

Challenging and Critiquing Notions of Servant Leadership: Lessons from My Mother



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Abstract In this chapter I offer a critique of Greenleaf's notion of servant leadership through a feminist lens. I reflect on my own formative experience as the child living in the servants' quarters of an English estate home where my mother served in the combined role of housekeeper, cook, maid, and scullery maid. I discuss the sense of perpetual humiliation and shame she felt living as a servant and how she emphasized the importance of education as a means to lift oneself out of poverty. I consider servant leadership as romanticized approach that fails to consider the aspects of servitude such as the subjugation of those who serve because they have no other choice. I consider how servant leadership has evolved to have an almost-pathological following, but without deep scholarly considerations of the limitations of this approach. I note that previous critiques of servant leadership have been dismissed by its proponents, resulting in a lack of criticality about this approach to leadership that was popularized by a white, middle-class American man whose lived experience never included working as a servant as his only means of survival.

Keywords Servant leadership · Critique · Higher education · Women · Feminism

In this chapter I share my experience as a woman and as a scholar whose early formative experiences shaped my education, career, and my life overall. The values I hold are fundamentally rooted in hard work, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, as a means to rise above one's circumstances. It is not uncommon for women, particularly those from less-privileged circumstances, to feel they must work harder than men to prove themselves (LaPan, Hodge, Peroff, & Henderson, 2013), while at the same time undervaluing their work by accepting less pay than male colleagues of similar rank and experience (Easterly & Ricard, 2011; Gee & Norton, 2009). This chapter is a narrative of tenacity, persistence, and success despite feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Burns, Brown, Eaton, & Mueller, 2017).

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Formative Experience

Both of my parents had a grade 10 education, though my mother later earned her General Education Diploma (GED) that was equivalent to high school completion. When I was five years old and my mother was seven months pregnant with my parents fourth child, my father left. With little education and very little work experience, she had few options for employment. Being an immigrant from England, she also had no family in Canada to offer emotional or psychological support. She gave up their fourth child for adoption, while trying to figure out how to feed the remaining three of us.

My memories of that time are blurry. I think my older brother ran away or went to live with some friends and my sister went to live with my paternal grandparents. I have never been able to reconstruct an accurate picture of what happened with the rest of my siblings during that time. I remember that my mother took me to England where she at least had family to lean on. I have written about this pivotal time in my early life elsewhere (Eaton, 2012). One particular day remains as a flashbulb memory, one of those “sundry private shocks” (Brown & Kulk, 1977) of a crucial day that shaped those that followed.

After returning to her natal homeland, my mother took the job of a live-in housekeeper for a wealthy family in Kent. I sometimes try to explain this time to others by referring to the television show, “Downton Abbey” (Fellowes, 2010). The house and grounds were impressive, with flower and vegetable gardens, livestock, stables, and other buildings across the property that housed equipment and animals.

My mother and I lived in the servants’ quarters of the main house. There was a separate entrance that led into a large working kitchen. There was a time when the family had numerous servants working in the house, but the number of staff had dwindled over the decades. By the time we arrived in the mid 1970s, the only other staff besides my mother was the gardener. He lived with his wife in a separate house further away on the estate.

Our life was confined to the female servants’ quarters. There was an area of the house reserved for a butler as well, but by that point, there was no butler and no need for that section of the house to be open. That, too, was closed off to us.

My mother’s role was that of all female servants rolled into one: housekeeper, cook, scullery maid, and whatever other roles that needed filling. At the back of the kitchen there was a set of narrow, spiraling stairs leading to a dormitory-style bedroom upstairs, lined with six single beds, one for each of the female staff. The dormitory was set up for single girls who would have followed a strict hierarchy, starting with the scullery maid at the lowest end, leading up to the main housekeeper. There was no space or place for small children in the dormitory.

Given that my mother was the only female staff member at the time, the family allowed me to have one of the other beds. Naturally, there were strict rules that I was never to enter the main section of the house. The family of the estate was doing my mother a favor by allowing her to have a child with her in the house, but they certainly did not want me to be seen or heard.

I did not mind though, especially since there was a small sitting room for us off the kitchen that had a TV. There was no cable for us, of course, but that did not matter. Every night after supper had been served, the dishes were washed and the kitchen was spotless, my Mum and I would snuggle up on the little settee and watch a program on BBC before bed. My favorite was “Dr. Who”. Every night, we watched one show and then headed up stairs to the dormitory.

My Mum regularly started work at 5:00 a.m. with preparations for the day, cleaning and getting ready for breakfast to be served at 6:30 a.m. Looking back, I cannot imagine how tired she must have been on a daily basis. But I never remember her complaining about being tired. She was English and had been trained to have a stiff upper lip, as is the British custom.

One day I arrived home from school to find my mother doing the job she had come to hate most in the world, de-feathering and “drawing” (also known as “gutting”) a chicken. The process involves plunging the chicken, headfirst, into a pot of scalding hot (but not boiling) water for a few seconds to soften up the feathers and kill any lice or fleas. Then, holding the chicken by its feet, she would pull out its feathers one by one. The smaller pinfeathers that were impossible to pick out by hand were either removed with small pliers or singed with a match. She worked without gloves, which meant that her hands became cut up and sore from the scratch of the quills.

The smell was the most memorable part of the experience. It is the kind of smell one never forgets. She would do this job in the scullery, the small room just off the kitchen, reserved for such unpleasant tasks. I remembered that she worked. And worked. And worked.

While my mother worked in the house, I was sent off to school. I went to a local school that most Canadians and Americans would call a “private school”. It was not a particularly high-ranking school, as I remember, but it was the best Mum could afford. She was adamant that I not attend a state school. She was emphatic that the level of education in the private schools was better.

The uniform consisted of a white collared shirt that had to be perfectly starched and pressed, a grey tunic dress, and a tie. I had no idea what to do with a tie, so my mother would carefully tie it for me every morning for the first few weeks, until I learned to tie a sailor knot on my own. I remember those moments as being intermingled with commentary, such as: “I know you don’t like this uniform, but it’s a privilege, young lady. A good part of my hard-earned money goes to paying for this school. You’d best quit your grumbling!”

If anything was drilled into my head in that year, it was that education was tantamount. It required sacrifice on her part. My part of the deal was to approach school as if it were a sacred privilege, and honor the experience through rigorous rituals of daily disciplined homework and respect for education.

The phrase “to have pluck” or “to have guts” means to be courageous or to be brave. I suspect my Mum did not feel particularly courageous as she was holding the chicken by its feet, plucking its feathers, as the first step in its preparation. After

the plucking comes the drawing (disemboweling) the fowl and, if appropriate, de-boning it. That sounds disgusting, but it was nothing compared to the process of de-feathering it.

She came to hate those days when she would be brought a freshly killed chicken from the barn and had to prepare it for supper that evening. She hated it even more when guests were invited and there may have been up to four chickens to pluck and gut before starting to cook the actual meal. I remember one such Saturday clearly. She was muttering under her breath in the scullery when I came downstairs first thing in the morning. I went to the scullery and found her bent over a bucket with a chicken that she was in the middle of de-feathering. I asked, "Are you OK?"

She looked up at me with tears filling her eyes and said, "Whatever you do, child, don't be like me. Don't be a servant. Get an education and have a better life. Whatever you do, don't pluck chickens to earn a few cents". She turned back to her fowl and kept working. Both literally and figuratively, she had pluck.

Servant Leadership Reconsidered

In the fields of education and leadership, servant leadership has long been considered highly desirable. The underlying tenet of this philosophical approach is one's desire to serve others (Greenleaf, 1998, 2002a, b, 2007). A key principle of servant leadership is that one puts serving ones followers above one's own needs or the needs of the organization, and in doing so, moves beyond self-interest (Van Dierendonck, 2010). Robert Greenleaf has arguably been the single most influential scholar on the topic. His rise to fame has been helped by endorsements from other well-known management gurus such as Covey (1994) and Senge (Bradley, 1999). Emphatic praise from the "managerial elites" (Eicher-Catt, 2005, p. 17) has led to an almost cult-like adoption of Greenleaf's teachings that is nothing short of pathological (Eicher-Catt, 2005).

The general idea of servant leadership makes sense to me on a soul-level that when we start from a desire to serve others, our moral compass remains firmly fixed on helping others, rather than exploiting them. Although the idea of the servant leadership model resonates deeply with me because of its roots in altruism, I also wrestle with it. This is exacerbated for me because the notion of servant leadership is almost sacrosanct in my field of educational leadership. To say one does not subscribe to the tenets of servant leadership is tantamount to heresy precisely because "serving and leading become almost exchangeable. Being a servant allows a person to lead; being a leader implies a person serves" (Van Dierendonck, 2010, p. 1231). Links to social justice seem to be inherently embedded in servant leadership. The "notion of servant leadership runs counter-cultural to traditional Western notions of leadership where men are heroes upholding positions of power" (Marina & Fonteneau, 2012, p. 72).

However, the definition of servant leadership varies wildly. Critics have noted that the numerous interpretations of servant leadership are vague and problematic (McLellan, 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2010). It has been asserted that the notions of

ethical or effective leadership and servant leadership have become so intertwined that any critique of servant leadership seems to be an endorsement of unethical or exploitative leadership (Bradley, 1999). So as an educator, I have been reluctant to be openly critical of servant leadership, for fear of becoming a pariah in my professional community.

This reluctance has perhaps been heightened because critiques of servant leadership seem limited. Among those that have been situated as critiques, some seem to serve only as a rebuttal of other critiques (McLellan, 2008; Reynolds, 2014). Even though it has been noted that “servant-leadership was not originally developed through research-based scholarship” (Reynolds, 2014, p. 52), advocates seem to insist on an almost unwavering discipleship of Greenleaf’s ideas. Such thinly veiled dismissal of any positionality that runs counter to full and unquestioning adoption of the Greenleaf school of thought seems a bit dangerous to me. When we shut down others’ critiques of ideas, it does not invite further debate on the topic. At the time of this writing, Trump is the President of United States of America and Boris Johnson is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Stories of “fake news” permeate our daily news and the country where I spent formative time as a child is contemplating how it will move forward with its departure from the European Union. I contextualize this chapter in this geo-political snapshots to emphasize that we live in a time when deep intellectual curiosity and debate are needed more now than ever before.

Greenleaf wrote that the idea for this approach was drawn from Hermann Hesse’s (1957) *Journey to the East*. Greenleaf himself notes that the meaning of Hesse’s original work has been debated and there was much speculation about Hesse’s life (Greenleaf, 2007). However, among those who have had the courage to engage in a critique of servant leadership, it has not been lost on us that Greenleaf and, his inspiration, Hesse, were both men of European descent. Among some of the critics of servant leadership that exist, a few have noted that the theory of servant leadership, as it has been articulated in research and management literature, is undeniably Eurocentric, and had its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Liu, 2019; McLellan, 2008). The notion of servant leadership is co-constructed between those who lead and those who are led, which can result in either an over-dependence on the leader, or employees who question whether the manager is a “real leader” (Liu, 2019, p. 1108), particularly if the leader is not of European heritage.

Feminists have noted that the notion of servant leadership is not genderless and that management and scholarly literature “that explicitly discusses women or examines feminist issues through the study of servant-leadership is rare” (Reynolds, 2014, p. 51). One feminist critic observed that servant leadership espouses and upholds patriarchal norms (Eicher-Catt, 2005). Women scholars of African heritage have astutely pointed out that Dr. Martin Luther King popularized the saying, “Anyone can be great because anyone can be a servant” (Marina & Fonteneau, 2012, p. 71). Greenleaf’s theories of leadership emerged shortly after King’s death in 1968 (Marina & Fonteneau, 2012). Given that Greenleaf and King both lived in the United States during the civil rights movement, and that Greenleaf allegedly made a point to promote women and Blacks to “non-menial positions” (Frick, 2004) it seems strange that Greenleaf gave the nod to Hermann Hesse, another white man, as the primary

source of his inspiration. African-American scholars have pointed out that the notion of servant leadership proliferated in African-American churches during the time of slavery (Marina & Fonteneau, 2012), but the possibility of such a theoretical lineage is rarely addressed when we read about or teach the concept of servant leadership.

To the best of my knowledge, Greenleaf never actually lived a life of service. His notion of servant leadership is romantic and idyllic. It appeals to those with a deep sense of morality who seek to do good through their work and their life. Greenleaf himself said, “My good society will have strong individualism amidst community.” (2007, p. 83) But when one is living as a servant to another, one’s individualism does not actually matter that much. What matters is following orders, undertaking tasks such that they are performed to the expectations of one’s employer, and being obedient. What matters when one is a servant is not that one be *individual*, but that one be *invisible*. Greenleaf talks about the noble aspects of serving, but seems not to recognize there is a societal divide between those whose titles deem them to be part of the nobility and those whose life of servitude means that even if they act in ways which seem noble, they themselves will never be part of the nobility. Greenleaf’s apparent obliviousness to the subjugation of those who actually live as servants has been noted by others (Bradley, 1999; Eicher-Catt, 2005), but his oversight has been largely absent from general discourse about servant leadership.

My mind goes back to that day in the scullery... To my mother’s tearful plea that I get an education and “not be a servant”. To her, being a servant was the worst and lowest possible job that anyone could have that was still considered an honest living. It was the only job she could get at the time, given her education, lack of experience, lack of a personal network, and limited employment skills.

The difference, I think, between being the kind of servant leader that Greenfield and others talk about in their work and the kind of servant that my mother actually was is choice... and freedom. The “desire to serve” is easy to talk about when the reality does not require plucking and gutting freshly killed animals. A life of servitude means that you do not have the option of declining or delegating tasks you find distasteful or reprehensible. You do not do the tasks because it is the “right”, or “just”, or moral thing to do. You do them because your employer could (and would) impose harsh consequences that could cost you your livelihood if you did not.

That time in our lives was about survival. It was not until years later (decades, actually) that I realized that there is a certain shame that comes with survival. There is a desperation that simmers underneath, a gagging need to hope for something better, and an unspoken fear that the dark days will never end.

This is an era of my life that I have disclosed to few people, until the past few years. The truth is that I have been ashamed of it. My mother lived in a state of perpetual humiliation during that time. She was ashamed to have us live in servants’ quarters and not have a proper home of our own. We eventually came back to Canada. She took night classes and earned her GED, got a job in a library, and life got better. Even so, we never owned a home, or even a car. And the scars of shame about her life of service remained for many years.

The time we spent living in England was deeply formative for me in terms of my values and life direction. Every single day I was reminded of the value of education

and how important it was and that it was worth almost any sacrifice. When I think about the millions of immigrants in Canada, the United States, and other countries today who work as taxi drivers, janitors and factory workers, because it is the best job that they can get to feed their families. It is not unlikely that immigrant parents in “serving” jobs are saying the same things to their children today that my mother said to me some 40 years ago. They want a better life for their children, one that offers them freedom from servitude, oppression, poverty, and loneliness. For those who serve not by choice, but out of necessity, an escape from that life can be an unending quest.

I am cautious today, when I talk about servant leadership, cognizant that models are sometimes just that—theoretical aspirations we work from when we try to do good. In North America particularly, I think we are almost obsessed by the idea that the power of positive thinking can help us overcome anything. The reality is that having the choice to live one way or another, work and act in a certain way, is driven partly by our own psyche and partly by our circumstances. When the circumstances get better, so the psyche can thrive, too. But before we can thrive, we must survive.

Deep down, my mother was a most reluctant servant. Naturally, she kept up the formalities and appearance of being a good servant, which is, of course, part of the job. But she was deeply ashamed of being a servant. And she wished for me to be anything but that.

My Life as a Scholar

Those formative experiences influenced me deeply. I learned to value education above all else. I became the first person in my immediate family to earn an undergraduate degree. I remember my mother feeling helpless that she could not help me with the admissions application because she had no experience with such processes. It nevertheless mattered to her very much not only that I apply, but that I be accepted. Throughout my post-secondary education, I often had the sense that other students whose parents had degrees had no idea that they were starting with an advantage. They simply took it for granted that others knew how to navigate higher education. I, on the other hand, often felt like I was navigating in the dark, never knowing what the next obstacle would be or when it would appear.

Being the child of a servant meant that I had been taught to be respectful and obedient, to know my place, and to be seen and not heard. These values were—and sometimes still are—at odds with life in the academy, where one is expected to debate ideas with confidence, ask questions, and challenge ideas. Even though I write this chapter as a scholar with a full-time academic tenure-track job, I can easily reflect on moments where the values of my upbringing are at odds with the demands of my role. I recall a moment at a meeting recently where a senior female colleague nudged me in the ribs and whispered in my ear, “Say something! You’re the expert in the room on this topic!” I fight my tendency to listen and keep quiet on a regular basis.

I have found few other women of European background whose experiences are similar to mine. When I read the writings of women scholars of African heritage whose experiences include wrestling with servitude as part of their lived experience (Marina & Fonteneau, 2012), their stories resonate with me, but I am cognizant that their experience differs from mine in deeply fundamental ways. I have had countless privileges as a white woman that they have not had. I cannot claim to know their experiences and I recognize that it would be egregiously wrong to do so.

It seems to me that there is a larger critique of servant leadership that must be undertaken, not only from feminists but also from those who study class, poverty, and decolonization. That critique is beyond the scope of a single chapter, but it is worth emphasizing that there are undeniable power, control, and injustice issues embedded in service that must be explored by scholars through a critical lens. There are further notions of Christianity entangled with servant leadership, such that the two sometimes become inseparable, making critiques of this approach more treacherous, as arguments against servant leadership can be taken as a rejection of Christian values.

For more than forty years, women scholars have been writing about how women's exclusion in the academy has been "an active and brutal process" (Smith, 1975). As I look around me today, I see women in positions of leadership who have become not only mentors, but friends. We have more opportunities for advancement and leadership than ever before. I recognize that although I may not have roots in a community of the intellectual elite, I nevertheless enjoy a position of privilege today. I also recognize that part of my development as an academic and as a leader involve not only finding my voice but using it.

My research focuses on academic integrity and applied ethics in educational contexts. Part of that work includes an obsession with having my students track down and consult primary sources. I insist that they cultivate a conscious reluctance to be satisfied with secondary sources. I have read and re-read Greenleaf's original works numerous times since I was a graduate student. Only now do I feel confident expressing a critique of one of the allegedly great leadership theorists of my field. This is part of what I feel I can do—and must do—with my voice as a scholar: speak up. It behooves us as educators, scholars, and academics to be skeptical. Discipleship is the enemy of criticality. We cannot engage in critical reflection if we insist on following a particular school of thought without scrutiny of the ideas stemming from it.

I continue to think deeply about what it means to be a leader, an educator, and a scholar. I continue to struggle with a notion of servant leadership that has been espoused almost without criticism that was popularized by white men who never lived a life of service. For me, those moments in the scullery led to a path in the ivory tower, but I have never forgotten my roots.

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