

Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune: A Life Devoted to Service

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore and analyze the leadership traits of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, an African-American woman of history, using the servant leadership theory developed by Robert K. Greenberg and the ten characteristics of servant leadership as conceived by Larry C. Spears. This exploration seeks to identify the significant factors propelling her to lead and unearth the skills and practices she demonstrated in her roles as an educator, social justice and political leader, and activist. Though many works exist about the life of Bethune, this particular investigation analyzes specifically her leadership traits as she sought to advance racial equality and social justice, while also promoting interracial collaboration.

This historical analysis aligned with the contemporary leadership theory of servant leadership is expected to provide a framework of leadership, learning, and service for leaders seeking equitable social change in educational and political systems. Leaders will be able to examine the motivation, performance, sustainability, and legacy of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune and relate these traits to their leadership and the influence of learning and service upon their work.

Introduction

At the age of four, my mother gave me a personally transformational book. *Little Journeys into Storyland* written by Louis B. Reynolds in 1949 was a compilation of inspirational and moralistic tales targeted at African American children and illustrated with photographs of African American heroes and heroines, families and children, and short biographical sketches of prominent African Americans of that time period. As a child born in the American segregated deep South, this was my first recollection of positive and uplifting images and stories of people who looked like me. This book captivated me. My mother spent many hours reading these stories to me until I was able to read to myself. Although the book contained approximately forty stories and I enjoyed them all, my most favorite was “Prayer for a School”, the story of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune. I was fascinated by her strong-will, persistence, and perseverance as she went about her quest of launching her school for African American girls. I decided then that I wanted to become a teacher just like her. I spent countless hours pretending to teach in my make believe school with my dolls as students. I never relinquished this goal as I entered higher education and thereby became an early childhood educator.

Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune’s life and example continue to rank high upon my list of historical and contemporary role models. As I formally studied various leadership theories, the distinctive qualities of Bethune’s life exemplified many of the characteristics of servant leadership.

The trait theory of leadership states that leaders often display certain characteristics that make them successful. Historical leaders antecedent to contemporary leadership theory demonstrated qualities that notably were predicated on strength of character, native skills and other constructive personality indicators. This essay will juxtapose the leadership characteristics displayed by Bethune using primary and secondary sources about her life and work with Robert K. Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership and Larry Spears' ten characteristics of servant leaders. Comparative analysis will provide a glimpse into Bethune's leadership in contemporary servant leadership terms and further examine the innateness of leadership traits.

Servant Leadership Literature

Robert K. Greenleaf coined the phrase "Servant Leadership". In his now famous essay first published in 1970, he said,

The servant-leader is servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first; perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.¹

With that definition in 1970, Greenleaf coined the term servant leadership and launched a quiet revolution in the way in which leadership is viewed and practiced. Today the concept of servant leadership is increasingly viewed as an ideal leadership form to which untold numbers of people and organizations aspire. In fact, we are witnessing today an unparalleled explosion of, interest in, and practice of, servant leadership.

Many businesses and not-for-profit organizations are shifting away from the more traditional autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership and toward servant leadership as a way of being in relationship with others. Servant leadership seeks to involve others in decision making, is strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, and enhances the growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of organizational life. In her groundbreaking book on quantum sciences and leadership, *Rewiring the Corporate Brain*, Danah Zohar goes so far as to state that, "Servant-leadership is the essence of quantum thinking and quantum leadership."²

Since the early 1990s, servant leadership theorists have been refining the operational themes associated with servant leadership. The following authors—the servant leadership variables associated with each author are listed by their names—have been key in the theoretical formulation of servant leadership based on Greenleaf's (1977) initial framework: (a) Graham (1991)—inspirational and moral dimensions; (b) Buchen (1998)—self-identity, capacity for

¹ Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 7.

² Danah Zohar, *Spiritual intelligence: The ultimate intelligence*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 146.

reciprocity, relationship building, and preoccupation with the future were essential themes; (c) Spears (1998)—listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment, and community building; (d) Farling et al. (1999)—vision, influence credibility, trust, and service; (e) Laub (1999)—valuing people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, and sharing leadership; (f) Russell (2001)—vision, credibility, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciating others, and empowerment; (g) Patterson (2003)—*agape* love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. Following this season of theory development in servant leadership studies, an increasing number of empirical servant leadership projects are being conducted and presented in the literature.

Biographical Information

Although Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune's life story has been told countless times, this brief biography is for the purpose of establishing her early experiences and subsequent leadership roles as a backdrop to this analysis.

Equal parts educator, politician, and social visionary, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, was one of the most prominent African American women of the first half of the twentieth century and one of the most powerful. Bethune born July 10, 1875, the daughter and sister of former slaves, evidenced vision and innovation early in life when she, in one of her first displays of fortitude and resolution, went about acquiring a primary education by walking five miles to a one room school for several years. Thus, she became the first member of her family of seventeen to attend school. It might be speculated that one legacy of her family's ordeal under the regime of slavery resulted in her resolve to do all that was in her power to survive and thrive. Bethune demonstrated leadership abilities, even as a child, for resolving conflicts, organizing projects, and looking out for the needs of others.³ She furthered her education by attending Scotia Seminary, a school for African American women in North Carolina, on a scholarship provided by a teacher in Colorado who wanted to help an African American girl realize an education. Upon completion of her program, her benefactor paid for her to attend the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Her every intention was to serve as a missionary in Africa. The Presbyterian Mission Board denied her request to serve stating that there were no missionary positions available for African Americans in Africa. After a period of disappointment, Bethune came to the realization that "Africans in America need Christ and school just as much as Africans in Africa...My life work lay not in Africa but in my own country."⁴

³ C.G. Newsome, Mary McLeod Bethune in religious perspective: A seminal essay. (Unpub. Diss. Duke University), 44,45

⁴ Newsome, 43

Her teaching career was launched at her former school in Mayesville, South Carolina, then later, moving on to teach at Haines Normal and Industrial Institute in Augusta, Georgia. She was inspired by the founder and principal of the school, Lucy Laney's commitment to serving others.

Bethune married Albertus Bethune, a clothes salesman in May 1898. They relocated to Savannah, Georgia and had a son in February 1899 and shortly afterward moved to Palatka, Florida where Bethune opened a mission school for impoverished African American children.

In 1904, Bethune and her family moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, to enable her to open a school for the children of poor African American laborers on the Florida East Coast Railroad. She located a dilapidated building and persuaded the owner to accept \$1.50 as a down payment for the eleven dollars per month rent.

Bethune foraged for discarded supplies and found a barrel to use as a desk and crates for chairs. Later she wrote, "I haunted the city dump and the trash piles behind hotels, retrieving discarded linen and kitchen ware, cracked dishes, broken chairs, pieces of old lumber. Everything was scoured and mended."⁵ Her ingenuity and resourcefulness led to the October, 1904 opening of the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls with five students attending who paid tuition of fifty cents per week.

The school had grown to almost two hundred fifty students by 1906. To raise money for a larger facility, Bethune began fundraising by selling homemade ice cream, sweet potato pies, and performing concerts. She also went door to door soliciting donations. Bethune later reminisced about this time, "If a prospect refused to make a contribution, I would say, "Thank you for your time. No matter how deep my hurt, I always smiled. I refused to be discouraged, for neither God nor man can use a discouraged person. "⁶

Finally, with the financial assistance of a few wealthy benefactors, Bethune was able to purchase land and build a brick school. This capacity to function in both the day-to-day existence of education while at the same time doing what was necessary to keep the school funded displayed the breadth of her leadership skills. Part of Bethune's charisma was rooted in her physical stature, in essence, her appearance.

Mary McLeod Bethune made an impressive figure. Her rather large frame was well-proportioned, enhanced by shapely ankles and truly beautiful expressive hands. The total effect of her physical appearance was one of strength and power, carried with grace and dignity... She took pride in looking exactly as she did and would not have wanted to change in any particular. But it was her luminous, hazel eyes, direct and candid, that caught and held the attention of all those who met her.⁷

⁵ Ralph Bullock, "Mary McLeod Bethune" in *In Spite of Handicaps* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1927,1968), 103.

⁶ Bullock, 104

⁷ Rackham Holt, *Mary McLeod Bethune: A Biography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 72.

But not all of Bethune's attributes were based on these external and often superficial, characteristics. Bethune was an eloquent speaker. Her training as a Presbyterian missionary had resulted not just in the grasp of articulation which often accompanies education, but it unleashed eloquence more common in that era among male clergy and politicians.

Nor was Mrs. Bethune, strictly speaking, a lecturer, in the sense that she was enlightening an audience of adults who were paying in advance to be informed upon a subject on which the lecturer has specialized knowledge. Instead she was a gifted speaker conducting a straight publicity campaign for the express purpose of fundraising in order to operate and maintain said school.⁸

The school started by Bethune, The Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls, would unite in 1923 with Cookman Institute to become Bethune-Cookman College. Though Bethune would remain at her school as a teacher and administrator for more than twenty years, she would branch out her efforts to address broader issues than the education of young African American women. In an era marked by the activities of both W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, Bethune focused her interest on the one group whose relationship would be closest to that of African American children, that is, African American women.

It would be her involvement in African American women's issues which would propel Bethune to the highest levels of American society and politics. Even when she entered government she never lost sight of the ordeal of the African-American woman, second-class because of race and gender.

Even when Bethune might seem to be most deeply immersed in her school, at no period did she lose sight of her long-time dedication to the cause of African American women. Her twin obsessions—the progress of women and of children—were intertwined and inseparable.⁹

Bethune began her club activity locally, but within short order she had applied her dynamic energies to her new interest. Within a few years of joining her first African American women's club, she was elected President of the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in Florida. It was not long before she held the national presidency. In 1924, she was elected president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.

In this highly visible post Bethune first drew the attention of the national political establishment. In 1928, she was invited to attend the Child Welfare Conference called by President Calvin Coolidge. Later during the Hoover administration, she was invited to attend the National Commission on Child Welfare. Finally, Bethune became more than just a figure whose presence was both a symbol to her race and an indication of progress, she was appointed to serve on the Hoover Commission on Home Building and Home Ownership.

Bethune's leadership legacy was a testimony to courage.¹⁰ She displayed courage to challenge racism, the courage to take on the responsibility of feeding, housing and educating

⁸ Holt, 110

⁹ Holt, 180

¹⁰ Newsome, 48

children, the courage to approach the elite for support, the courage to challenge presidents and in the midst of it all Bethune considered herself first and foremost an educator.

Mrs. Bethune's quite justified appraisal of herself as an educator was more than proved through her intuitive, administrative sense, and power as a lecturer. In this field she was not excelled. She had the uncanny knack of retaining and using aptly words and phrases, and in creating object lessons by turning personal experiences into richly adorned parables.¹¹

Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune was an educator and a leader with the courage and determination to leave the world a better place than she found it. By her own words and example, Bethune demonstrated the value of education, a philosophy of universal love and the wise and consistent use of political power in striving for racial and gender equality. Equally important to note, Bethune was an astute business woman. Her business involvements included serving as President of Central Life Insurance Company of Tampa, Florida and as a Trustee of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company of Jacksonville, Florida. She also wrote numerous magazine and newspaper articles and contributed chapters to several books.

In the final year of Bethune's life, she invested her efforts toward the establishment of a foundation that ultimately would be located in her home on the campus of Bethune-Cookman College. The mission of the foundation included awarding educational scholarships, sponsoring an annual women's conference, providing a chapel for interracial devotional retreats, and collecting documents related to Bethune's life. Bethune hoped the foundation would inspire ongoing advancement of her life goals. She managed to raise the needed funds for the foundation and five days before her death, the filing cabinets arrived. At the end, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune acknowledged that the work of her life was filled with divine guidance and a daily awareness of the presence of God. Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune died on May 18, 1955 of heart failure in her Daytona home.

Spears' Ten Characteristics of Servant Leadership comparatively personified through the life of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune.

After years of carefully researching Greenleaf's original writings while serving as the executive director of the Greenleaf Center, Larry C. Spears identified a set of ten characteristics of the servant leader central to the development of this type leader. These ten characteristics contribute to the meaningful practice of servant leadership.

Throughout the life of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, the subject of this essay, her leadership actions indicated characteristics of servant leadership occurring naturally as a calling. Servant leaders have a natural desire to serve others. This notion of having a calling to serve is deeply rooted and value-based. Servant leaders have a desire to make a difference for other people and will pursue opportunities to impact the lives of others. A servant leader is willing to

¹¹ Holt, 162

sacrifice self-interests for the sake of others. To have a calling cannot be taught. Unless a person has a natural desire to serve, servant leadership will be elusive.

Bethune's perceptive personality and spiritually focused childhood birthed inner yearnings and vision that evolved throughout her lifetime. Servant leaders have a natural desire to serve others. This principle was evidenced often and early in Bethune's life. In an interview with Johnson, she reminisced:

My mother said when I was born I was entirely different from the rest...In the ordinary things the children engaged in I wouldn't. I had the type of leadership like my mother. She said I was just different from the others. My taste for food was different. I would just look at it and not eat it. I had my own ideas about even that. I had just a different setting in my acceptance of things from the rest of the children, and she very early detected that I was just a little different. My older sisters wanted to get married early. I had no inclinations that way. I had more of a missionary spirit—the spirit of doing things for others.¹²

Bethune demonstrated leadership abilities, even as a child, for resolving conflicts, organizing projects, and looking out for the needs of others.¹³ When Bethune was the age of 10, a new mission school for African Americans was opened in Bethune's hometown by the Board of Mission for Freedmen of the Trinity Presbyterian Church.¹⁴ When Miss Emma Wilson, the teacher at the new mission school, approached Bethune's parents, there was no doubt that she was the one to attend. Bethune interpreted this event as miraculous evidence of a God-ordained destiny for her life and saw this as an opportunity for her and her family to move beyond servitude and poverty.¹⁵ She began to believe that surely as the only educated person in her family, God had a purpose for her life.¹⁶ Bethune walked five miles each way to this rudimentary mission school.

Schooling deepened the meaning of Bethune's Christian faith to include service as well as trust. She prayed fervently that she would find God's purpose for her life and move beyond the social conditions of enslavement.¹⁷ Although the possibility of further education did not look hopeful, Bethune's sense of divine destiny was once again affirmed when a Quaker schoolteacher from Colorado offered to finance her education at Scotia Seminary, an institute in North Carolina that aimed to elevate the status of African American women by preparing them in mind, body, and spirit.¹⁸ Transitioning to the Scotia Seminary context enlarged her world view,

¹² Charles Johnson, Interview with Mary McLeod Bethune, (Florida Memory Project, Florida Department of State, Bureau of Archives and Records Management: 1939), 33

¹³ Newsome, 44-45

¹⁴ Holt, 18

¹⁵ Holt, 19

¹⁶ Holt, 20

¹⁷ Newsome, 66-68

¹⁸ Audrey Thomas McCluskey and Elaine Smith, eds, *Mary McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2001), 3

as she was determined to learn as much as possible and prove herself worthy of this life-expanding opportunity.

After completing 7 years at Scotia Seminary, Bethune headed to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago for two years of missionary training, yet another opportunity in the unfolding revelation and affirmation of God's purpose for her life. At Moody, Bethune's Christian faith and commitment to a life of missionary service grew stronger. Spears emphasized, "a strong belief in the ideological nature of a cause is necessary for one to develop the other leadership traits."¹⁹

Listening

Knowledge is the prime need of the hour. Bethune

Listening intently to others is a characteristic exhibited by servant leaders. These leaders seek to identify and clarify the will of a group. They seek to listen receptively to what is being said (and not said). People instinctively understand that servant leaders want them to share their ideas and that these ideas will be valued.

Bethune listened to the needs of her family and community members from an early age. She conveyed to Johnson that "I had gotten what I could at the Mission school and did all I could in the community to keep alive the interest in education, keeping up intercession for an opportunity to train myself that I might be of service to others."²⁰

Later during her time at Scotia, she stated that "homesick girls would always find me". Consequently, Bethune asserted "that girls with their problems, difficulties, and disappointments always would come to me for advice. I don't know why, but I entered in the school life there just as I did in the little mission, finding things to do and people to serve."²¹

Empathy

From the first, I made my learning, what little it was, useful every way I could. Bethune

Servant leaders strive to "walk in others' shoes". All people need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique personhood. A servant leader will understand and empathize with the circumstances and problems of others. They will earn the confidence needed to lead by listening and not passing judgment, but being fully present in the situation being experienced.

Bethune related to Johnson, "when anyone was sick in the community, she would entice her mother to make them some soup."²² She also wanted to share her shoes with children without

¹⁹ Larry Spears, *Servant Leadership and the Greenleaf Legacy* in L.C. Spears (Ed.) *Reflections on Leadership: How Robert K. Greenleaf's Theory of Servant leadership Influenced Today's Top Management Thinkers* (New York: Wiley and Sons), 9

²⁰ Johnson, 33

²¹ Johnson, 34

²² Charles Johnson, Interview with Mary McLeod Bethune, (Florida Memory Project, Florida Department of State,

shoes”.²³ Her empathy extended to the magnitude that she stated “As I got I gave...I feel it in all things, and I feel that as I give I get”.²⁴

Bethune was able to embark on her incredible quest because of the educational opportunities she was provided by missionary teachers and therefore, dedicated her life to ensuring that all African American children had the opportunity to advance themselves through education.

Healing

If our people are to fight their way up out of bondage we must arm them with the sword and the shield and the buckler of pride. Bethune

One of the great strengths of servant leaders is the potential for healing self and others. In “The Servant as Leader”, Greenleaf wrote, “There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between the servant leader and the led is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something that they have.”²⁵ The ability to create an environment that encourages emotional mending is crucial for those who want to become great servant leaders.

Bethune was raised in a God-conscious environment with intentional nurture in the Christian faith. ²⁶This belief in Christian principles led Bethune to develop sensitivity and benevolence toward others whatsoever their plight. Upon her death, columnist Louis E. Martin said, “She gave out faith and hope as if they were pills and she some sort of doctor”.²⁷

Bethune’s service to humanity reflected a philosophy of education that was truly from a Judeo-Christian perspective in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the term. She enabled African Americans to move beyond the oppression and degrading conditions of servitude toward spiritual, economic, and political liberty. Bethune gave her whole self and her whole life to the advancement of community, racial unity, and interracial cooperation.

Reflectively, in her interview with Johnson, Bethune mused, “possibly the first real wound that she could feel in her soul and her mind was the realization of the dense darkness and ignorance that she found in herself—when she did find herself—with the seeming absence of a remedy”.²⁸ She elucidated that what she meant by that was the recognition of lack of opportunity.

Bureau of Archives and Records Management: 1939), 37

²³ Johnson, 39

²⁴ Johnson, 39

²⁵ Larry Spears, *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant leadership*(New York: Wiley and Sons, 1998), p. 12

²⁶ McCluskey and Smith, 52-53

²⁷ Newsome, 45

²⁸ Johnson interview, 24

Awareness

Faith is the first factor in a life devoted to service. Without it, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible. Bethune

General awareness and especially self-awareness strengthens the servant leader, giving them a keen sense of what is happening around them. They are always looking for clues from the environment to inform their options and decisions, maintaining their own inner-security. They are not absorbed into the problems of others nor are they surprised by them, yet servant leaders are informed and aware of the situations that surround them.

Bethune had an unforgettable encounter with a white girl at the home of her mother's former master.²⁹ While her mother was tending to some work, Bethune found herself in the midst of a playhouse filled with books and other school supplies. When she picked up a book, the white girl made it clear to Bethune that she could not read and led her to the picture books. This encounter left Bethune with life-altering self-awareness, a determination to read, and a drive to realize her calling to serve others by sharing her acquired knowledge.

Persuasion

Cease to be a drudge, seek to be an artist. Bethune

Servant leaders rely on persuasion, rather than formal positional authority in making decisions. Servant leaders are naturally convincing and offer compelling reasons when they make requests rather than coerce for compliance. This characteristic offers one of the clearest distinctions between traditional leadership and servant leadership. The servant leader is effective at building consensus within groups.

With the love and respect of the students and teachers, Bethune developed her natural leadership abilities, such as advising students and negotiating with school authorities for changes in the seminary. Through the values, instruction, and human care at Scotia, Bethune's self-image, and sense of worth and dignity grew strong.³⁰

Conceptualization

I never stop to plan. I take things step by step. Bethune

Servant leaders seek to nurture their abilities to "dream great dreams." This also encourages others to dream great dreams and avoid getting bogged down by the day-to-day realities and operations. Servant leaders balance creative thinking and bringing the world, events and possibilities together. No situation remains in isolation or in a problematic state through the efforts of conceptualization.

²⁹ Holt, 18-19

³⁰ McCluskey and Smith, 43-44

An early biography on Bethune by Clarence Newsome suggested “she approached life with a single vision, a firm conviction of an underlying unity in all dimensions of life including spiritual, social, and political”.³¹ Believing that education provided the key to racial advancement, she conceptualized and then founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute, Florida (1904), which through her persistent direction as president (1904–42) became Bethune-Cookman College (1929).³²

Foresight

Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it might be a diamond in the rough. Bethune

Foresight is a characteristic that enables servant leaders to understand lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision in the future. It is deeply rooted in the intuitive mind. Servant leaders are adept at picking up the patterns in the environment and predicting what the future will bring.

With a strong sense of divine guidance, Bethune left her work in Palatka, Florida with a determination to start a school in a destitute area of Daytona Beach, Florida. While faced with opposition and insults, she saw the African American community of Daytona as a needy mission field with potential and opportunity.³³ Bethune believed that progress of the race could be ensured through liberally educated African American women.³⁴

Bethune related that during a trip to Europe “I felt that the poorest share-croppers in Mississippi and Georgia were much better off than many of the poor waifs I saw”.³⁵ She emphasized that “One gets many very different ideas—we are not the only sufferers and burden bearers in the world. I stiffened my back and got new courage to come back to America with greater appreciation for the blessings we did have”.³⁶

Stewardship

We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends. Bethune

Stewardship is the ability to reach the potential of those around you for the greatest impact possible. Robert Greenleaf’s view of all institutions was one in which chief executives, staff, directors, and trustees all play significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the

³¹ Newsome, 217

³² Newsome, 25

³³ McCluskey and Smith, 72

³⁴ Hanson, 18-19

³⁵ Johnson, 41

³⁶ Bullock, 105

greater good of society. Knowing that everyone contributes to the greater good, a servant leader sees the attributes of each person and stewards those resources for maximum impact.

In July of 1923, Bethune yielded control of her school to the Methodist Church. This strategic decision included the merger of her school with Cookman Institute, a co-educational Methodist school for African Americans in Jacksonville, Florida. Accepting the merger required compromise that involved a shift from Bethune's commitment to an all-girls school. She was asked to serve as president of the newly formed Bethune-Cookman Collegiate Institute.³⁷

The school expanded and changed over time under the leadership of the Methodist Church. A high school was added and then replaced by junior college curriculum in 1939. By 1943, the Institute had become a liberal arts college granting Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees in elementary education.

Growth in People

There is a place in God's sun for the youth "farthest down" who has the vision, the determination, and the courage to reach it. Bethune

Servant leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, servant leaders are deeply committed to a personal, professional, and spiritual growth of each and every individual within the organization.

Bethune embraced the Scriptures as the standard for life and saw Jesus as an ideal and a force that compelled people to act upon the ideal. Following Jesus meant advancing the cause of unity and "brotherhood" in the world through the complimentary ideologies of Judeo-Christianity and American democracy.³⁸ Bethune promoted education for the "whole person". Accordingly, she believed that training the heart according to the principles of Christianity was central to the training of minds and hands.³⁹ On her journey from the cotton fields of South Carolina to national leadership, Bethune demonstrated her "whole person" philosophy of Christian education through the establishment of her small industrial school for African American girls that she developed into the 4-year, co-educational Bethune-Cookman.⁴⁰ The aim of the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School of Negro Girls was "to uplift African American girls spiritually, morally, intellectually and industrially".⁴¹ The school stood for a broad, thorough practical training.

³⁷ Newsome, 157-158

³⁸ Newsome, 218-219

³⁹ Newsome, 225-226

⁴⁰ McCluskey, 72

⁴¹ Johnson interview, 73

Building Community

If we have the courage and tenacity of our forebears, who stood firmly like a rock against the lash of slavery, we shall find a way to do for our day what they did for theirs. Bethune

Servant leaders believe that organizations need to function as community. They are aware that the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives has changed our perceptions and caused a sense of loss. Servant leaders bring and instill a sense of community through their attitude, thoughts and behaviors.

Bethune's influence extended far beyond the establishment of her school. In 1905, she organized a boy's club; in 1911, she established a hospital, and in 1938, she acquired federal funds for a public housing project. Bethune rallied for temperance. Furthermore, she made her college library available to the African American community. Fervently, Bethune promoted spiritual and social transformation with her Sunday afternoon community meetings and was very active in Negro women's club work that was usually connected with churches and focused on assisting the sick, elderly, needy, and contributing to the church.⁴²

Bethune's participation in federal programs began in 1914 when she was recruited to assist the Red Cross. She managed the Florida chapter during the mid-1920s, successfully organizing relief efforts following a destructive hurricane in 1928.⁴³ Bethune promoted the development of a national coalition of organizations to work with federal agencies for the advancement of all African Americans, particularly the cause of African American womanhood, by harnessing the power of women. Although she faced some criticism, at the first meeting in December of 1935, she persuaded these women leaders to vote in favor of a permanent organization, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), with Bethune as the first president of the coalition.⁴⁴

During her 14 years as President of the NCNW, Bethune fought for equal opportunities and living improvements for African Americans, particularly African American women, in all aspects of American society. Among her most notable achievements with the NCNW was the White House Conference of the National Council of Negro Women in 1938. This was the first White House conference ever held to address the involvement of African American women in the federal planning and implementation of social programs.

As the only African American invited to participate in White House conferences on child welfare during both the Coolidge and Hoover administrations, Bethune embraced the conviction of divine appointment as a leader of her race. She faced many difficulties in her efforts to improve the employment and educational opportunities for African American youth. Yet the criticism she sometimes received was offset by her successes, particularly in the state of Illinois, with the largest number of African American youth participants in the National Youth

⁴² Newsome, 177-178

⁴³ Newsome, 179-180

⁴⁴ Hanson, 164-172

Administration programs nationally and the successful recreation camps for African American girls.⁴⁵ Bethune's friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt enabled several private meetings a year with the President, giving Bethune more access to the President than any other leader in the United States history.⁴⁶

Bethune historian Elaine Smith points to Bethune's *My Last Will and Testament* as a literary legacy addressed specifically to African Americans and containing nine principles for advancing spirituality, cultural responsibility, and holistic living of the African American race.⁴⁷ Through this reflective document, Bethune hoped that future generations of African Americans would glean wisdom, purpose, and ongoing ambition to continue the fight for equality.

If I have a legacy to leave my people, it is my philosophy of living and serving. As I face tomorrow, I am content, for I think I have spent my life well. I pray now that my philosophy may be helpful to those who share my vision of a world of peace, progress, brotherhood, and love. Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune

Conclusion

How did Bethune accomplish everything she did? Why was one woman so successful in pursuit of her goals? She had an innate curiosity, liked pragmatic solutions, acquired education against all odds and learned to express herself with wit and clarity. Her personal charm helped a lot too.

Each of Bethune's achievements would have made a person famous. Thus, her founding of the Bethune-Cookman University would make any educator famous. Equally, her work while in government service would have made any politician famous. Moreover, her establishment and governance of the National Council of Negro Women would have made any citizen famous. However, all these people collectively could not have changed world history as Bethune did individually.

Servant leaders make huge sacrifices and risk their lives for the benefit of humanity. They put the benefits to others above their own needs. Dr. Bethune's example continues to be relevant in today's world whereby a civic-minded educator could use his or her knowledge to inform the public and influence public policy. Bethune showed us that learning coupled with commonsense wisdom, observation, imagination, critical thinking linked with pragmatism, concern for the common good, and skill to put everything in clear language can result in a positive outcome and meaningfully change life for the better in a society.

What we need today is to provide servant leader role models for our young so that they realize that celebrity status in itself is not a substitute for knowledge, service, or community building. Our world needs servant leadership practitioners more than ever. Deepening economic woes threaten the American dream for far too many working people. Racial divisions are

⁴⁵ Newsome, 198, 203

⁴⁶ Newsome, 199

⁴⁷ Elaine Smith, Mary McLeod Bethune in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing Co., 1993)115

embarrassingly persistent in too many aspects of our economic and social lives. Political despair is battering the uniquely American optimism that has made us a great nation. There are precious few servant leaders in our current political environment. Many elected officials are more interested in personal power, individual legacy, and financial gain than in the sacrifice and commitment that servant leadership requires. Conclusively, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune was such a leader; a historical servant leader relevant as an example for the contemporary world.

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