

Speaking to GREATNESS: Nurturing Genius

By Ann McGee-Cooper

Each of us has many gifts that we enjoy yet take for granted. I have spent a lot of time reflecting on the voices and mentors who helped me see my gifts and have the courage to live into them.

I was fortunate to be introduced to Robert K. Greenleaf in 1980 by Diane Cory, who then worked for AT&T, and he became a generous friend and mentor, supporting our work designing learning experiences teaching servant leadership, a concept Greenleaf championed. I didn't have a great deal of time with him but the instances when he did serve as a mentor were deeply transforming.

I remember Bob listening in a very deep and profound way. He was never quick to answer. And he asked surprising and interesting questions. I hoped that he would "give me the answers." But more times

than not, he would ask questions to help me think from a new perspective. And when I pushed hard for his opinion on a specific teaching approach, he said something like this: "Ann, you have so many gifts making learning fun, creative and interactive. Trust your instincts. You are there with the Partners at TDIndustries and managers at AT&T. You will sense things intuitively that I can't foresee. Learn to listen to that still, quiet voice within and observe what happens with those you are teaching. Trust yourself to know how best to engage them as they create their culture of mutual trust and serving their Customers." Those weren't his exact words. I probably can't come close to what he said. But what stuck with me and kept challenging me through the years was his deep faith in my unique gifts to make learning meaningful, beginning with the learner's concerns and therefore highly engaging. He would say, "The secret is to build from what comes from their concerns, insights and gifts."

I wonder if we don't all have wise voices from the past that keep speaking to us and encouraging us to dare to trust

our many gifts and keep reaching higher. I vividly remember an art teacher in a scholarship class at the Houston Art Museum, Ms. Norma Lynn Woods. I had just spilled black ink across a drawing I had labored over meticulously for many hours. She came over and sat beside me and reassured me, "I know you are frustrated that the plan in your head has now been taken away. But I have noticed that you do your best creative work when some accident or mistake blocks your initial plan. How can you make this accident work in your favor?" This may have been the seed of a powerful life lesson that there is always an opportunity in every problem. The bigger the problem the bigger the opportunity!



Robert K. Greenleaf

My mother chose to describe some of my ridiculous ways of approaching work as, "Ann has

a great gift of finding ways to make work fun!" One day my job was to mow the lawn and the grass had gotten quite tall. I figured out a way to write my name across the lawn with the lawn mower and then go back to carefully mow each section until my name had disappeared. My father was frustrated by my time-wasting antics. Yet Mother chose to see this as a creative act, bringing a challenge to an otherwise mindless task.

Each of these is an example of speaking to greatness or mirroring that something special in each one of us that makes us unique and fuels our personal genius. Think of genius as whatever you do effortlessly or with such deep concentration that you forget to be tired, hungry or even what time it is. You become absorbed in deep fascination and pour huge personal resources into honing your mastery. I know that gardening holds a key to my genius because I can be out in very cold weather, planting bulbs, stacking rocks and pruning frozen plants and not feel the bitter cold. Gardening



isn't work for me but more of a fascinating puzzle and sacred sanctuary that brings me close to Mother Nature.

Gardening ignites my intuition and helps me hear my inner voice. I am completely absorbed in feeding plants and pulling weeds and suddenly, out of the blue, some insight breaks through.

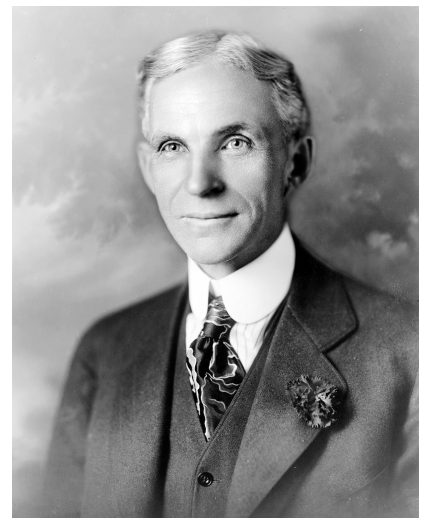
I suggest that a powerful skill of a servant-leader is to make time to mirror the specialness of those around us. Duane Trammell, our co-founder, is a master at breaking down a huge, complex project into a well-planned process with a timeline. And he always makes sure to engage our input before he draws up the process. We each see our influence and it becomes like a huge, fascinating game or challenge. His visual reminders keep us all focused on "True North."

Noticing the everyday gifts of those around you at work and home can awaken a special warm glow and energize these strengths to keep growing at an even higher level. I hear people say, "I don't need appreciation. Just tell me when I err." Yet many areas of research reflect that if you want to excel, set a high goal and picture yourself already there. Getting trustworthy feedback that you are making progress fuels your resolve. And hearing from

more than one person about a special gift can provide the courage to believe it is real and significant.

I strongly encourage you to make it a daily habit to mirror the greatness, strengths and genius in those you love, admire and work around. And if you find yourself interacting with someone who sets your teeth on edge, try focusing on their gifts instead of what frustrates you. By building on strengths we tend to grow more authentically than when our flaws are endlessly pointed out.

I have always liked a quote by Henry Ford.



"Whether you believe you can or you can't, you are right."

By mirroring the individual greatness of others, you can transform their self-image and contribute to maximizing greatness.

"Nothing much happens without a dream. For something really great to happen, it takes a really great dream."

-Robert K. Greenleaf