



## A Mentor's Journey ... I Get It!

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### **Abstract**

This personal essay walks the reader through the career path of an educator, illustrating personal and professional growth all along the way – including the transformational impact of earning a DSL degree from Regent University in 2007. Key takeaways: gold nuggets, lessons learned, questions for further reflection, references to Robert Greenleaf and other major influencers in the servant leadership arena, as well as recommendations for further reading give the reader an opportunity to utilize this life journey reflection as a personal tool for self-assessment and growth.

*Keywords:* servant leadership, relationship, emotional intelligence, passion, calling, community, shepherd, innovation, second half, servant, listening, accountable

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### **Introduction**

In college, I must admit I chose education as a major because that was the vocation I had seen modeled the most. I remember sitting in those initial pre-service classes and sometimes doubting myself. Am I up for this? How will I become competent in working with students every day? Do I have the grit? Do I even want to do it?

But, my instructors had a passion for their craft, and that influenced me. One in particular, Dr. Pearson, exuded a love for learning and critical thinking, and I gravitated to his disposition. He seemed to dedicate his best to his work as if it were a calling. Was I called to teach? I think I was – while sitting in his class my sophomore year, learning from his discernment and his pushing back on some traditional schooling practices and the status quo mindset.

Yet, when do you really know for sure? The first day I had my own students, my apprehensions disappeared. Something deep inside kicked in, and off I went. I was a

teacher – indeed such an honorable profession. And I enjoyed it ... I was fulfilled ... I did feel called. I thanked God for what I strongly felt was His hand in all of this. I had relied on my Christian faith to take me down the right career path, and it did.

Oh my, year one ... I lost my voice about halfway through the fall. I met so many people in my home community I had not known before. And I coached athletics after school. When the end of the second semester rolled around, and I could actually catch my breath, I was exhausted – but also, I realized I could do this and do it well. The kids were a blessing to me more than they realized. I loved the spontaneity of a creative classroom. I loved being a positive role model. I loved the focus on meaningful work. My undergrad profs would have been proud of me, but still, I did not quite get it. Soon I was back in school, working on my master's, then school administration certification, and in what seemed like a quantum leap in time, I had 12 years under my belt as a teacher. The bell tolled, and in the middle of the summer just before going into year 13, I was called on to serve as the principal of a P-8 school. Oh my, from the frying pan into the fire! But I loved it. I was solving problems for people all day long. My wife said I came home much later in the evenings but with a smile on my face. I focused on reinventing where needed – whether the master schedule, turning staff loose with new initiatives, embracing innovation in the classroom, or inviting parents in to truly be a part of the school's community. Peter Block (2018) wrote about the critical need across our society for a return to community groups that fellowship and work together, and the school setting is a natural fit for this culture of relationship and belonging. When I later heard him speak at the Greenleaf Servant Leadership Conference in Indianapolis, his message resonated with me.

School-level leadership is one of the most influential positions one can hold. How many jobs can one think of where you get to talk to hundreds of people every morning on an intercom to help them start their day? Speak to a gymnasium full of kids? Be recognized as a leader in the community and region? Invest in and grow a staff of professional colleagues? Sit around the leadership team table with the superintendent as one of the key influencers in moving the school district forward? But, still, I did not quite get it. The average shelf life of a school principal is four years (Donley et al., 2020). I made it eight and a half. And just like that, my turn at the local school level was over. I was 43, I had given what I had felt was my best, and my track record landed me at the State Department of Education serving new school principals as a leadership consultant – mainly a provider of support, a shepherd. Again, I loved this new work! I logged many miles, day after day, visiting young leaders in schools all over half of the state. I could not believe I had fallen into such a gig, and I instantly found new energy and passion. Bob Buford (2015) called this renewal of life purpose the second half, and it does often include following the call to new work. This privilege to help mold young talent, to give back from the other side of the desk, had been an epiphany for me that previous summer at home with my wife and our two young girls. I was painting our

farm's fence in front of the house, and it came to me in an instant, "You are burned out, spent. How many other principals are feeling the same way across the state right now? Help them." But, still, I did not quite get it. Eventually, something down inside told me to go back to school! What? Why? I was in the second half of my career and had transitioned to an education cooperative much like a think tank that provides services to schools and districts. At this stage, this was perfect for me. Creative, innovative work providing support to our colleagues down in the trenches. But that voice within kept nagging at me to begin doctoral study. And so, I did. And oh my, what a priceless journey those four years offered me. The focus of the program was servant leadership. The emerging research on the topic – how the practice of this lifestyle changes self, lends authentic care and support to others, and transforms organizations – was fascinating to me. And we zeroed in on Ken Blanchard's quadrant: leading self, coaching others, developing healthy teams, and growing a healthy organization (Blanchard, 2018). Soon afterward, I heard Larry Spears speak and was thrilled to have the opportunity to meet him and chat for a few minutes. Larry was well known internationally for his scholarship in the domain of servant leadership. His mining from Robert Greenleaf's writings on the 10 key characteristics of servant leadership spoke to me. These North Star nuggets are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2018). So, I began integrating servant leadership principles and resources more into my work. But, still, I did not quite get it. Soon after earning my doctoral degree in strategic leadership, I was offered a position to teach in higher ed. The timing was perfect for me to jump into working with graduate students who were training to be school administrators. I remember the first day walking across campus to my new office. I could not believe it! Was this real? I was actually a college professor? I loved every minute of it, and my students loved studying about servant leadership and how it can transform a school into a culture of care, relationship, trust, accountability, and innovation. I soon realized that in education circles, the works of Blanchard, Greenleaf, Spears, John Maxwell, Stephen Covey and many other well-respected authors who wrote in the servant leadership camp were not being read as much as they needed to be by teachers and school-level leaders. Their message was compelling: Our life's work is not about personal achievement and external accolades in the manner in which the world defines success. Instead, it is about unselfish purpose. But, still, I did not quite get it. For the last 17 years, this walk in higher education and learning more and more about servant leadership has been such a priceless journey. My students have let me know over and over this increased focus on serving and creating a stronger culture of care in the school setting is needed, and they embrace it. I am blessed beyond measure to have the privilege to do this work. And I love the focus in academia on the latest research and sharing our new findings. Recently, a colleague from another university sent me his new book, *Servant Teaching: Practices for Renewing Christian Higher Education* (Schultz, 2022). Once I looked inside, oh my, such a jewel! The

short read explained, page after page, how to facilitate a college classroom in the true spirit of serving. From learning all student names from Day 1 (before Day 1) to creating every class session to be rich and alive, listening to students more, dropping the overwhelming and often almost worthless busy work, doing much less of “this is how I did it” and building much more true community. This reading was inspiring to me. I had been on the right track all along – however, still missing the mark a bit. All these years I have, indeed, been growing as a teacher. All these years I have made sure I plugged into every course what I considered important content. All these years I have, indeed, mentored, lecturing on and hopefully modeling the virtues of this and that. I have generally tried to learn the names of students and build quality relationships with them. But also in all these years, I have not really considered much (enough) that any legacy we leave as educators, any long-term memories a student has of how we might have positively affected their life, any significant growth they may have attained under our care. These outcomes depend on one thing: genuine care for every student, as if they are the neighbor next door – not mainly an ID number that will need a grade attached by the end of term. David Brooks (2023) identified this intentional connecting by genuine listening and understanding as the art of knowing others and being known. I get it! If even one student, in any course, is left feeling like they were not connected well to me or as if I had not had the time to focus on their work and circumstances fully and with a teacher's bent toward mentoring with attention and care, then I have failed – at least to a degree. Over the years, I have attended several leadership conferences led by John Maxwell and heard him teach over and over that growing people is one of any leader's most important responsibilities. Scouting for talent, developing talent, and multiplying talent (Maxwell, 2020). My work is about investing in positive ways in others. It is a paying forward of sorts. I decrease, others increase. Yes, I do get it.

### **Nuggets That Help Keep Me Centered**

1. A fulfilling, unselfish life is not about our wants and acquisitions, but instead God's call to make a positive difference in the lives of others.
2. A servant's heart is about investing in others and helping them grow into their full potential.
3. Finding my voice is not finding my comforts, but instead being in touch with who I genuinely am on the inside, and then helping others find their voice.
4. The model of Christ (wash their feet, feed My sheep), and His core values of love God, love others, and make disciples is the answer to addiction to narcissism and causing pain for others.
5. The legacy we leave is not a résumé of accomplishments, but a lifetime of unselfish purpose.

## Lessons Learned in the Higher Ed Classroom

1. Students can tell when we are engaged in the class with them.
2. When we are real, students will be more real and be more engaged in the course content.
3. Humor, taking time for community, and the sharing of concerns – showing interest in students as more than subjects in a class.
4. Students know they need to be held accountable, but doing that with grace makes all the difference.
5. Developing and seeing the class more from the students' perspective will make the experience for them so much more memorable and fulfilling. Yes, we have an important task to complete, and so do they. But we should see ourselves as leaders of leaders. They know when we care on a level deeper than merely getting them to the academic finish line.

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, 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 they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 22)

### Questions for Further Reflection:

1. Can you remember a teacher who modeled authentic servant leadership for you and your classmates?
2. What is your process for creating a culture of care in your classroom?
3. Have you had specific training in the domain of servant leadership and emotional intelligence in your school or department?
4. Is your organization servant-focused? If so, how is this growing the workplace in healthy ways?
5. Are you able to remember the names of your students, where they are from, and what is unique about them?
6. What is one strategy you would recommend to other educators on how to transition from being too content-driven at the expense of being relationship-centered?

### Recommendations for Further Reading

- Leadership and Self-Deception. The Arbinger Institute.
- The 8th Habit. Stephen R. Covey.
- Necessary Endings. Henry Cloud.

- The Courage to Teach. Parker Palmer.
- Primal Leadership (Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence). Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee.
- Strengthening the Heartbeat. Thomas Sergiovanni.
- Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership. Samuel D. Rima and Gary L. McIntosh.
- Atomic Habits. James Clear.
- Long Journey Home. Oz Guinness.
- The Road Less Traveled. Scott Peck.
- Service in the Trenches—School Principals Share True Stories of Servant Leadership. Edited by Rocky Wallace, Eve Proffitt, and Stephanie Sullivan.

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### About the Author

Rocky came to Campbellsville University in the fall of 2018 to help develop the graduate education leadership program. He had previously served in a similar capacity at Asbury University and Morehead State University.

A former school principal of a U.S. Blue Ribbon School, Rocky has served as a consultant to school principals for the Kentucky Department of Education, and as director of instructional support and adult education at the Kentucky Education Development Corporation. He has authored/co-authored, edited/co-edited 12 books on servant leadership and school improvement for Rowman & Littlefield.

Rocky and his wife Denise co-pastor Claylick United Methodist Church near Lawrenceburg, Ky., and have two grown daughters, Lauren and Bethany, granddaughter Corrie, 6, and grandson Cade, 4.

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