



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## **It Starts With Uncertainty**

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**Margaret Wheatley & Pema Chodron**

**Margaret Wheatley:** I see the essence of my work as becoming comfortable with uncertainty, which is actually a chapter title in my book, *Leadership and the New Science*. I came to that work initially through science, through an understanding of chaos as having a deeper order revealed in it, and as a person who had worked in organizations a lot.

I remember the great revelatory moment I had when I was writing my first book that order and control are two different phenomena. In the Western leadership tradition, we believe that order is only available through the control that we exert. But I realized that order is available through different processes that have nothing to do with our own authorship--that this world is in fact exquisitely ordered, but not necessarily for our own purposes. The Western tradition is to play God with the world, assuming that nothing happens unless we make it happen.

We feel we have no support from natural processes, no support from life, and that we can only make the world the way we want it by the force of our own effort. That's a great deception in Western thought, and it's been a hindrance in leadership practices. I like to quote Chuang-tzu, from the third century BCE, who had a very different approach to leadership. He said it's more a matter of believing the good than of seeing it as the result of our effort.

So as leaders, do we believe we are participating in a world that knows how to organize itself? Do we realize we are work-ing with people who have great reservoirs of goodness, commitment and creativity? Or do we, in the traditional Western model, feel that if there's good in the organization, it's only because of our own qualities of leadership? I have realized over time that the real role of a leader is not to control but to mid-wive-to evoke those qualities of commitment, compassion, generosity and creativity that are in all of us to start with.

It's time to drop our illusions of control and certainty, say Margaret Wheatley, author of *Leadership and the New Science*, and Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron. They discuss how organizations can acknowledge their confusion and trust in the goodness of the underlying order.

**Pema Chodron:** Meg, I was electrified by your article "[Consumed By Either Fire or Fire](#)," because while it talks about personal journey, the implications for leadership are profound. Here is the question that came up for me. You talk about the need for leaders to trust the goodness of people and not feel they have to control things. It seems to me, though, that this means the employees themselves have to have a lot of trust in their own goodness, and they have to have the inner strength that allows them not to freak out in the face of insecurity and uncertainty.

I would guess that the traditional leadership policies you're trying to change come from the fact that people are so afraid of paradox, so afraid of uncertainty. It takes a lot of bravery even to consider that uncertainty is not a threat, that in fact it's creative and powerful.

I spend a lot of time in my own teaching proclaiming that truth, and it makes me realize again and again how it comes back to the individual journey of mindfulness. It requires being able to look bravely at yourself without running away from what you see, because resting with the ugliness, the chaos and the confusion in yourself is the path to happiness and creativity and flexibility.

To me, the point where people get stuck is exactly here. They have so little trust in their ability to rest with negativity and uncertainty that whenever they detect a hint of paradox or not knowing, they become afraid and do all kinds of conformist, fundamentalist things to become secure again.

**Margaret Wheatley:** In your book *When things Fall Apart* you quote Trungpa Rinpoche as saying that this is a dark time when people lose faith in themselves and so lack courage. To me, that's a very dear statement of what's going on now, because we are at a point where we feel very badly about who we are as a species. There is all this self-loathing and the messages we give each other are filled with what's wrong with us. Whether it's at the individual or organizational level, we're focused on pathology and use a lot of very negative terms to describe our experience.

Then if that self-loathing is combined with a culture that emphasizes control, it holds you accountable for making things work all the time-without failing, without feeling confused or overwhelmed by uncertainty. We hold each other accountable for achievements that are in fact impossible, because we can't pretend that chaos doesn't erupt in our lives and that we have it all figured out. We just can't pretend that. But our organizations insist on that illusion and make us feel badly for not being able to live up to it. These world views converge on us and we're left loathing ourselves and feeling overwhelmed.

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Yet I also know people have a clear recognition that most of us are good and want to serve others. We know compassion is available in our selves and that we will experience compassion from others. So many people are realizing that the only way to go through this increasingly crazy time is to focus on ourselves not in a narcissistic way, but understanding that the source of peace and the place to find rest is within.

**Pema Chodron:** The thing that intrigues me is how society and organizations can encourage the things that meditation fosters at the individual level. It was very much Trungpa Rinpoche's vision that we work at both the individual and community levels. He talked a lot about enlightened society-about creating communities that foster this trust in the goodness of human beings. We think too small; we are confined by our beliefs, and one of the main beliefs that confines us is in our own inadequacy, our own imperfection. Before you can truly know what compassion is, you have to

develop equanimity towards that which is threatening, disagreeable or fearful. Equanimity and compassion don't come from transcending these things; they come from moving closer to what scares you, threatens you, causes you to become aggressive and selfish, and so forth.

This requires a lot of courage, but I find that's a message people can accept. Interestingly, the idea of developing courage doesn't seem to trigger people's inadequacies. I think they know they have some courage. The problem is they think they're supposed to be courageous in facing the outside world, whereas what is so profoundly transformative is the courage to look at yourself. It's the courage to not give up on yourself, even though you do see your aggression, jealousy, meanness, and so on. And it turns out that in facing these things, we develop not self-denigration but compassion for our shared humanity. One of the things you ask in your article is, how did the shadow disappear in our pursuit of looking for the light? How is it that the shadow just disappeared, when things are actually so unpredictable and surprising? We have to realize that these very things are the seeds of loving-kindness towards oneself and real compassion for others.

**Margaret Wheatley:** One of the things I've learned from science is that what's true at one level is true at other levels. So if processes are true at the level of the individual, we are going to find they also work at the level of community, organization or nation. For example, I see these same processes at work at the national level in South Africa. Their effort to face the truth of apartheid through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been a powerful teacher to me.

The process started with the whites saying, well, we won't listen because they're going to distort the truth for their own advantage and we'll have no control over it. Instead, what happened was that as the victims of torture came forward, as mother after mother spoke about the loss of her child or husband, it became a shared national experience of listening to people's human stories. And over time it allowed the whites to see the humanity of black South Africans, to see that they experienced the same sense of loss, the same grief as they did. To see them as human was a profound shift in the national sensibility, because any form of terrible treatment such as apartheid depends on denying the humanity of the victims.

What I learned from this is that first of all we need to listen to one another's stories. We really need to acknowledge the other's experience as they present it to us, and out of that comes the possibility of a different relationship. When we are aware of the other's humanity, so much becomes possible in terms of working with each other.

Pema Chodron: This is what I have been discovering again and again. We assume that by moving closer to suffering we would spiral down, but it's amazing what a source of inspiration it is to face it together. It surprises us that the darkness is a source of inspiration.

**Margaret Wheatley:** The experience of facing ourselves at the individual level also helps us be together differently at a societal level. What I'm finding is that independent of any explicit spiritual basis, when people in organizations are able to tell the truth of their experience to each other, it addresses the questions of who really we are in an organization and what we are really learning. What do I feel about how this team is working, truthfully? What have I learned today about doing this project? There has been so much avoidance of being together in our humanity in our organizations that we don't ask these kinds of questions. But I find it's truly

transformative when we start telling the truth to one another, including our mistakes, including our confusion. We summon something deep in all of us any time we speak together about the truth of our experience of being human. Like you, Pema, I think people want to be courageous. We really want to be more noble, and we want to speak for the things we see and the things we believe. This doesn't have to be grounded in any spiritual practice, but it always takes people there. Whether it's in a government office, a meditation center or a large corporation, whenever we can truly encounter one another in all of our humanity, we get past the illusion that everything works according to plan and we never feel uncertain. This is the great imprisonment we're trying to find our way out of, and one way to do it is to speak truthfully to one another about our experience. Then we experience a great recognition of being in the presence of other human beings. Whether it's through suffering or joy, what we're really seeking is that moment of recognizing another human being. That's always joyful in some way.

**Pema Chodron:** This is what I would consider a spiritual journey, although it doesn't have to have any of the religious labels. When people are courageous enough to express their experience—their inspiration as well as their disappointment and failure—that's the basis of awakening, of spiritual awakening. Of course, our experience is colored by our own take on reality.

**Margaret Wheatley:** Yes, until you get to the enlightened state.

**Pema Chodron:** But even when we're talking about the enlightened state, the path still seems to be one of waking to each moment as honestly as we can, and being willing to communicate with other people without feeling shame about exposing our defects. Because when we are willing to expose our defects, we expose some kind of heart to other people. Curiously enough, people respond more to our honesty about our imperfections than they do to our perfections. When we're honest about our difficulties with a project, or with another individual, or whatever, everyone in the room sort of resonates with the bravery of someone who's courageous enough to express their pain. It's so fascinating that that's what inspires people.

**Margaret Wheatley:** The experience of really listening to another human being is the source of our willingness to love them. Someone just gave me a t-shirt that says, "You can't hate someone whose story you know." That works at every level. The difficult issues in our society will not be resolved until we can listen to people's experience of things like racism and sexism—just listening without trying to defend ourselves.

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In organizations, we're blinded to the power of honest communication because we fear it will take us down the road of guilt and accusations, that it will fracture our relationships rather than heal them. We really don't want any more meetings because all we've done for years is accuse and yell at each other, trying to push our own agenda through this very dense resistance. We can't see the power of these very simple processes that would bring us to this great place of opening to one another. Yet when we finally realize the truth of who we are, and really hear people's stories, it truly changes our capacity to be together.

The first thing that arises when we open up to each other is a great sigh of relief. We realize

that we're not the only one who feels bewildered. When we hear that nobody knows the answer any more, that none of the old ways work, that we don't know what the new way is, then confusion has a higher value than certainty. Uncertainty is more appropriate to a world that is so perplexing to us. When people hear that, they relax

**Pema Chodron:** Because that's their experience.

**Margaret Wheatley:** That's their experience, so they feel confirmed. And what comes next is the possibility of courage. Instead of blaming ourselves because we're the only one who doesn't get it, we realize we're all dwelling in the confusion of modern-day life. I certainly see this in myself-I am able to trust myself more because I've had the recognition that what's called for is simply to notice how confusing and chaotic life is.

That allows the really big questions to surface. People everywhere are asking profoundly spiritual questions-about being together more with other human beings, about their lives having meaning beyond the criteria we've been given of success, money and material goods.

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I feel these questions arising from the planet in many different places as we come to the end of a world view that has led us into a particularly vacuous place. It is a world view that has kept us apart, and I'm beginning to think that how we can come together as human beings is the real question we face. In the program I took with you, Pema, you said that the root of suffering is the illusion of our separateness. That we've forgotten that we're all interrelated.

I do feel that's the root of suffering in this culture. This culture has torn us apart from one another and only supported us in our individual quests for things that are not in themselves satisfying. We're coming to the end of that now. We're realizing how empty we are, and I think we have courage to understand how far we've drifted from who we are as human beings, and to realize we can learn again how to be together.

In fact, a lot of people do know how to be together, but it's a skill that hasn't been considered important or given any status in our society. It's actually been dismissed as insignificant and soft and fuzzy. So courage is what we need, and the source of that courage is recognizing that the questions, doubts and desires that move in me move in everyone else as well.

**Pema Chodron:** When I think about the kind of teaching you're giving, Meg, and the Buddhist and Shambhala teachings I've been privileged to receive, I realize that if we look back--I'm sixty-three, so let's say sixty-three years ago--there were only a few people who would have been able to hear these teachings. Most people would have thought them strange and been in no way attracted to them.

Now we're seeing a vast audience of people from all backgrounds who are hungry for these kinds of teachings. The curious inspiration for this is recognition of how unpredictable our future is, which is actually encouraging courage. Something like the Y2K bug has people everywhere talking about how the future is totally unpredictable, and many of them are hearing the teaching of moving towards what scares us, of not being afraid of unpredictability. In fact,

unpredictability is the norm, and as you say, it becomes a higher value than security. It's fascinating to me that the times are such that people's belief systems are actually changing. People are thinking bigger.

Of course there's also the opposite reaction, an increase in fundamentalism among those who seek refuge in certainty, but I'm more struck by the hunger for the positive message - the creative capacity of resting with unpredictability. Unpredictability and interdependence are two truths that people are more and more able to hear. Hearts are more open to the fact that life is an unending surprise.

The whole globe is shook up, so what are you going to do when things are falling apart? You're either going to become more fundamentalist and try to hold things together, or you're going to forsake the old ambitions and goals and live life as an experiment, making it up as you go along.

My question is how organizations can lead us not toward some predictable goal, but toward a greater and greater capacity to handle unpredictability, and with it, a greater capacity to love and care about other people.

**Margaret Wheatley:** Many of us within large organizations are awakening to the awareness that life is uncertain and that we do make it up as we go along. But these aren't the usual management principles (laughs). There are very powerful forces that have no interest in this kind of awakening. I believe that's part of the gift of being alive right now. We have a wonderful opportunity to transform our relationships and our awareness of life. It's about creating a whole new world view, and I would say, even moving beyond that to emptiness. But we have to realize that we're not going to gain sanction from our present institutions. That's why courage is even more required. We're actually being quite revolutionary here. The world is going to continue to tell people who feel this awakening that they're crazy, so we might as well realize that what we are seeking is quite revolutionary in these times. It is part of a great swelling up on the planet of a desire for transformation. I don't know if I want to say it's big work, but it feels fundamental, in the good sense of returning to the foundations that truly support us.



**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)