Robert Greenleaf (2010) speaks of his relationship to Robert Frost’s poem *Directive* as a symbol in understanding servant-leadership, offering meaning for others in their reconciliation of who and where they are on life’s inward journey. Reflecting on my personal journey, in searching for a higher purpose and identifying what needs changing (Sipe & Frick, 2015), a closer examination into the learnings inspired by my family is exposing the limitations in my predisposed self-orientation approach to leadership and challenging my relationship to a life of meaning. My inward desire to become a better person is opening my heart towards an other-orientation approach to serving, and towards servant-leadership; a framework that encourages dreaming bigger dreams and healing previously ignored wounds. Self-transcendence comes in valuing life not as a contest, but as a doorway into thanks.

Choosing to sit in silent reflection, in pursuit of a greater self-awareness, is foundational to any servant-leader’s journey (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). Thinking critically about one’s actions, motivations, and conditions poses a risk though. As Greenleaf (1977/2002) came to understand, what one discovers might not align with their attitudes, beliefs, or intentions; what one discovers might be uncomfortable:

> Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake
and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity. (p. 41)

Servant-leadership, a non-traditional leadership theory, shifts the spotlight away from the leader at the center and repositions it towards others. Stemming from the belief that natural leaders are called to serve others first, and only come to lead at a later point, Horsman (2019) equates this outward motivation of servant-leaders to an initial inward sense of fulfillment and actualization. Horsman sees this desire to see others grow, to invest fully in their well-being, at the heart of servant-leadership.

The paradoxical nature of leadership is evidenced in the tensions contained within the will to power (Nietzsche, 1901/2017), the will to meaning (Frankl, 1969/2014), and the will to love (hooks, 2000/2018). Finding harmony in the balance between these competing wills may take on different forms throughout life, flexing in any direction to respond to the energy of the moment or the needs of those involved. Over reliance on any of one of these wills creates a leadership gap capable of producing harm, whether through persecution, indoctrination, or obsession. When it comes to the paradox of servant-leadership and reconciling the discrepancy between being a servant and being a leader however, despite the existence of numerous positions on this continuum, aspiring to fully become a servant is the best option. Unlike other descriptive models of leadership, servant-leadership’s prescriptive nature serves as a guide not on what to do, but on how to be. Servant-leadership, as James Autry understands, is about first wanting to be a better person, not about becoming a more effective leader, and that when one becomes a better person, one frequently becomes a better leader (Spears & Noble, 2015).

Through the lens of self-responsibility, this article explores the progression from assimilating into a position of power, to redefining
meaning through the freedom of choice, to prioritizing the well-being of others as an expression of love. This article ultimately affirms how servant-leadership, through the demonstration of awareness, conceptualization, and healing, leads to self-transcendence; reframing life from being a linear problem to solve to being a mystery to embrace.

WILL TO POWER

Following Greenleaf’s (1977/2002) premise that caring for others is the foundation of a good society, servant-leadership provides a vision for doing the necessary inner work to achieve self-awareness before engaging with the outer work of the world. This progression from inner awareness to outer understanding is neatly expressed in Ferch’s (2020) synthesis of past thought leaders’ discussions on the impossibility of knowing humanity without knowing oneself first, emphasizing how a leader-first mentality obscures healthy self-awareness. In knowing oneself, blindness is revealed. Berger (2011) comes to describe this blindness like the cinema, while your perception is one of freedom and truth seeing, it is the story playing out immediately before your eyes that commands attention. In that manner, there is no better way to engage with the world more openly than by first removing the blinders from one’s eyes and choosing to see a broader expression of the human experience.

ASSIMILATION

Leadership is not supposed to be defined by or dependent upon race, class, or gender, but like most white, middle-class men, I was born and raised in an environment that championed my success from day one (hooks, 1984/2014). From athletics to education to business, my grooming was both conscious and unconscious, direct and indirect. For every purposeful step I took in my development, I was met with an equal or greater supportive response from my coaches, teachers, and
employers. This environment conditioned my purpose to focus on assimilating into the status quo. Not to my detriment, but for my benefit. Like Ann McGee-Cooper’s initial understanding, leading always meant from the top, with me and my bright ideas at the center (Carey, 2015). It meant my vision and my authority were what ultimately mattered. Aligning with the system in place assured a clear path into personal and professional success that included a fancy title, robust paycheck, and nice quality of life. Becoming a leader, and rising within the corporate ranks, represented success and achievement; these aspirations informed my every decision. Leadership in this regard, fell right in line with my upbringing, my environment, and my privileges. My path into the leadership spotlight, into accumulating power, was not accidental. It was predictable and I blindly accepted it without hesitation.

AWARENESS

Servant-leaders become aware by embarking upon a deep personal journey, pulling only from one’s cultivated inward resources, and beginning to lose what must be lost (Greenleaf, 2010). In exploring the notion of loss, removing the blinders in assessing the modern world, today appears to be the best time to be alive; the easiest time to be living. At no point in human history has there been as much potential, opportunity, and luxury than exists right now. Yet, there are many who would argue that the modern age is not all that great, that the conditions leading to privilege also carry a dark shadow. For them, every day is a struggle; one that shows no signs of improving. In exploring his fundamental belief that all individuals will strive to grow, spread, and become dominant out of an incarnate will to power, Nietzsche (1901/2017) asks, “Where must our modern world be classed—under exhaustion or under increasing strength?” (p. 28). True both in his era and today, there are many who see strength where others feel exhaustion. It is this divide that contributes to the polarizing attitude levied against
the will to change. Nietzsche observes the privileged are cast as greedy (successful, but undeserving) while the oppressed are cast as lazy (failures and undeserving). When opposing positions are attacked through contemptuous lenses, nihilism results. What is the point? Why fight for change and endure hardship for the possibility of a better and brighter future? Why suffer exhaustion when there is no indication that it will lead to strength?

The progression from cynicism to pessimism to nihilism is not the cause of privilege, it is the rationale; the result of habit (Nietzsche, 1901/2017). Nietzsche argues there is an overarching need to discern the nature of the regimes that govern our lives, to understand that all value-based approaches carry their own shadows, that over-intellectualism itself is a shadow, and that these absolutes eliminate the possibility of mystery. Harm results no matter who wields the power. What then constitutes the habit that most needs breaking? Frankl (1969/2014) answers this question by exposing a shadow that governs modern life, saying:

One of the forms the will to power takes is what I call the will to money … Once the will to money takes over, the pursuit of meaning is replaced by the pursuit of means. Money, instead of remaining a means, becomes an end. It ceases to serve a purpose. (p. 72)

Building a life around logic and reason, in following the well-paved path aimed at building a strong foundation, I gained the financial independence I always sought. Along with it came the freedom of choice; where I wanted to live, the type of work I engaged with, and how to raise my family. Approaching life as a problem to solve, as though it was a game to play by which the rules could be discerned and followed, had its benefits. But at what cost?

Greenleaf (2010) acknowledges that personal growth may be blocked by the conveniences of the modern world, that engaging in the
servant-leadership journey means coming to terms with the reality of guaranteed loss with only a possibility of gain. Detaching from the regimes governing one’s life, from a self-oriented will to power, becomes as much a moral necessity as an exercise in recalibration, one where the outcomes focus on the impacts to others rather than personal benefit. In seeking generative growth, in pulling the most applicable lessons one can from both the positive and negative learnings of life, there is great hope in realizing the conditions one inherits is not an illness, but a predisposition to an illness (Nietzsche, 1901/2017), a weakened state to push back against external sources of harm. Assimilation into a self-oriented approach to leadership, one motivated by personal gain and financial stability, might begin to feel like an illness, but the contributing conditions merely represent a predisposition to that feeling. Rather than viewing this inherited privilege as a negative, exhaustive intention, it can become a positive, impactful strength when the will to overcome is understood to be within one’s locus of control.

WILL TO MEANING

In his engagement with servant-leadership, Ferch (2011) believes, “In sincerely facing some of the shadows of our personal and collective history, we are given the opportunity to embark on a path of discovery, self-responsibility, and commitment to one another” (p. xxiv). Having children and raising a family was always part of my life’s plan. Except children have an uncanny ability of disrupting even the best of plans. Each unique in their gifts and ways of being, it is clear my daughters’ journeys through life will be informed as much by their differences as the environment they were born into. Not right or wrong, but distinct paths in life. My path into fatherhood, in response, was enlightening. Having children illuminated the limitations in my definition of success and unveiled a new capacity to dream bigger; a new path emerged should I be courageous enough to follow.
FREEDOM

When one begins to think of deviating from the path of power and self-orientation, however, logic and reason lose their value. This form of simplistic reductionism is what Frankl (1969/2014) calls the mask of nihilism. For him, man’s freedom is not connected to doing anything he pleases, but rather in deciding his stance on the conditions he faces. Losing the ability to differentiate between the factors within and outside of one’s control, is a form of nihilism. In describing the will to meaning, Frankl makes it clear that while fate cannot be changed, man can change himself. Choosing to assimilate into an inherited world, even when the overriding logic and reason suggest doing so is the best course of action, does not mean man is fated to do so. Assimilating into the corporate world, I took on a series of roles with expanded responsibility and increased leadership accountability. This succession always felt natural, until it didn’t.

Eva et al. (2019) acknowledge how servant-leaders choose to blur the lines between the personal and the professional by honoring the uniqueness of each follower, focusing on individual wants, needs, backgrounds, and beliefs; reorienting concern outward towards the community. After experiencing a variety of organizational cultures and working under a broad spectrum of leadership styles, I reached a point where a conscious resistance formed in my mind. I was no longer willing to perpetuate the disproportionate degree to which leaders were held accountable for what they delivered instead of the environment they created, who their people became. Yet, reflecting on servant-leadership as a path out of self-orientation and power, I struggled with how to acknowledge my privilege.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

Spears (2010) identifies a core characteristic of servant-leadership as conceptualization, balancing the day-to-day responsibilities of leading
with providing a clear sense of direction and purpose for the future. This could take the form of articulating an expansive vision for an organization or in stretching the minds of team members through a depiction of the art of the possible. Greenleaf (1977/2002), in speaking of conceptualization as the prime leadership talent, makes the connection with dreaming great dreams saying, “Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen, there must be a great dream” (p. 30). Conceptualization is more than simply establishing a goal; it is daring to dream big and then sharing that dream in a way that turns it into a distinct possibility. For something truly spectacular to take shape, to spark radical change, the conceptualization of the dream needs to also be spectacular.

Greenleaf (2010) maintains there is a profound, searing loss that must occur to progress along the inward journey of servant-leadership, saying “If you can’t find yourself, you’re not lost enough” (p. 31). Rather than reflecting my way into a larger cohesive understanding of how to counteract privilege, might it be more prudent to simply step aside and make room for others to assume a leadership position? Conceptualizing a different path in life, in dreaming a bigger dream, intentions must still be matched with the persistence to turn that dream into a reality (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009). By resigning my leadership position in the weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic began, voluntarily walking away from the corporate world to pursue a life not motivated by money or title, I did just that. The experience was the definition of non-linear in that it removed me from my comfort zone and placed me in a situation that did not have a clear or definitive conclusion. In my instance, what the departure lacked was a broader encompassing of others. Leaving the corporate world in pursuit of greater meaning remained a self-centered search for that meaning.

Mirroring the advantages that come with power and privilege, I am
fortunate to be living a life sheltered from major hardship. When considering human suffering, I can cast a wide net across my lineage and find little reason to not feel fortunate. Fortunate, but unsettled. Wiesel (2006) weaves a compelling narrative for thinking more broadly about the pain and suffering in the world by highlighting that more people are oppressed than free, with human rights violations occurring in all corners of the world. This raises the question, what is it that prevents people from being more sensitive to the plight of others? Is it physical distance, local ambivalence, or simply good fortune?

Dr. Raymond Reyes in his talk on *Dealing with Conflict* (Mentorsgallery, 2010) suggests that your head must be connected to your heart, otherwise you get trapped in the dealings of facts and logic and resultingly can be moved to harm others. Only when your head and heart are connected, when you slow down and take a breath before acting, are you able to take the best course that considers not just your own interests, but those of others. Taking a hiatus from the corporate world allowed me to slow down and take that breath, exposing the hidden selfish tendencies existing in my head, disconnected from the loving sentiments towards others that occupied my heart.

In consideration of the antecedents of servant-leadership, van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) look to compassionate love, a genuine appreciation and care for others, to move beyond the moment and instead embrace the humanity in everyone. Discovering a meaningful approach to becoming sensitive to the concerns of others is a critical challenge facing humanity. One that requires conceptualizing a distinct and transformational future. Ray (2022), in his testament for forgiveness, shares his wife’s compelling explanation for engaging in something that might not seem like your battle, “It’s not for you, she whispered, it’s for your daughters. The souls of others” (p. 74). When you can know those who will benefit, your daughters perhaps, advocating for what is right
becomes a personal responsibility. Dreaming of a future where my head is connected to my heart, where my actions are not self-serving but instead serving others, is the beginning of a great, non-linear dream.

WILL TO LOVE

In hooks’ (2000/2018) articulation of the will to love, where nurturing the well-being of others is prioritized over wealth and safety, she reinforces the underlying interactive process of loving as an action (verb) and not merely a concept (noun) saying, “The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other” (p. 93). To claim to love, hooks believes one must acknowledge society’s lovelessness as a wound and begin to reconcile the hurtful nature of one’s actions.

Tran and Spears (2019) draw attention to the delicate balance individuals must make between conceptual thinking and their day-to-day operational focus, highlighting the discipline required to stretch one’s thinking in transitioning to becoming a servant-leader, in choosing connection. Rising through the ranks of corporate America, my early leadership training centered on the operational, ignoring the conceptual. By focusing on how to effectively write and conduct annual performance evaluations, my training taught me how to package feedback into a cohesive narrative, one that would tell a compelling story and affect behavioral change. Yet my training also indirectly conditioned me to think that acknowledging all the positive acts someone demonstrated might water down the potency of the real message needing to be delivered at the end of the year. This line of thinking became the habit I internalized in all aspects of my life.

Northouse (2021), in speaking to a servant-leaders’ focus on leadership behaviors, acknowledges an attentiveness to the needs of followers as a predecessor to their empowerment and development of their full capacities. Where I faltered, even as my approach was met with praise and behavioral reinforcement, was in proactively providing
frequent, real-time words of affirmation. I fell into a trap of holding my
tongue and only recognizing others for their larger accomplishments,
typically in infrequent, formal settings, thereby placing an upper limit on
the potential growth and development others could experience.

FORESIGHT

Greenleaf (1977/2002) observes the rational challenge facing
servant-leaders as one of foresight, saying:

The failure (or refusal) of a leader to foresee may be viewed as an
ethical failure, because a serious ethical compromise today … is
sometimes the result of a failure to make the effort at an earlier date
to foresee today’s events and take the right actions when there was
freedom for initiative to act. (p. 39)

To foresee, one must look to the past, but not rely on the past as a
source of fresh innovation. My head is filled with positive thoughts. I
tend to downplay weaknesses, quickly forget transgressions, and choose
to value the spirit with which others operate instead of overly focusing
on the outcomes of their actions. The problem is my words sometimes do
not match my thoughts. Especially now, as a parent of two young
children, I find myself being overly directive, demanding corrective
behavior over every little thing my girls do. I know this is done out of a
place of love, in wanting my children to become conscious of their
actions and the impacts on their surroundings, but it sounds and feels so
contradictory to how my mind thinks. And my children are not aware of
that disconnect. They only hear frustration and disappointment over yet
another trivial thing. Worse than the incongruence of my words and my
thoughts is how frequently I do not say anything at all. Not in the way I
catch myself from saying an unnecessarily critical thing to my children,
but more in line with my corporate training where I do not offer praise
for their kind interactions with one another, or for when they show
demonstrable progress on their developmental journey.

Understanding the importance of foresight, hooks (2000/2018) warns, “Awakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination” (p. 87). To awaken to love, reflecting more deeply about my past and the silence that frequently accompanies my positive thoughts, I think of my wife and her everyday heroism in building our beautiful life, and sustaining an environment of laughter, love, and hope with our children even during the most frustrating of moments. I think of the smile on my face and the warmth in my heart as I watch her engage with our children. The harm caused by my inaction, my repeated decision simply to observe, does not create undue negative circumstances in our life, but harm does not live exclusively as a deficit. Failing to create an environment where love and personal growth flourish, failing to unlock the greater potential in others, is also a form of harm; fortunately, one that can be overcome through healing.

HEALING

In speaking of servant-leadership, Sousa and van Dierendonck (2017) observe two coexisting and complementary dimensions: a service-oriented side and an action-driven side. It is in this balance that the key characteristic of healing comes to bear. The purposeful bringing together of service and action creates an environment where healing can occur. Facing our faults and overcoming them occurs in healing, but this is also where the understanding of how to bring healing to others emerges (Ferch, 2011). Understanding the reflection to action continuum also means appreciating that there are many times when those initial feelings, the ones that lead to meaningful healing, do not originate out of perfect, well-formed reflections. Feeling a need to heal, even before full comprehension, is just as important as acting. Frankl (2000) highlights this point in recognition that human existence is a balance between
action and reflection; that life cannot be fully reflected upon or fully analyzed. Sometimes it is wise to stumble through the human experience, existing in action with others, rather than holding one’s tongue.

On a particularly lovely date with my wife that she put a great deal of thought and care in planning, I embraced the need for action, steering the conversation towards the topic of appreciation. I spoke first of her amazing qualities and all the consistently thoughtful ways she engages me, our children, and our families. She is truly the glue that brings everyone and everything together. I then asked for her forgiveness for not being more deliberate in sharing my feelings. I mentioned that not a moment goes by where I am not looking at her and how she conducts herself and am not filled with awe and pride, that my mind is filled with positive thoughts towards her, but I am not consistent in sharing these observations and feelings. Her half-joking response was “Don’t stop,” before turning slightly more serious in saying, “I’ll never turn down words of affirmation,” as she sat across from me with a warm smile and welled-up eyes. The immediate impact of acknowledging my faults, asking forgiveness, involving her in this healing, and openly sharing words of affirmation were clear.

Grenny et al. (2021) bring to light an understanding that communication is a dialogue where other perspectives and needs are expressed; one where you can only ever control yourself. The stories we tell ourselves about other’s actions, and the underlying motivations that led to those behaviors, often trip us up. Becoming a stronger leader requires a little more grace and a lot less trying to control a narrative. The choice to relinquish power in favor of love means making people feel appreciated and supported, creating an environment where a co-authored narrative can result. True to this understanding, my wife’s response was to not only offer forgiveness, but to also share her appreciation for me, for my words of gratitude and the shared partnership
in building our beautiful life.

Greenleaf (2010) offers that a measure of a servant-leader’s wholeness is not certainty, but reaching the fluid state beyond confusion, a character defining place marked by rightness, responsibility, and courage. In living a meaningful life filled with love and a focus on the well-being of others, one way to move beyond confusion is to embrace healing. Both in helping others to heal and in healing oneself. To transcend self-orientation and to conceptualize a greater dream, one must first come to understand how their actions harm others and then consciously take steps to enact change:

It is helpful to understand that servant-leadership starts within each one of us, and that it is first and foremost a personal philosophy and commitment that we can choose to practice in any environment … We don’t need anyone’s permission to personally do our best to act as a servant-leader. It is our choice. (Spears, 2021, p. xi)

In his detailed inquiry into servant-leadership, Mathew (2021) speaks of Mother Teresa’s belief that within the depths of the human heart lies the universal need of humanity to not only be seen, but also to feel wanted. As it pertains to healing, gifting another the words of affirmation that confirms their value does not need to be an overly constructed event. Speaking from the heart is more than enough to heal. Acknowledging one’s leadership weaknesses and involving others to overcome them leads to this type of healing. More evidence that what holds power might not need to, that working hard to ensure others are acknowledged, understood, and appreciated, brings not only self-healing, but also healing to others. “To return to love, to know perfect love, we surrender the will to power” (hooks, 2000/2018, p. 221).

CONCLUSION

At times, the act of reflection comes very easily for me; the gift of
having intellection as a strength. But the downside of intellection is that it often entails thought for the sake of thought, without any deeper purpose. Reflection, like leadership, is not a linear process. Both require lived experiences across multiple points in one’s life, patching the learnings together into a cohesive narrative. Only when the narrative is nearing completion does it become possible to take a step back and see exactly what the story is telling. Certainly, there are clues that emerge and patterns to follow, but like Frankl’s (1969/2014) zeitgestalt, the outcome is determined by the unique time, energy, and personality that is brought to bear over the entirety of one’s life.

Greenleaf (2010) sees a paradox in the destination and destiny contained within the servant-leadership journey, that one can simultaneously exist both at the beginning and the end. Progressing from an assimilation to power, to a redefinition of meaning, to an appreciation of love, servant-leadership can lead to self-transcendence, opening the door for meaningful change. Moving away from viewing life as a problem to solve and instead toward a mystery to embrace, reflection and healing begin to erode any predisposition to a self-orientation of power, leading to a greater expression of love for others. Self-transcendence does not require abandoning oneself, it involves understanding oneself (awareness), dreaming bigger dreams (conceptualization), and addressing previously ignored wounds (healing). The distinction comes in recognizing the opportunity that loss creates; beginnings emerge from endings.

In Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity: Servant Leadership as a Way of Life (Ferch, 2011), stories of horrific events and uplifting responses are shared with the purpose of placing the intersection of power, love, and forgiveness at the center of the human experience. In driving deeper personal reflection, Ferch observes a consistent lack of courage to not only stand up against what is wrong, but also to stand up
for what is right. Appreciating the interplay of power and love, courage becomes the key to meaningful change. When it comes to opening minds and hearts to the possibility of healing, in shifting away from the conditioned, out of the linear and toward a healthier balance, admitting to one’s faults must then be met with the courageous persistence to change.

Sitting with the concepts of awareness, conceptualization, and healing proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Identifying problems to solve and enacting a corresponding plan of action is second nature to me, but relaxing the degree to which I think through logic and reason and instead embracing the mystery of love, the non-guaranteed, the free-flowing path, takes a reconditioning of my mind. Something that will take time and the accumulation of more life experiences in support of the needs of others. Servant-leadership is a worthy partner on this journey as it provides a framework for placing others at the core of my being. Not to become a better leader, but to become a better person.

Greenleaf (2010) understands the power in any symbol is in its ability to stimulate significant meaning, that one only gets meaning when one is open to receiving it, and that the disturbance of awareness alone is not enough. In her symbolic poem, Praying, Mary Oliver (2006) offers her own take on the mystery of life by removing the emphasis on life as a defined contest and instead replacing it with the limitless imagery of a doorway into thanks. Self-transcendence, being open to the significant meaning of the doorway, takes self-responsibility. Responsibility in sitting in the difficult concepts and understanding the conditions governing life. Responsibility in pursuing healing, in showing appreciation and committing to change. Responsibility in architecting a better way forward, one that may bring as many challenges as it does successes, but one that is more deeply rooted in the regenerative nature of love. By sitting in silence, one comes to hear a clearer voice, one comes to dream a bigger dream, one comes to envision healing. In
breaking this silence, one comes to value life no longer as a contest, but as a doorway into thanks.

Clearing the mind of all distractions, lending the moment the seriousness it deserves, I perch on an outcropping of rock piercing the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, and reflect on life, leadership, and the future:

*silence*

*I listen to the Ocean (god?),*  
* wondering about tides,*  
* ebbing and flowing.*  
*I think about gravitational pull*  
* and lunar phases,*  
* waxing and waning.*  
*I see my journey, moving*  
* into the spotlight,*  
* onwards and upwards.*

*I listen to my Mind (god?),*  
* building a life*  
* leveraging logic and reason*  
*I think about the future*  
* and financial stability,*  
* a glass of wine at sunset.*  
*I see the proverbial crossroads*  
* and chase the feeling*  
* I’ve overlooked before.*

*I listen to my Heart (god?),*  
* questioning privilege, choice, and options.*
What is success?
I think about 2016,
a year of tidal and lunar shifts,
Father knows best?
I see greatness in others,
a distinctly different path for each daughter,
a world informed by difference.

I listen to the Ocean.
I think about the Future.
I see greatness in Others.

embrace the mystery
break the silence

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