

# Leadership In InBetween Spaces

## A Reflection by Jim Emrich

### Getting Lost

..."We want a guide who only has at heart our getting lost! This is the ground on which the greatest religious traditions of the world have always stood. The tradition built around the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the one in which I grew up and which has the greatest symbolic meaning to me now, seems especially emphatic on this point. Jesus seemed only to have at heart our getting lost; he was concerned with what must be taken away rather than what was gained." So wrote Robert Greenleaf in 1963, six years before he authored his seminal article on servant-leadership. In my heart, I know that Bob has spoken a deep truth. Servant-leadership, at its best, is grounded in the soil of authentic religion. It is not a secular concept. It is also about getting lost, laying aside the conventional wisdom as a guide to how we should be and act in the world.

### Getting Lost in a Banking System

Several years ago, one of my clients, a large banking system with a national market, decided that it wanted to take consumer banking seriously. Senior management wanted to develop a new strategy for identifying customer needs and delivering timely cost effective products to serve those needs, and they wanted this strategy and the required implementation steps developed now. Thus, we decided to use a whole-system change process that would gather a critical mass of people together to assess customer needs, develop potential product offerings and identify the key strategic initiatives necessary to bring these products to the consumer market. The "critical" mass was some 200 branch and regional managers from all over the country (most of whom had never worked together before) and the process we used was Open Space Technology. In essence, we had to go from "Hello, my name is and this is what our consumer customers are telling us that they need," on day one to "Here are the critical strategic factors for success in the consumer market and how to implement them," by day four. In the end, the effort was a genuine success, but not without getting really lost in the process giving rise to confusion, fear, anger and temptation.

### Where are we and where are we going?

By the second day of our gathering the situation seemed very chaotic: ideas literally flying all over the place with no leader emerging. Would the energy of this group ever get focused and if it did, would it be in a positive direction. Was this the cauldron of creativity or a rebellion in the making? My job as a consultant was to "hold the space" (yes, pray for and in it) as a sacred place where God's Spirit and human spirits were working together.

### This is new and we are frightened

This group of managers was given a responsibility and a commitment they had never experienced before. They were in charge and in some ways, this was scary! Power was now relational as distinct from unilateral. Neither they nor the senior executives who commissioned the work were comfortable with this as it began to unfold during the second day. There was a great desire for a single leader to emerge from the group or failing in this, senior management should just take over and tell them what to do. After all, isn't that what leadership is? One, or

perhaps a few leaders, and lots of followers. My job as a consultant was to believe that God was at work in them enabling them to both will and work for God's good pleasure. Practically, this meant that I was a human encouragement (give courage) vessel with a simple message, "You do not have to be afraid."

### Out of our fear we have become angry

Initially the fear of the group turned into anger. But gradually, fear turned into passion. What they genuinely cared about in serving their customers emerged and the quality of their engagement in the immediate work moved to a new level. The drive to serve and the willingness to accept responsibility came together. Senior management needed to embrace passion in a different. Not unlike the passion of God, they needed to embody passion as hopeful waiting. My job as a consultant was to help both the working group and senior management do their work of living out of passion, although for each it had a very different face.

### If you are a consultant, you will make this effort a success

The conventional wisdom is that good consultants are supposed to be relevant, powerful and, on frequent occasion, spectacular. This is how our "value added" is frequently understood. These are the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness. These are also the temptations which servant-leaders face and the ones I knew I would face in undertaking the assignment. Thus, I prepared for my work by praying with the temptation passages for over one month and worked with the reflections of Parker Palmer and Henri Nouwen on these temptations of leadership.

### Meeting ServantLeadership

#### Again for the First Time

Servant-leadership has ancient roots and yet seems to be just emerging. It proceeds from the conviction that God serves and loves God's creation and that we are to do likewise. It embraces freedom and is embraced by the Spirit that nurtures it. It embraces order as it focuses on, productivity, effectiveness and creation of human "wealth." It honors personal fulfillment and expects contributions to the good of the commons. It is an act of faith as opposed to the pursuit of success.