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Journeying to a New World

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Note: This is an adaptation of the Epilogue in *Leadership and the New Science*, Second Edition, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996.

I first wrote these thoughts in 1995. Twelve years later, I'm still trying to come to terms with the experience of seeing, feeling, tasting and working earnestly from a new paradigm while living in the old one. And I'm more concerned than ever that we understand how crucial it is that we stay together and support one another.

I was in this work a few years before I was able to identify its real nature. I realized that I and others weren't asking people simply to adopt some new approaches to leadership or to think about organizations in a few new ways. What we were really asking, and what was also being asked of us, was that we change our thinking at the most fundamental level, that of our world view. The dominant world view of Western culture – the world as machine – doesn't help us to live well in this world any longer. We have to see the world differently if we are to live in it more harmoniously.

Once I understood the nature of the work, it helped me relax and be more generous. I learned that people get frightened if asked to change their world view. And why wouldn't they? Of course people will get defensive; of course they might be intrigued by a new idea, but then turn away in fear. They are smart enough to realize how much they would have to change if they accepted that idea. I no longer worry that if I could just find the right words or techniques, or describe multiple case studies, I could convince people. I no longer expect a new world view to be embraced quickly; I don't know if I'll see it take root in my lifetime. I also know that people are being influenced from sources far beyond anyone's control. I know many people who've been changed by events in their lives, not by words they read in a book.

These people have been changed by life's great creative force, chaos. One of the gifts offered by this new world view is a clearer description of life's cyclical nature. The mechanistic world view promised us lives of continual progress. Since we were in control and engineering it all, we could pull ourselves straight uphill, scarcely faltering. But life doesn't work that way, and this new world view confirms what most of us knew – no rebirth is possible without moving through a dark passage. Dark times are normal to life; there's nothing wrong with us when we periodically plunge into the abyss.

Over the past years, nudged by the science, I have come to know personally that the journey of newness is filled with the black potholes of chaos. The science has restrained me from trying to negotiate my way out of dark times with a quick fix. But even though I know the role of

chaos, I still don't like it. It's terrifying when the world I so carefully held together dissolves. I don't like feeling lost and emptied of meaning. I would prefer an easier path to transformation. But even as I experience their demands as unreasonable, I know I am in partnership with great creative forces. I know that chaos is a necessary place for me to dwell occasionally. So I have learned to sit with these dark moments – confused, overwhelmed, only faintly trusting that new insights will appear. I know that this is my only route to new ways of being.

The more I contemplate these times, when we truly are giving birth to a new world view, the more I realize that our culture has to take this journey through chaos. The old ways are dissolving, and the new is only beginning to show itself. To journey through chaos, we must engage with one another differently, as explorers and discoverers. I believe the passage is possible only if we claim these roles. We need to realize that no single person or school of thought has the answer, because what's required is far beyond isolated answers. We need to realize that we must inquire together to find the new. We need to turn to one another as our best hope for inventing and discovering the worlds we are seeking.

Being an explorer is unnerving and filled with risk. I keep hoping that someone, somewhere, really does have the answer. But I know that, in this voyage to a new world, you and I have to make it up as we go along, not because we lack skills or expertise, but because this is the nature of reality. Reality changes shape and meaning as we're in it. It is constantly new. We are required to be there, as active participants. It can't happen without us, and nobody can do it for us.

If we take seriously the role of explorer and inventor, we'll realize how much we need each other. In this time of chaos, the potential for disaster is as strong as for new possibilities. How will we navigate these times?

The answer is, together. We need each other differently now. We cannot hide behind any old boundaries or hold onto the belief that we can make it on our own. We need each other to test out ideas, to share what we're learning, to help us see in new ways, to listen to our stories. We need each other to forgive us when we fail, to trust us with their dreams, to offer their hope when we've lost our own.

I crave companions, not competitors. I want people to sail with me through this puzzling and frightening world. I expect to fail at moments on this journey, to get lost – how could I not? And I expect that you too will fail. Even our voyage is cyclical – we can't help but move from old to new to old. We will vacillate, one day doing something bold and different, excited over the progress, the next day, back to old behaviors, confused about how to proceed. We need to expect that we will wander off course and not make straight progress to our destination. To stay the course, we need patience, compassion, and forgiveness. We need to require this of one another. It will help us be bolder explorers. It might keep us from going mad.

This is a strange world and it promises only to get stranger. Niels Bohr, the great quantum physicist, once said that great ideas, when they appear, seem muddled and strange. They are only half-understood by their discoverer and remain a mystery to everyone else. But if an idea does not appear bizarre, he counseled, there is no hope for it. So we must live with the strange

and the bizarre, directed to unseen lands by faint glimmers of hope. Every moment of this journey requires that we be comfortable with uncertainty and appreciative of chaos' role. Every moment requires that we stay together. After all is said and done, we have the gift of each other. We have each other's curiosity, wisdom, and courage. And we have Life, whose great ordering powers, if we choose to work with them, can make us even more curious, wise and courageous.



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. For more biographical information, see margaretwheatley.com/bio