

Destiny and the Leader

by Joseph Jaworski

This article was included in the book, *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, and Servant Leadership*, edited by Larry C. Spears, copyright © 1998 by the Greenleaf Center, and published by John Wiley and Sons.

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In this essay, Jaworski probes Greenleaf's ideas about a central issue of servant leadership: how individuals and organizations go about discovering and fulfilling their unique purpose.

My first encounter with Robert Greenleaf's ideas on servant-leadership came just when I needed them. Greenleaf himself would have understood how that happens. "One gets what one is ready for, what one is open to receive," he once said by way of explaining a Robert Frost poem.¹

Greenleaf's own introduction to the concept of servant-leadership occurred in just such a way, at just such a moment. As a consultant to a university racked by turmoil in the 1960s, Greenleaf felt a need to understand where the students were coming from. To do that, he decided to read what they were reading. That led him to Hermann Hesse, then one of the most popular authors on campus. He persevered through the bleakness of novel after novel until in 1970 he arrived at *Journey to the East*. This novel, with its powerful story of Leo, the archetypal servant-leader, permanently changed his view of leadership.

In my own life, I've become increasingly conscious of the way such "predictable miracles" operate in our lives: how doors open when we're ready to walk through them, how we encounter people or ideas at precisely the right moment. The closest I've come to finding a word to describe this phenomenon is *synchronicity*, which Carl Jung defines as "a meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved."²

I wrote about my personal experience with these predictable miracles in *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*. The book was never intended to be an autobiography, even though I illustrate some of my ideas with events from my personal journey. All of us have pivotal events in our lives that leave us forever changed. For me, one of these was the national tragedy of Watergate, brought home to me because of my father's role as special prosecutor. And the second was the personal crisis of a divorce. In the aftermath of Watergate, I felt compelled to rethink everything I thought I knew about leadership. And my divorce prompted me to set out on a journey to discover my purpose in life—a journey, incidentally, that I think every leader must take.

In 1980, when I was just beginning to think deeply about these issues, a little pamphlet arrived in the mail—sent to me, I now think, by Vince Drucker, Peter Drucker's son. It was a copy of Robert Greenleaf's essay *The Servant as Leader*, which he had written after reading Hesse's *Journey to the East*. I was astounded at the extent to which our ideas converged. Greenleaf was saying what I felt but hadn't heard anyone say in quite the same way.

The framework Greenleaf set forth enabled me to understand the underlying dynamics of leadership. There are two essential dimensions to leadership, Greenleaf asserted. The first, and by far the best known, is the desire to serve others. The second is the desire to serve something beyond ourselves—a higher purpose. Greenleaf did not restrict himself to a single term in speaking of this transcendent reality. At one time or another, he spoke of it as the goal, the dream, the overarching purpose.

That guiding principle—that we must discover and serve our purpose—resonates powerfully with me. It also had a strong appeal for Greenleaf, who viewed it as "something to strive for, to move toward, or become."³ Purpose is not the exclusive province of individuals. Those who would be servant-leaders must take the journey within to discover their personal purpose, but organizations that intend to endure and excel must also embark on a journey to discover the reason for their existence.

With Greenleaf, I have come to believe that if we are willing to take that most difficult journey toward self-discovery and lifelong learning, we will lead lives filled with meaning and adventure. Moreover, we will gain the capacity to create and shape the future for ourselves and our organizations in ways we can hardly imagine.

Because so much attention is often given to Greenleaf's ideas about serving others, I'd like to focus here on his ideas about the process through which individuals and organizations discover and serve their purpose, their destiny.

The Journey to Discover Our Personal Destiny

When I was just beginning my own journey of discovery, a man sent me a copy of Hesse's *Demian* with a page turned down to this passage: "Each man has only one genuine vocation—to find the way to himself. His task is to discover his own destiny—not an arbitrary one—and live it out wholly and resolutely within himself."⁴

In the weeks after that, I committed myself to that journey of discovery. I decided to leave the law firm where I had been very successful and start a leadership program. Even today, I can still feel the incredible pain involved in leaving people who had been part of my life for 20 years. They didn't understand where I was going. And because I didn't understand it myself, I couldn't explain it to them. Later on, I would take comfort in Greenleaf's belief that it is enough to set out in the direction of your dreams. But at the time, all I knew was that I felt compelled to set out on that journey into the unknown.

Many others have written about this need to discover our destiny or purpose. Author-psychiatrist Viktor Frankl says that the most basic need for any human being is "the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled."⁵ That call to meaning saved his life. When he arrived at Auschwitz, authorities confiscated a manuscript that he had devoted much of his life to preparing for publication. His desire to reconstruct the book enabled him to survive the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl's experience led him to identify with Nietzsche's insight that "he who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*."⁶ What's important, Frankl came to believe, is not what we expect from life, but rather what life expects from us. That idea—that we are here for a reason—is strikingly similar to Martin Buber's idea that destiny stands in need of us.

I came across almost exactly the same thought in James Hillman's *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*. Hillman believes that "each person enters the world called."⁷ One of my favorite stories from the book concerns 16-year-old Ella Fitzgerald, who planned to make her debut as a dancer at the Harlem Opera House. But just as she was being announced, she changed her mind—or, as Hillman puts it, "she figured out her calling"—and decided to sing. That sense of personal calling, that belief that "there is a reason that I am alive" is at least as old as Plato's *The Republic*.

In his writings and in his PBS interview series with Bill Moyers, mythologist Joseph Campbell describes this search for calling or purpose as "following your bliss."⁸ There are those who insist on interpreting his words as a call to "do your own thing." Nothing could have been further from Campbell's thinking. He wasn't issuing an invitation to a hedonistic existence. He was calling us to take that journey to discover and serve our purpose, our destiny, or as he put it, "our vital design."

Most of us tend to avoid taking the journey to discover and serve our purpose. We refuse the call because deep down we know that to cooperate with fate brings not only great personal power, but great personal responsibility as well. When we do finally say yes to the call, we embark on a journey toward lifelong learning, meaning, and adventure.

In this process of continuous learning, growth, and development, we undergo three fundamental shifts of mind that set the stage for our becoming more capable of participating in our unfolding future. The first is a shift in the way we think about the world. Instead of seeing the universe as mechanistic, fixed, and determined, we begin to see it as open, dynamic, and alive. The second shift occurs when we come to understand that everything is connected to everything else and that relationship is the organizing principle of the universe. The third shift occurs in our understanding of commitment. It's not, as I once thought, doing whatever it takes to make things happen. It is, rather, a willingness to listen, yield, and respond to the inner voice that guides us toward our destiny.

When we follow our purpose and experience these fundamental shifts of mind, a sense of flow develops and we find ourselves in a coherent field of others who share our sense of purpose. We begin to see that with very small movements, at just the right time and place, all sorts of consequent actions are brought into being. We start to notice that the people who come to us are the very ones we need in relationship to our commitment and that doors seem to open for us in ways that we could hardly have imagined. Greenleaf spoke of this phenomenon in terms of encountering opportunities that he could not have anticipated. Campbell put it in terms of being helped by invisible hands.

My own experience is, I think, a good example of how this happens. One day, shortly after I had made the commitment to start the Leadership Forum, I was walking down a London street, wondering how I would ever find the experts and the money to launch such a venture. As I passed a newsstand, my eye was caught by a caption on the cover of *U.S. News & World Report*. "RX for Leadership in America," it said. I opened the magazine and found an article by Tom Cronin, a highly regarded presidential scholar which bore strong parallels to my own thoughts on leadership. I bought the magazine, tore the article out, and flew to the States. Within a couple of days, I was at Cronin's home in Colorado telling him about my dream. He listened intently as I explained what I wanted to do, then said, "You can count on me. Sign me up." He introduced me to John Gardner, the founder of the White House Fellows Program, the very model I had in mind for the Leadership Forum. Gardner introduced me to several thinkers and practitioners in the field who in turn introduced me to others. In a very short time, we had assembled a virtual Who's Who in the field of leadership development.

Then, in three short weeks, I was able to raise the very substantial amount of seed money needed for such a venture. I was experiencing the power of commitment to a higher purpose, discovering what the members of the Scottish Himalayan Expedition discovered—that "the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. . . . All sorts of things occur to help one that would otherwise never have occurred."⁹

Many of us, particularly business leaders with overcrowded agendas, avoid the difficult task of crossing the threshold to begin this inward journey. We may wrestle for years with fearfulness and denial before being able to transcend that fear. We tend to deny our destiny because of our insecurity, our dread of ostracism, our anxiety, and our lack of

courage to risk what we have. The consequences of continuing to refuse to discover our purpose and act on it are clear. Abraham Maslow, my early guide through what was then unfamiliar terrain warns that if we deliberately plan to be less than we are capable of being, we run the risk of being deeply unhappy our whole lives.

The Corporate Journey to Discover Purpose

Greenleaf's ideas on the importance of corporate purpose grew out of his 36-year career at AT&T. He believed that under Theodore Vail's visionary leadership, AT&T had been "a great covenantal company with a sense of enormous obligation for the nation's telephone service."¹⁰ But somewhere along the way, that sense of purpose was lost, and with it the vision and spirit that had infused it.

Greenleaf had his own theories about why AT&T was broken up in 1984. Although he acknowledged that there could be many explanations, he consistently rejected the "official" reason: that the company had become too big and had a monopoly on the nation's telecommunications activity. His own explanation was that the company had lost its spirit, its great dream. If it had kept its original dream, or if it had been fortunate enough to have a visionary leader capable of creating a new one, he believed that AT&T might have been a leader instead of just another competitor in the telecommunications revolution.

So how do leaders discover the purpose—the destiny—of the organizations they lead? Very much as they discover their own. By embarking on a search to discover it. By asking: Why is this company here? What is its reason for existing? "Far too many of our contemporary institutions do not have an adequate dream, an imaginative concept that will raise people's sights close to where they have the potential to be," Greenleaf noted.¹¹ In a 1986 introduction to his earlier essay, "The Leadership Crisis," he made the somewhat startling assertion that the effectiveness of a company's leaders is directly proportional to the greatness of the company's dream.¹²

That idea—that a sense of purpose enlarges the capacity of leaders, and that the absence of a sense of purpose imposes limits—may be revolutionary, but my own experience tells me it is true. I have found that when the searches of an organization and its leaders run parallel and then converge, a great explosion of energy and creativity takes place. If organizations want that creative explosion, if they want the kind of performance that leads to truly exceptional results, their leaders have to be willing to take themselves and their organizations on a journey to discover and then act on their purpose.

In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras studied a number of "truly exceptional companies that have stood the test of time" and compared them with "another set of good companies that had the same shot in life, but didn't attain quite the same stature."¹³

Their study of exceptional companies led Collins and Porras to conclude that great company builders understand that "it is more important to know who you are than where

you are going, for where you are going will change as the world around you changes.”¹⁴ The leaders of these great companies had a desire to create something enduring, something larger than themselves—an institution “rooted in a set of timeless core values, that exists for a purpose beyond just making money, and that stands the test of time by virtue of the ability to renew itself from within.”¹⁵

For years, Peter Senge has been recommending Greenleaf’s *Servant Leadership* as the single most important book on the subject of leadership. But as so often happens, the ideas and the influence flow both ways. In an introduction to a new edition written just a few years before his death, Greenleaf expressed his appreciation to Senge for the idea of “shared vision.” Greenleaf believed that every person, regardless of his or her status in the organization, must be able to shape the dream and claim it as his or her own. This is especially true, he said, for “an old institution that has lost a great dream it once had and wants to get a new one.”¹⁶

How can a company know if it has a big enough dream? “The test of greatness in a dream is that it has the energy to lift people out of their moribund ways to a level of being and relating from which the future can be faced with more hope than most of us can summon today,” Greenleaf says.¹⁷ I’ve heard a very similar idea expressed by Bill O’Brien, retired CEO of Hanover Insurance: “People have a burning need to feel that they are part of an ennobling mission.”

Spirit and Being

Greenleaf often spoke of the importance of spirit. That has made some people question whether he was speaking in a religious sense that is somehow in conflict with the responsibilities of leaders of secular institutions.

I don’t think so. Even when Greenleaf spoke of spiritual matters, it’s clear that he was speaking in a very broad sense. He often turned to the root of the word—*religio*, “to rebind”—to explain his understanding of the purpose of religion: “to bridge the separation between persons and the cosmos, to heal the widespread alienation, and to reestablish men and women in the role of servants—*healers*—of society.”¹⁸ I see in his definition a great explanation of the servant-leader’s responsibility to build common ground and to heal a fragmented society.

Greenleaf offers another explanation of the religious impulse, this one borrowed from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel whose life and thinking he admired. “The root of religion is what to do with the feeling for the mystery of living, what to do with awe, wonder and amazement,” Heschel said.¹⁹ That idea is almost palpably present in the lives of those who exercise leadership in times of crisis. Shortly after Winston Churchill became prime minister of England during World War II, he shared his thoughts with some very close colleagues. “I felt as if I were walking with destiny,” he said, “and all of my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial. I thought a good deal about it, and I was certain I would not fail.”²⁰

That sense of destiny enables leaders to help others cultivate optimism. It also gives them “a special obligation to act on what they believe.” But this obligation is not to some external force. “I think of responsibility as beginning with a concern for self, to receive that inward growth that gives serenity of spirit without which someone cannot truly say, ‘I am tree,’” Greenleaf said.²¹

I have come to believe that leadership is much more about *being* than *doing*. It is about our orientation of character, our state of inner activity. I see the same emphasis in Greenleaf’s writing. He does not say that we make the world a better place by our actions—though he worked hard to make leaders more effective. He believed that the world should “be a better place because of who one is and how one does one’s work.”²²

Greenleaf’s emphasis on *being* was not lost on Peter Drucker, who worked with him for 15 years. In the foreword to *On Becoming a Servant Leader*, a recently published collection of Greenleaf’s private writings, Drucker recounts an incident that occurred at a corporate education session they were conducting together. When one of the participants approached with the question, “What do I do?” Greenleaf responded, “That comes later. First, what do you want to be?” Drucker, always the pragmatist, recalls that his own “What do you think will work?” elicited laughter from all three.²³

Wholeness

Greenleaf was attracted to the notion of wholeness and to the leader’s responsibility for helping individuals and organizations achieve it. In *My Debt to E. B. White*, he expressed his appreciation to the writer for his “ability to see things whole, or more whole than most.”²⁴

In 1980 I encountered this concept of wholeness in a very powerful way through the ideas of David Bohm, the great theoretical physicist. Bohm believed that everything in the universe is a part of one unbroken whole. He also believed that there is a level of reality—an implicate order—beyond our ordinary experience and perceptions. At this level of reality, everything, including the past, is enfolded in everything else.

Greenleaf may never have met David Bohm, but he had an intuitive understanding of the importance of wholeness. In probing the meaning of “Directive,” one of Robert Frost’s most enigmatic poems, Greenleaf concludes that we become whole through the difficult and sometimes mystifying journey of self-discovery. If we take that journey, we will become whole and we will gain the ability to “see things whole.” The important thing, he says in words borrowed from Frost, is to live “in the light of your own inward experience.” That inwardness and that wholeness are marks of the servant-leader.

From an early age, we’re taught to deal with complexity by breaking things down into their separate parts. The flip side of this idea is that to see the big picture, we feel the need to put the pieces back together. I don’t believe that Greenleaf, any more than David

Bohm, felt that “seeing things whole” meant assembling pieces of reality into some kind of a mosaic whole. Seeing things whole is really about understanding the whole that already exists.

The Right Direction

One day in 1987, I was talking to a group of Forum fellows about the journey I had taken in creating the Leadership Forum. After the talk, Mary Ann Buchannan, director of our Oregon chapter, told me that my talk sounded as if it could have come directly from Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Even though Joseph Campbell was very popular, I hadn’t then heard of him. So she sent me the book. As I read it, I couldn’t help thinking that in describing the hero’s journey, he was describing the process people and organizations go through to discover their destiny. Not only did it bear a startling resemblance to the journey I had been taking for the past 15 years, but it tracked precisely with the ideas of Robert Greenleaf that had started me on that journey.

Those who would be servant-leaders, Greenleaf says, must “sooner or later—and in their own way—come to grips with who they are and where they are on the journey.”²⁵ He believes that on this journey, our direction is far more important than our destination. “One often does not know the precise goal,” he says, “but one must always be certain of one’s direction. The goal will reveal itself in due course.”²⁶

Greenleaf, whose taste for the writings of Henry David Thoreau was an acquired one, encountered the same thought in *Walden*: “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”²⁷

The idea that life is a journey into the unknown is echoed in the words of the Spanish poet A. Machado, who tells us: “Wanderer, there is no path. You lay a path in walking.”²⁸ That’s also been my experience. Direction is all we can really know. The path reveals itself as we walk along. Following the path requires us to be fully awake, filled with a sense of wonder, acutely aware of everything occurring around us, waiting expectantly for that “cubic centimeter of chance” to present itself. When it does, we must act with lightning speed and almost without conscious reasoning.

Creating the Future

The capacity for a different kind of consciousness is crucial to effective leadership. Greenleaf believed that leaders need to enlarge their capacity to “know the unknowable” and “foresee the unforeseeable.” We do this, he explained, by increasing our ability to “intuit the gap” between what conscious rational thought tells us and what we need to know, between what is and what can be.²⁹

The future, as Greenleaf saw it, is not something “out there,” but something we create at every moment. “By our efforts,” he said, “we bring the future into the present.”³⁰ Greenleaf’s views about creating the future are remarkably aligned with those of Bohm’s implicate order—the unbroken wholeness out of which seemingly discrete events arise. All of us are part of that unbroken whole, which is continually unfolding from the implicate and making itself manifest in our explicate world. Greenleaf’s and Bohm’s ideas are very similar to those of Jonas Salk, who invented the vaccine that eventually wiped out polio. Salk believed that the universe unfolds kaleidoscopically according to a deeply ingrained order, and that people can develop the capacity to sense the way the future wants to unfold and guide that process by the choices they make.

I believe that we participate in creating the future, not by trying to impose our will on it, but by deepening our collective understanding of what wants to emerge in the world, and then having the courage to do what is required. This is the least understood and yet most crucial foundation of servant -leadership.

But how can we gain this sense of what wants to emerge and unfold in the world? We can begin by following Greenleaf’s advice to “listen to signals.” If we do, we will find, as Greenleaf did, that “prophetic voices are speaking all the time,” pointing to a better way. We can heed his invitation to “develop a sensitivity to intimations from beyond the barrier that separates what we call reality from mystery.”³¹

We can heighten this awareness in many ways. My deepest insights seem to come when I’m spending time in solitude, writing in my journal, going for a run, or sitting beside running water. Others find that they listen best when they’re taking long walks, practicing yoga, or meditating. However we come by our insights, we should heed Greenleaf’s advice to respond to each one as it is offered. That, he felt, was “the ticket of admission for receiving the next one.”

By listening to signals we gain that sense of how the future is unfolding that enables us to cooperate with destiny. This brings us full circle to the responsibility of servant-leaders to discover and serve their own destiny and that of their organizations. It is a particularly optimistic thought. It opens us to a world of possibilities, a world of predictable miracles and synchronous events, a world in which we can create the future into which we are living.

Notes

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22. Greenleaf, "Preface to the Ethic of Strength," *On Becoming a Servant Leader*, p. 14.
23. Peter F. Drucker, Foreword to *On Becoming a Servant Leader*, p. xii.
24. Greenleaf, *My Debt to E. B. White* (Indianapolis: The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, 1987), p. 1.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
27. Henry David Thoreau, quoted in *My Debt to E. B. White*, pp. 6-7.

28. A. Machado, quoted in *Synchronicity* by Joseph Jaworski, p. 134.
29. Greenleaf, "Leadership and Foresight," *On Becoming a Servant Leader*, p. 319.
30. Greenleaf, "The Future Is Now," *On Becoming a Servant Leader*, p. 75.
31. Greenleaf, *Old Age: The Ultimate Test of Spirit (An Essay on Preparation)* (Indianapolis: The Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, 1987), p. 15.