



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## **Consumed by Either Fire or Fire: Journeying with T.S. Eliot**

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For too long, I have lived in the world wanting to change it. This has been an impossible stance. It intensifies normal desires to contribute something to the human condition into crusades that are doomed to disappoint. I have gradually weaned myself from this posture, I think, because it is just too exhausting and unsatisfying to maintain.

As I've traveled on this road that I made hard, I've had many essential friends. Including T.S. Eliot. I cannot avoid him. Time and again I get absorbed in the relentless weaving of paradox and imagery in *Four Quartets*. Many times I have used Eliot to provoke my own experience-to understand what I've learned about this work of wanting the world to be different, better. Eliot shines brilliant beams of light on the path I've been exploring. He names sensations that now lie deep in my body, sensations I experienced as I discovered how best to direct my energy and passion. Sensations that began as pain or wonder, that now sometimes sleep quietly within as wisdom gained, questions answered.

As I was reading him yet again recently, I began copying those passages that always leap out at me. Certain lines endure as a meaningful chronicle of my experience, expressed in his voice far beyond my own capacity for expression. I became engaged in a dialogue with myself (undoubtedly the easiest kind to have) about why these lines keep attracting me.

I know that we notice what we notice because of who we are. We create ourselves by what we choose to notice. Once this work of self-authorship has begun, we inhabit the world we've created. We self-seal. We don't notice anything except those things that confirm what we already think about who we already are. But I've always appreciated the thought of I. A. Richards who described a good reader as "a mind paying attention to itself." Using the terms of his field of semantics, he speaks of what meditative traditions call the observer self. When we succeed in moving outside our normal processes of self-reference and can look upon ourselves with self-awareness, then we have a chance at changing. We break the seal. We notice something new.

So I'm wondering now what newness I might notice as I go back into *The Four Quartets*. If I contemplate those descriptions of his world that I chose to notice, will I then see mine differently? I want to follow Eliot's lead on this journey. I want to enter the endless spiral of his paradoxes to see what I will see. And from this, I hope to enlarge the paradoxes I embrace as I draw the circle of self.

You say I am repeating  
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.

Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,  
 To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
 You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
 In order to arrive at what you do not know  
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
 In order to possess what you do not possess  
 You must go by the way of dispossession.  
 In order to arrive at what you are not  
 You must go through the way in which you are not.  
 And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
 And what you own is what you do not own  
 And where you are is where you are not.

### East Coker III

I choose to begin with this passage not because of its profound paradox, but because it begins with humor and frustration. I want to appreciate these emotions that are frequent companions of paradox. I relate to his repetition, because I find myself on many different podiums, repeating myself. And I'm frustrated with repeating myself (I shall say it again. Shall I say it again?) because I know I'm saying things that have been said by others, over and over. I'm giving voice to ideas that have been expressed by mystics, martyrs, philosophers, scientists, and everyday people. For millennia. Is anybody listening?

I lose my patience. I wonder where all the learning is going, why it isn't showing up in new beliefs, new practices. Patience is my greatest challenge. (Well, actually, the challenge is compassion, from which patience arises.) So I try to relearn patience from the true exemplars, those spiritual teachers past and present who spend their whole ministries being repetitious. They never accuse us of being stupid or stubborn. These teachers so love the truth of what they say that they seem to enjoy repeating themselves. I think this must be the key. Loving truth so much that no repetition is tedious. Feeling truth new and vibrant each time it is voiced. Loving people so well that giving voice energizes the speaker long past normal human endurance.

Well, maybe.

What are the truths that Eliot must keep repeating? He follows with a timeless description of the path by which truth is obtained. Pure paradox, a path that jostles us continually with its demands. A path that requires no less than the total loss of certainty and identity. "A condition of complete simplicity, (Costing not less than everything)" he says at the very end of the Quartets. The way of no ecstasy, the way of ignorance and not-knowing, the path of dispossession and the dissolution of self that opens us to life.

Many years ago when I was first beginning to write of new science, I was well-guided. In one trenchant phrase, the journey ahead was described to me as a journey "of wonder and not-knowing." I have remained clear about that, and perhaps in contradiction to Eliot, I have found that wonderment, which opens us to new truth, is often accompanied by something a bit like ecstasy. Astonishment is fun; people love the experience. Wonder seems to return us to our innocence. We enter into a state of delight-show us something else strange and preposterous

so that we can laugh and exclaim. In this innocent state, we are willing to give up our self-concepts and glimpse into the unknown with new eyes. Ever since I began noticing the effects of wonder, I've tried to lead people to a place where they could encounter this astonishing world and grin with delight. If I could do that, I learned they would willingly follow me elsewhere in thought.

But the rest of the journey is just as Eliot describes it. He is, after all, repeating the paradoxes of Jesus, of Buddha, of Lao Tzu. If you would save your life, you must lose it. If you would thrive in the new world, you must dissolve your old form. Letting go is the only path to safety. Surrounded by so much truth, it's a puzzle how we ever came to deny it. Did we ever really believe we could proceed through life by growing all the time, new and improved at every turn? How did the shadow disappear from our pursuit of the light? When did we forget that "there must be opposition in all things." When did we stop acknowledging the great space for discovery that is created by the opposing poles of paradox?

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope for hope  
 would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without  
 love  
 For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
 But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
 Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
 So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.  
 East Coker III

Eliot extends his hand and asks us to dance into the emptying stillness that truth places on our path. We cannot approach truth from who we are. We think too small. We are confined and confining in our beliefs. A few years ago, feeling imprisoned by the beliefs I was promulgating passionately to myself and to the world, I imagined creating a year-end ritual. I've never done it in all the glorious pomp and pageant I imagined, but the ritual is "The Bonfire of Beliefs." At least once a year, can I take those ideas and beliefs I most cherish and try to see the world without them? "For hope would be hope for the wrong thing. . .for love would be love of the wrong thingÉ" Give up what I believe-these truths are too small for me to perceive what I truly seek. Open to something much wilder, although that too will become tame. Do this over and over, until I ring inside from hollowness and emptied faith. Except the faith I learn in the waiting. Real faith.

We must be still and still moving  
 Into another intensity  
 For a further union, a deeper communion  
 Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,  
 The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters  
 Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.  
 East Coker V

The journey is the accumulation of stillness. Patience. Emptiness. The union that I seek is not of my creation. The self I have created impedes union. Stillness must be learned, and the endless time in which I learn it is filled with doubts and desolations. Stillness often feels like abandonment. Why isn't Spirit communicating with me? What have I done to deserve such a

stony, cold silence? How do I avoid filling with new terrors the emptiness that terrifies me?

Yet the wave cry and the wind cry want to fill the silence. Life is our comforter. When I stop the self-absorption, when I can pause a moment to gaze on what's around me, I experience this comfort. I feel the movement of forces that exist beyond me, but which willingly carry me with them. I don't experience nature's elemental energies of wind, movement, or mountains cast high into the sky as hostile. In that, I may be lucky-never to have been overwhelmed by gales or floods. When I lift my head into the wind, or commune with a mountain, I do so as a participant. I feel this planet as an expression of the life that moves in me and everyone. Often, Nature is my most comforting companion. She invites me to remember that I am necessary to creation.

But only if I discipline myself to stop looking inward. Only if I remember that the communion I seek is everywhere around me, waiting for me to notice its presence. It is another intensity and it cries out for us.

And what you thought you came for  
 Is only a shell, a husk of meaning  
 From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled  
 If at all. Either you had no purpose  
 Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured  
 And is altered in fulfillment.  
 Little Gidding I

Here is Life's great gift-unending surprise. And it's other gift-Life's inherent orderliness. We are not adrift in a purposeless universe. We are not the byproduct of a Darwinian accident that felt lucky because we were the ones to survive. I used to challenge MBA students with the question, "Do you think your life's purpose is something you create or discover?" They always wheedled out of it by answering, "Both." This may be true, but I feel that Viktor Frankl was right when he said that "meaning precedes being." I know we each have a unique contribution that is necessary for the whole of us to thrive. I know our gifts are required. I don't know where these gifts originate, but I know what they feel like. I feel joyful when I yield to their expression.

Yet Eliot cautions us about something I also know to be true. We so want to know our purpose that we too quickly determine what we think it is, and we kill ourselves in the process. We turn from stillness and listening to earnest action, and Spirit disappears. After a while we find ourselves expired-we played God with our lives and lost the source of all inspiration, the breath of life.

This is a real dilemma. How do we attend to our purpose while holding the humility that we do not create it? Once we catch a glimmer of what it might be, how do we avoid taking over as creator? It gets even more complicated. How do we avoid getting ego-seduced by the specific manifestation of our gifts? Is it possible to live in the humility of knowing that our purpose, as clearly as we self-define it, is but "a husk of meaning"? The task is really to become superb listeners. Heidegger wrote that waiting, listening, was the most profound way to serve God.

Can we live into the presence of purpose, never hoping for a straightforward answer but inviting in always the great mystery that gives rise to our questions?

You are not here to verify,  
 Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
 Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
 Where prayer has been valid.  
 Little Gidding I

To this place, listening carries us. Whatever we conceive our work to be, in the end we know that we are only, infinitely, serving the place of prayer. I used to believe my work was about organizations and life inside them. Then a bit later I thought I was charged with changing the dominant worldview of Western thought. Notice how my scope increased as my ego gained a surer footing. Then one day, in a sunny patch of jungle in the Yucatan, I leaned against a small but perfect Mayan ruin while my two sons swam in a shadowy cave pool. Faced with jungle growth and sun, and the cold stones of yet another attempt at civilization, I knew that my work was, as is everyone's, about reclaiming Life. All of us are struggling together toward a time when the human spirit can find more room for itself in the societies we create. We are all participating in enlarging the spaces in which we together dwell, so that they might hold more of the greatness of each of us.

Who then devised the torment? Love.  
 Love is the unfamiliar Name  
 Behind the hands that wove  
 The intolerable shirt of flame  
 Which human power cannot remove.  
 We only live, only suspire  
 Consumed by either fire or fire.  
 Little Gidding IV

I lose my breath reading this passage. Do I experience the demands of Love as an intolerable shirt of flame? I know I feel there is no escape from this path, but I don't yet know that this path leads only to fire. I do, more and more, feel as my companions those from all centuries who followed the blinding path of Love, who willingly donned the shirt of flame and wore it to their martyrdom. Recently I've been reflecting on how strange we are, my generation, to believe we can help birth a new world without it affecting our career progress. I'm aware of how little courage our lives have required of us. But Life keeps raising the stakes.

When I thought the opposition to my work was in the person of a controlling boss, it seemed I might maneuver my way past him or her. When I thought the opposition originated from a lack of evidence for how much we all benefit from inclusive, inviting workplaces, it seemed I might create change by rational argument. When I thought the work was about shifting a world view and welcoming in life's great creative capacities to our human lives, it seemed I had a lot of support from the planetary community of living beings. They were making their case-I needed merely to direct attention to what they were doing.

But Love is not satisfied by logic. It may be that we'll accomplish this latest revolution with grace, that we'll marshal the powers of non-violence and people will willingly surrender their ideas and their power because they too are tired of the violence and the impotence. But maybe not. Maybe the only route to Love is fire, or fire. I don't know this, but I do know that I have had

to surrender to this as the great possibility. I have had to confront whether I am willing, if asked, to forego the life that holds me so securely and comfortably. And I don't know what I have answered, because Life hasn't yet asked me. I believe I have recognized the shirt of flame, but will I be asked to wear it?

But Eliot has moved past my question. He has put my queries to rest. He has illuminated my path and assured me of the journey. I have learned what we are engaged in and how we must be together.

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under  
conditions  
That seem unpropitious.  
But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.  
East Coker V

This is the knowing that resolves paradox, that puts an end to questions. Shall I say it again? I shall say it again. We do what we are called to do because we feel called to do it. We walk silently, willingly, down the well-trodden path still lit by the fire of millions. And the rest, I know now, is not our business.



#### ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: [margaretwheatley.com](http://margaretwheatley.com). For more biographical information, see [margaretwheatley.com/bio](http://margaretwheatley.com/bio)