

Opening the Third Way: A Developing Theory of Leadership

By Charles Shepard

Leadership as a product of service seems to be the most prominent motif of our current readings and class discussions in Leadership and Advocacy. It is a familiar theme in my learning from childhood to this point in my development, and I have been inspired to reflect on those who taught me those lessons as well as to read about leadership in the professional literature. Members of my family have embodied servant leadership: my maternal grandmother, Mary “Grams” Henderson, was a middle school history teacher in a diverse public school district. She took on the challenge of teaching the less-savory aspects of the Jim Crow South — an era that dominated her early adult life — to black and white children in metropolitan Atlanta. My mother, Mary Beth Shepard, worked more than 20 years for the legal aid agency in our home county. She coordinated pro bono legal services among the members of the local bar association in order to provide access to quality legal representation for the underserved, many of whom were mothers and children suffering the traumas of poverty and domestic violence. Grams and Mom were inspired by Albert “Papa” Henderson, Grams’s father and Mom’s grandfather, who was an attorney in rural Georgia through the Great Depression, World War II, and the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. He was a gentle, patient, kind man who Mom raised almost to Atticus Finch status among our family members.

Maybe my most satisfying and meaningful leadership role was not a formal one. Late in middle school I befriended a fellow student named Jamie. Though we were in the same grade, he was older, and participated mostly in special education classes that, though never specified to me, were likely related to intellectual disability. I remember standing up for him one day during gym in the eighth grade,

and we were inseparable during common school experiences from that point until high school graduation. I distinctly remember meeting his mother and father at Jamie's invitation one afternoon after school during our senior year. Their gratitude was palpable, and it may have been this relationship above all others that inspired me to take on the challenge of working with individuals and families affected by developmental disabilities.

I was reminded of Jamie as I read about Jane E. Myers (Remley, 2003), who may be the most referenced character between readings and class discussions. She was influenced by her experiences caring for a family member with physical and developmental disabilities. It is my intention to, like her, recognize a specific purpose in my leadership (Gibson, 2016). May that purpose deprioritize leadership as an end in and of itself, but rather be a conduit for easing the suffering and promoting the wellbeing of others as well as inspiring the next generation of leaders who are first interested in the needs of others.

As I took in the stories of Myers, Courtland Lee, Don Locke, and Mary Thomas Burke, I have felt my spirit renewed and energized. What follows is the brief exploration of others who have inspired me, a notable period of conceptual development for me, and a proposal for how to integrate these new-to-me concepts into a theory and philosophy of leadership.

Inspiration: The founding of a servant's dream

Grams, Mom, and Papa set my course early in my life. Nevertheless, I did not consider counseling as a profession until after I met my wife, Nicki. One of the foundational moments of our relationship occurred while she was working on her

master's degree in marriage and family therapy and counseling at a small seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. We were planning our wedding, and I was considering a career change from sports journalism. I was on a path that would have led to law school, and we were discussing whether or not to invest in an admission test preparation course. During that conversation she suggested that I consider counseling as a professional rather than as a layperson. As I considered her suggestion, I came to a greater appreciation of what she saw in me. A few months later, she was graduating, and I was starting my master's journey.

Our school taught from a Christian perspective. Unsurprisingly, the model of Jesus was drawn upon ubiquitously for portraying an ethic of servant leadership. In fact, at the program graduation ceremony, the academic director traditionally gave a presentation of the Biblical story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet just before he is crucified. Graduates are granted an embroidered, monogrammed towel prior to their receipt of their diploma as a reminder of this inspiring story to prioritize the needs of others. So it was with great enthusiasm that I took a position as an intensive in-home clinician with a group in rural Virginia, providing clinical mental health services to clients living in poverty.

Respiration: Development of a Third Way perspective

To my chagrin, it did not take long for my early professional dream to sour. We arrived in the Shenandoah Valley in late August of 2009. Unbeknownst to us, it was also at that time that the agency that hired me to start then (and subsequently Nicki in November of that year) was in the beginnings of an unfavorable insurance audit. By Christmas of 2009, many staff members' credentials were questioned.

Some were laid off because they did not meet requirements. Though we survived that rumble through the staff, we were not immune from taking a considerable pay cut. Before I reached my second anniversary with the agency, it closed. Fortunately, another similarly focused group expanded its practice to assume many of the clients and provide jobs to staff.

During this time, Gretchen Wilhelm, then my residency supervisor, recommended I read two books by Pema Chödrön — *When Things Fall Apart* (2000) and *The Places that Scare You* (2002). It was through these readings that I first became aware of the concept of the warrior bodhisattva, a person who seeks liberation from suffering not only for themselves, but for all sentient beings. It was Chödrön who was the first to specifically articulate “third way” thinking into my awareness (2000). The third way is a path that negotiates the extremes of binary thinking. It is not necessarily a compromise between two options, but instead a perspective focused on the most compassionate option, then selecting it.

Third Way perspective is a motif that transcends time, culture, and language. It is notably present in Robert Greenleaf’s seminal essay on servant leadership, *The Servant as Leader* (1970). Greenleaf references the story of Jesus confronted with the woman accused of adultery to expound upon the servant-as-leader’s inclination toward bringing more compassion into the lives of people. When challenged by the accusers that “The law says she shall be stoned, (sic) what do you say?” Jesus “chose ... to withdraw and cut the stress — right in the event itself — in order to open his awareness to creative insight. And a great one came ... ‘Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone’ ” (1970). It was this ubiquitous and enduring motif

that sustained me as my security crumbled around me. I have a dear supervisor and mentor to thank for it, and I aspire to take that with me into my leadership and advocacy style.

Aspiration: Integrating the Third Way into a style of leadership

Greenleaf notes that the difference between the servant-as-leader and the leader-first person:

Manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and the difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to be servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived (1970)?

Those who have come before me have shown me how to embody this ethic.

Therefore, may my leadership and advocacy be fueled by compassion for my fellow travelers through life. May it be focused on relieving suffering and promoting happiness and well being for all, regardless of difference, privilege, or lack thereof. May this practice of mine be also marked by noticing and tolerating considerable discomfort. Greenleaf also notes, "A qualification for leadership is that one can tolerate a sustained wide span of awareness so that he better "sees it as it is." May I demonstrate the ethic of Jesus, draw in the sand, and open opportunities for creative insight.

Finally, may I embody these values in such a way as to inspire those in my care: clients, students, supervisees, and the professional community. May I cultivate an identity that projects servant-first leadership. May there be no question that my primary interest is that those in my care grow as persons, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to be servants. May this be so just as my mentors did it for me.

References

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