

The
Awakened Leader 

Leadership as a Classroom of the Soul

by Susan S. Trout, Ph. D.

THREE ROSES PRESS ♦ ALEXANDRIA VIRGINIA

Personal stories in this book have been changed
to honor the privacy of those involved.

Portions of this book were first published in
Born to Serve: The Evolution of the Soul Through Service.

©2005 by Susan S. Trout

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means,
electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information
storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the
1976 Copyright Act or in writing by the publisher.

Published by Three Roses Press, P. O. Box 19222, Alexandria, VA 22320

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 0-9625386-3-9

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2005900534

Cover and book design by Jane Perini

Author photograph by Suly Uberman



ESSAY ONE

The Seed of Leadership

Once we give the seed of leadership an opportunity to take root, it must grow into its own tree. Just as a giant sequoia grows upright while a Monterey cypress is twisted, spreading, and gnarled, individuals must apply their own force to create the shape of their leadership.

The impulse toward leadership has felt like a ride I have been on since birth. I even ponder the possibility that the source of my acute sense of destiny for my life rests in previous soul experiences. I imagine a meeting in the beyond in which I raised my hand to volunteer to do this job of learning about leadership and service, not only for myself, but in connection with a larger picture that is global in scope and metaphysical in nature.

Many people besides me lead because they are compelled by a sense of destiny. Destiny is a calling from the soul. Since we always have choice, we can choose



*Destiny is a calling
from the soul. Since we
always have choice, we can
choose how, when, and if
we accept our soul's call.*

how, when, and if we accept our soul's call. If our soul calls us to lead, taking time to look for the thread of leadership in our lives is a worthwhile pursuit. By recollection and self-reflection, we can see both the compelling forces and the stages of growth we have experienced. We identify our perceptions and actions, puzzling out why some efforts worked and others did not. When we glean knowledge from our examination of the past, we bring new leadership insights and skills forward

into the present. Our choices reflect our growth and guide us in our leadership destiny. This reflection, both on the problem at hand and after the fact, hones the direction of our leadership and helps us expand and challenge ourselves further.

Often destiny is revealed through a single incident. Throughout my youth, my mother told the story of my birth in tones that conveyed her belief that I had a special destiny. My parents, concerned that their second-born was a month overdue, hired Mrs. Schnegas, a midwife my mother described as having "the gift." When Mrs. Schnegas asked my mother if she wanted to know information about her unborn baby, my mother readily agreed. Mrs. Schnegas reported that the child would

THE AWAKENED LEADER

be “a daughter born with a veil over her face and would be intelligent, pretty, and an outstanding leader in her chosen field.” The midwife then adjusted a lump in my mother’s abdomen and I was born soon after with a rosette caul over my face. My father punctured the caul so I could take my first breath. I weighed over ten pounds and had an extremely misshapen head and a flat nose. Over the next several weeks, Mrs. Schnegas reshaped my head and pulled out my nose, perhaps shaping my destiny as well as my face. By telling the story, my mother planted the seed that I had a gift, which I was to discover and use to benefit others. Each retelling of the tale fertilized this seed.

Looking back, I can see how certain factors came together to inspire my later interest in the brain, communication, and healing. The reshaping of my head was the beginning, followed by the fact I waited until almost three years of age to speak and then did so in sentences. I was the eldest daughter of four children and felt particularly protective of my two sisters, as well as of my deaf grandmother and brain-injured aunt.

My mother, a talented seamstress and needleworker with a wry sense of humor, suffered from depression. She fluctuated between being emotionally unavailable and venting her anger on the family. Despite my mother’s illness and our sometimes-fractured relationship, I always knew I was a bright spot in her life. Her inability to effectively parent her children led to my early recognition of parenting as *the* most important role on earth. Later, this belief became a commitment to teach adults about the nature of the human psyche so they could heal their emotional wounds.

My father was an exceptionally gifted tool-and-dye maker and inventor. He described me as independent and strong-willed and told how, at age five, I asked him to stop telling me what to do so I could learn from my own mistakes. Although he complied with my request, he believed girls were destined to become wives and mothers and denied his daughters assistance with college. His refusal and my

THE SEED OF LEADERSHIP

innate desire to learn drove me to seek the academic success I needed to ensure myself a college education. At the same time, his example taught me a variety of practical life skills, including a surprising ease with machines and finances. My parents' German and Swiss roots offered a home imbued with the values of organization, discipline, and hard work. My siblings and I were taught to be self-sufficient and productive citizens while dutifully meeting family responsibilities.

We are not, however, only products of our parents and home life. The seed of leadership is also watered by the place and time in which we live. Our development is molded as much by deprivation as by nurture. When our soul is determined to evolve, it will find a way to convert even rocks to fertile soil. Delineating the ups and downs of our life enables us to see how we have transformed the obstacles into gifts. As we reflect on the events of our life and how they affected us at the time, we discover the meaning behind both positive and negative memories. No experience in life is wasted.

I grew up during the Second World War in a small farming town in northwestern Indiana founded in the late nineteenth century by German, Irish, and Polish immigrants. My family was practical and conservative. Working hard and helping others was proof of a good life. A small town provided a contained, protective world, especially against the backdrop of war, giving me opportunities I would not have had in a larger, more urban setting. Described as a "natural teacher" by the school principal, by age fourteen I was a regular substitute teacher in the elementary school. Soon after my high school graduation and with



When our soul is determined to evolve, it will find a way to convert even rocks to fertile soil. Delineating the ups and downs of our life enables us to see how we have transformed the obstacles into gifts.

THE AWAKENED LEADER

no college degree, I was offered a teaching position at the school. I opted instead to pursue degrees in the diagnosis and treatment of children and adults with communication disorders and brain dysfunctions.

Despite the positives, my view of the world was restricted by small-town values that esteemed the practical over the creative arts and the predictable over the spontaneous. I did not hear classical music or see the masterpieces of great artists until I went to college. Participation in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church provided further restriction, leading me later to question the value of organized religion. Breaking out of the narrow confines of my conventional upbringing has taken conscious effort. I have sought opportunities to learn about eastern and western spiritual traditions and metaphysics to find the ground of my own beliefs. I have traveled, and explored music, art, and history in order to overcome my fear of the greater world and to transcend my inner reserve and lack of self-confidence.

Recognizing the degree of our belief and disbelief in our own abilities allows us to better identify the challenges we face as leaders. Our challenges come through our wounds and our drive to heal or overcome them. For example, if we are rooted in the belief that the ultimate value in life is productivity, we may be well-organized leaders who neglect the rich role imagination plays in solving problems. Caught in a box of linear thinking and predictability, a conflict arises when we are confronted by the unexpected. We may experience challenges in our relationships with our coworkers because we ignore their creative potential. Once we face our inner conflict and heal its cause, we bring the spaciousness of creativity to our leadership. We become leaders who can harmonize our inner world with our outer relationships.

For me, the desire to excel academically was to some degree driven by my need to prove to myself that I was not as worthless, incapable, and unintelligent as I believed. These beliefs persisted, however, despite achieving top grades and posi-

tions of responsibility and leadership. Any failure to be chosen as a leader at school or church left me devastated and I compensated by becoming socially responsible and competitive. My success won me the approval and love of my teachers, who throughout high school and college reflected back to me a belief in my potential I myself did not hold. More than once, a professor has pounded on his or her desk in an attempt to shock me out of my stubborn belief in my worthlessness.



A sense of unworthiness or a desire to earn a loved one's approval often drives people toward successful careers and leadership roles.

A sense of unworthiness or a desire to earn a loved one's approval often drives people toward successful careers and leadership roles. Our destiny is ensured, perhaps, by what our soul is trying to overcome, or, stated more positively, by what our soul is trying to learn. We can, of course, choose to close our eyes to the opportunities. Although repeatedly presented with facts to the contrary, I could not integrate the praise

and feedback from my teachers in a way that transformed my self-belief. Sometimes, in order to please someone else or to perform to expected social norms, we take detours that are not in the best interest of learning the lessons we need. Pursuing excellence in academia, for example, can close the door of creativity and innovation, effectively sealing off the expression of individuality and the voice of the soul. Early successes, such as mine in a small, supportive town, can lead to fears when put to the test of a larger, less friendly environment.

From my earliest recollections, my interest in being a writer paralleled my desire to be a leader. In high school, I wrote poetry, plays, and kept a diary. In college, my writing efforts turned to essays, term papers, and clinical summaries. Being competitive, I was driven to write the best possible term papers, well-researched and well-documented, and soon suppressed my poet-self except in personal letters.

THE AWAKENED LEADER

I developed a fear of having an original opinion, certain I could not be insightful and creative. This fear reached crisis proportions when I developed writer's block while writing my doctoral dissertation. I could not select my thoughts, organize them, or put them into cohesive sentences and paragraphs. Acute anxiety made my handwriting barely legible. My sentences were long and written with clauses within clauses, sentences within sentences. Eight years later, in the process of counseling a doctoral student on overcoming his writing block, my own inner writer returned.

My first professional position after receiving my master's degree was in Anchorage at the Alaska Center for Handicapped Children and Adults and the Arctic Health Research Center. I worked with speech, language, and hearing-impaired children and adults and traveled by bush plane to do hearing research in Eskimo villages along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers and the Bering Sea. Later, I accepted my first professional leadership position as a department head and sensed the complexity of leadership by observing the challenges of the organization's director.

Living in Alaska, immersed in its beauty and accepting culture, helped me break out of the strictures of my small town upbringing and learn more about myself as a person. One startling discovery I made was that, at age twenty-three, I felt disconnected from feelings of love of self, love of humanity, and love of Source. To survive the emotional pain of my childhood and to protect my heart from further harm, I had, over time, closed my heart to receiving and extending love. Sensing I was in grave danger of losing my vitality and will to live, I searched for a way to rekindle my heart's love and wisdom. I chose to reconnect with animals, which in my childhood had offered unconditional love and made me feel safe in an unsafe world. Among my favorites had been a cat and three pet chickens, which slept under my bedroom window and allowed me to dress them in doll clothes and push them in my doll buggy. As a young adult, I needed to reclaim that experience and

THE SEED OF LEADERSHIP

begin the healing of my heart. I selected a Siberian husky puppy as my companion. His love, playfulness, and independent spirit soon awakened my heart from its long dark night.

Meanwhile, I became increasingly aware of the tremendous gap between the stellar leader I wanted to be and the emotional strength I needed to be one. My motivations were paradoxical — my strong desire and determination to lead co-existed with a stark fear of being attacked and harmed by those I led. My greatest fears were that I would make a mistake, be criticized, and neglect my responsibilities. The source of these fears rested in my childhood experience of being the target of relentless parental anger. These same fears affected the choices I made in my personal life. To be socially responsible, I felt I had to do what was socially expected. I felt conflicted between choosing a career and marriage.

As a child, I told my mother I would not marry or have children. I seemed to know that fulfillment of my destiny lay elsewhere. Personal goals such as marriage or children, or challenges such as illness or family problems, can distract us either temporarily or permanently from attending to our responsibilities as leaders. By definition, leadership makes intense demands on our attention and energy. Balance between work and home is difficult to achieve, especially for women.

Following my need to meet social guidelines, I forgot my childhood wisdom. From Alaska, I returned to graduate school. In the Midsixties, halfway through my doctoral studies, I married, even though every bone in my body told me it was not wise to do so. I followed my husband to California where he had a position as a surgery resident in San Francisco. I stayed at home and devoted my time to decorating our apartment, tending to housekeeping, preparing my husband's meals, and joining him in hospital-related events and social activities with his friends.

San Francisco at that time reflected the nation's loss of trust in the establishment. Civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests were commonplace. The gen-

THE AWAKENED LEADER

eral civic unrest was mirrored in my personal life. Three months into my marriage, I felt my life energy dangerously wasting away. In 1966, a friend handed me Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan affirmed my own deep knowing that by trying to confine myself to society's narrow image of "woman," I was denying my own identity. I reentered my profession and accepted a position in neuroscience research at a medical center. Soon, I was asked to create a graduate program for training professionals to work with children and adults with neurological impairments. At the time, most workers in this field were trained in university departments of education. Our department challenged this practice by offering clinical training and a master of science degree. At thirty-three, I became the first woman to chair a university department within a medical center in San Francisco. Simultaneously, riding on the tail of the women's movement across the nation, the designation "chairman" was changed to "chairperson." I was on my way to discovering how exhilarating, dramatic, and frightening a leader's role can be.



Once we give the seed of leadership an opportunity to take root, it must grow into its own tree.

Once we give the seed of leadership an opportunity to take root, it must grow into its own tree. Just as a giant sequoia grows upright while a Monterey cypress is twisted, spreading, and gnarled, individuals must apply their own force to create the shape of their leadership. Holding back from doing so thwarts destiny. Leaders are leaders because of their willingness to stand forth and make known their beliefs. The first time I learned that a leader makes her beliefs known occurred when I was a twenty-year-old college senior and assisting the director of a freshman dormitory. When the director became ill, I was left in charge of 125 freshmen women. Innumerable messages were soon slipped under my door informing me of recalcitrant behaviors of the young women. I called the residents together and, after truthfully sharing my limi-

THE SEED OF LEADERSHIP

tations and responsibilities, I conveyed my trust in them and asked if they would be willing to be self-responsible for their choices. To my surprise, they agreed.

From this and later experiences teaching and working with the hearing and neurologically impaired, I knew I wanted to be a leader of a helping profession. I felt I could contribute to remedying the professional incompetence I observed. I wanted to build programs that inspired and sustained professionals. By the time I became department chairperson, I had decided to be a leader fully committed to a vision and one willing to go against established conventions to bring that vision into reality. I determined to lead a department that would train clinicians to become self-responsible adults who balanced personal growth and service by caring for their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. I wanted to teach professionals to bring their whole selves to their service in the world and to their personal lives.

San Francisco in the 1970s felt like a breath of crisp, pristine air. Like Alaska, the city offered open and creative opportunities for further shedding my traditional past. For the first time, I heard the words *holistic health*, *meditation*, *personal growth*, and *spiritual awakening*. Resonating with these ideas, I studied, took courses, and engaged in dialogue about holistic concepts and strived to apply them in my daily and work life. My heart ached when professionals giving speeches on new paradigms of medicine and education were booed and mocked by the audience. Transcendental meditation, *est*, and Esalen made front-page news as oddities. I concluded it was dangerous to be a cutting-edge leader who introduced change to the status quo. Little did I know I would need an endless source of inner strength if I wanted to be among the strange ones.

Part of nurturing the seed of leadership requires nurturing intuition. Using rational thinking alone is insufficient in analyzing complex problems and in identifying the next best step in an organization's evolution. It is impossible for us to know the full complexity of the organization without integrating reason and



*Part of nurturing the
seed of leadership
requires nurturing
intuition.*

intuition, qualities of the head and the heart. In doing so, we begin to rely on our hunches, our heart's felt sense. We look for analogies and sense parallels that exist in seemingly disparate situations. I did not realize the full value of attending to my heart and its intuitive wisdom as a leader until I was faced repeatedly with situations whose solutions I could not find using rational thought alone. Comforted by

Einstein's words, "I never discovered anything with my rational mind," I decided to nurture my intuition by developing a spiritual practice of meditation and beginning my day with quiet contemplation. Over time, I observed the fruits of this practice. Solutions, ideas, and next steps for the department and my leadership "fell into my head."

Once I was personally comfortable with the emerging paradigms, I felt compelled to challenge the status quo of the patriarchal medical center and university. I introduced meditation and personal growth methods into our graduate program and asked graduate students to care for their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. Our department closed every afternoon for a twenty-minute meditation, which was considered inappropriate in an academic setting. When the administration did not support my leadership, I reacted with the spirit of a warrior and became an activist. Suspicious of my leadership style, the university and medical center arranged for an external evaluation of our department. We received stellar reviews. Yet, within a year, the university president abruptly closed our department along with other innovative off-campus programs. The professed reason was limited financial resources.

The closing of the department and the collapse of my marriage occurred simultaneously. Free to forge a new life, I decided to explore the lack of joy I had long

THE SEED OF LEADERSHIP

felt in my career. To discover the true meaning of service and my motives for helping, I embarked on a personal quest in search of an answer to a long-held question, “What does it mean to serve with God’s eyes?” For nearly a year I traveled and volunteered for people and organizations in several cities. In 1980, the journey led me to relocate to Washington, DC.

Once settled in my new location, I agreed to accept a position as training director of a personal growth organization even though I did not feel aligned with its philosophy. The instant I agreed, I knew I had made an error. A dark cloud engulfed me, accompanied by the same inner turmoil I had experienced on my wedding day. Once again, I had chosen to listen to my head and its rational thinking and not the messages of my heart. I knew, as I knew with my marriage, that I had chosen against my destiny and would one day have to correct my choice.

As with my marriage, I vowed to “be responsible” and do what needed to be done to make a wrong decision a right one. The codependency I had learned as the eldest daughter of a depressed mother resurfaced. I could not say no because I feared disapproval and needed others to validate my existence. I was not aware of my true feelings.

I decided to use the intense emotional and spiritual pain resulting from ignoring my heart’s intuitive wisdom as an impetus to heal and grow. I embarked on an inner journey that led me to face the quality of my motivations for service and leadership and the quality of my interpersonal relationships. I recognized I needed to leave my position and informed the board and director of my intention. Within weeks of my decision, but before my departure, the organization’s director was diagnosed with terminal cancer and died.

When the board asked me to become the new executive director, I tapped into a pool of primordial grief and sobbed uncontrollably. With my head and heart as one, words gently cascaded from me like ancient wisdom flowing from an oracle:

THE AWAKENED LEADER

“Yes, I accept, but you need to know that this center will never be the same. With me as its leader, this will become a different organization than it is now.”

My destiny course corrected, I returned to learning how to lead an organization that balanced personal healing and service and applied universal psychological and spiritual principles in everyday life. I wanted to lead people willing to be self-responsible for recognizing and healing obstacles to their personal growth and who wanted to incorporate this growth into their service and the organization’s structure and programming. When I said yes to the board, I knew with certainty that together we were destined to evolve into an exemplary and integrous nonsectarian spiritual and educational organization. Over time and with name changes to mirror transitions, the Institute for the Advancement of Service was born.

As with a tree, the planting and early years of growth of the seed of leadership are the ones in which the organism is most likely to be damaged or destroyed. But even mature trees need nurturance in the form of water, sunlight, fertilizer, and pruning. They must become strong enough to weather storms, survive drought, and fight disease and infestations of insects. Like the life journey of a tree, leader-



Like the life journey of a tree, leadership is not a product but a process.

As we grow in inner strength and competence, more is asked of us.

ship is not a product but a process. If thus far my leadership had been characterized by both enthusiasm and challenges, such experiences would only increase. As we grow in inner strength and competence, more is asked of us. This means problems will loom and their solutions will require greater creativity, strength, and fortitude. Care of ourselves as leaders subsequently takes on increasing importance.

THE SEED OF LEADERSHIP

For nearly twenty years, my role as the Institute's director has brought my soul into the richness of its leadership classroom. As a small organization with an uncomplicated organizational structure, the Institute's setting supports conscious learning of soul lessons. I can easily observe cause and effect between decisions I make concerning structure and philosophy and the effect these decisions have on others. With every achievement, challenge, and crisis I have experienced in my classroom at the Institute, obstacles to my personal growth have been burned away and my soul has been served. Guidance, support, and protection have always arrived from both seen and unseen helpers. Each time I grow in my leadership, the energy of the Institute shifts and the entire organization and all of its members are served.

My book *Born to Serve: The Evolution of the Soul through Service* serves as the foundation for the Institute's work and defines service as being "equal partners joined in a common purpose rather than separated individuals doing something to one another. Joined in this way, we release something far greater than is otherwise possible: a holy relationship in which we support the emergence of each other's higher potential into a joint masterpiece . . . The goal of all service is simply to bring out what is already there, to unveil the soul."

In reviewing my leadership, I recognize that my greatest soul lessons occurred during crises that developed as a consequence of my ambivalence about being a leader. Throughout my forty-five years as a leader, I have both doubted I was to be a leader and felt inspired to be one. I always knew I had not developed certain leadership capacities, including having the self-confidence to stand alone with inner strength when making difficult decisions and when receiving criticism. Other challenges have been: neglecting care of myself and being confused about what responsibilities are mine and not mine.

The feelings of unworthiness integrated in my childhood resulted in self-doubt and fear of rejection. My compensation for these feelings was to become over-re-

THE AWAKENED LEADER

sponsible for the needs and happiness of others and to sacrifice my own needs and well-being. I discounted my intuition and used rational thinking over the wisdom of my heart as the truth. I suppressed my poetic nature and wrestled with my failures in communication and my fear of failure. I was unaware of my unresolved personal issues and their impact on those I led. I was slow to develop the boundaries needed to prevent receiving negative projections.

When I reach back into my childhood and bring my story forward, I can also easily identify the source of mental and spiritual strengths that have been a plus in my leadership. The gift of a wise midwife predicted my capacity to have a vision and serve a vision greater than myself. My family genes brought me the ability to concentrate and synthesize knowledge. I believe in others because others, especially teachers, believed in me. My family heritage and focus on the practical has given me the stamina and organizational skill to bring into reality the application of universal psychological and spiritual concepts. By pushing against the traditional, I discovered that by nature I am metaphysically oriented in my life and in my leadership.



*We learn most about
leadership by being a leader.
Birthed from a healthy seed,
we are shaped by both
nature and nurture into the
kind of leader we are
destined to become.*

CONCLUSION

We learn most about leadership by being a leader. Birthed from a healthy seed, we are shaped by both nature and nurture into the kind of leader we are destined to become. Our leadership, made visible by the nature of the seed from which we sprang, is nurtured by how we put into service the opportunities for learning and growth presented to us.

THE SEED OF LEADERSHIP

As leaders, the breadth and depth of our soul is not always readily visible to us. Yet we stand strong, like a tree, nurtured by genial sunshine and fed by amiable rain. We thrive even when buffeted by screaming winds and storms. Our strong and deep roots support us and our soul coaxes us to reach heavenward to the light in times of calm as well as in moments of adversity. Although we may stand supported and encouraged in the company of others, our destiny as a leader, like our birth and death, is a solo journey. Our soul's vision is to share the fruits of our personal growth with joy and enthusiasm on behalf of humanity's potential.

Reflection

What are the seeds of leadership in my life story?
What experiences molded my style and manner of leading?