

## **TOM HILL**

Tom Hill is a leading voice in the new recovery advocacy movement in the United States. He has served this movement in several roles, including providing technical assistance to many of grassroots recovery community organizations funded through the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment's Recovery Community Services Program. One of Tom's special areas of interest is applying the concept of servant leadership to organizations whose missions focus on recovery advocacy and/or peer recovery support services. Below is a seminal paper that Tom has contributed on this subject. I consider it essential reading for those involved in grassroots recovery community organizing.

William L. White

### **COMMONSTRENGTH: BUILDING LEADERS, TRANSFORMING RECOVERY**

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### **Introduction**

This working paper explores the intersection of the values and principles of Servant Leadership with those of a newly emerging recovery advocacy movement, particularly as the latter has been informed by the culture of 12-Step communities. This paper is intended to provide an arena in which to explore and grapple with assembling aspects of vision, spirit, and information into a newly imagined perspective that has meaning for this movement and can inspire guidance to move forward and stay on track.

The last several years have witnessed a renewed interest and activity in building a recovery advocacy movement. Despite a great deal of enthusiasm and a few small advances, leaders and followers alike have been slow to realize what we have been creating and the movement has suffered from a lack of clarity and, at times, identity. Some of our leaders have assumed the task of making issue-related decisions in a top-down fashion with the belief that decisions are best made by the experts and carried out by foot soldiers, the rank and file, the grassroots. This is not only poor community organizing, but also a futile way to approach the recovery community. It short-changes the potential inherent in this community: a collective abundance of personal histories of transformation, healing, and liberation. In order to tap into this wealth of valuable human experience, a wiser approach might be simply to ask members of this community what is important to them and what issues and concerns have meaning to them.

Bringing together grassroots leaders in the recovery community to take ownership in creating their own movement is a first step that ought not be minimized, dismissed, or rushed. This is an effective way to build a strong constituent base, and can create a training ground for building leadership, acknowledging “expertise” in places where wisdom has been born from personal experience. Involving the grassroots in this kind of activity increases the possibility that an authentic movement can emerge. It’s time to consider a movement born from the struggles of the people that utilizes the unique gifts and responsibilities of recovery to promote deliverance, not only to people in or seeking recovery, but also to the entire world.

Given the choice, why would we want to sell ourselves short with an advocacy movement concerned with reforming a sick system when we have the opportunity to build a liberation movement seeking radical changes in the ways the world operates? The difference between reformation and liberation is the difference between giving a small part of ourselves and giving ourselves with full and reckless abandon, knowing that the antidote for the sickness requires the full dose of our gifts, not just a small portion of them.

**A Vision of Recovery Liberation.** What exactly would a liberation movement look like for people in recovery? It might entail a vision of a world in which people in recovery are no longer looked at as a scourge, but rather as people who have powerful gifts to offer the world, the least of which is the gift of transformative healing, through the practice of specific processes and skills. In order to possess a vision of the enormity of our potential gifts, we need to fully esteem ourselves, both individually and in community. We need to consider what we want to be liberated from. This process might begin with a look at the ways in which we have been and are oppressed and stigmatized as people who have experienced both addiction and recovery. Also warranted is looking at the ways in which we continue to oppress and stigmatize ourselves. Because of the myriad issues involved, a suggested route to getting there starts with an understanding of the various teachings of servant leadership.

Servant leadership is more than a “style” of leadership. As a way of engaging with the world, it suggests a radical alternative to the predominant forms of leadership commonly practiced today. It involves values and behaviors that include listening, empathy, healing, and humility. In the practice of servant leadership, strong emphasis is placed on acts of service (giving oneself freely) which promote growth in others, nurture human potential, and build community. Servant leadership is based on the premise that true transformative healing happens when a leader identifies *first as a servant*. In order to accomplish transformative healing, a leader must be willing to demonstrate a form of leadership that is based on acts of service.

Servant leadership ultimately exposes a leader’s profound weaknesses, from which genuine strengths and gifts can emerge. It requires moral courage for many leaders to embrace and publicly exhibit personal weakness, as doing so ultimately challenges the dominant belief system and view of leadership. Transformative healing evolves through

a synergistic equation of mutual help: A helps B *and* A and B both get better. Servant leadership, paralleling the recovery process, is life-affirming and life-restoring.

Sources and examples of servant leadership can be found in both secular and religious settings. No matter where servant leadership is located, a thread of spirituality runs throughout its practice. Since many people experience recovery as a process that requires spiritual nourishment, we will look at the ways in which servant leadership already exists in the recovery experience and ways in which it can be strengthened through emphasis and intentionality, as we build a movement. This will require looking at how servant leadership has been revealed through religious practice, and we will give special focus to Jesus Christ as servant leader.

The recovery movement is made up of a variety of recovery communities that are coming into being all over the country. Participating in these communities are people who identify as being in recovery from addiction to alcohol and/or other drugs. These individuals, joined by family members and allies, are taking bold steps forward to speak out about addiction and recovery in our society. For many of these people, the route to recovery has involved membership in 12-Step groups. The first of these was Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), which began in 1935 and remains the fertile soil from which all 12-Step groups have sprouted. While there is a proliferation of countless 12-Step groups deriving from A.A., the most recognizable are Narcotics Anonymous and Al-Anon.

**Giving Back to Others a Common Value.** Central to all 12-Step programs is the notion of “giving back.” This means that individuals steward their recovery through acts of service, most notably to others afflicted by addiction. In fact, this very concept of mutuality, in regard both to service and to healing, can be considered a cornerstone of 12-Step recovery. Because of the 12-Step emphasis on achieving and maintaining recovery through a process of mutual healing, spiritual awakening, and service, many 12-Step principles and practices are closely akin to those of Servant Leadership.

It should be emphasized that within the growing recovery movement are people who have chosen paths to their recovery which exist outside of and differ from 12-Step programs. Alternative programs (for example, Women for Sobriety, SMART Recovery) have been created that are geared to people who choose not to embrace a 12-Step path. (Some individuals have made a conscious decision that 12-Step programs are not right for them, based on issues that they have with program content, language, or ideology.) Other people have taken the route of professional therapy or turned to their faith communities. Still others have chosen a solitary path and recovered “by themselves.” Whatever their chosen path or method, all of these people are being welcomed as part of a recovery movement alongside their sisters and brothers from 12-Step programs.

Such ready acceptance has not come so easily to those who are practicing “medically assisted” recovery. The most common and widely used medication is methadone, but also used are naltrexone, Welbutrin, and most recently, buprenorphine. Because of misinformation and misunderstanding, methadone users have been stigmatized by both the general public and the recovery community. Stigma within the recovery community

has come primarily from members of the 12-Step community, many of whom oppose the use of medication or believe that the use of a substance to achieve recovery is counter to the goal of abstinence. However, recovery communities across the nation have made tremendous progress in embracing individuals who practice medically assisted recovery and are beginning to welcome them as a vital part of the recovery movement. (There is a note of significant irony here that points to the predominance of 12-Step beliefs and attitudes in the recovery movement and begs the question, “Who is welcoming whom to what?”)

We can follow the lead of our recovery communities that have grappled with inclusion and seek to include people with all types of recovery as we consider a vision of a recovery movement. Yet, for the purpose of this paper, conscious reference will be made to the principles and practices of 12-Step recovery programs because this is where elements of servant leadership are most readily found. Many people who have achieved recovery outside 12-Step programs have incorporated service as a means of maintaining and enriching their own recovery. Like members of 12-Step fellowships, they have learned that the healing benefits of such service are shared mutually by the one who serves and the one being served. Universal understanding seems to exist among people who took different routes to recovery that one’s own recovery depends on helping others to recover.

**The Collective Spirit of the Recovery Community.** The amazing power and grace contained in the collective spirit of the recovery community is a force to be reckoned with. We do not take our “second chance” for granted. We know that together in community we can accomplish those things we are unable to do for ourselves alone. We acknowledge and cherish the spiritual thread that runs through every facet of recovery and binds us together.

In the last several years, many of us have been gathering to form grassroots recovery communities and decide what kind of movement we would like to build together. We have much to overcome in regard to the stigma, discrimination, and oppression we experience, due to society’s ignorance and misunderstanding of addiction and recovery. In turn, we need to develop a clear understanding of the ways in which we stigmatize and oppress ourselves, both as individuals and as a community.

**Deciding What We Care About.** Coming together in dialogue will enable us to decide what is important to us as a community and to discern the issues that hold relevance for us. It is important that we comprehend our power to decide our own issues and agenda. Taking action that is significant and meaningful to our community can be realized through a process that includes dialogue, discernment, and reflection. I suggest that this process may be facilitated best by grassroots leaders who have consciously adopted the practices of servant leadership.

We have an opportunity to create a movement that fights stigma and discrimination and, more importantly, serves to liberate each one of us from forces that continue to oppress us. This new recovery liberation movement can transform the world for many, including

the folks who still suffer in isolation with their brokenness. We have learned to address our addictions with love, compassion, and forgiveness and have moved toward a manner of “right living” that we call the gift of recovery. It is time to consider giving the gift back, in the spirit of awesome generosity that we have learned, to the rest of the world.

### **A Bold Vision for the Recovery Community**

**A.A. as a Vehicle for Social Change in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.** At a lecture in the mid-1980s, a participant asked psychologist and author M. Scott Peck what he considered the most significant source of social change in the 20th Century. He replied, without hesitation, “Alcoholics Anonymous, because it introduced the idea that people could help themselves” (Baldwin, 1994). What Dr. Peck *did not articulate* was the immense power that is present when a person in recovery experiences mutual healing with another person in recovery and within a community context. The power of this mutual healing cannot be produced, contained, managed, or absorbed by any organization or institution that does not comprehend that its source lies within the human spirit. The power in this healing really is as simple as “one alcoholic helping another,” and it is a healing that has worked for many. As if to complement Dr. Peck’s claim, at the end of 1999, *Time* magazine recognized Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, as one of the top 100 most influential people of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

**A New Emergence of Recovery in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.** If Alcoholics Anonymous was indeed the most important movement of social change in the last century, what new and greater contributions will the recovery community make in this new one? The recovery community has entered the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a new sense of emergence. Some of us are crossing the line and stepping forward. Vocal and visible, we are beginning to boldly tell the world who we are, where we have been, and where we are now: that we are no longer part of the problem. In fact, we not only have suggestions for but are living proof of the solution to what has gone awry with our collective worldview. If we allow ourselves to sustain a large-enough and bold-enough vision, the recovery community can radically alter the social order of society. We can certainly weigh in on the subjects of substance use, addiction, and recovery as we never have before. But we are only at the root beginning of our possible contributions. Because of our intimate knowledge of sickness, darkness, and brokenness, we have the capacity to extend our recovery and healing outside of ourselves and outside of the confines of our communities into the larger world. We also know about the process of change and what it takes to sustain it. We in the recovery community have much to teach a world that is naturally resistant to behavior change, because we once were resistant ourselves.

Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, did not set out to change the world. They simply began with the discovery that when one alcoholic helps another, healing takes place. They had no intention of starting a social movement but were, instead, looking for a solution to save their own lives from the relentless disease of alcoholism. The organization that evolved out of their combined vision and efforts, with its minimal but highly effective structure, reflected their wisdom about the nature of

service and their insights based on their experience that when one sick alcoholic helps another, both can and do become healed. Dr. Bob has been reported as saying that the A.A. experience could be reduced to two words: *love* and *service*.

Over time, Wilson was able to reflect and articulate what exactly it was they had created and made comment upon his realization in an A.A. *Grapevine* article dated 1946 that begins with a description of the recovery process:

*Then, as we learn our new lesson and really accept its teaching, we enter a new level of better feeling and doing. Life takes on a finer meaning. We glimpse realities new to us; we apprehend the kind of love which assures us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. These are some of the reasons why we think that Alcoholics Anonymous may be a new form of society. (A.A. Grapevine, 1988)*

## **What is Servant Leadership?**

**Leadership that Emerges from Serving.** Servant leadership is based on the idea that leadership can rise from a foundation of service. Grounded in the liberationist teachings and practices of Jesus, it has both religious and secular applications. The term was coined in a secular context by Robert Greenleaf in a 1970 essay, “The Servant as Leader.” Greenleaf produced a number of writings on the subject and founded what is now the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, challenging and inviting a new generation to approach leadership from a different and paradoxical perspective. As a result, over the years, a slow but steady servant leadership movement has taken hold in many organizations, institutions, and communities. Greenleaf left us a legacy of thoughts and writings, many of which centered on applications of servant leadership in universities and corporate settings, as well as religious institutions.

Servant leadership, according to Greenleaf (1970), “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.” Greenleaf also established a concrete evaluation measure for determining whether servant leadership was effective or if something could even be considered servant leadership:

*The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?*

Greenleaf, who readily admitted that this test was difficult to administer, understood the equation generated when one person serves another, inspiring the one being served to administer acts of service in the name of their own liberation and healing. This is the equation that becomes manifest, as acts of healing increase at the same ratio of acts of service, and vice versa.

**Greenleaf’s Ten Characteristics of Servant Leadership.** Larry Spears (2003), current head of the Greenleaf Center, extracted ten characteristics of servant leadership from Greenleaf’s writings:

- Listening
- Empathy
- Healing
- Persuasion
- Awareness
- Foresight
- Conceptualization
- Commitment to the growth of people
- Stewardship
- Building community

These thoughtful categories suggest some of the themes involved in servant leadership. They are worthy of deeper discussion, but unfortunately will not be addressed in any length in this paper. Still, keeping them in mind will be useful as we draw parallels with everyday leadership opportunities that occur within the recovery community. We certainly will want to revisit Spears’ thoughtful work in the near future.

### **Recovery and Servant Leadership**

As we explore servant leadership and its significance to the recovery community, it may be helpful to consider a few things that we know to be true:

- The notion of service is widely recognized by members of the recovery community. While the basis for this is steeped in the 12-Steps, those who practice other routes to recovery also are familiar with the relationship of service to sustained recovery.
- People in recovery, particularly 12-Step recovery, have been taught a way of life that is grounded in service. Although we know that giving service is both good and right, we initially do it to stay sober and because we become convinced that our lives depend on it. As individuals become more seasoned in their recovery, they may move beyond this initial need for service and replace it with a general desire and willingness to be useful to others. Regardless of how it is couched, this notion that service not only sustains one’s recovery but also enhances one’s life is not widely realized outside the recovery community. This sets us apart from individuals who may perceive that they have something to lose, rather than gain, by incorporating servant leadership into their lives.
- Because of this essential need to “do service,” members of the recovery community have a keen understanding of *servanthood* (service given freely) and do not tend to confuse it with *servitude* (being subservient). Because service is couched in a recovery context, it counters all connotations that cast service as demeaning or dehumanizing. Transcending the notion of *humiliation*, service is looked upon as a means to practice and maintain *humility*. These are important distinctions for people who have experienced addiction and all of the personal shame—resulting from internalized stigma driven, in turn, by societal stigma—that is embedded in the

experience of addiction in America. A significant turning point for many in recovery is when they begin to address the need for self-forgiveness and healing from shame.

- Because of their experience with oppression, women and people of color have traditionally bristled at the thought of *servanthood*. Yet through their practice of the 12-Steps, many of these individuals from oppressed groups have come to an understanding of *servanthood* not as yet another oppressive force but, rather, as a liberating one, distinctly different from servitude.
- While service is a strong component of our recovery, we are also mindful about not over- extending ourselves and the importance of setting boundaries to our service on behalf of others. Failure to pay attention to self-care can jeopardize one's recovery. Self-care contributes to the development of humility and balance and is ongoing. It is manifested in the saying, "You can't give what you don't have."
- Through the practice of the 12-Steps, many people in recovery know the power of bearing witness to someone else's pain and suffering. At the same time, we have a profound sense of "bearing witness" to somebody else's sense of brokenness, without having a need to fix it. In this way, we are able to "be with," in a relationship which closes the distance between *them* and *us*.
- In a similar vein, through attendance at 12-Step meetings and through contact with other people in recovery, many have come to understand the power that happens when one human being listens to another. The understanding is underscored with the notion that individuals often experience healing simply by the experience of being heard and having someone else bear witness to their pain.
- People in recovery all begin their recovery at the same starting point, which involves surrender. In turn, addiction is "the great equalizer," cutting through the many differences that would normally separate us. Also, because the process of recovery is based on mutual help and healing, we are no different from the people whom we set out to help. This avoids any of the usual trappings of "us" helping "them."
- As we overcome this dichotomy of separateness and operate within a context of sameness, our acts of service become elevated above the often patronizing acts of mission work and charity in which "good, decent people" help the poor and needy or the sick and suffering. In the recovery community, we all count ourselves among the sick and suffering. And few of us, given our histories, have ever been considered "good, decent people," at least during our active addiction.
- As a result of all these factors, people in recovery become very clear about one point that Greenleaf emphasized: the motivation behind an act of service is always as much, if not more, about helping the person extending the service as about the one receiving the service. Through our primary concern for healing ourselves, we set off a ripple effect in which the greater good of the community is offset by the betterment of our own welfare.

**Community Wisdom as Our Guiding Force.** It is in this spirit and framework of our community wisdom that we approach the notion of servant leadership. While we have much to learn, we also have plenty to offer about the process of healing transformation at work through community. If we are serious about taking what we know and communicating it in meaningful ways with the larger world, we need to be humble in our approach. An intentionality in the use of servant leadership principles, which we already

know in our hearts, will help guide us on a course of reflection and action that evokes humility alongside our desire to share our experience with a world that desperately needs our love and healing but may not yet realize it.

**Honoring A.A.'s Traditions of Anonymity.** In an attempt to counter the societal stigma of addiction and recovery, some of us have developed a personal policy of open disclosure regarding our recovery status. Those of us who are involved in 12-Step programs, by honoring the Twelve Traditions and in light of societal views of our addiction, are prudent in maintaining anonymity, both for ourselves and for others. In other words, a person can make a choice to be open about being in recovery, while practicing discretion regarding their 12-Step membership. Because A.A.'s primary purpose is to carry "its message to the alcoholic who still suffers," it never has challenged societal stigma (and most likely never will). Instead, its founders recognized stigma as a deterrent to sobriety and suggested anonymity at the level of press and general media as a strategy to circumvent it. Also, the practice of spiritual anonymity, as codified in the 12<sup>th</sup> Tradition of A.A., is suggested to simultaneously caution against grandiosity and inspire humility.

Therefore, any discussion of servant leadership and building a recovery liberation movement will naturally preclude any direct involvement of A.A. or any other 12-Step group. The reliance on references to 12-Step culture in this paper is expressly for the purpose of setting a tone of historical and cultural precedent and locating underpinnings of servant leadership and spirituality in the recovery community.

### **Spiritual Groundings of Servant Leadership**

**A Program Based on Spirituality, Not Religion.** Alcoholics Anonymous was intentionally structured to be a spiritual program, in a way that it would not be confused as religion. While the intentionality of this is clearly stated in the A.A. literature, the program itself is influenced by and contains underpinnings of its founders' Christian background and heritage. Tidbits of Christian lore crop up in various elements of the program. In addition, in some regions of our country, A.A. groups have taken on a distinctively Christian tone and character. It is important to note that the founders of A.A. were as conscious as they could be, both in their time and culture, of creating a spiritual program that would be accessible to any suffering alcoholic, regardless of their religious beliefs, if any. The suggestion of a "God as we understand Him," regardless of its gender assumptions, is an attempt to transcend culture and religion and remains an open invitation to diverse spiritual experience and practice.

Because of the teachings of the 12 Steps, many members have been introduced to a spiritual life for the first time and have learned the value of extracting spiritual principles from religion for themselves. This has involved internal conflict for some—especially those who react with strong feelings toward churches and institutions in which they have personally witnessed or experienced directly unsolicited judgment, abuse, and oppression. It is important to understand that, for many individuals in recovery,

becoming a member of a 12-Step program may be the first time they have felt an authentic connection with or meaningful belonging to any spiritual community.

**Greenleaf's Views on Religion and Spiritual Seeking.** We have discussed servant leadership as introduced by Greenleaf, who largely (though not entirely) conceived of it as a spiritually based practice in secular settings, predominantly in corporate and educational institutions. However, Greenleaf also gave great consideration to the ways in which the practice of servant leadership could bring renewal to (mostly Christian) churches, especially those that have veered off the path of practicing the teachings of Jesus. This approach is helpful in fleshing out a more comprehensive picture of servant leadership, which is embedded in the spiritual practice in many religions. For example, as we observe certain elements of Christian belief and practice that elevate Jesus of Nazareth as the original servant leader, it is important to consider the many parallels with other religions and spiritual practices in which elements of servant leadership are deeply rooted. In the intended spirit of Alcoholics Anonymous, we can aspire to the creation of recovery-based servant leadership that incorporates all spiritual practices and religions, while understanding that the spiritual experience of many of us in the United States has been culturally rooted in Judeo-Christian practices and beliefs.

This idea of superimposing servant leadership over a pre-existing cultural norm is supported by Greenleaf in a 1966 essay, "The Search and the Seeker." Greenleaf, a practicing Quaker, cites his approach to religion as incorporating the Judeo-Christian tradition as a convenient starting point, because of its cultural familiarity and relevance to him. Greenleaf chooses to use the word *religion* in its root sense: *re-ligio*, which means something that "*binds or rebinds one to the cosmos.*" In a position paper, "Religious Leaders as Seekers and Servants" (1982), Greenleaf offers a useful operational definition for the word *religious*:

*Any influence or action that rebinds—that recovers and sustains alienated persons as caring, serving, constructive people, and guides them as they build and maintain serving institutions, or that protects normal people from the hazards of alienation and gives meaning to their lives—is religious. Any group or institution that nurtures these qualities effectively is a religious institution, regardless of the beliefs it holds to.*

While Greenleaf (1966) expresses regret at the damage that has been done in the name of Christianity, he suggests separating the liberationist practice of Jesus from church and theological dogma. In the quest for a spiritual journey, he suggests the seeker not be afraid of traveling a variety of terrain and specifically cites A.A. as one of them.

**Common Spiritual Values in Eastern and Western Cultures.** Thich Nhat Hanh (1992), a Buddhist monk, offers us a view of the universality of spiritual life from a non-Western perspective:

*If you think that the teachings of Buddhism are completely separate from the other teachings in your society, that is a big mistake. When I travel in the West to share the teachings of Buddhism, I often remind people that there are spiritual values in Western culture and tradition—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—that share the essence of Buddhism. When you look deeply into your culture or tradition, you will discover many beautiful spiritual values. They are not called Buddhadharma, but they are really Buddhadharma in their content.*

## **Servant Leadership and Christianity**

**Elevating Spiritual Essentials from Institutionalized Religion.** With Christianity, as with other religions, it may be useful, as Greenleaf and others have suggested, to separate the aspects of spiritual belief and practice from the church as an institution. Churches of various denominations actively practice and celebrate the teachings of Jesus that promote principles of servant leadership and radical transformation of the human spirit. Sadly, many other churches, having compromised their initial charge to serve the brokenness of the human spirit through an authentic modeling of Jesus, have become institutions that seek to serve and sustain primarily themselves. This is a pitfall of any movement in which institution-building becomes a priority and preoccupation, sometimes an obsession: if we are not vigilant about keeping integrity intact in our institutions, they will cease to serve us and can possibly undermine the very mission and vision that they were built to support.

**The Nature of Fundamentalist Religions.** Early in the evolution of any religion is a period in which people begin to establish codes of behavior that are manifest as laws. This is an important early phase of community or institutional development from which a prophetic phase can emerge, leading to movement toward transcendence and the transformation of the human spirit. Many religions, particularly those that are fundamentalist in nature, get stuck in this phase of abiding and enforcing laws, often emphasizing a rigid adherence to the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law. This rigidity can freeze any movement toward social action and social justice, or render it superfluous. In such fundamentalist organizations (which can exist outside of religion), individuals and communities assert their identities by establishing power and maintaining social control. In turn, they self-define by excluding others who are not like them, especially those who are considered unclean, impure, or immoral (the very people whom Jesus championed).

This risk of fundamentalism is important to note as we look to Christianity as a source for understanding the capacity of Jesus to be a model of the principles of servant leadership. In the day-to-day reality of the times in which we live, we are experiencing life in a society ruled and guided by fear. When fear is promoted as a way of responding to a range of threats, some people take comfort in increasingly rigid structures; a profusion of rules, laws, and moralistic codes of behavior; and a belief that setting up exclusionary measures will ensure safety, or at least give them the perception of it. Within such a

cultural climate, it is no wonder that some people have been attracted to a basically fundamentalist ideology that promises security at the cost of personal freedom.

Charles Ringma (2000), reflecting on the work and prophetic voice of Jacques Ellul, offers a similar perspective:

*We can so easily fall into the trap of making simplistic crossovers from the biblical text to the modern world and claim that this is a biblical view of marriage, politics, community, the arts, and economics. And we then set about imposing that on the rest of the world. Many Christians seek to reinstitute a Christian version of the Old Testament theocracy in the belief that this will create a safer and better world. But the biblical emphasis is more on living a particular quality of life of forgiveness and justice than on the creation of structures.*

Witnessing fundamentalist religions on the rise and gaining a particular stronghold of power gives us a vivid, firsthand, opportunity for noting that a fundamentalist agenda is, by its very nature, incongruent with the principles and outcomes of servant leadership. For example, the political and social agenda of fundamentalist Christians poses a serious affront to the spiritual principles and practices taught by Jesus. Some fundamentalists disingenuously use the terminology of servant leadership, while advancing leadership that promotes arrogance, bigotry, and exclusion. Currently in our country, terms such as “faith-based” are employed as seemingly innocent, practical, and cost-effective solutions to social and political problems, often masking a hidden fundamentalist agenda based on an authority of patriarchy and fixated with power, coercion, and control.

**Taking a Stand on Authentic Servant Leadership Practice.** Building a recovery movement that successfully engages the spiritual values and principles of servant leadership to achieve a truly progressive vision will require us to be very clear about which side of the fence we stand on. We will need to be vigilant if we are to ensure that the power of servant leadership is not usurped by those who have no real intention of practicing it in its authenticity. In creating a recovery movement based on values of human liberation, we need to make careful choices regarding our spiritual sources and religious alignments. When we make reference to Jesus, we need to be clear that we are talking about the man who had the moral courage to stand up for social justice and embrace spiritual transformation. This is the man who turned the tables on greed, coercive power, and oppression. Jesus refused to be corrupted by power and warned his followers about the dangers inherent in succumbing to its seductive nature.

It may be useful to consider that Jesus Christ held and incorporated many characteristics that are considered feminine. In his quiet, contemplative manner, he held a tenderness that was both loving and nurturing. Even in his extreme fierceness, he seemed to be the containment of the feminine spirit in the male body. This is important to reflect upon as we create a movement that makes an intentional use of servant leadership. Initially, servant leadership will be misunderstood and dismissed as soft and weak (feminine) in a contemporary world that is largely fixated on patriarchal expressions of authority,

coercive strength, and militaristic power. As we offer the many ways in which servant leadership has contributed to our recovery and our lives, we can appreciate the radical nature of our message (that strength and power can emerge from the expression of weakness) and its power to bring healing to sick systems or to dismantle them altogether.

When we speak and practice the message of recovery, we are living extensions of the message of Jesus. In this spirit, Henri Nouwen (1972) offers an alternate approach to Christianity: “When the imitation of Christ does not mean to live a life like Christ, but to live your life as authentically as Christ lived his, then there are many ways and forms in which a man can be a Christian.” In this light, we also can speak of messages, similar to those voiced by Jesus, that are contained in many other spiritual disciplines. In fact, locating one source of the message above all others is less important than identifying universally held spiritual values and beliefs that promote social justice, inclusion, and human liberation, along with the practices to realize them. In doing this, we need to be conscious that we are rejecting a prevailing form of Christianity that has traditionally defined itself through the domination of other belief systems, rather than seeking to make important contributions to them and along with them.

**A School for Servant Leadership.** The Servant Leadership School, based in Washington, D.C., and a ministry of the Church of the Saviour, takes a decidedly Christian approach in its teachings of servant leadership. For over fifty years, the Church of the Saviour has spawned a number of small ministries committed to working with and being among the poor people of the city. The school operates under a rubric of social justice, emphasizing the work and teachings of Jesus as one who succeeded in upsetting the balance of exploitative power and championing the poor, the downtrodden, and the outcast, particularly since these are the people chosen by God to inherit the commonwealth or kingdom.

Through study, reflection, and prayer, many students are exposed to an approach to Christianity that challenges their complacency, their access to privilege, and any previous ideas they might have had concerning the gifts and responsibilities inherent in living a spiritual life. Through the School’s activities, students are encouraged to listen closely for and discern God’s call to them, especially as it inspires them to embody the spiritual and social justice principles set forth by Jesus. This movement from thought and reflection into action, a process to which educator Paulo Freire (1972) gave the name *praxis*, transports servant leadership from an academic experience to one in which students are called to be actively and authentically engaged with the world. Leaders at the school refer to this as the *inward/outward* journey.

*What Jesus teaches, Jesus does! And he does it to the extremity of self-giving in suffering servanthood. This offering of self is at the heart of his power to be a leader, and is the key to both his identity as the messiah and his role as a Servant Leader who would challenge and transform the world. (Simms, 1997)*

At the Servant Leadership School, a range of Christian thinkers including Henri Nouwen, Parker Palmer, Jean Vanier, and Thomas Merton are read and their thinking is explored. The work of these thinkers and the teachings and role modeling of Jesus are used to inspire reflective writing on topics of servant leadership. We will explore in this paper, in greater detail, some of Nouwen's thinking, especially as it applies to the relevance of servant leadership in a recovery community context.

**Servant Leadership in Non-Christian Traditions.** Taking Greenleaf to heart, it is important to emphasize that principles of servant leadership also are exemplified in non-Christian spiritual faiths and can be found embedded, for example, in Buddhist, Native American, and Judaic traditions. The Buddhist teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh and Deepak Chopra include essential ingredients for servant leadership practice. Also of particular interest is the work of Don Coyhis and White Bison, Inc. (2002), who have extracted long-practiced principles of servant leadership from Native American traditions. With guidance from community elders, they have superimposed the notions of the 12 Steps on the traditional medicine wheel, thereby rendering the 12 Steps relevant to traditional Native experience.

As servant leadership is studied in greater depth and further applications are made to the recovery experience, it will be useful to consider an approach that authentically includes a blend of spiritual and religious practices. For the purpose of this paper and as a starting point, limited mention of non-Christian experience will have to suffice. However, the need for deeper discussion is germane, especially in a recovery community context in which a variety of spiritual paths are traveled and not always through the realm of Christian experience. Just as we acknowledge many paths to recovery, we can ascertain many paths to spiritual deliverance. Universalizing key spiritual aspects by acknowledging and honoring all forms of religion and spiritual practice will be vital in making servant leadership principles and practice accessible to all people, including members of the recovery community.

### **The Paradox of Servant Leadership**

Because the coupling of the words *servant* and *leader* sounds so impossible at first, we need to understand that the heart of servant leadership will always be found at the crossroads of paradox. It is confounding to many of us, who have been otherwise influenced, to consider how a person could be both a servant and a leader.

**A Definition of Paradox.** Bennett Simms (1997) defines paradox as “the dynamic relationship of two apparently opposing truths that require one another to be wholly true.” The challenge of dealing with paradox in practice, he states, lies in the achievement of balance, although the sense of balance is never perfect. In fact, the greatest paradox of servant leadership is made manifest in our ultimate inability to achieve its balance because of our own humanness and our imperfection. Because of this, our grasp and embrace of the concept of paradox is frequently incomplete and always a struggle. This may be especially true for individuals who are recovering from an addiction-suffused

worldview that separates things into neat, distinct categories of black and white. For many of us, the recovery process has involved engaging an entirely new outlook in which an *either/or* approach can, through an understanding of concepts like harmony and balance, grow into an approach of *both/and*. In this way, paradox can become an everyday reality and a vital component of our recovery process.

So, the paradox of leader and servant is reflected in an entire range of overriding paradoxes that embrace the human spirit:

- Vulnerable–courageous
- Strength–weakness
- Arrogance-humility
- Inner–outer
- Liability–giftedness
- Whole–broken
- Wounded–healed.

**Paradox in Spiritual Principles and Practice.** In the practice of servant leadership, Jesus of Nazareth was a tremendous example and role model as one who held paradox. His presence was an embodiment of heaven and earth, of both the divine and the human. As previously mentioned, perhaps the most radical and transformative paradox he exemplified was the containment of a feminine spirit in a man’s body. Here, Jesus shares similarities to “two-spirit” individuals in traditional indigenous cultures who embody the paradox of containing both masculine and feminine traits and characteristics. Traditionally, in many Native cultures, two-spirited individuals have been socially esteemed as great leaders, shamans, and healers.

Ernest Kurtz is a scholar who has made major contributions to the recovery community, among them *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (1979). In another book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (1992), he asserts that it is in our imperfection that we welcome and embody the paradox in which our spirituality is based and from which it also emerges:

*The core paradox that underlies spirituality is the haunting sense of incompleteness, of being somehow unfinished, that comes from the reality of living on the earth as part and yet also not-part of it. For to be human is to be incomplete, yet yearn for completion; it is to be uncertain, yet long for certainty; to be imperfect, yet long for perfection; to be broken, yet crave wholeness.*

This inclusion of imperfection within the spiritual has often come as a surprise to those of us who thought that we were unworthy of a spiritual life because of our flaws, our brokenness, our aching imperfection. In fact, the paradox determines that no matter how far we evolve toward spiritual wholeness, it is our brokenness and essential humanness that are the sources of our real power and give us the humility to continue. This perspective is supported by Parker Palmer (2000) who suggests considering our light/shadow side: that while we develop ourselves in

the light of spirit, we also must let the darkness of our shadow inform our spiritual practice. This speaks to the experience of individuals in recovery who often express gratitude for their addiction, while seeking reconciliation for it.

The spirit of this sense of imperfection also is expressed in yet another way, as provoked in a personal letter, dated 1960, from Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, to Dorothy Day, founder of *The Catholic Worker*. In the following reflection, Merton could be referring directly to those whose lives have been affected by addiction:

*I am coming to believe that God (may he be praised in His great mystery) loves and helps best those who are so beat and have so much nothing when they come to die that it is almost as if they had persevered in nothing but had gradually lost everything, piece by piece, until there was nothing left but God.*  
(Elie, 2003)

**Paradox in the Practice of Liberation.** In a more secular discussion of transformation and liberation, Paulo Freire (1970) offers us yet another paradox: oppressor–oppressed. He suggests that liberation is likened to the act of childbirth and from its process emerges a new individual who transcends, while still embracing, the paradox of being both oppressor and oppressed. “Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being; no longer oppressor, no longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom.”

**Embracing Paradox as a Means to Inform Leadership.** Simms urges us to view servant leadership not as something unattainable, but rather as an ideal to which we can aspire to practice. Servant leaders consciously and intentionally use the paradox of their flaws and imperfections and the very powerlessness of their servanthood to inform their leadership. They begin their journey by taking a radical stance in a world that insists on equating power with control and vehemently distains any outward demonstrations of weakness or vulnerability. In fact, the quest to embody servant leadership will always run against the grain of what is considered acceptable and valued by dominant cultural attitudes that increasingly reinforce individual strength and independence over a belief in the common good. The ultimate challenge for those practicing servant leadership may be the attempt to elevate paradox in a society that barely comprehends its meaning, much less its day-to-day practice. This may be especially true in many of our institutions and organizations, in which the ability to incorporate paradox (and thus servant leadership) has posed a series of significant challenges.

### **Strengths of the Recovery Community: Principles, Paradox, and Right Living**

**Paradox and the 12-Step Experience.** First, we can pause to savor the ultimate paradox for members of the recovery community, suggested by Kurtz (1992): sober–alcoholic.

Although the words are specific to A.A., they speak universally of recovery in their juxtaposition of *what we are becoming* with *what we are*. This paradox of being/becoming has a particular potency when coupled with the following passage, taken from the end of the Step Twelve chapter of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (1952):

*We no longer strive to dominate or rule those about us in order to gain self-importance. We no longer seek fame and honor in order to be praised. When by devoted service to family, friends, business, or community we attract widespread affection and are sometimes singled out for posts of greater responsibility and trust, we try to be humbly grateful and exert ourselves the more in a spirit of love and service. True leadership, we find, depends upon example and not upon vain displays of power or glory.*

*Still more wonderful is the feeling that we do not have to be specially distinguished among our fellows in order to be useful and profoundly happy. Not many of us can be leaders of prominence, nor do we wish to be. Service, gladly rendered, obligations squarely met, troubles well accepted or solved with God's help, the knowledge that at home or in the world outside we are partners in a common effort, the well-understood fact that in God's sight all human beings are important, the proof that love freely given surely brings a full return, the certainty that we are no longer isolated and alone in self-constructed prisons, the surety that we need no longer be square pegs in round holes but can fit and belong in God's scheme of things—these are the permanent and legitimate satisfactions of right living for which no amount of pomp and circumstance, no heap of material possessions, could possibly be substitutes. True ambition is the deep desire to live usefully and walk humbly under the grace of God. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1952)*

This passage offers a new way of “right living” to anyone who has worked through the cycle of the 12 Steps. Based on love, humility, and a keen selflessness that transcends the alcoholic/addict ego, it suggests certain codes of spiritual knowledge and behavior that bear remarkable resemblance to patterns of servant leadership. Those who “practice the steps,” have been taught that doing 12-Step service is what maintains their recovery and that they can only keep it by giving it away. As some experience a more ripened and mature recovery, they sometimes find satisfaction in applying acts of service that extend far beyond the parameters of 12-Step environments. These acts of service may take many forms and are often an adjunct to 12-Step work, performed in relation to one’s families, communities, or the world at large.

**A New Consideration of Power through Servant Leadership.** Because of lessons learned from our lives, both before and throughout the process of recovery, members of the recovery community may be especially sensitive and have negative or ambivalent reactions to forms of leadership that are rigidly hierarchical, authoritarian, or coercive.

As a result, we may be more attuned to values embedded in Servant Leadership principles. Many who have been acculturated to the 12 Steps have been exposed to and, in many instances, embraced forms of servant leadership without necessarily naming them as such. Further, in the grasp of personal powerlessness and what that means in a person's recovery, more than a few have developed mistrust for the kind of power that is achieved and maintained through control. Here we can add power–powerless to our list of servant leadership paradoxes, perhaps as a direct contribution from the recovery community.

**Paradox of Sickness and Wellness.** Another paradox that resonates with the recovery community is disease–wellness. Twelve-Step culture emphasizes the need for a person to return to the root of his or her sickness in order to achieve and maintain wellness. Bypassing the nature of the “dis-ease” of addiction circumvents the achievement of wellness. This is why people in 12-Step programs continually have to tell their stories of “how it was then” as a means to illuminate “what happened” and “what it’s like now,” exemplifying the shadow–light paradox. This act of self reflection, shared frequently in community, so that members of the community can “bear witness,” is a component of each recovering person's journey towards wholeness, as well as the recovery of the community itself. Nouwen (1972) reiterates this in the context of Christian-based liberation:

*Hospitality becomes community as it creates a unity based on the shared confession of our basic brokenness and a shared hope. This hope in turn leads us far beyond the boundaries of human togetherness to Him who calls His people away from the land of slavery to the land of freedom.*

**A.A.'s Organizational Structure and Servant Leadership.** Components of servant leadership are evident in the organizational structure and culture of 12-Step programs. Meetings are run in an egalitarian fashion, with rotating leadership. Leaders are regarded as trusted servants. Opportunities for telling personal stories, and for both speaking and listening, are available at each meeting. Decision-making is based on group conscience. Service is not only emphasized, but also an expectation.

Twelve-Step culture fosters a bottom-up organizational model, like servant leadership, and is run on strict principles of stewardship. For example, the structure of Alcoholics Anonymous, the progenitor of all 12-Step programs, is based on “bottom up” principles, in which power and decision-making capacity are generated by service representatives of individual “home groups,” or the grassroots. Even in the home group meetings, which attain their own autonomy, decision-making is done by a democratic process of discernment known as “group conscience.” Kurtz (1979) allows that

*the essentially unorganized nature of the fellowship works against any absolute rigidities. However dogmatic or inclined to absolutism any A.A. group may become, any two or three alcoholics who disagree*

*with such a turn may depart and by meeting for the purpose of sobriety form their own, new A.A. group.*

Looking at the almost invisible organizational structure of A.A. presents a tremendous opportunity to understand the manner in which an organization, or a coalition of organizations, can be formed to contain and nurture, but not dominate, a movement. Such an approach to organizational development is a challenge to the way that we are used to doing business. A.A. has successfully demonstrated that incorporating servant leadership principles and values in the early development of organizations charged with fostering a recovery movement can be a way to steer clear of ego-driven practice. As we advance our thinking and propel our movement forward, it may be sensible to take a closer look at the ways in which A.A. has developed as both a grassroots organization and movement.

It is important to note that Robert Greenleaf (1975) observed the servant leadership principles embedded in 12-Step organizational culture. Comparing A.A. to a range of other self-help trends of the time (most of them long forgotten) and their various costs and fees, he made some powerful connections between A.A. and servant leadership:

*Standing conspicuously apart is a slightly older offering, Alcoholics Anonymous, which, over forty years ago, resolved that they would be poor, they would own no real property, no one but a participating alcoholic could contribute to their modest budget, and the essential work of one recovered or partly recovered alcoholic helping another would not be done for money. Some who are close to the problem hold that A.A. has helped more to recover from this dreadful illness than all other approaches (mostly for a fee) combined.*

**12-Step Recovery Based on Necessity of Service.** It has been emphasized throughout this paper that service is the foundation in the practice of 12-Step recovery. Through the commitment to helping one another achieve recovery, 12-Step groups foster the growth of people and promote a combination of empathy and healing. Basic service opportunities are offered to the newcomer, such as setting up chairs, making coffee before meetings, and cleaning up afterwards. These activities encourage a sense of purpose and belonging, give newcomers something to focus on besides themselves, and promote a sense of responsibility that will hopefully keep them coming back. In time, they can graduate to more committed levels of service, as servant leaders of meetings and sponsors of newcomers to the fellowship. In general, there is an underlying principle that suggests that when one is approached by another member with a request for service, such as to speak at a meeting, there is a responsibility to say “yes.”

**12-Step Sponsor as Wounded Healer.** Taking a look at the relationship between *sponsor* and *sponsee* may inspire many servant leadership implications. Sponsors serve to orient the newcomer to the culture of 12-Step meetings, while helping them navigate through the perils of early recovery. Eventually, a sponsor will lead the sponsee through each of the steps in the 12-Step cycle. In this relationship, the sponsor exemplifies the

wounded healer, the term used as title of a book written by Henri Nouwen in 1972. Describing the role of wounded healer as one modeled after Jesus, Nouwen could easily be describing a 12-Step sponsor when he writes about

*a new fullness by making his own broken body the way to health, to liberation and new life. Thus, like Jesus, he who proclaims liberation is called not only to care for his own wounds and the wounds of others, but also to make his wounds into a major source of his healing power.*

*This is because a shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation. When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope.*

Or, put more simply, Elizabeth O'Connor (1991) writes that “we heal ourselves as we engage in the binding up of the wounds of others.” Greenleaf (1973) takes it further, noting that healing means “to make whole” and that “one never fully makes it,” continuing:

*[Making whole] is something always sought. Perhaps, as with the pastor and the doctor, one who enters the person-team relationship as an intervenor who seeks to make it better by his presence might better see his own healing as his motivation. Something subtle is communicated to one who is being served if explicit in the contract with one who serves is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they both share. It is a never-ending search because the concept of wholeness seems enshrouded in mystery, along with other mysteries that we will probably never understand.*

Greenleaf continues to explain the difference between seeing something broken as something that needs to be fixed, rather than healed. In this thinking, he demonstrates a highly profound understanding of mutual healing, especially in the ways that the healer experiences personal healing:

*If you see the impediment as error that you are called upon to change or correct, then you risk being led to assume “I have it; I will give it to you,” either overtly or covertly. If you see the impediment to group effectiveness as illness, you will have a chance to enter the relationship as a healer—to make everybody whole, including yourself, the healer—so that all may see more clearly where they should go and how they should get there.*

Thus, as the sponsor facilitates a healing process for the sponsee, he or she also witnesses his or her own healing process. This use of brokenness as strength is an aspect of servant leadership that resonates with the recovery community. We will explore it further in Nouwen's later work.

**Gratitude for Recovery and Addiction.** Finally, the 12-Step experience fosters a sense of gratitude in community members. People who initially perceived their addiction as a great misfortune become able to see it as a great blessing, because their terrible suffering humbled them to the point that they were able to surrender to something more powerful than themselves, whom many call God. Far from simply being grateful for recovering what was lost before addiction took hold, there is often a greater sense of gratitude over the transformation to a higher sense of selfhood that previously had been either unimagined or unrealized. It is at this location that gratitude meets humility and surrender intersects with liberation.

Bill Wilson (1946) writes about his own gratitude that prevailed over his own self-satisfaction:

*gratitude that I had once suffered the pains of alcoholism, gratitude that a miracle of recovery had been worked upon me from above, gratitude for the privilege of serving my fellow alcoholics, and gratitude for those fraternal ties which bound me even closer to them in comradeship such as few societies of men have ever known.*

### **Conceptualizing Our Experience**

**Personal Recovery in a Larger Context.** Conceptualization, a touchstone of servant leadership according to Spears (2003), is not a strong suit to many who have achieved recovery through the 12 Steps. One of the limitations of 12-Step culture is its tendency to encourage members to keep their recovery "in the personal." Keeping one's recovery personal can lead to framing both addiction and recovery strictly within the context of personal responsibility. Thus, many members of 12-Step programs are hesitant to expand their stories into something larger than the sphere of their own personal experience and comfort level. Because of this, precious opportunities to look beyond oneself and to consider the extent to which members' lives and addictions have been determined by social, economic, and political systems frequently have been missed. A prevalent fear is that by this expansion of thinking, one might appear to others to be taking the focus off one's self or attempting to lay blame outside one's own purview. On a practical note, keeping one's recovery "in the personal" has been a means of promoting hiding, preventing visibility, and perpetuating stigma and myth.

The process of conceptualization is dependent on transcending the concrete and creating or recognizing larger conceptual frameworks to contain it. On an entirely different note, it may require us to hold the paradox that balances the tension between our personal selves and our worldly selves. In order for us to accomplish such conceptualization

alongside 12-Step culture, we are going to have to confront the misguided perception that projecting our experience to bigger systems outside a 12-Step context will necessarily compromise anyone's recovery. In fact, enlarging our vision may very well enhance recovery as we know it. But that thought is foreign to many in recovery, precisely because of the preciousness of their individual recovery to them.

Perhaps one way to help individuals get past their fears is to create the conceptual framework from a foundation of servant leadership. In other words, the idea of putting one's personal experience in a larger socio-political context may appear more enticing if it is linked by comparison to the idea of helping one's self by helping others. One caveat to this is that the idea of enlarging one's vision and conception of recovery may best be suited to individuals who have some seasoned recovery under their belt. This is because many individuals in early stages of recovery need to stay for some time "in the personal," in order to accomplish the tasks necessary to their personal development before they are able to focus on anything outside themselves.

**Freire's Concept of Critical Consciousness.** In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paulo Freire discusses the difficulty or incapacity of oppressed individuals to perceive "generative themes" that serve to articulate the nature of their oppression. Without a consciousness grounded in critical thinking, people tend to reduce their reality to small pieces, lacking an understanding of how those pieces interact and form a whole. With this insight, Freire could have been referring specifically to the recovery community. Freire suggests that for individuals to broaden their reality, they need to "reverse their starting point: they would need to have a total vision of the context in order subsequently to separate and isolate its constituent elements and by means of this analysis achieve a clearer perception of the whole." In simpler terms, this means that it may be helpful to begin with the larger picture and then locate the place that we occupy within it before returning to a new vision of the larger picture.

The lesson for the recovery community is to transcend our fears regarding critical thinking and critical consciousness. Because, in our addictions, many of us tended to intellectualize our experience in order to avoid our emotions, we are wary that if we move too much toward the intellectual, we will compartmentalize our experience. Such compartmentalization has been a way of avoiding our feelings, which is detrimental to our recovery. We need to understand that intellectual activity, in the right context, will not threaten our recovery. Here is another opportunity to look at our handling of paradox. In this case, the paradox of thinking-emotion (or head-heart) presents us the challenge to integrate what we think with what we feel in a way that promotes a more holistic self.

**Creating Opportunities to Expand Recovery and Eliminate Stigma.** On a seemingly more practical level, by creating a larger context, we will create opportunities to inform, enhance, and expand our personal experience of recovery and share it with the community at large. We also will have an opportunity to understand oppression in new ways, including the way that our experience of being oppressed led some of us down the path to substance use and addiction. This is linked to the oppression that we all

experience from a society that continues to stigmatize us and discriminate against us, irrespective of whether we are in the throes of active addiction, have decades of recovery, or are anywhere in between. Looking at every facet of our experience of oppression will give us further opportunity to examine the extent to which we now continue to participate in our own oppression and how self-oppression and internalized stigma continue to haunt us and hold us back. This accomplishment will afford us a solidarity that we have never realized, calling all people in recovery to stand together. For example, when we extend hospitality to our brothers and sisters who have been locked up by the criminal justice system, as a result of their addiction, we can boldly proclaim that addiction is not a crime and we will not allow ourselves to be called terrorists.

## **Other Challenges to the Recovery Community**

**Our Vigilance about Being Inclusive.** Looking at oppression and internalized oppression from another vantage point may help us ascertain the various ways in which our community practice is less than inclusive. In an earlier section, we spoke of “addiction as the great equalizer” and stated that everyone in recovery has the same starting point. In a very profound sense this is true and yet, as a community, we need to take a hard look at the various ways in which we allow that truth to become undermined. Because the hierarchical power structure of our society becomes socially reproduced in our community, recovery is not always played out on the level field that we might like to imagine. Contributing factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class can place any individual in a privileged or disadvantaged position and function as obstacles to their recovery. Further, compounded stigma, based on such components as ex-offender status, homelessness, mental health, or HIV status can be devastating, not only in terms of maintaining recovery, but also in finding one’s place in the recovery community. Finally, we have had the tendency to create our own pecking order based on substance of choice and path to recovery and have barely begun to consider what to do with family members and allies.

So, as we continue to discern and discuss who we are as a community and who we need to become, we have important decisions to make. If we are sincere about our goals to be inclusive and to make recovery available to everyone, we need to authentically create a space for this to happen and sensitize ourselves to the ways in which we have been oppressed, the ways in which we are still oppressed, and the ways in which we oppress ourselves and each other.

**Extending Service Beyond the Confines of 12-Step Culture.** A final challenge for members of the recovery community will be to take the notion of service as it works in the context of 12-Step culture and filter it through a servant leadership lens, projecting it to the greater recovery community and the community/world at large. While we have a positive, gut-level response to servant leadership, our conceptual understanding of it is immature and unformed. If we can boost our conceptual skills, we may be poised to enlarge our vision to one which encompasses a full-blown, large-scale liberation movement. Such a vision can begin with those of us in recovery, extend to our families

and allies, and eventually branch out to everyone in the world who is experiencing any life-depriving aspect of the human condition. (It might also require us to deepen our understanding of addiction and recovery and the ways in which they become embodied on individual, family, community, and societal levels.) This vision of abundance requires us to take some rather large steps, steps that reflect the esteem with which we are held by others, both as individuals and as communities in recovery.

With this new vision of liberation as a goal, we are likely to project the power of our potential into greater realms both inside and outside the recovery community. In doing so, we can proclaim the skills we have to offer as gifts: our tremendous resiliency, our ability to survive and transcend challenging circumstances, and our commitment to personal growth and transformation. We have an even more potent gift to share: our experience of naming the pain of our brokenness, walking through it, and using it as a tool to heal both ourselves and others who are broken.

*This is because a shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation. When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope (Nouwen, 1972).*

In fact, our greatest gift may be contained in our profound sense of hope. However, for this vision to come to fruition, we first have to work through our fears and come to believe in our own capacity to transform the experience of recovery into a liberation movement that can be shared with and benefit the world.

## **Learning from Another Liberation Movement**

**Analogies with the Gay Liberation Movement.** As we approach the idea of a liberation movement based on recovery, it can help us to look at the formation of previous movements. While a number of movements can inform us, for the purpose of this paper, we will look at the vicissitudes of the early lesbian/gay/bisexual/ transgender (LGBT) movement, particularly in its early years when it was known as the gay liberation movement. The primary reason for choosing this movement over others is to look at the gay community's strategies to address and overcome societal stigma.

Prior to the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 in New York City, gay political organizing was low key and had a conservative, polite tone. Then, fueled by a new breed of gay activists, many of whom had cut their teeth during the civil rights, women's, and anti-war movements of the 1960s, the gay liberation movement set out to target three major arenas of oppression: the legal system, the mental health (and health) professions, and the church. However, before any kind of movement agenda could be established, leaders had to contend with the fact that they had a very small constituency that was willing to be vocal and visible.

**Consciousness Raising as a Social and Political Tool.** For many who were willing to become activists and visible community members, considerable training and consciousness-raising (CR) had to occur. The purpose of CR was to enable community members to elevate their thinking and politicize their personal experience. (In the terminology of the day, participating in this personal process of change was referred to as “becoming radicalized.”)

Lesbian feminists, who had learned the practice of “CR groups” during their extensive work in the women’s movement, brought their skills and experience with this potent tool to the emerging gay movement. They applied these skills in small, informal, CR groups which met regularly in people’s living rooms and kitchens. These groups gave people an arena in which to understand the ways that oppression had deeply affected their lives and to establish commonalities in experience with individuals like themselves. For many, it was a time to understand that their mistreatment by society was not their fault and that they no longer had to consider themselves sick, sinful, or immoral or as outlaws. CR groups gave people an arena to come together and learn, grow, constructively deal with their anger, and move toward action. Eventually, people were able to use CR groups to develop a process to discern issues that would ultimately be moved forward as initial platforms in the movement’s political agenda.

**Key Similarities in Underlying Issues.** If we take a look at the issues and actions that have emerged in the LGBT liberation movement since the early days, we can see some commonalities with some of the issues in the recovery movement, as well as the types of actions that might be taken by it:

- **Visibility and coming out:** In order to build a base and to challenge stigma, pioneers of the LGBT movement realized the necessity for constituents to proudly and publicly self-identify.
- **Legal and discrimination issues:** These have ranged from repealing sodomy laws to addressing housing and job discrimination to advancing the more recent agenda concerning the honoring and sanctioning of LGBT relationships and families.
- **Homophobia and stigma:** Like addicts, LGBT individuals have been told that they are sick, immoral, sinful, fatally flawed, and incapable of living a happy life.
- **Internalized homophobia and stigma:** Many LGBT individuals continue to believe that they are sick, immoral, fatally flawed, and undeserving of a happy life.
- **Movement from pathology-based thinking toward wellness:** This began with an activist strategy that led to the removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder from the DSM-II by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973.
- **Movement from “moral deviance” towards goodness:** An early slogan of gay liberation, “Gay is Good,” challenged the prevalent thinking that gay was dirty, degenerate, and immoral. LGBT inclusion in certain mainline churches has experienced advances (and setbacks) for the last 35 years.
- **Countering judgment based on the perception of (bad) behavior:** This point is salient to any constituent group that is perceived by others as a group whose

members' behavior is immoral, sinful, or wrong. One reason why the American public has been so dispassionate about HIV/AIDS is because it presupposes that AIDS has been brought on by individuals who engage in "bad behaviors" and ultimately get what they deserve.

Each of these issues and actions parallel those with which we currently struggle as we consider building a recovery movement based on liberation. It should be noted that even after the 35 + years of community organizing and movement building, the LGBT community is still quite divided on whether to consider itself a radical liberation movement or a reformist one, based on fighting for civil rights. Still, LGBT community leaders have continually created space to come together to discuss the intrinsic differences between various approaches and to locate the places where they intersect. We in the recovery community will be wise to look more closely at the history of this movement, as well as others, with all their achievements, compromises, and setbacks, as we plan out the course and agenda of our own movement.

**Lessons Learned about Inclusion.** Finally, consider the lessons of inclusion: how to authentically consider issues of race, class and gender. Tantamount to the LGBT movement has been the ongoing struggle of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals over including and standing up for the transgender community, even when doing so has meant setbacks in social and political acceptance. None of this struggle has come easily. LGBT people realize that you don't get anything unless you fight for it, even if it means being included in your own movement. There is a lesson here for us in the recovery community as we witness our own struggle to authentically include elements of our community that experience additional stigma and oppression because they are ex-offenders, achieve their recovery through medically assisted means, or exhibit signs associated with mental illness.

A conscious study of servant leadership may well give members of the recovery community the conceptual skills and framework to make the leap from the personal to the social and political. Imagine study-dialogue groups that provide members with an opportunity to discuss readings, raise consciousness, and garner support from one another. Such a notion may initially instill fear in individuals who have been told that to leave the sphere of the personal recovery and delve into other areas will put them on "a slippery slope," inevitably heading for a drug or a drink. One way to approach this resistance may well be through the example of the community's experience of spirituality. Because many members of the community access spirituality as means to maintain their recovery, servant leadership (as a spiritual concept) may be the vehicle to inspire movement from the personal and serve as a tool for building capacity toward greater conceptualization.

### **Recovery Culture and Servant Leadership**

The values in 12-Step culture are clearly based on spiritual principles. While 12-Step literature emphasizes the separation of spirituality from religion, a strong and sometimes

overt grounding in Christianity is often found. One example is the “11<sup>th</sup> Step Prayer,” the prayer of St. Francis, which exemplifies the heart and soul of Christian-based servant leadership: “It is better to comfort than to be comforted, to understand than to be understood, to love than to be loved” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1952).

**Blending Secular and Religious Forms of Servant Leadership.** Because of their grounding in spirituality, both secular and Christian forms of servant leadership are likely to have resonance with the recovery community. Further, the community will most likely embrace a hybrid of the two forms—secular and religious—as its newly termed servant leaders (or some comparable term) take existing recovery community principles, values, and practices and instill them with new life and intentionality by reiterating them and reorganizing them under an overlaid map of “Recovery Community Servant Leadership.”

The challenges ahead will be to take the recovery community’s understanding of spirituality and servant leadership and to build a movement that makes both as universal as recovery itself. A significant task will be to inspire members of the community to adopt conceptually (and in what might be considered “outsider” terms and ideas) what they are already doing in 12-Step practice and to extend their notion of “giving service” beyond the confines of the 12-Steps and into greater society. By providing a theoretical framework for and extension to already existing practices, work being actively undertaken by members of the recovery community can be reinforced through a new mindfulness and intentionality. This is a way not only to build and enhance existing forms of leadership but also to elevate the esteem and positive visibility of the recovery community overall.

### **Nouwen: Through a Recovery Filter**

Many of the writings of Henri Nouwen hold resonance with recovery community values, particularly those derived from 12-Step experience. Nouwen, a Catholic priest and theologian, left a prestigious position at Harvard University after receiving a call to live and work with a community of severely disabled individuals in Toronto, known as L’Arche. In various writings, Nouwen refers to 12-Step work, so it is safe to surmise that he had some working knowledge of it. Whatever the extent of his personal experience, it is difficult to read his work and not draw distinct correlations between his understanding of a servant leadership process and the process experienced in 12-Step recovery culture.

**Articulating Religious Experience to a Secular Audience.** While many of his writings are enlightening, for our use here, it is particularly useful to look at Life of the Beloved (1992). The book is a personal account by Nouwen directed to a longtime friend whose life is entirely outside the experience of Nouwen’s religious community. Because it is an attempt to communicate concepts of God and spirit to a secular audience, the book serves as a model for transcending religion, specifically Christianity, to provide more universal and less institutionally based interpretations and assumptions.

**Nouwen's Four Components of Spiritual Life.** Nouwen outlines four basic tenets of a spiritual life. These four components inform the essence of servant leadership and have been used by institutions and proponents of servant leadership as a template for educating. The structure, though quite simple, has a cogent relationship to the basic fundamental notions of the 12-Steps. Nouwen breaks spiritual life down into four basic themes: 1) Taken, 2) Blessed, 3) Broken and 4) Given. Although a brief synopsis of each segment follows, it is highly suggested that the reader study this lovely book to get a greater understanding of Nouwen's intention in his own words:

- **Taken:** Nouwen speaks about the notion of being taken (or *chosen*) by God. We are all taken/chosen by God. Since everyone is taken, this is not an action that makes us unique or different from others. In other words, being taken does not give us rank, although it frequently comes with responsibility. What may be different is the manner in which God takes/chooses us. For many of us in recovery, we can trace the time that we were taken by God, or a Higher Power, as that moment in which we made the decision to leave the darkness of addiction and begin our journey of walking into the light of recovery. Others have spoken of experiencing a deeper "call," as their recovery has evolved into more seasoned stages.
- **Blessed:** To accept being blessed requires only that we allow the blessing to touch our original goodness. It means canceling out the negative messages that we have heard about ourselves (and have so often internalized) and replacing them "with gentle reminders of that beautiful, strong, but hidden, voice of the one who calls us by name and speaks good things about us (1992)." Embracing our blessedness becomes the way in which we ground ourselves in the pure love that God has for each of us. It creates space for self-forgiveness which, in turn, promotes forgiveness of others and the possibility for reconciliation. Finally, it is in our sense of being blessed that we derive the impetus of our power: "The blessed one always blesses."
- **Broken:** We are all broken and we all have a place of darkness and pain. Often, the root of our brokenness is rejection, isolation, or loneliness. Some of us are more in touch with our brokenness than others, and, in some of us, brokenness manifests itself in more obvious modes. For those of us in recovery, brokenness is not only present in our addictions, but also in the range of factors that contributed to our becoming addicted. Further, in the course of our addiction, we were often active participants in contributing to our own brokenness, by acting out our low self-esteem and self-hatred. Because of these various factors, being broken can be a source of great shame and internalized stigma and can promote all manner of illness and "dis-ease." According to Nouwen, the way to healing is to place our brokenness under a blessing. Like a healing salve, the blessing helps to soothe the sting of brokenness.

Another way of looking at Nouwen's thinking is that blessedness and brokenness are flip sides of a coin, the light side and the shadow side, exemplifying, once again, the paradox of servant leadership. Because God has blessed us, we are capable of generating self-love and self-forgiveness, which foster a process of healing our brokenness.

*And so the great task becomes that of allowing the blessing to touch us in our brokenness. Then our brokenness will gradually come to be seen as an opening toward the full acceptance of ourselves as the Beloved. This explains why true joy can be experienced in the midst of great suffering. It is the joy of being disciplined, purified and pruned. (1992).*

Further, by extending ourselves to others, we find that helping others helps us heal, as well. Nouwen assures us that it is our brokenness and our weakness from which rises our greatest strength. By extending our brokenness in authentic and engaging ways, we are able to promote healing in ourselves and others.

- **Given:** Completing the cycle is the final stage which requires us to give ourselves completely to God, each other and, ultimately, the world. God is asking us to give away what we have and to trust that, for everything we give away, more will come back to us in ways we never could have imagined. For many members of the recovery community, this is understood as “giving service” and “giving back,” as detailed in the 12<sup>th</sup> Step. This is the inward/outward journey that we learn to travel through acts of service. It is through service that we facilitate and accelerate our own healing through the practice of helping others. We do this because it serves to secure our recovery and, ultimately, because it saves our lives. Because the giving of ourselves is the panacea for our brokenness, and the act of healing is cyclical, like the 12 Steps, and never complete, we come to value the notion of service as it becomes an unquestionable and unwavering part of our lives.

*It has become clear that [Christian] leadership is accomplished only through service. This service requires the willingness to enter into a situation, with all the human vulnerabilities a man has to share with his fellow man. This is a painful and self-denying experience which can indeed lead man out of his prison of confusion and fear. Indeed, the paradox of [Christian] leadership is that the way out is the way in, that only by entering communion with human suffering can relief be found (Nouwen, 1972).*

**The Call of Servant Leadership to Those in Recovery.** This cycle of taken-beloved-broken-given encapsulates the basic reasons why a person in the recovery community is naturally drawn to servant leadership. Whereas those outside the recovery community

might balk at the notion of serving or have a tendency to misunderstand service entirely, members of the recovery community, and especially those with experience in 12-Step culture, will likely be able to embrace this paradigm with a fundamental understanding and a full and open heart. Members of the recovery community have the capacity to understand that an act of service, similar to an act of surrender, is not about victimization, but, on the contrary, is an act of personal and spiritual liberation. We fundamentally understand the difference between *servanthood* and *servitude*. Nor is an act of service merely about giving our spare time in the realm of volunteerism. If we can begin with our desire (and, for some, a mandate) “to serve, to serve first,” then following the call of servant leadership may indeed become a natural part of our recovery process and we may be able to explore it with a new intentionality. Nouwen (1992) put it this way:

*The different twelve-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, and Overeaters Anonymous, are all ways of putting our brokenness under a blessing and thereby making it a way to new life. All addictions make us slaves, but each time we confess openly our dependencies and express our trust that God can truly set us free, the source of our suffering becomes the source of our hope.*

### **Conclusion: Consciousness Precedes Being**

*We too can offer something to you: our experience and the knowledge that has come from it. The specific experience I'm talking about has given me one certainty: consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable. (Havel, 1997).*

This quote by Vaclav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, in his 1990 address to the U.S. Congress, might well have been describing the recovery community. *Our experience and the knowledge that has come from it* are based on the pain of our brokenness and the transformative healing and liberation that have emerged from it. We in the recovery community have suffered scorn and rejection from a society which has devalued our experience of addiction as a product of a weak, lazy, and resource-draining mentality. We are continually blamed for being irresponsible and hell-bent on feeling good, when many of us attest that we were drawn to using substances in order to feel normal or to assuage the pain of our brokenness. Since many of us experienced brokenness long before we ever

picked up a substance, it is abundantly clear that there is often much pain and woundedness lying beneath any addiction.

**Raising Our Heads and Our Consciousness.** Even in recovery, we still suffer the blame for our addiction and mistrust of our newfound and often hard-earned stability. Even after we have reconciled with our past and made necessary restitution, even after we sought reconciliation and have proved that we are valuable members of society, we continue to suffer the stigma of both our addicted and our recovered selves. And to some degree, we participate in the sully of our own names and reputations. We have been hesitant to raise both our own heads and our own consciousness to the level of transforming our internalized stigma and self-oppression. But all of this is significantly changing as each of us considers our social responsibility of healing others as well as ourselves, both in and outside of our community. In this way of stepping out of the shadow of the problem and into the light of the solution, “coming out” as a person in recovery can and should be considered a revolutionary act.

**Naming Our Fears and Walking through Them.** For the recovery community, building a liberation movement may well be reduced to a final paradox of fear–love. Going through the process of our recovery, we have had to name and walk through our fears. We know that this “walking through” is a constant fact of our lives, because recovery *is* a process and not a one-time event. Parker Palmer (1990) reminds us that all of the great spiritual traditions honor the hallmark “Be not afraid.” This directive is a reminder that we do not have to operate from a place of fear, as long as we expand the capacity in our hearts for love and hold the knowledge that we are never alone. In fact, as fear may be embedded in each of our calls to leadership, each one of us can answer our personal call with the love and deeply felt knowledge of servant leadership.

**Time to Offer Our Gifts.** In the end, we have to decide whether we have the willingness and compassion necessary to make our offering to a world that is in desperate need of the gifts that we have received. As the sickness and pain of the world deepen and as its citizens become more isolated and detached from community, many arenas remain in which the concept and processes of recovery can and will be welcomed. We are the navigators of that process on the most visceral level.

As we master each of the ten tenets of servant leadership, as outlined by Spears by way of Greenleaf, and the four areas of Nouwen’s sense of the beloved, and link these to the practice of the 12 Steps, we are likely to emerge with a new set of servant leadership principles that are a hybrid of all of these sources, but specific to our experience. With these tools of servant leadership and our newly forming consciousness, we will be equipped and ready to step forward to enter the world in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a new worldview and an intention to proffer the generative gift of recovery, and the processes that facilitate it, to the individuals, families, communities, and nations that so achingly need it.



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