The Generational Journey of Racial Reconciliation

A Call for Tender Hearts and Continuing Conversation Through a Servant-First Life of Leadership

—Michael T. Von Behren

Punching through the earth twelve feet above the pavement stretching toward the open sky a powerfully clinched fabricated metal hand towered above the intersection of 38th and Chicago streets in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It appeared to have broken through asphalt, sediment, and even bedrock arising from molten fury deep beneath the very mantle of ground where a few paces away George Floyd took his last constricted breaths. The painted outline of a figure, more angelic than human, still marked that spot when my own eyes took it in just over a year later in July of 2021. As when the book of Genesis recounted God’s query to Cain, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground” (New International Version, 2011, Genesis 4:10), in this instance it was as if Floyd’s blood congealed with ore at the core of creation and screaming out penetrated its crust in the shape of a fist.

Perhaps that was the intent of artist Jordan Powell-Karis and fabricator Seven Bailey who designed the structure. Powell-Karis and Bailey created the sculpture as a grassroots community response to the death of George Floyd. They set the completed version in place in the midst of the intersection of 38th and Chicago streets on
Martin Luther King Jr. day of 2021 (Boogren, 2021), just six months prior to my visit there. The harshness of that symbol of Black power was tempered by the beauty beneath. Instead of jagged earth and pierced pavement, at its base lay a garden surrounding its forearm with blossoms of color and petals proclaiming life. My wife grew up minutes from there. My in-laws still live walking distance from those neighborhoods, which were wracked with riots in the summer of 2020. Arriving for our annual summer visit our family took a self-guided tour. Twelve months later burn scarred buildings and boarded up store fronts still revealed the intensity of the mob violence and the devastation left behind.

In the years since a rising wave of racial consciousness has swept across the U.S. in what John McWhorter (2021), a professor in the Center for American Studies at Columbia University, considered a deluge of unprecedented urgency. McWhorter called this “Third Wave Antiracism” (p. 7). The first, as he defined it, stretched from the start of the abolitionist movement all the way to the civil rights era addressing slavery, segregation, and voting rights. The second, encompassing the last quarter of the twentieth century, educated our country on the ills of prejudice teaching people to recognize it within themselves and in others. The current third wave has amassed adherents in the highest echelons of institutional power and policymaking in our nation’s schools, businesses, media, and government not only among leaders of color but more significantly among those who are White seeking to finally, as McWhorter (2021) characterizes it, “get rid of racism” (p. 139). McWhorter, a Black man himself, speaks with and for those who see this third wave as destructive. It is, he argues, “a critical mass of white people coming to think like a charismatic hard-left contingent of black people” (p. 88), which, “America’s gains since the 1960’s have happened in
spite of, not because of” (p. 89). Ideological differences over what needs, or does not need, to be done to address racial issues has channeled the animosity of the riot stricken neighborhoods into school board meetings, has soured social media posts, and has canceled both careers and friendships.

Is there a way of leadership that can respond to today’s racial tensions with healing power rather than destructive power? The tended garden juxtaposing Powell-Karis’ sculpture suggests, at least to me, that there is a way, a lifestyle, a mode of living and leadership that holds together both eye-opening beauty and legitimate power. The seminal essay Robert K. Greenleaf (1977/2002) wrote in 1969, *The Servant as Leader*, articulated a way that posits as much promise for today, and tomorrow, as it did then: servant-leadership. In that essay he offers a self-less mode of leading, which is people-oriented not goal-oriented, where the growth of people, the healing of relationships, and the restoration of community takes focus. In this article I will describe a generational approach to reconciliation that calls for tender hearts and continuing conversation through a servant-leadership lifestyle. I will first introduce servant-leadership before broaching a present and lingering difficulty over racial issues in my line of service as a parish pastor and elected leader in a mainline protestant Christian denomination. While I opened this article giving attention to the racism affecting people of color in the United States, I will draw parallels and lessons from the atrocities fueled by racism that took place during the Holocaust in World War II era Europe and the healing process following years of apartheid in South Africa. I will then set out to describe the servant-leadership way of being in the manner Greenleaf (1977/2002) once expressed it with five words: beauty, momentaneity, openness, humor, and tolerance. These will form an entry into how one might lead as an agent of forgiveness,
healing, and community restoration in a time when racial topics strike deep ideological divides. I will apply this to my current challenge within the church, while offering insights on forgiveness and healing from my own family life along the way. In so doing I can only hope my humble fits and starts toward becoming a servant-leader may serve to nudge each reader into a more profoundly life-giving way of responding to these issues as well.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP: AN ANCIENT YET ENDURING MODE OF LIFE

Shann Ray Ferch and Jiying Song (2020) acknowledge that although the term servant-leader did not appear commonly in conversations on leadership until Greenleaf named it, this mode of leadership, and of living, was not new. Rather, servant-leaders are “aligned with the ancient history of servant-first leading, rather than leader-first leading . . . They seek the essence of what it means not only to lead and follow but also to live” (p. xvi). I intend to draw out and apply to this conversation a generative construct Greenleaf articulated as his own ideas on servant-leadership were still in the making. Greenleaf (1977/2002) expressed it this way:

I suggest these five words—beauty, momentaneity, openness, humor, and tolerance—as marking some dimensions of a lifestyle that is rooted in inward grace: sensitive and aware, concerned for the ever-present neighbor, both the well-fed one next door and the hungry one on the other side of the earth, seeing and feeling what is right in the situation. (p. 316)

These words he spoke in a commencement address to students graduating from the University of Redlands in California in 1966. It was a time of racially charged tumult, which undergrads across the country found themselves pulled into as students and thrust deeper
into upon graduation. That summer James Meredith, the student Coretta Scott King (1969) applauds as having “personally integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962” (p. 277), was shot leading a civil rights march across Mississippi. That summer Stokely Carmichael, then Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), in response popularized the term “Black Power” (p. 278). He rallied marchers away from an integrated non-violent approach to a militant one “with no whites invited or even tolerated” (p. 278). In that instance Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1963/2010) continual refrain, “we must in strength and humility meet hate with love” (p. 50) won the day. As the march continued for three more weeks across Mississippi, marchers tolerated flare-ups of hatred and animosity, which tormented them in cities along the way. King’s presence proved pivotal as did the protection of federal agents accompanying them, who prevented “wholesale violence” (King, 1969, p. 278). Greenleaf’s words to graduates that year, although not addressing these issues specifically, offer a life-giving approach commensurate with Martin Luther King Jr.’s concept of strength displayed in humility and love.

RESPONDING TO RACIAL TENSIONS IN THE COMMUNITY OF CHRIST

“I don’t need this. We’ve already dealt with this. I’m not racist.” These remarks punctuated impassioned responses by pastoral colleagues of mine in regard to a resource on race relations prepared by the district of our national church body. These pastors and I all served as part of the same denominational church. We were gathered that day for a monthly meeting intended for encouragement, advice, mutual support, and to share both news and resources coming from the district office in our region. The overall tone of conversation on that particular day among that group of pastors, each like myself of
Northern European descent, reverberated with all the prominent tensions propagating shock waves through contemporary North American life whenever race relations are on the table. The resource on racism in question was a scriptural study suitable for Bible classes or small groups complete with links to videos chronicling the personal experience of members of our shared church body who hail from a variety of ethnicities. It called for inner awareness. It called for each person to recognize how one’s personal bias has impacted the lives of others. In this meeting of pastors all the voices were skeptical of acronyms like CRT, BLM, and DEI, as each understood them. While the resource itself attempted to avoid those acronyms, pastors around this particular table detected the aroma of such ideologies and, much like John McWhorter (2021), found cause to cry foul. In their perception critical race theory (CRT), Black Lives Matter (BLM), and even diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) frameworks are each fraught with ills that further inflame racial tensions. My role as a District Vice President for our shared church body, on that day, involved hearing their concerns not arguing the case for the usefulness of that resource.

As a district official though, I have further responsibility. I also bear responsibility to the minority voice not present at that particular table. I am responsible to those who asked for help ensuring the past is not forgotten. Desmond Tutu (1999) began his story of the reconciliation of South Africa following apartheid, *No Future without Forgiveness*, with a retrospective thought: “We were very soon to discover that almost nobody really would now admit to having supported this vicious system” (p. 15). The idea of producing that particular study on racism came at the request of a predominantly Black congregation, the only one I am aware of in my district of our church body, which encompasses four states and more
than two-hundred and fifty churches. This congregation offered a resolution to our district convention in 2018 asking district congregations to officially denounce racism, to foster dialogue within the district about racism and its effects, to provide tools to enable congregations to see and respond to racism in their respective settings, and to call for repentance (Northwest District LCMS, 2018, p. 43). In concert with the pastors’ sentiments above, there were challenges to that resolution from those not seeing the need for it. This church body has made such official statements already, they argued. Nevertheless, an amended version of that 2018 resolution passed and our district, in keeping with the resolution, subsequently produced the study resource in question.

Award winning novelist Mary Gordon (1998), penned the warning, “Forgiveness, of course, can be good for both sides, but forgetting almost never is . . . because only a recognition of guilt by both sides can begin to prevent repetition of the same heinous deed” (p. 152). She responded not to race relations in the Americas, in that essay, but to the racially motivated atrocities that unfolded across continental Europe during the Holocaust. Her thoughts on forgiveness for such acts are set among a symposium of late twentieth-century thought leaders in Simon Wiesenthal’s (1998) The Sunflower. Susannah Heschel (1998), whose Father Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel actively engaged alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement in the U.S., dared to ask, “can we forgive the German people?” (p. 172). The Holocaust amounted to, she answered, “a kind of national suicide, soiling Germany, perhaps forever” (p. 173). Others in that collection echoed her view. Mark Goulden (1998) wondered, might a “brand of Cain stay forever on the German brow?” (p. 156).

This concerns me, might people forget and how quickly? My
contemporaries and I are merely one, perhaps two, generations of pastors past the civil rights movement; is Tutu’s (1999) quip already fitting? Are there aspects of what took place my colleagues and I no longer admit? The congregation which raised this issue to my district’s attention began in 1951 as an intentionally interracial ministry in response to the segregated nature of nearby existing district congregations in my church body. Also concerning is that the viewpoints conditioning such segregation, prevalent in American life at the time, may not have entered the church from outside. Ironically, views like these may stem from idiosyncratic perspectives to which members of my church body, including me, cling to preserve a pure enclave of thought to prevent the influence of contemporary culture.

Several years ago, my wife and I visited the birthplace of our particular stripe of Christianity here on U.S. soil. It is a collection of small agricultural towns nestled in the rolling hills above the bluffs that oversee the broad muddy churn of the Mississippi River in South-Eastern Missouri. Saxon immigrants from Germany settled there. Having left their homeland due to their deep faith in Christ, and government restrictions on how they should practice it, they arrived eager to build a new home free from that influence. A preserved smattering of the original log and wood plank dwellings with their antique household wares, quite austere by today’s standards, still stand as an authentic Saxon immigrant homestead complete with barn, granary, and, to the shock and surprise of my wife and I, slaves’ quarters. The slaves’ quarters, and the slaves who lived in them, belonged to the previous owners of that property before the Saxons arrived (Kramer, 1978). Although the founding members of my church body did not own slaves, publications of my church body in the mid-nineteenth century publically denounced the abolitionist movement as a child “of unbelief in its development of
nationalism, deistic philanthropy, pantheism, materialism, and atheism . . . a brother of modern socialism, Jacobinism and communism” (Walther, 1863/2000, para. 21; see also Meyer, 1964, p. 234). My church body defended the institution of slavery on biblical grounds saying, “misuse does not abolish proper use” (Manteufel, 2013, p. 21).

I am moved by the impassioned appeal of the Apostle Paul to the first century slave owner Philemon urging him in the name of Christ Jesus to receive his run-away slave, Onesimus, back into his household “no longer as a slave, but . . . as a dear brother” (New International Version, Philemon, 16). Yet, since no accompanying New Testament encyclical calls all Christian slave masters to release their slaves, but passages to believing communities call for masters to treat their slaves well (for example Colossians 4:1), the leading theologian of my church body at the time took the plea from Paul to Philemon in a spiritual sense not as a reference to present physical emancipation but to an eschatological reality (Walther, 1863/2000). My church body remained largely silent on this issue prior to the Civil War (Fortenbaugh, 1933). Then eventually entering the debate it did so to defend scripture against notions of civil equality. Another publication of my church body at the time warned: “This spirit, which confuses Christian liberty with civil equality, is blowing over the entire country as a hot wind . . . a spirit of subversion” (Walther, 1862; as cited in Meyer, 1964, p. 236). Similar desire to stand firm on scripture still echoes in the voices of my fellow church leaders who are uneasy continuing conversations regarding race relations in the current wave of antiracist climate. Many fear insistence on continued dialogue is a harbinger of heterodox thought rising from a concoction of socialism, atheism, and rationalism similar to what the forbearers of our church body enumerated long ago.
As my wife and I stepped into that rickety wooden shed, barely wide enough to contain the wood plank bed and nightstand combination that furnished it, we stood stunned for a few moments. Even compared to the frugal nature of the immigrant’s rustic agrarian homes, the slave’s quarters seemed no more than a loosely erected shack whose wall boards might do as little to impede a howling wind as a set of window shutters. I know of no one in my church body today who would advocate restoring the institution of slavery. I know few who even realize their church once supported “this vicious system,” to again borrow Tutu’s (1999) words. Does the guilt of our historic proclamation in this matter still hang over me, my colleagues, and my fellow church members today (assuming one accepts there is guilt to hang)? A prolific historical theologian, whose own history of life and ministry began in my church body, Martin Marty, also published in Wiesenthal’s (1998) symposium. Marty’s cleverness at taming errant comments capturing them in the gentility of language perhaps better expresses the concern.

I must raise the question whether it is always valuable to prolong a people’s sense of guilt. As a white, they tell me that I must always feel guilty and grovel over what whites in the Americas did when they killed Indians and enslaved blacks. And, to a measure, I do. But I have sufficient guilt of my own faults in relation to the heirs of the Indians and blacks, and to many other people. Is there not a limit to the good that can be achieved by my groveling, my self-hate, my loss of pride in the positive features of my heritages? (Marty, 1998, pp. 211-212)

Marty’s words become the focal question in this article and from here on I will attempt to show how servant-leadership can offer a life-giving answer.
CONTOURS OF AN OPTIMAL LIFE: A SERVANT-FIRST LIFE OF LEADERSHIP

Greenleaf (1977/2002), in his address to the graduates, mused about an “optimum lifestyle” (p. 311). While he hesitated to give a formula, for each must find their own way, he felt “five words may suggest a way of thinking about it” (p. 311). The first of those was beauty.

Beauty

One person might have found beauty in the flowers beneath the sculpted fist in Minneapolis, another in the solidarity of struggle for Black power it represented, another in the music filling the air, and another in the community gathered to see it; it is said beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Yet, Greenleaf (1977/2002) spoke less to the standards one uses to assess ascetics and more to an inner posture toward life and others. As he described it, “those who would be moved by beauty must constantly strive to cultivate the uncertain ground by reaching for a response to that which is not yet generally appreciated—or understood” (pp. 312-313). This posture does not retreat from tense, anxious, or conflicted situations and relationships but presses into them, not forcefully but openly, looking for the lovely presently obscured by what is ugly or by oversight.

I stood in George Floyd’s Square by a planter of bare soil on the day of my family’s visit; they wandered the block to see memorials ornamenting the sidewalk. As I lagged behind taking in the scene, a tall gentleman stepped out of a makeshift greenhouse to comment on my shirt. He then invited me: “Put your hand into that dirt.” I did not; it seemed like an odd request. Yet, he came over and did so himself. He put his hand in the planter and told me how the beauty of new life was springing up in that community, and by putting my hands in to cultivate the soil with my fingers I too could be part of it.
I later learned his name, Jay Webb, the so-called gardener of George Floyd’s Square; he was responsible for what grew beneath the sculpture of the fist (Sidner, 2021). “Servant-leaders are attuned to the individual and collective paradox of liberty and responsibility,” wrote Ferch (2012, p. 51). Webb approached me, as I imagine he did many others. A Black man reached across the racial divide with intent to find beauty more so in people and relationships than in flowers. The garden was simply his tool to accomplish it.

**Momentaneity**

Now is the time for such an approach Greenleaf (1977/2002) said quoting the song which “the Psalmist of old proclaimed, ‘This is the day which the Lord has made; rejoice and be glad in it’” (p. 313). Only Greenleaf’s concept of time did not expect these issues could be solved simply and immediately. He held a concept of “moments that contain eternity” (p. 313). That is, each moment is the focal point of light but the light radiates from this moment back shedding light on a new way of drawing meaning from the past and from this moment ahead illuminating steps into the future offering hope. Momentaneity then recognizes the importance of engaging now in what are often long solutions. This is evident in Greenleaf’s contrast of two “very able” (p. 200) chief executives for whom he consulted. In one case after the executive recounted all the organization attempted to do to resolve an issue, Greenleaf suggested initiating a deeper inquiry, more conversation, to seek a better understanding. Greenleaf could see the ire of his client rising, until he burst: “‘Damm it,’ he exploded, ‘I don’t want to understand anything. I just want to know what to do about it!’” (p. 200). In the other case Greenleaf uncovered the issue for his client. The client acknowledged many things wrong with his institution, but he retorted, “this job of mine is tolerable only because I am capable of
living with the illusion that things are a lot better than they really are” (p. 201). Neither of these leaders lived with momentaneity. McWhorter’s (2021) critique of the present popular approach to racial issues is that it treats the current effects of past racism as if these are actively prejudicial acts of racism today. As a result it promotes a quick universal fix by calling upon those of the White community to acknowledge they are “tainted permanently by ‘white privilege’” (p. 16) and to root out their racist biases. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2017), introducing the tenants of critical race theory (CRT), suggest racism is so difficult to address due to its “ordinariness” (p. 8). They argue it must be discussed precisely because, “it is not acknowledged” (p. 8), and further, what is considered by some sufficient to address it, “color-blind, or ‘formal,’ conceptions of equality expressed in rules that insist on treatment that is the same across the board can thus remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination” (p. 8). Monemaneity bridges these viewpoints. Neither ignoring problems nor embracing quick fixes it engages continuing dialogue until the beauty of a way forward appears.

**Openness**

Commitment to dialogue of this sort necessitates openness. The openness Greenleaf (1977/2002) spoke of both moves toward others and receives others, offers influence and receives influence; it loves even enemies and listens from the heart. Greenleaf presented it this way: “Listening is . . . an attitude toward other people and what they are trying to express” (p. 313). He clarified, “It is openness to communication—openness within the widest possible frame of reference” (p. 313). In conflicted situations people often close themselves off refusing the influence of those with whom they disagree or who have harmed them. Ferch (2012) warns, “contempt
(severe dislike) and unwillingness to receive influence (stonewalling)” (p. 151) predictably yield doomed relationships. Openness, on the other hand, to hear from and be moved by the voice of another endears people to one another in healing ways. The riots over inequality in urban centers deeply saddened Martin Luther King Jr., who condemned the violence and destruction, but he pleaded that merely dealing with the criminal actions to suppress the riot missed the point for “rioting is the language of the unheard” (King, 1969, p. 272).

Third wave antiracism emphasizes the voice of color (McWhorter, 2021). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe this too as a necessary basic thesis of CRT: “Because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know” (p. 11). It unsettles McWhorter (2021) the way this “obscure legal theory” (p. 66), CRT, has seeped into all strata of American life seeding the idea that “any claim of racism a black person makes must qualify automatically as valid because . . . they are black and speaking from ‘their experience’” (p. 64). He advocates returning to color blindness where each person’s voice counts the same regardless of their ethnicity. Openness seeks another path recognizing that the favored have responsibility to move toward and listen intently to those less favored. Long before CRT or third wave antiracism servant-first leaders positioned themselves with sincere openness, in the moment, in search of beauty. Greenleaf (1977/2002) therefore called upon those of privilege saying:

If they can abandon their present notions of how they can best serve their less favored neighbor and wait and listen until the less favored find their own enlightenment, then define their needs in their own way, and finally, state clearly how they want
to be served. The now-privileged who are natural servants may in the process get a fresh perspective on the priority of others’ needs and thus may again be able to serve by leading. (p. 49)

_Humor_

The fourth word Greenleaf (1977/2002) used to characterize this leadership lifestyle was humor. There is today very little levity in conversations over race. People quickly entrench in stonewalled contempt, unless they are making a joke at the expense of a person with whose position they disagree. Yet, that kind of humor serves no one. It demeans. It does not build up. Greenleaf beckons “look at humor this way, drawing down into our affections what we must learn to love” (p. 315). In Donald T. Phillip’s (1992) assessment of Abraham Lincoln’s leadership humor played a similar role in Lincoln’s ability to lead with grace, rather than bitterness, even when he bore the brunt of scorn and sarcasm. “When a man hears himself somewhat misrepresented, it provokes him . . . but when the misrepresentation becomes very gross and palpable, it is more apt to amuse him,” quipped Lincoln (as cited in Phillips, 1992, p. 72). Greenleaf’s (1977/2002) idea challenges a leader to love even those one does not particularly like by awareness and acceptance of one’s own faults. This happens with a “quiet inward smile called humor when we regard the silly little half made creatures that we are” (p. 315). If I do not care for a person, it is likely due to an attribute, a viewpoint, or a behavior of theirs I cannot abide. Only if I recognize the half made creature I am, and smile over it, can I accept the half made creature in front of me with a similar affectionate smile undergirded in a ready measure of forgiveness for that person’s stinging faults.

Richard Stengel (2010/2018), who spent nearly every day for three years with Nelson Mandela writing his biography, noted that
Mandela admired and emulated Lincoln’s graceful disposition toward his own adversaries (p. 83). As Lincoln used humor to defuse his own ire and endear himself to others, Mandela did the same with his smile. Stengel (2010/2018) estimates Mandela’s smile among the “most radiant in history” (p. 96). Even though he lived “at a time when Africans were meant to humble and docile, when a smile on a public figure seemed to suggest a lack of seriousness” (p. 96), Mandela’s, by contrast, “was the smile of the proverb ‘tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner’—to understand is to forgive all” (p. 97). Above all Mandela wanted friends and adversaries alike to know this: “He was a man without bitterness” (p. 97). The emotional postures of Lincoln and Mandela, whose lives and leadership brought wholeness in times of precipitous racial strife, offer a window into a kind of humor that heals because it allows a person to love both oneself and others. Referring to a biblical prescription Greenleaf (1977/2002) said, “How can you love your neighbor unless you love yourself? And how can you love yourself without humor?” (p. 315). This begs humility, not making too much of oneself.

Tolerance

Far too often people’s failures are grievous enough to leave tears not smiles, hurt not grace, and spawn hate not love. Greenleaf’s (1977/2002) conception the optimal servant-first life calls one beyond humor to tolerance. This is not the flippant live-and-let-live attitude one might interpret it to be. “I use this word in an older meaning—the ability to bear suffering with serenity” (p. 315), Greenleaf offered in caveat. Both Martin and Coretta Scott King were indelibly marked by such tolerance in the expression of Mother Pollard, an elderly Black woman in Montgomery, who weeks into the 1955-1956 bus boycott having found no other option but to walk
exclaimed, “My feet is tired, but my soul is rested” (King, 1963/2010, p. 130; King, 1969, pp. 121 & 145). Victor Frankl (2000) mustering this sort of tolerance lived through three years of racism’s hell in Auschwitz and Dachau then surviving went on, through research and teaching, to show that the stand one takes toward suffering can fill life with meaning. This meaning is profoundly redemptive when those who suffer have the strength of soul to forgive. Marlene Ramsey (2020) studied the lives of people who ordered or committed violent racially charged acts of murder in South Africa and later found forgiveness from the families of their victims. She attested to her own mindset as she began: “I was unsure, even questioning the heart of humanity” (p. 56). Yet after, she exclaimed, “I can now say a life lived for others, a servant-led life, exists, heals the world, restores us to one another, and gracefully makes us whole” (p. 56). One person she studied, a White man named Brian Mitchell, after being forgiven publicly for the brutal deaths of eleven people for which he was responsible, received an invitation from their village, a Black village called Trust Feed, to live with them. “‘I was dead until that day,’ he said, ‘And after that day I lived.’ Today he continues to work raising funds to construct a community center, hand in hand with those whose family members he had killed,” Ramsey wrote (2020, p. 57).

Pain, emotional or physical, is a form of suffering with potential to yield meaning. Frankl (2000) posits another is death; yet another is guilt. He considers these the “tragic triad” (p. 142). Tolerance also then refers to the willingness to suffer guilt. Ramsey (2020) found that the hardened, arrogant, denial of the perpetrators she interviewed formed from “emotional fortifications to alleviate the suffering” (p. 47), that is, suffering wrought by guilt, shame, and self-loathing. Not only does a life of tolerance, of the sort Greenleaf (1977/2002)
suggested, call for the forgiveness of others as one bears “suffering with serenity” (p. 315), it begs each individual to accept guilt and in humility ask forgiveness. Those living a servant-first lifestyle seek out moments of openness to hear the harm they may have caused and to look for the beauty of new meaning in the transformational moment. Frankl (2000) posits meaning derives from the opportunity guilt affords one to “change for the better” (p. 142). What is more, forgiveness when granted empowers that change (Ramsey, 2020).

THE POWER OF ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS: MY OWN LIFE LESSONS

As I listen to the voice of my fellow church leaders, and members, who are uneasy with contemporary conversations on race, I share their concerns over letting the current culture set the agenda for conversation afraid of ingesting a poison that might weaken the confession of faith. Still, I hear in Elie Wiesel’s (1958/1986) account, for instance, what the silence and disinterest of onlookers can do to the faith of those who suffer under acts of unspeakable violence. I call these unspeakable not only due to their severity but more so because people do not want to believe they happened and so do not engage in conversation of them. Recalling the smoke rising from the crematorium of Birkenau and the lines of men, women, and children walking forcefully to their deaths, Wiesel (1958/1986) wrote this: “Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust” (p. 32). Callousness toward injustices endured by others, in effort to protect one’s own faith, can do grave violence to theirs.

An unanticipated violence occurred in my home as I turned the pages of Wiesel’s (1958/1986) Night. I read riveted as he recounted
the cruelty of spirit that reduced the value of his humanity to less than the worth of a gold filling affixed to his tooth, which a rusty spoon later wrenched from its place in the dark corner of a lavatory by the hand of another greedy inmate. That inmate was a foreman named Fanek with help from his shady dental partner. The former dentist agreed to assist Fanek in this violence for nothing more than a measly morsel of crusty bread. All the prisoners, not just Elie, were treated by the Nazi SS guards as if their life held no value and for the scant privilege of being placed in charge of a few fellow inmates men like Fanek adopted their captor’s views on human worth. I underlined as my eyes scanned the letters on the page drawing out each morsel of meaning then scribbling it in the margins for retention’s sake. As I did, my wife said, “Did you ask Micah before you began writing in her book?” I took the book off of my daughter Micah’s shelf. A literature major, she loved books. This one sat idle on her bookshelf at home. She was away at college. She read it in high school. When assigned to read it for a class of my own, I did not consider buying it. We already owned a copy, right there in Micah’s room. It was a copy that my parents purchased for me when I was in middle school during which I wrote a book report on it. Years ago my wife found it in our storage to give to our daughter. “That book is not yours anymore. We gave it to Micah. You don’t seem to know the meaning of a gift; you can’t just take it back without asking. Now you’ve marked it all up too.” “It’s a four dollar book” I retorted. It was written right on the spine, $4.59. (Although, that was thirty-five years ago; it is likely more to purchase new now.)

In my dullness I did not realize, it was not the value of the book that my wife’s comment hinged upon. I had not violated the book any more than Fanek had violated the gold of the crown in Wiesel’s
mouth. I had violated the relationship with my daughter. It took a night of stewing over this before my heart softened enough to see beyond the scribbles in a cheap paperback so as to recognize the love and respect my wife held for our now young adult daughter. Over the course of that night this little incident became a protracted encounter, which my wife bravely used to have a critical conversation with me about how I had not only violated my daughter in my haste but I had spent the last few days doing the same to her. The craziness of my schedule, my frustration over not getting enough done, and a variety of unanticipated stressors like a reoccurring computer problem, a surprise traffic toll in the mail, and a newly scheduled meeting on my day off consumed my thoughts leaving none for her nor, as she pointed out, for our daughter. Her love and respect for our daughter went beyond what my behavior in those moments expressed, but which I have come, through her courage, to admire and aspire too.

Restoration began the next day after I let down my defensiveness and realized the importance of these two relationships in my life, that with my wife and that with my daughter. I apologized to my wife, while again listening to her concerns that this pattern of devaluation went beyond the underlined and dog-eared pages. Listening, truly listening, changes the heart. It changed my heart as my listening also changed hers. I asked forgiveness and she forgave. The next step involved calling my daughter, who had no idea of this matter. I told her about borrowing her book, of writing in it, and asked for her forgiveness too. I offered to make it right by buying her a clean new copy, but that was not necessary. She was not concerned about the book, but the phone call, the value it displayed in our relationship, and the respect it offered to her as a competent young adult, as well as for her autonomy, mattered more than anything.
I realize it may seem inappropriate to connect this interpersonal story from every-day family life to the ghastly violence suffered by Wiesel in Birkenau, Auschwitz, and Buna. Yet I speak of this because these are the beginnings, the roots of such violence. It has its sinister seed in the ways we treat people day-to-day. The less sensitive we are to the value of relationships, and the dignity of people, the more apt we are to allow that violence to escalate. It can morph into the kind of racism that devalues entire ethnicities. I use the word violence not only to refer to physical harm but as Parker Palmer (Carey, 2015) spoke of it; violence is whatever violates the “identity and integrity” (p. 255) of a person including evading and invading. Evading avoids engagement, presence, and dialogue. Invading forces one's own quick fixes into it. Fully present dialogue, however, “gives rise to the forces that unhinge the way we harm each other, opening us up to more accepting and empathetic understanding of one another” (Ferch, 2020, p. 127).

I recently conversed with a mentor, and friend, over lunch about forgiveness. He is a certified executive coach. He converses with corporate leaders, small business owners, and non-profit directors, who invite him to skillfully guide their personal and professional development. He does this on the side. His full-time position is titled Director of Ministry Leadership. He is a professional leader of leaders. I wanted to know, from his perspective, how forgiveness functions in the life of a leader. He took our conversation back to the relationship with one of his daughters. When he has hurt her, by some decision a father thinks he needs to make in order to protect, or parentally guide, his young adult daughter so that she does not fall prey to the wiles of an errant path, she often cannot pinpoint exactly what he did to her. She instead feels devalued. He said what matters most to her when this happens is not for him to articulate in an
apology all the specifics of what he did to hurt her; what matters most is that he approach her with a tenderness of heart so that she knows he cares and values her. His apology is for devaluing her. That is often the only apology she needs for the father-daughter relationship to be restored.

Honestly, I expected an answer about leaders and their charges, perhaps of a corporate executive violating the ingenuity of employees. I learned from him that we are all people: bosses and employees, leaders and followers, Nazi’s and Jews, pastors of predominantly middle-class White congregations and Black Americans of any religious, or no religious, stripe. In every case it is the tenderness of heart which values the relationship with the other that proves essential for reconciliation. Even after the egregious and apparent violence is over, long over, the violence that continues generation after generation is the violence caused by calloused hearts which no longer portray tenderness, hardened hearts that are no longer sensitive to the plight of another. This is what plagues contemporary America, in my estimation. When angst rises against conversations about race, whether the acronyms CRT, BLM, or DEI enter the conversation is essentially irrelevant. If we cannot approach the other, whose experience of marginalization and inequity is quite different than ours, with a tender heart, we are contributing to the cycles of violence rather than the balm of healing.

FORGIVENESS ASKING ON BEHALF OF PRIOR GENERATIONS

What about the sins of generations past? Must we accept complicity for what our forbearers have done? Ferch (2012) noted that as the twentieth century closed and this world embarked on a new post-segregation, post-apartheid, post-Holocaust era Elie Wiesel
called upon Germany not just to condemn anti-Semitism, but to ask for forgiveness from a new generation of Jews. Shortly after, in February of that year, German President Johannes Rau appeared publicly before Israel’s parliament to do just that saying,

I bow in humility before those murdered, before those who don’t have a grave where I could ask them forgiveness. I am asking for forgiveness for what Germans have done, for myself and my generation, for the sake of our children and grandchildren, whose future I would like to see alongside the children of Israel. (Laub, 2000, para. 7)

Rau asked forgiveness for himself and his generation. That is tenderness of heart. Rau was not responsible for what took place fifty years prior under the Nazi leadership, yet he was responsible for continuing the path of healing in his day. Palmer (Mentorsgallery, 2010a) recognized that whether the stonewalling-self or the open-self appears from within a person depends upon the influence and example of that person’s leaders: “As human beings, the side of us that emerges depends to some considerable extent on the circumstances in which we find ourselves” (2:32). He further added, “The leaderly task has a great deal to do with what kind of circumstances one designs” (3:14). Will that design encourage tender ongoing conversation? What Wiesel and Rau designed did.

CONCLUSION: CONTOURS OF A SERVANT-FIRST LEADING LIFE

These are some of the poignant contours of a servant-first life. However, as Greenleaf (1977/2002) noted, “at every level from the family to world society we are tragically short of such people” (p. 317). If we do not identify and call on such people to lead, but acquiesce to those who promote themselves with a leader-first
mentality, and if we do not by our own servant-leading assist others in living this sort of life, Greenleaf warns, “not much else counts” (p. 59). That is true in all strata of society, and I have found it to be true in the church as well.

Only the leaderly influence of renown French novelist Francois Mauriac convinced Wiesel (1958/1986) to break his own self-imposed ten-year vow of silence and to tell his story to the world, but present day readers, like myself and my daughter, must continue reading it. We must continue to give attention to Jewish people, even though the smokestacks of Auschwitz have long since lain dormant. We must continue to give attention to the contemporary challenge of being Black in America and the features of society that further marginalize not only Blacks but many peoples of color. Tutu (1999) predicted, and I am inclined to agree with him:

It may be, for instance, that race relations in the United States will not improve significantly until Native Americans and African Americans get the opportunity to tell their stories and reveal the pain that sits in the pit of their stomachs as a baneful legacy of dispossession and slavery. We saw in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission how the act of telling one’s story has a cathartic, healing effect. (p. 279)

I am also inclined to agree once again with Palmer (Mentorsgallery, 2010b) as I conclude. He notes both the personal and public aspects of this task, if it is to yield lasting reconciliation: “There is a solitary journey to be taken here toward being truthful with myself about how I’m personally complicit with evil and then there’s a corporate journey to be joined to keep, to help keep, that insight alive” (2:21). I am ready to embark on both journeys; there is still room to join me.
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