive those who had murdered five members of his family during the Vietnam conflict (Keith, 2008; Taylor, 2013). As Nguyen (2003) noted, Thuan “was full of bitterness” and “his heart felt closed to such an act of forgiveness” (p. 83). However, during the darkest days of his captivity, which included interrogation, torture, and isolation, Thuan heard a mysterious voice from within urging him to “distinguish between God and the works of God” (Nguyen, 2000, p. 42). He suddenly

realized “that even if he could not do God’s work, he could still love God, and that loving God was more important than loving God’s work” (Nguyen, 2003, p. 207). It was a moment of clarity—a “transforming revelation . . . [that] loving God was the most important thing in his life, and no one could take that away from him. No prison cell could ever isolate him from God” (p. 207).

Thuan gradually realized that his mission as a servant-leader was no longer limited to the people of a particular geographical territory: “Yes, Lord, you are sending me here to be your love among my brothers, in the midst of hunger, cold, exhausting labor, humiliation, [and] injustice. I choose you; your will; I am your missionary here” (Nguyen, 1997/2003, p. 20). Eventually, Thuan discovered that despite his unjust treatment, he was being called “to transmit a message of love, in serenity and truth, in forgiveness and reconciliation” (p. 3).

However, “not all people have experienced the abiding loveliness of being welcomed back to community after having gravely wronged others” (Ferch, 2012, p. 71). Thuan’s guards were among these, and they constantly questioned the sincerity of his love. Despite Thuan’s reassuring responses, the guards refused to believe him: “Even when we have treated you so badly? When you have suffered in prison for so many years without ever having a trial?” (Nguyen, 1997/2003, p. 53). Thuan’s captors could not conceive of such a possibility. Appealing to their lived experience, Thuan said, “Think about the years we have been here together. You have seen for yourselves that it’s true. I really love you” (p. 53). Unconvinced, they inquired, “When you are freed you won’t try to take revenge on us or our families?” (p. 53). Thuan replied, “No[,] I will continue loving you, even if you want to kill me” (p. 53). When asked why, Thuan offered the following response: “Because Jesus has taught me to love you; if I do not, I am no longer worthy of being called a Christian” (p. 54).

As evidenced by the preceding conversation between Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan and his captors,

dialogue cannot exist . . . in the absence of profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. . . . Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. . . . If

I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue. (Freire, 1970/2018, pp. 90–91)

For both Cardinal Thuan and Paulo Freire, love is more than a “sentimental exchange between people, but rather love constitutes an intentional spirit of consciousness that emerges and matures through our social and material practices, as we work to live, learn, and labor together” (Darder, 2017, p. 96). As van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) postulated, there is a “deep connection between servant leadership and compassionate love” (p. 128) that results in an outgrowth that includes forgiveness. Consequently, the world would discover that the lessons Thuan learned about love and forgiveness in prison would form, inform, and ultimately transform his spiritual life, and serve as the cornerstones of his global servant-leadership.

Following his release in 1988, Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan was permanently exiled from Vietnam in 1991. Given his newfound availability, compelling story, and leadership potential, Pope John Paul II named Thuan a cardinal and appointed him vice president (1994–1998) and then president (1998–2002) of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Nguyen, 2003). This Vatican committee is charged with collecting “information and research on justice and peace, about human development and violations of human rights,” and cultivating partnerships with international organizations that “strive to achieve peace and justice in the world” (John Paul II, 1988, Article 143, #2).

For consequential thought leaders such as Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Greenleaf, and many others, the theory and practice of servant-leadership and forgiveness is more than just an endeavor toward the healing of an individual, an organization, or a society. A servant-led way of life characterized by a compassionate ethic of love and forgiveness can evolve human consciousness toward the common good and contribute to the fashioning of a more just, humane, and sustainable world (Boyle, 2017; Ferch, 2012; Freire, 1970/2018; hooks, 2000).

References

- Blessinger, P., & Stefani, L. (2018). Inclusive leadership in higher education: International perspectives and approaches. In L. Stefani & P. Blessinger (Eds.),

- Inclusive leadership in higher education: International perspectives and approaches* (pp. 1–13). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Boyle, G. (2017). *Barking to the choir: The power of radical kinship*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Darder, A. (2017). Pedagogy of love: Embodying our humanity. In A. Darder, R. D. Torres, & M. P. Baltodano (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 95–109). New York, NY: Routledge.
- De Vries, H., & Schott, N. F. (Eds.). (2015). *Love and forgiveness for a more just world*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R. C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research. *Leadership Quarterly*, 30, 111–132.
- Ferch, S. R. (2012). *Forgiveness and power in the age of atrocity: Servant-leadership as a way of life*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si'*. Retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#_ftn90
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). (50th Anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1970).
- Griswold, C. L. (2010). Debating forgiveness: A reply to my critics. *Philosophia*, 38, 457–473.
- hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. New York, NY: Perennial.
- John Paul II (1988). *Apostolic constitution: Pastor bonus*. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19880628_pastor-bonus-index_en.html
- Keith, C. (2008). *Catholic Vietnam: Church, colonialism, and revolution, 1887–1945* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- King, Jr., M. L. (2010). *Strength to love*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. (Original work published 1963).
- La Caze, M. (Ed.). (2018). *Phenomenology and forgiveness*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Letizia, A. J. (2018). *Using servant leadership: How to reframe core functions of higher education*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Nguyen, A. C. V. (2003). *The miracle of hope: Life of Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận, political prisoner, prophet of peace*. Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media.
- Nguyen, F. X. T. V. (2000). *Testimony of hope: The spiritual exercises of John Paul II*. (J. M. Darrenkamp, F. S. P. & A. E. Heffernan, F. S. P., Trans.). Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media.
- Nguyen, F. X. T. V. (2001). *The road of hope: A gospel from prison*. (P. Bookallil, Trans.). Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media.
- Nguyen, F. X. T. V. (2003). *Five loaves and two fish*. (Tinvui Media, Trans.). Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media. (Original work published 1997).

- Ricoeur, P. (2006). *Memory, history, forgetting*. (K. Blamey & D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Rushdy, A. H. (2018). *After injury: A historical anatomy of forgiveness, resentment, and apology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Selladurai, R., & Carraher, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Servant leadership: Research and practice*. Hershey, PA: Business Science Reference.
- Smith, S. L. (2017). Forgiveness. In R. Koonce, P. Robinson, & B. Vogel (Eds.), *Developing leaders for positive organizing: A 21st century repertoire for leading in extraordinary times* (pp. 121–134). Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing.
- Taylor, K. W. (2013). *A history of the Vietnamese*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- van Dierendonck, D. (2011). Servant-leadership: A review and synthesis. *Journal of Management*, 37(4), 1228–1261.
- van Dierendonck, D., & Patterson, K. (2015). Compassionate love as a cornerstone of servant leadership: An integration of previous theorizing and research. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 128(1), 119–131.
- van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Voiss, J. K. (2015). *Rethinking Christian forgiveness: Theological, philosophical, and psychological explorations*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.