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## J. Joseph Garrahy: Servant Leader

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# Foreword

**J. Joseph Garrahy:**

## **Servant Leader**

**Victoria Almeida\***

In the words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, “I am a part of all that I have met.”<sup>1</sup> I recently had an opportunity to take inventory of my professional life and examine why I chose to practice law in Rhode Island, and what impact that has had not only on me, but more importantly on my community, both legal and civic.

Upon graduating from law school in June of 1976, I returned home to Rhode Island to practice law. I purposefully decided to return to Rhode Island because Rhode Island held my treasure; all that was dear to me and all that had formed me was found in Rhode Island. As Margaret Elizabeth Sangster said, “[t]here is nothing half so pleasant as coming home again.”<sup>2</sup> A few months after returning home I was offered the career opportunity of a lifetime, which has had a lasting impact on me, my profession, and

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1. ALFRED LORD TENNYSON & AIDAN DAY, ALFRED LORD TENNYSON: SELECTED POEMS 95 (1991).

2. RICHARD ALAN KRIEGER, CIVILIZATION’S QUOTATIONS: LIFE’S IDEAL 261 (2002).

my community. That opportunity came upon the election of J. Joseph Garrahy in 1977, who served until 1985 as Rhode Island's 53<sup>rd</sup> Governor. On January 4, 1977, Governor Garrahy appointed me to be his legal counsel. On that day, I became the first woman in Rhode Island history to become legal counsel to a governor.

On January 31, 2012, I attended his funeral Mass and listened to the tribute about his years as Governor and more importantly, the splendid virtues of his life. I began to realize how this non-lawyer informed and shaped my career as a lawyer, and how my professional life paralleled his.

#### SERVANT LEADER

Governor Garrahy was a servant leader. The concept of servant leadership is said to be rooted first in China. Circa 600 B.C., it was Lao Tzu who stated:

The greatest leader forgets himself  
And attends to the development of others.  
Good leaders support excellent workers.  
Great leaders support the bottom ten percent.  
Great leaders know that  
The diamond in the rough  
Is always found "in the rough."<sup>3</sup>

In the course of my work with Governor Garrahy, it has become clear that Lao Tzu's words epitomize Governor Garrahy's memorable life. Governor Garrahy knew that each life can and does make a difference in the lives of others. In his daily interactions with me and the other staff members, as well as with the public, he displayed uncommon courage, necessary humor, intelligence, goodness and grace. He demonstrated a giving and caring attitude about each individual and expected us to be truly good to one another, not just civil to each other. Fresh out of law school, I was that "diamond in the rough," and certainly not the most qualified attorney in the State of Rhode Island to advise a Governor. However, he attended to my development as a person and as a lawyer and supported my enthusiasm for the law with all

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3. PATRICK WARNEKA ET AL., *THE WAY OF LEADING PEOPLE* (2007).

of its luster, and yes, with all of its limitations.

Governor Garrahy helped to inform my life as a lawyer by demonstrating, by word and by deed, those qualities essential to insure and promote the common good in my profession and in public service. He did this by always upholding the commonality of virtues that transcend race, class, and other distinctions that separate people from each other. Governor Garrahy liked to get to know people irrespective of their status, and when he greeted and spoke with you, you felt as if you were the only person in the room. While he embraced civility, he lived a life of far greater virtue, namely, of love of neighbor and respect for neighbor.

Thirty-two years after I served as legal counsel to Governor Garrahy, I became President of the Rhode Island Bar Association. The theme of my presidency was "Servant Leader," which was modeled after my mentor, Governor Garrahy. Governor Garrahy's example continuously influenced my career as a lawyer and inspired my leadership while President of the Rhode Island Bar Association. In fact, the Rhode Island Bar Association created the Victoria M. Almeida Servant Leader Award in my honor, which I share in my heart with Governor Garrahy.

Governor Garrahy inspired me to believe that public service, if entered into with the utmost good faith, selflessness, and willingness to accept others as more important than oneself, is the true crown of any career. I began my career in public service with Governor Garrahy in 1977. While still Governor, he later asked me to serve as the attorney member of the Rhode Island Parole Board. I still serve on that board, having recently been reappointed by Governor Chafee. I think of Governor Garrahy each and every time I serve in that capacity, and his example and influence still continue to shape my decision making on the matters that come before me.

#### GREATER JUSTICE FOR ALL

"Greater Justice for All" was my vision for the Rhode Island Bar Association during my Presidency. It was only recently, while reflecting on the life of Governor Garrahy, that I realized "Greater Justice for All" was also the hallmark of his term as Governor. While many Rhode Islanders fondly recall the Blizzard of 1978 as the prime example of his quiet and steady leadership, I remember the tumultuous issues of that time and his leading the way toward

“Greater Justice for All.”

Governor Garrahy was at peace being with all people, but especially with the lost, the forgotten, the marginalized, and those who we may find difficult to love. That is why Governor Garrahy sought greater justice for the mentally disabled at the Ladd Center, and spearheaded necessary reforms so that residents would be treated with the dignity they deserved. That is why, as Governor, he sought greater justice by improving the deplorable and dangerous conditions that existed at the Adult Correctional Institutions. That is why he began the effort to close the Institute of Mental Health, where generations of Rhode Island’s most vulnerable residents were placed and forgotten, and in some cases, abused and mistreated. Seeking greater justice is why he began the process of mainstreaming the disabled to places in local communities where they would be welcomed and loved for who they are, learn how to live independently, fulfill their potential, and live out their lives with purpose.

Governor Garrahy also sought greater justice for the way Rhode Islanders recognize and preserve our state’s natural resources by establishing the Department of Environmental Management. He sought greater justice for litigants and those served by our judicial system by establishing, through an Executive Order, the first judicial merit selection process. He sought greater justice for senior citizens and children in state care by initiating programs to serve and protect those populations. He also sought greater justice by opening state government to women and minorities by appointing them to key legal and policy positions in his cabinet, the executive department, various state departments and agencies, boards and commissions, and by appointing the first African American to the Rhode Island Judiciary.

Being part of Governor Garrahy’s cabinet allowed me to participate in extraordinary events in our state’s history. It was an opportunity I would not have had anywhere else in the country. While I initially returned to Rhode Island because my treasure was here, I have remained because my heart is here as well.

#### THE GARRAHY LEGACY

The Garrahy Legacy can be summed up by the first reading at his funeral Mass. Coincidentally, it is the same passage that I

shared with members of the Rhode Island Bar Association in my last message as President to the Bar. Governor Garrahy lived this message every day, it was the secret of his success, and it was that which endears him to all of us:

Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit . . . . Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of [the poor], exercise hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Have the same regard for one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly.<sup>4</sup>

As the years pass, we will remember Governor Garrahy with a little wonder – for we shall never see his like again. We should, however, be inspired by his example and strive to continue his legacy through seeking greater justice for all within ourselves, our legal community, and for the state of Rhode Island.

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4. *Romans* 12:9-16 (New American).