Introduction

Servant-Leadership and Breaking Free
of Gendered Categorizations

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Section I by Joe Walsh

I remember the morning vividly. As I gaze outside at the fall colors, painting the University of Minnesota maroon and gold, I try to contain my nervous excitement for the impending philosophy course on knowledge and society. The epistemological discussions promised to happen were a constant source of generative energy for my college-aged self recently coming to terms with my attraction to other men and constantly questioning how identity is constructed by the self and by others. The first question raised this class period caught me off guard. In a room filled with inquisitive and inspiring minds, a student seeking to test the limits of social construction asks about how trans persons sexually identify. The presumption of their prompt comes from a binary gender perspective in which sexuality is also limited to either same- or opposite-gendered attraction and performance. The idea perplexed the room. Given a transitive gender identity, there came several invites for further information into this hypothetical situation. While I felt too threatened to engage with the conversation as a discreet gay man, I couldn't help but wonder what the dialogue would look like if instead of asking about the different identities assumed by society and our classroom,

the question was posited directly to this hypothetical person about their definition of their sexuality.

Too paralyzed to truly study for the rest of the lesson that day, the details in my memory are blank after this conversation. The prospect of a listening society that dares first to ask for a self-expression of identity rather than imposing a construction a priori onto our relationship with each other continued to ring in my mind. Such a subversion of the social construction of gender and sexuality, as I would later read and become engrossed in, lies at the heart of a leader that chooses to listen first and place emphasis upon the needs, well-being, and wholeness of the community over themselves. Considering the topic of Greenleaf's (1977/2002) liberating servant-leadership philosophy as it relates to the feminist movement within leadership studies, I see just how a closely related queer studies seeks insight into similar questions.

To better explore the impact that a true servant-leadership philosophy offers is to deepen our understanding of different ways of knowing—to move beyond the traditionally masculine definitions of leadership and engage meaningfully with feminist ways of knowing, which embrace both the feminine and masculine qualities of relating to one another, not as discrete states of being but as fluid polarities of wholeness. Hegemonic masculinity, which reigns over societal perceptions of authority and the conflation of leadership, asserts a leader-centric ontological claim (Heasley, 2005). The servant-leader philosophy seeks an understanding of leadership that is emergent within the interconnected nature of the community rather than from the authoritarian power and traits of the singular leader (Northouse, 2015).

Drawing inspiration from Herman Hesse's character Leo in *Journey to the East*, Robert K. Greenleaf recognized a needed paradigm shift in the ways society interacted with one another (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). Calling for *seekers* who are able to better identity the highest priority needs of the individual and society, Greenleaf recognized a moral ontological dilemma posing a crisis of leadership—the ways people relate to one another is too wrought with coercion and a blasé attitude toward the potentiality of one's neighbor. A *leader-first* mentality acts outside of their own consciousness, and the servant as leader who is motivated by the highest needs and noble pursuits actively engages within the positionality of their leadership practice in order to decenter themselves. The servant-leader does not attend to the needs of their followers as a means to an end, nor in an attempt to garner a false trust and increase a perception of connectivity or debt toward a group.

A servant-leader carries a philosophy that posits the highest needs, desires, and dreams of all, especially the least privileged, as the epitomized end.

A leader-centric philosophy acts as an imposition of a singular vision onto a community, much like the societal insistence on sexual definitions. A queer epistemology intentionally inquires about the needs, desires, and identity of the followers first. Queer epistemology is akin to the servant-leader philosophy in that both respect an individual's ownership of their identity first.

Greenleaf (1998) writes that a leader has the responsibility to concern oneself with those who are less privileged in society, and to address and remove inequalities. Yet, as the animating writing of Matthew Williams and Jennifer Tilghman-Havens as they appear in this text shows, servant-leadership theory is strictly limiting when identity work is not integrated, and a diversity of voices is missing. The cannon of servant-leadership continues to grow, and the writings contained within this anthology contribute to the ever-widening perspective of how the author's positionality directly relates to the theoretical and practical aspects of leadership.

As Greenleaf (1977/2002) coins the term *servant-leader* in his 1970 essay "The Servant as Leader," the feminist movement also gains momentum seeking liberation for all against the toxicity of a patriarchal system in which only wealthy white men are recognized as a legitimate and complete persons (hooks, 1984/2015). Greenleaf's (1977/2002) conception of legitimate power coming from relationship, and an authentic leader being one who chooses to serve first, creates a driving force for generative social interactions of leadership. The often-quoted best test of leadership, investigating whether those served are improved in their quality of life, are able to choose and live freely, and are themselves able and inspired to serve others, coincides directly with the feminist movement. To treat the person as whole means to embrace both the masculine and feminine and requires an epistemology that extends beyond reductive categorization. The whole person is an entity larger than labels, even those ubiquitous labels such as gender, and requires the servant as leader to see beyond the constraints of predefined social constructions.

A new way of seeing the world brings with it a promise of trans-formation. The servant as leader, embracing a listening-first disposition, is able to harvest a transformation of the ways in which we limit ourselves and our relations. Dr. Shann Ray Ferch, in his chapter "Eros and Logos," writes about the unification of the gendered ways of knowing that are too often considered rivals: for all genders to construct within themselves and

their communities a synthesis of the feminine and masculine. Remarking on Greenleaf's poetic essays on the prophetic nature of the servant-leader, Ferch highlights how thinking outside of a strictly empirical construct creates opportunity for equitable, liberatory, and loving kindness paradigms, as opposed to reinforcing toxic masculinity and other colonizing practices.

Greenleaf's (1977/2002) assertion that the phenomenon of leadership has the responsibility to concern oneself with those who are less privileged in society, and to address and remove inequalities, walks in tandem with feminist and queer theory. In the nexus of servant-leadership, feminist, and queer philosophies is the idea that one's societally imposed identity ought not to limit a person's ability to emerge and speak with legitimate power and engage with leadership (Frick, 2004). The choice to define and exclusively construct society through the use of identity categories is inherently limiting to the human potential and reduces the generative possibilities of our social interactions. "If we can free ourselves from assuming the inevitability of some form of gender, then combinations of femininity and masculinity—and of same-gender or other gender desire—do not represent the only human possibilities" (Jackson, 2005, p. 33).

To be queer is to defy what is considered as traditional social constructions. "The nontraditional male presents an unknown. The difference demands justification and explanation. 'Non' requires an invention of self" (Heasley, 2005, p. 115). Queer epistemology directly challenges the linear logic of the postenlightenment social world, forcing a reconsideration of the social contract based on a loving axiomatic tradition. The inherent contradiction of the queer into normalized society threatens a perceived paradox, what Derrida considers aporia (Rasche, 2011).

The construction of servant-leadership, by intentionally joining the typically subservient *servant* with the connotatively assertive and ruling *leadership*, acts in kind with *queer* as a living paradoxical construction. For Greenleaf (1977/2002), to serve is fundamentally to listen—not limited to listening as a passive approach to following directions but rather listening to the natural transformations, yearnings, and potentialities of all those around us. The leader, in contrast, is characterized by the ability to decide and to declare to others the direction for moving forward. The connection between listening for the direction and shouting the direction for the future is found in the ways Greenleaf shapes the servant-leader as being in touch with the emerging future. Considering the foresight to be the "lead" of leadership, the hyphenation of *servant-leadership* acts to ease the aporetic understanding of what it means to be a natural servant and legitimate leader (Wallace, 2007).

As I reflect back on the lessons I gained from my experience in the epistemology discussion, and recognize the ways in which seeming contradictions around cultural understandings of gender and sexuality embolden an oppressive definition toward even hypothetical persons, I see just how powerful embracing a queer identity and worldview can be. As a leadership philosophy, queer epistemology elevates the liberatory forces that seek to break free of colonization, toxic masculinity, and archaic understandings of leadership as a phenomenon found in a specific type of hierarchy rather than as an emergent phenomenon within social relationships. Servant-leadership walks in step with queer philosophy, with the stunningly courageous feminist thinkers, and is primed for cutting-edge research to create new ways of seeing the world and each other.

Section II by Kae Reynolds

In my early years as a career academic, I attended a conference for servant-leadership, and I recall distinctly a rather awkward moment. One of the keynote speakers had opened the floor for questions, and a woman from the audience stood up and said two things. First, she commented on how curious it was that people find servant-leadership so revolutionary: women had been engaging in this form of leadership for generations. There was scattered laughter and applause in the room. Secondly, she commented on how the distinguished panel of keynote speakers was exclusively male and white. This time, there was a viscous moment of silence. For me, a person who tends to avoid conflict, this was excruciatingly awkward: but what a moment to relish. I admire this woman for having the courage to create a publicly awkward moment.

Conflict is awkward. We are experiencing these moments of awkwardness and discomfort increasingly, as the silenced masses leverage the tools of modern society both to expose the injustices entrenched and enacted through inequality, and to reveal the darkness and pain in the hearts of those who feel oppressed by enlightenment. The awkwardness of conflict is penetrating many areas of disagreement, as crisis after crisis sets in: whether a "Me Too" hashtag, a BLM protest, or decrying *covidiocy*, the public arena is flooded with awkward encounters of conflicting views and values. We are living in an age of crisis; yet crisis can bring key revelations as to the entwinement of human relationships and opportunities for transformation that have failed (Branicki, 2020).

Echoing the words of Shann Ray Ferch from his chapter in this anthology: we are harmed. Indeed, we are harmed; we are all harmed. We are hurt; we are indignant; we are suffering. We are all harmed because we are all inherently vulnerable. We face challenges, among these, the struggle for equality—not just for women, but with an understanding of a critical feminist philosophy that strives toward dignity for all marginalized groups. To better deal with these conflicts, we need better means to push through the awkwardness and get us to the other side without hurting each other: a consistent and intentional pursuit of integration. We need a language for taming conflict, holding environments for suspending vulnerability, and protocols for shaping resilience to ease the journey on rocky paths along which egos, hearts, minds, and souls are scattered.

People who wield political and economic power often appear to forget the vulnerable nature of humanity. They are under the illusion of immortality, existing in bubbles of false invincibility. Prime ministers, presidents, Hollywood moguls, and everyday toxic individuals permit themselves to harm others with hateful words and spiteful acts, dismissing their behavior as "jokes," "banter," "satire," or "alternative truths." But words hurt. Mere facial expressions hurt. The mere presence of an oppressor hurts. All forms of communication have intention, motivation, meaning, and impact. Those who wield and enact power must recognize the impact of their language, and the moral imperative to dismantle inequality and division. If the masked knife-throwing magician no longer cares to avoid impaling the lovely assistant, don't we need to ask ourselves: are our psyches evolving such that we no longer desire to escape harm and instead voraciously lust after schadenfreude? Even if we tire of "political correctness," we need people to stop being political-correctness snowflakes and start being more "woke" to the cult of carelessness enacted through the collusion of social violence and systems of androcentricity.

The post-truth society is both blessed and plagued by the paradox of transparency, which reveals both individual worthiness and collective cruelty. Standing by as we watch a person be degraded, assaulted, even murdered is symbolic of the collusion of which we are all guilty through our ignorance, indifference, and inaction. Our globalized and technologically interconnected society has created a hyperpublic town square of ubiquitous soapboxes. It has simultaneously empowered the masses to become their worst selves behind masks of technology-enhanced anonymity. The solipsists create anarchy and chaos by labeling everything except their own truth as "fake" and are so bold as to refuse to mask their toxicity. By daring to get awkward, those

who shackle themselves in the stockades of social media, defying collusion to take a stand, subject themselves to invisible hands that freely and proudly sling rotting insults and putrefied death threats.

Marshall (2002) stated, "Integrity is doing the right thing when you don't have to—when no one else is looking or will ever know" (p. 142). Curiously, despite technology enabling us all to be looking all the time, it seems that collective integrity is fading, as the firing squads are shrouded in anonymity, firing at will for all who will look on. More than ever, in a postcare global arena, as we all throw ourselves to the proverbial lions, society needs a beacon. We need a code. A code for human potential, a code for embracing the social imperative of human existence and human survival. That beacon is the inalienable right to human dignity. May we vigorously pursue integration with intent and commitment by mounting the beacon of human dignity on a three-pillar foundation: appreciative inquiry, an ethic of care, and servant-leadership. Appreciative inquiry can provide the language for conflict mediation; servant-leadership, the culture, norm and protocol for resilience; and an ethic of care, the framework for managing vulnerability. This structure to uphold the beacon of human dignity should keep us right so that we can resist using conflict to destroy each other.

Crisis creates consequences for well-being and opportunities for learning. Instead of deploying weapons of mass division and mass humiliation, we choose to deploy the tools of appreciative inquiry and commit to what is life-affirming, not life-destroying:

> The task of AI is the penetrating search for what gives life, what fuels developmental potential, and what has deep meaning—even in the midst of the tragic. In so many times of disruption, there is always the radically increased potential to summon our better humanity. (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020, p. 269)

Gilligan (2011) challenged society to resist losing our humanity and losing the grounds that make us human: the capacity for empathy, for relationality—the capacity to care. We must practice caring responsiveness. The difference between a caring approach to crisis management and the traditional, rational approach lies first in the criteria for success: qualitative value (e.g., quality) of care and relationships versus a cost-benefit, cost-loss calculation of human and financial costs; second in the aim or purpose of the crisis response: social transformation (e.g., learning and progress toward improving quality of life and social justice) versus a return to normalcy; and

third, in the means or praxis of the response (e.g., ongoing attention to relationships versus performance goals) (Branicki, 2020). With a care ethics approach, communities can promote the stability, efficacy, connectedness, and affirmative learning necessary to emerge stronger (Dückers et al., 2017).

In times of crisis, servant-leadership not only has potential for meeting the emotional and psychological needs of its recipients but can also enhance resilience:

> Leaders with a high level of resilience are able to respond in positive ways to crises their organizations may encounter and, by exhibiting that resilience and those positive responses, are able to increase the level of resilience of those around them. (Eliot, 2020, p. 12)

The inherent core of all ethical action must be to do no harm; and the inherent core of leadership must be to empower each other, enhance relationality, and build resilience. The leaders we choose must commit to deploying appreciative inquiry, servant-leadership, and an ethic of care to harness the generativity of conflict to strengthen our collective values, including the pursuit of equality.

With this anthology, we aspire to get awkward and raise awareness of the crisis of care exemplified in leadership inequality. We aspire to challenge assumptions of neoliberal capitalism and provide insight into the alternative pathways that appreciative inquiry, care ethics, and servant-leadership can provide both in times of crisis and in times of perceived normalcy. It is our hope with *Servant-Leadership, Feminism, and Gender Well-Being* to inspire and equip our readers with language to approach conflict with courage, to stand and create the awkwardness we need to evolve.

Section III by Jennifer Tilghman-Havens

As I consider the major issues facing our nation and the world, the social ills that plague us are increasingly the result of divisive binaries that inhibit our ability to engage with one another as a human community. The binaries of black/white, male/female, liberal/conservative, and so forth drive wedges between us, exactly at a moment in history when coming together to face the dangers before us (i.e., climate change, COVID-19, racism) presents

our only chance at ensuring human and ecological flourishing. The term *leadership*, at its root, arises from the Old English word *laedon*—to take someone upward or forward, and *schaeppen*—to create something of deep value. Leadership at its best is bringing others together to move forward on a journey to create something deeply meaningful. This is what our world craves deeply—leaders to guide us toward creating a new, more equitable, more just and sustainable society. Too often our culture equates leadership with power, but the power associated with leading others on a meaningful journey cannot be decoupled from the wisdom to guide the path with care so that all may be included. Love must be part of the leading. A leader takes others with them because they care deeply for those being led, and they care for the valued project being envisioned together. Servant-leadership is an approach to leadership that aligns with these ideals. At the heart of servant-leadership is a profound invitation for leaders to embrace their fullest humanity and to honor that humanity in those around them, for the good of the whole.

Within this understanding of servant-leadership, examination of social identity is central. Each of us is called to reflect upon the inner dynamism of our interior life to notice both an embedded oppressor and embedded oppressed within us—aspects of our identity or family history that have been historically or culturally privileged and identities that have been marginalized (Ferch, 2012). The inner work of integrating these complex aspects of our identity is crucial to effective leadership that is integrative and liberatory for all. Robert Greenleaf's own countercultural vision is that leaders who have historically been advantaged will hand over their power so that those without out it can lead. This is a key aspect of servant-leadership. He asks, "What is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27). Where historically rooted dynamics of privilege and power are at play (for instance, in a mixed male-female boardroom, or in a diverse classroom led by a white teacher), traditionally advantaged leaders are invited into ongoing critical self-reflection to examine their ability to either disrupt or reinforce dominant norms. In whatever situation they find themselves in, leaders are invited to take part in critical self-examination: what are the privileges that, without my own awareness, can manifest themselves in toxic ways in this situation? Servant-leadership invites dominant-identity leaders to step back, to listen, to bring their full empathy, and to invite otherwise silenced voices for the benefit of the least privileged. This process in turn allows for

the full humanity of each individual to arise and be added to the chorus of voices toward a richer, integrated harmony for all.

There is a very real cost to women and people of color when leaders neglect to see and validate the fullness of their contributions. For many women and people of color, lack of visibility within movements or organizations requires them to hustle and achieve more than male counterparts in order to be acknowledged as leaders (Lazarus & Steigerwalt, 2018). Attempting to make oneself visible and "seen" can lead to overcompensating, giving long hours, and sacrificing time at home and with family. In my own professional life, I work at an institution whose leadership history has until somewhat recently traditionally heralded white, male, clerical leaders. To compensate for not embodying the expected quality of a leader at my institution, I was intent to fulfill all my roles perfectly. Bowles and McGinn (2005) call this "reactive role management" (p. 202), a coping strategy used by many women and people of color who decide to meet every demand required by the various roles they embody in order to "meet the mark" that was not initially built for them in a white, male-dominated society. Sometimes reactive role management requires females and leaders of color to become "superpeople" to feel as though they are doing enough (Bowles & McGinn, 2005).

Servant-leadership is meant to be liberating for those being led. Servant-leadership that is deeply shaped by personal and social identity echoes themes of what I call "liberatory leadership," drawing upon the wisdom and theory of bell hooks (1984/2015) and Paolo Freire (1972). Within a liberatory approach to leadership, dominant-identity leaders (men, straight folks, and white-identifying leaders) engage in a process of liberating themselves from narrowly conceived visions of privilege. In turn, they are able to create conditions within organizations where others are liberated from unjust systems and welcomed fully as they are. Nondominant-identity leaders are invited into full participation at all levels of organizations and begin to be freed from internalized limiting self-conceptions, finding their authentic voice. Within this vision, integration becomes possible as women find liberation toward fully embracing their experience and gifts, and men find liberation in a new, more integrated masculinity. White leaders begin to examine the historical and current privileges of their white identity, and look to the wisdom and expertise of historically marginalized communities as guides in the journey toward the deeper meaning, justice, and truth to heal and unify our broken world.

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