

ERIN GRUWELL AND THE FREEDOM WRITERS

Laurel:

Loved what you did with this paper. Outstanding in so many ways. Fantastic analysis, and remarkably in-depth. Your score is 15/15. Great work!

Larry

Laurel Ley

Gonzaga University

ORGL 530: Servant-Leadership

November 20, 2010

## ERIN GRUWELL AND THE FREEDOM WRITERS

“Servant-leadership can make a difference in our life and in the life of those we touch. But it takes heart. . . . *Servant-leadership works*. Servant-leadership is about getting people to a higher level by leading people at a higher level.” (Blanchard, 2002, p. xi) This paper will explore servant-leadership in context of the movie “The Freedom Writers” and the companion book, “The Freedom Writers Diary, both of which are based on actual events. As a note, as is common in the movie industry, the incidents portrayed in the movie are often compilations of events or some scenes reflect artistic license to facilitate the telling of the story; however, I will generally reference the movie scenes “as is”. In addition to exploring basic concepts of servant-leadership, human developmental theories will be applied to various characters. [\[Great\]](#)

### **The Story of Erin and The Freedom Writers**

“True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others.” (Spears, 2002, p. 3) And Erin Gruwell of The Freedom Writers appears to exemplify this. Erin, a 24-year old Caucasian woman with brunette hair, in 1994 began student teaching at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. She clearly came from a more privileged background and on the first day of school was proud to wear the pearls given to her by her mother, who is dead. This was during the time following the Rodney King incident and the ensuing race riots in Los Angeles. Previously a high-ranking school, Woodrow Wilson High School had recently started bussing in kids from the surrounding areas due to desegregation laws; ethnic tensions were high and many of the students came from backgrounds including domestic and/or sexual abuse, homelessness, drug or alcohol abuse, etc.

Erin was fresh from college, enthusiastic and seemingly idealistic with a starting class plan that did not fit the testing ranges of many of her students which often reflected reading skills at the fifth grade level. Many of the students had been identified as trouble-makers, transferred

from other schools due to behavioral issues, and generally it was assumed these kids would be “warehoused” until they dropped out of school. It was evident from the beginning that Erin was committed to making a difference and this continued, in spite of no support from her advisor at the school, little initial participation from the students, and limited variable support from her husband and father with whom she had a close relationship. After struggling to connect with the students, one day students were passing around a drawing of one of the students showing him with large lips, laughing as they passed it to each other and then to him. Erin angrily confronted the class on the drawing, making comparisons to caricature-like drawings which exaggerated physical characteristics of Jewish people and blacks that were published in papers during the Holocaust. After delivering an impassioned speech, she quickly realized that none of the students, with the exception of one, knew what the Holocaust was. She brought the kids together by showing them that regardless of their individual backgrounds; they shared many similarities in terms of loss and life experiences with each other and with children of other eras, including Anne Frank. Erin demonstrated that she was willing to care or as Thompson says, “If you wish to exert an influence, you must be open to being influenced. . . . Vulnerability is one word for that kind of openness” (2000, p. 182). She persevered in spite of looking silly at times.

Erin took on multiple part-time jobs in order to pay for books and extracurricular activities she wanted to provide for her students including blank journal books. She took them on field trips, bought them books, and together the class raised money to have the woman who helped Anne Frank’s family come for a visit. It was from the students filling out the journals and the resulting relationships which developed between Erin and the students that they came to name themselves “The Freedom Writers”. During her time at Woodrow Wilson, her marriage ended in divorce related to the time Erin was spending with and on her students. But while it seemed that Erin was the only one who was giving, based on what is observed in the movie and

what she talks about in various medium, if what Beazley and Beggs say, Erin was receiving from her students as well: “Those who cannot accept cannot truly give; those who cannot be served by others cannot truly serve others.” (2002, p. 58) In fact, giving and receiving was in Erin’s blood as she grew up with a father who was an activist based on his own life experiences and Erin was named after Hank Aaron, the famous African-American baseball player. While her father was not supportive initially, over time, he begins to participate and value what she was providing for the kids. After four years at Woodrow Wilson, Erin returned to school to pursue her graduate degree; and eventually created The Freedom Writers Foundation to provide curriculum support and information to schools and teachers interested in applying her techniques as well as providing scholarships to students; Erin and some of the students lecture nationally. During the time she was at Woodrow Wilson High School, she was working in a system in which people had begun to feel like Thompson talks about “. . . work lost its human dignity in exchange for its usefulness” (2002, p. 21). But for whatever reason, at her seemingly young age, Erin was driven by connecting with the humanness in everyone and inspired that in others. [\[Excellent section\]](#)

### **Erin and Servant-Leadership**

When I first read about this assignment, I immediately thought of Erin and the movie “The Freedom Writers”. I had seen it on television a year or so ago, and a few times since. A number of months ago it was on in the middle of the night when I was up with an ill dog; I was so moved I went out and purchased the movie and the book. From the first scene at the school, the scene is already set to see Erin Gruwell as a servant-leader when she says to her advisor, “I know I have a lot to learn as a teacher but I’m a really good student.” What I was inspired by is the fact that Erin seems to be a natural servant-leader and fits this common definition of a servant-leader:

The leader-first and servant-first are two extreme types. Between them are the shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. . . . 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 is, and most difficult to administer is this: 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. 24)

When considering the ten common characteristics of a servant-leader (as outlined in the Appendix), Erin demonstrated some element of each of them in the movie:

*Listening:* Consistently Erin demonstrates that she really wants to hear what the students have to say but aren't. One student said, "She gets to know you. She wants to get to know you . . . (The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 2009, p. 226). She consistently listens to her own inner guidance;

*Empathy:* Erin is willing and able to accept the students how they are. At one point, she says to a student "So what you're saying is. . . ." demonstrating her empathy. What she also did was inspire the ability for others to have empathy. One student says, "What helps me persevere isn't the pity people feel for me or the praise and congratulations at the end. It is when I . . . recognize the familiar pain in someone's face as he or she connects to my story" (The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 2009, p. 306);

*Healing:* I am always intrigued with "healing" being listed in this order as it seems the natural outcome of integrating the other characteristics, and that is true for this story. One student said, "Ms. G never looked at me and saw an undocumented immigrant, she saw *me*" (The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 2009, p. 287);

*Awareness:* From the moment Erin picks up and reads the journals that the students have written, Erin is awakened to the reality of these kids' lives and is willing to stay present and aware, regardless of how painful the reality may be;

*Persuasion:* Interestingly, by listening and empathizing, Erin is able to persuade the students that she cares and to try something different for them. She is also able to persuade the District Superintendent to support her choices when she encounters roadblocks and barriers with both her advisor and her principal who listens to the advisor;

*Conceptualization:* At one point when being told what she is doing is fruitless, Erin says, "If I do my job, they might be lining up at the door";

*Foresight:* Erin is constantly assessing her own actions, decisions, and connections and is refining and developing what needs to be done next to connect. This quote by Thompson seems to encapsulate what Erin was often pondering, "*What is the question you have failed to ask?*" (2000, p. 163). She was always willing to grow and expand;

*Stewardship:* The entire story is about Erin's stewardship of youth. She commits and persists with her original class, and then with them creates the foundation to help others;

*Commitment to the growth of people:* The Acknowledgments section of the book starts with the classic story of the starfish on the beach which ends with, "I'll make a difference to this one" (The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 2009, p. 312);

*Building community:* When the situation happened with the drawing, as Erin says, "I immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum" (The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 2009, p. 3) She started by building a community within her students and inspires others. The book ends, "And also to you, the reader – we now pass the baton to you . . . (p. 314)". After reading this quote from Juana Bordas and based on my Diversity course, I have sometimes

wondered if the ethnic makeup of the students made it more conducive to creating community in spite of the individuals' issues and differences: "Many women, minorities, and people of color have long traditions of servant-leadership in their cultures. . . . that were holistic, cooperative, communal, intuitive, and spiritual" (Spears, 2002, p. 13)

What it appears Erin does is this: "Greenleaf suggests that individuals who are unusually open to inspiration are the visionaries whose insights guide others." (Williams, 2002, p. 78)

[\[Well done\]](#)

### **Erin and Levels of Human Development**

I have been torn about which source to use as a reference in comparing Erin's actions to various human development models as both have advantages; I feel those discussed in Thompson are more directly applicable to this situation as it encompasses more than just work. What I have found of interest for my own learning is that it would be easy to put Erin Gruwell into a specific level of development but I am beginning to look at the subtleties between actions which reflect a higher level of development versus a mindset or life perspective which is truly at a higher level of development. I have also been intrigued with how at such a younger physical age Erin could be so evolved when so many people take years to get where she appears to be. For example, I have been on an active search in life for something bigger than me but it has taken me almost until the age of fifty to evolve where I am. I wonder what transpired in Erin's life that she had the capacity to make the choices she did, when she did, in the way she did.

From the perspective of Kohlberg's levels of cognitive development, I would evaluate some of the various individuals or groups of individuals from the movies at these levels:

*Stages 1 and 2 / Preconventional:* Initially, the students are in such a survival mode given their living situations, they are at this level as it seems her advisor is. Specifically, they fit this, "Incapable of either self-reflection or insight into others, people at this level

live in a world that typically extends no further than the limits of their own self and its needs” (Thompson, 2000, p. 120). The advisor seems most concerned about her own role and job. It is as if she is in survival mode living in such fear of the students and change;

*Stages 3 and 4 / Conventional:* Erin’s husband, Erin’s father, and the District Superintendent seem to be at this stage, “the person becomes concerned about other people and their feelings and expectations” (p. 121). The students appear to evolve into this stage as their awareness of the world expands. It is an interesting example of how quickly and under what conditions development can evolve. Erin’s husband appears to regress into Stage 2 as his needs are not being met by his marriage and he appears to be jealous of Erin’s view of the world. The District Supervisor appears to be more into Stage 4 and Erin’s father appears to return to a previous way of being at Stage 4, “. . . begins to internalize the values of the larger society in which he or she lives . . . Relationships are important . . . they are supplanted in their primacy by the person’s conception of his or her role and duty in society” (p. 121);

*Stages 5 and 6 / Postconventional:* Miep Gies who tried to save the family of Anne Frank commented about people’s choices, “. . . can in their own small ways turn on a light in a dark room”. In terms of her choices and actions related to the students and school, Erin appears to be at this level, “The values of society remain important . . . an increased capacity for reflection allows the person at Stage 5 to step back and critically examine both his or her own values and those of society. . . . possibility of going beyond a duty-oriented mentality to become a truly autonomous moral entity” (p. 121).

What is interesting in this is that contrary to what Thompson points out, Erin appears to hold the same values across her family, personal, and business life; likely reinforcing her greater

level of development, “. . . developmental level is a better predictor of behavior in personal and family settings than it is in the work environment” (2000, p. 122).

From the standpoint of Torbert and Fisher’s theory, the various characters of the story reflect:

*The Impulsive:* Erin’s advisor is between this and the Opportunist: “. . . primarily interested in fulfilling their own personal needs . . . adept at using power and coercion to meet those needs . . . Their time horizon is exceptionally short . . . almost incapable of self-denial or sacrifice . . . usually adept at avoiding even self-criticism . . .” (Thompson, 2000, p. 124);

*The Opportunist:* In terms of the advisor, “Opportunists share with Impulsives a focus on self as the center of the universe, but they can also develop a pronounced manipulative quality as they seek to get ahead in the zero-sum game that is their version of life . . . If something goes wrong, they will generally find a way to blame something other than themselves . . .” (pp. 124-125);

*The Diplomat:* I think Erin’s husband is here but regresses when overcome with his own fears and ego-related issues, “. . . fashion their self-image around the approval of a certain core group . . . Conformity to group values and demands is the chosen currency . . . will go to great lengths to avoid inner and outer conflict” (p. 126);

*The Technician:* Not directly applicable to the key individuals in this story

*The Achiever:* Erin shares some of these characteristics, “. . . goal oriented but capable of taking a long-range view . . . have a deep sense of responsibility . . . encourage mutuality rather than hierarchy . . . frame of reference . . . ‘it’s just the way the world is’” (p. 128);

*The Strategist and Beyond:* Erin’s action reflect a Strategist’s viewpoint; what I question is whether or not this is a way of being, although it seems to be: “Strategists gain the

capacity, in effect, to transcend the conflict by replacing the need for achievement with the desire to serve a higher good. . . . Strategists serve an ultimate purpose born of their expanded worldview . . .” (Thompson, 2000, p. 150) [\[Good\]](#)

### **Conclusion**

Overall, in spite of the limitations of culture, background, personalities, biases, levels of human development, etc., it seems that what Erin inspired and accomplished is this:

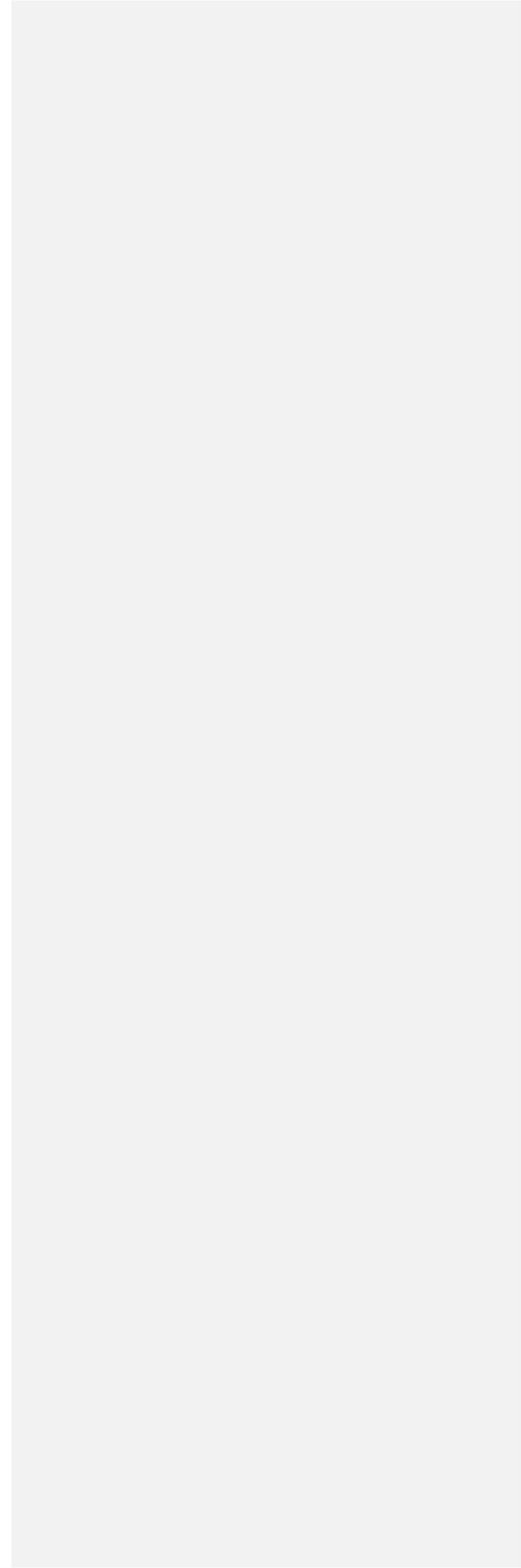
The greatest gift you can give to other people is themselves. You do this when you affirm in people their basic gifts and talents and capacities, their ability to become trimtabs themselves, to become change catalysts. When you do that, you show tremendous reference for people, you show humility, you show respect, you show caring . . . The natural thing with people is to want to be understood. No: Instead, seek to understand the other first. . . . The key to empowerment is to listen to other people and to value their differences. (Covey, 2002, pp. 30-31)

What is not directly addressed in either the movie or companion book is what is Erin’s relationship to her inner guidance or what her spiritual beliefs are. Erin has written a book entitled “Teach With Your Heart” and based on what I watched in the movie, I am guessing that this line is applicable to how she lives her life: “In the silence live your intuition, your creativity, and your connection with your very soul. Decide that you’d like to bring them to work with you.” (Thompson, 2000, p. 242)

I am inspired and impressed with the example not only Erin set but on a greater scale what the students achieved is almost beyond comprehension for those of us who can get caught up in our daily inconveniences. It is humbling and could be a bit shaming except if I keep my vision on the bigger picture and that is much more exciting than being stuck in my fear: “If we follow our gift . . . it will take us on an adventure into a dimension of life that is perhaps larger

and more profound than we could possibly envision when we began.” (Jones, 2002, p.39)

[\[Inspiring person, movie, and paper!\]](#)



## References

- Beazley, H. and Beggs, J. (2002). Teaching servant-leadership. In L. C. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Focus on leadership: servant leadership for the twenty-first century* (pp. 52-63). New York, NY: Wiley & Sons.
- Blanchard, K. (2002). Foreward. In L. C. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Focus on leadership: servant leadership for the twenty-first century* (pp. ix-xii). New York, NY: Wiley & Sons.
- Covey, S.R. (2002). Servant-leadership and community leadership in the twenty-first century. In L. C. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Focus on leadership: servant leadership for the twenty-first century* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Wiley & Sons.
- Greenleaf, R.K. (2002). Essentials of servant-leadership. In L. C. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Focus on leadership: servant leadership for the twenty-first century* (pp. 18-25). New York, NY: Wiley & Sons.
- Jones, M. (2002). Servant-leadership and the imaginative life. In L. C. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Focus on leadership: servant leadership for the twenty-first century* (pp. 34-46). New York, NY: Wiley & Sons.
- Questioning the Story [Website article]. Retrieved from <http://www.chasingthefrog.com/reelfaces/freedomwriters.php>
- Sher, S., DeVito, D., Shamberg, M. (Producers) & LaGravenese, R. (Director). (2007). *Freedom Writers*. United States: Paramount Pictures.
- Spears, L. C. (2002). Introduction: tracing the past, present, and future of servant-leadership. In L. C. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Focus on leadership: servant leadership for the twenty-first century* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Wiley & Sons.

The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell (2009). *The Freedom Writers diary*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

Thompson, M. C. (2000). *The congruent life: Following the inward path to fulfilling work and inspired leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Williams, L.E. (2002). Fannie Lou Hamer, servant of the people. In L. C. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Focus on leadership: servant leadership for the twenty-first century* (pp. 64-87). New York, NY: Wiley & Sons. [\[References are great\]](#)

Formatted: Left

## Appendix

*Listening:* Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision-making skills. Although these are also important skills for the servant-leader, they need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant-leader seeks to identify the will of a group and helps to clarify that will. He or she listens receptively to what is being said and unsaid. Listening also encompasses hearing one's own inner voice. Listening, coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant-leader.

*Empathy:* The servant-leader strives to understand and empathize with others. People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. One assumes the good intentions of co-workers and colleagues and does not reject them as people, even when one may be forced to refuse to accept certain behaviors or performance. The most successful servant-leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners.

*Healing:* The healing of relationships is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing one's self and one's relationship to others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is a part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come in contact. In his essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf writes, "There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share."

*Awareness:* General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Awareness helps one in understanding issues involving ethics, power and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position. As Greenleaf observed: "Awareness is not a giver of solace--it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity."

*Persuasion:* Another characteristic of servant-leaders is reliance on persuasion, rather than on one's positional authority, in making decisions within an organization. The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. The servant-leader is effective at building consensus within groups. This emphasis on persuasion over coercion finds its roots in the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) -- the denominational body to which Robert Greenleaf belonged.

*Conceptualization:* Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to dream great dreams. The ability to look at a problem or an organization from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. For many leaders, this is a characteristic that requires discipline and practice. The traditional leader is consumed by the need to achieve short-term operational goals. The leader who wishes to also be a servant-leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Within organizations, conceptualization is, by its very nature, a key role of boards of trustees or directors. Unfortunately, boards can sometimes become involved in the day-to-day operations--something that should be discouraged--and, thus, fail to provide the visionary concept for an institution. Trustees need to be mostly conceptual in their orientation, staffs need to be mostly operational in their perspective, and the most effective executive leaders probably need to develop both perspectives within themselves. Servant-leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach.

*Foresight:* Closely related to conceptualization, the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation is hard to define, but easier to identify. One knows foresight when one experiences it. Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind. Foresight remains a largely unexplored area in leadership studies, but one most deserving of careful attention.

*Stewardship:* Peter Block (author of "Stewardship and The Empowered Manager") has defined stewardship as "holding something in trust for another." Robert Greenleaf's view of all institutions was one in which CEO's, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. It also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion, rather than control.

*Commitment to the growth of people:* Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her organization. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues. In practice, this can include (but is not limited to) concrete actions such as making funds available for personal and professional development, taking a personal interest in the ideas and suggestions from everyone, encouraging worker involvement in decision-making, and actively assisting laid-off employees to find other positions.

*Building community:* The servant-leader senses that much has been lost in recent human history as a result of the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives. This awareness causes the servant-leader to seek to identify some means for building community among those who work within a given institution. Servant-leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in businesses and other institutions. Greenleaf said, "All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his or her unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group."

*Note: As adapted from Spears, L. C. email/announcement sent October 26, 2010*