

Transcendent Leadership

Gary Greenberg, 21 May 2024

In airport bookshops, LinkedIn, ads in magazines, Amazon, everyone is talking about leaders. Become a Mindful Leader, Ten Tips for Great Leaders, What Leaders Know, What Leaders Do, How Leaders Lead...everyone wants to be a leader.

Nowhere, however, do I see articles like How to Be a Great Servant, What Servants Know, How Servants Serve. The closest it gets is an occasional mention of a dedicated "public servant", a nice name for a government employee, maybe used to make them feel better about receiving a meagre salary.

Yet if you ask any true leader what their secret is, they will tell you this: "I serve the people around me. No one can do this job by themselves, so I empower my team. And we serve our public, whether it be customers, voters, or patients."

The secret to great leadership is to be a great servant. It's that simple.

This insight is not lost on the spiritual community. Jesus came as a lowly carpenter and spent his time among the poor and the sick. Although Vishnu incarnated as the kingly Lord Ram, he also incarnated as Arjuna's charioteer. Hanuman was the ultimate servant, pledging his army and his own life to the service of Ram. This service was his salvation.

Service, then, is the key that unlocks power, whether it be worldly or spiritual. But for service to really accomplish lasting benefit, both to the servant and the one served, it must be selfless. Service done for selfish reasons, whether it is to manipulate others to gain wealth or power, or even create good karma for oneself, only reinforces ego. So for service to play a truly beneficial role in one's life, it must be selfless.

Selfless service, so beautifully explained by Lord Krishna in the Gita, is humanity's salvation. But given the strength of the ego, how are we to transcend our unconscious attachment to the illusory self and act dispassionately? Not only do external things beyond our control happen to us, our inner genetic and epigenetic environment has a strong influence over our feelings and decisions. A friend recently lent me a book by Robert Sapolsky called Determined, which highlights the near-infinite determinants of our thoughts, feelings, opinions and actions, arguing that free will is an illusion and we are like leaves swept along in the river of causes and conditions. If we are essentially blind agents acting and reacting according to conditions, one might very well ask if indeed it is even possible to wake up from this uncomfortable dream that we call life.

The great masters tell us it is possible and they tell us how. Through daily practice of a spiritual discipline, our mistaken identification with conditioned consciousness will loosen, allowing a spacious, peaceful presence (which has always been there) to appear. When we're least expecting it, for an instant we become what we really are, clear light radiating from the Eternal Sun. It's not something we see, it's what we are. We are at home in the center of creation, and the view from here is radiant and full of love, and we are awestruck. There's no pride here, only oneness. Samsara and nirvana are one, and compassion emanates from the heart. If one is to take any road, Service is the only road to take.

I was blessed to be in the presence of Lama Garchen Rinpoche recently and the question arose in me: if we are all one and the separate self is an illusion, who is there to make spiritual effort? And as if to prove the point, someone else asked him that very question. I was overjoyed that my question had been voiced, but even happier when I heard the

answer. It's the Dharmakaya itself, the Infinite One, that makes the effort, Rinpoche said. We're not separate, even in our spiritual practice. We're always One.