

# An Interview with Margaret Wheatley

## Living a Discerning Life in a Complex, Harsh World

**Dr. Margaret (Meg) Wheatley** has served as an organizational consultant for 40 years with leaders on all continents and with most types of organizations and communities. She holds a doctorate in organizational behavior from Harvard University, and a master's degree in media ecology from New York University. A prolific writer, her articles appear in both professional and popular journals, and her books have included *Leadership and the New Science* (now in 18 languages) and her most recent work, *So Far From Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World*. In this work, she invites readers to develop the skills most needed when working for good in this complex and often harsh world.

In an interview, LCWR director of communications **Annamarie Sanders, IHM** spoke with Meg about living a discerning life while working for positive change in the world.

**Q** In your most recent book, you quote the Buddhist meditation master Chogyam Trungpa as saying, "When tenderness tinged by sadness touches our heart, we know we are in contact with reality. We feel it. That contact is genuine, fresh and quite raw." You go on to say that living from this stance leads to a sadness and loneliness because we see clearly a world that others deny. To live a discerning life,



**it seems imperative to live from this stance. Would you say more about what it takes to view the world as it is with tender hearts?**

What's ironic about this question is that I just completed a long retreat and this is exactly the question and the practices that my teacher gave me. So that is to say there's no simple answer. But one of the things I am learning is that when we are truly in the tender heart of sadness, we don't feel pride, or arrogance, or any

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of the nastier ego feelings. We don't feel that we know what's right. What I am encountering in my own practice is what my teacher calls the genuine heart of sadness or the pure heart of sadness -- which is actually a very welcoming place. Being there doesn't mean that we try to move out of that sadness and fix the other person for whom we feel the sadness. How to be there is something I have learned from women religious throughout the years. You are fully present to what is going on in the world. Yes, being fully present makes us feel very sad, but it also conditions our hearts so that we feel spontaneous compassion and love. This is a much healthier place to be than a place where you react or get angry or just want to fix a problem that is not solvable. I am finding that feeling a pure heart of sadness is actually a peaceful emotion.

The loneliness is also something that becomes a genuine feeling, but not anything you have to fix. I think what is basic to all of this is the question: How can we just be with our hearts wide open and experience all the depth of that emotion without needing to react? Our tendency when we feel lonely is to react, to try and get over the loneliness, and push away the sadness.

**Q** What do you think keeps most of us away from even entering into that kind of a space?

I think we live in a culture that tells us that loneliness is not acceptable -- that you don't have to feel lonely, that sadness comes from failure in the pursuit of a happiness which we are so bizarrely

focused on. We don't want to feel sad, we're afraid of these things, and yet they're just part of the human experience.

It is impossible to be with the people whom I am with who suffer greatly and experience horrific oppression – and the people whom so many sisters are with – without letting our hearts open to their circumstances. When we do, we feel sadness and perhaps loneliness, although I find loneliness is less of an issue. When I am really standing with others, I don't experience feeling lonely at all.

I would ask the sisters to consult their own experience and what they have discovered in bearing witness or standing with others because I think we are describing the exact same thing. The key is a commitment to wanting to keep our hearts open.

**Q You also note that we often do not know what to do with our sadness and our grief over the world. You obviously have opened yourself to feeling these emotions quite profoundly. What do you do with your own sadness and grief?**

There are basically two things that any one of us does in the face of our sadness and grief. We can shut down and pretend we are not feeling this. This, of course, eats away at us over time and we end up living very distracted lives that are more and more superficial. Our other choice is we can open. Those are the two basic gestures: stand back or move into.

Sadness and grief are a part of my life now and I actually take that as a good sign. It means I haven't closed down and that I am on the right path. Keeping my heart open is an important goal of mine. Feeling sadness or grief is a sign that I am doing so.

I want to emphasize one thing though. We have to let these emotions move through us and not

let them fester. I recently had a friend who did not smoke die of lung cancer. She told me that lung cancer is on the rise with women and that it is often associated with grief. She was someone who experienced the grief of the world. So what I have learned from her sad death is that it is really important to let the sadness move through us and not hold it in. I think we do that through things like ritual, through singing together, and through liturgy – and it is increasingly important that we do these things. The other side of grief and sadness is joy, so it is important to let the grief mutate itself into inexplicable joy.

**Q You observe that no one is able to develop insight and compassion without a regular practice of quieting and watching the mind, a practice of some form of mindfulness. Would you talk about your own practice and what it has meant for your own life?**

My own practice gets more and more serious as the world gets more and more insane. I could draw a direct relationship between my increased practice and the increase in brutality, disrespect, and anti-human behaviors going on in this country and all over the world. These anti-human behaviors are completely irrational from a human survival point of view and the more I experience them, the more I deepen my commitment to want to be there for people. I don't want to be one who withdraws. Yet it takes more practice and a stable mind to be able to stay.

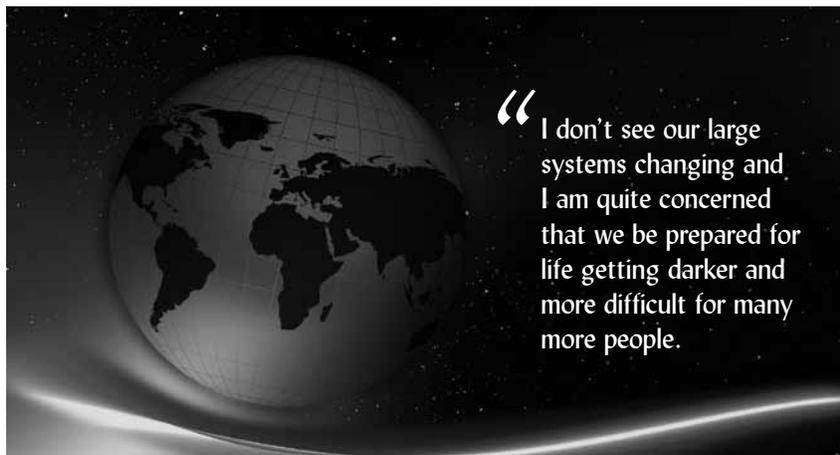
I see so much dehumanization going on with policies, programs, and withdrawal of funding decisions that are taking away the social safety net in many countries now. The more I see that, the more I know I want to be of comfort and support to the people who are working in organizations that are trying to assist others. Doing so is a commitment I made many years ago. As I live this commitment, in order not to not just lose my temper, become enraged, or be brought down by despair, I need to have a regular daily practice.

My practice is quite modest. I meditate anywhere between 15 and 45 minutes a day – depending on my schedule. I try to keep my awareness very active during the day. What has really developed my capacity though is that I go on a solo meditation retreat for two months every winter. My teacher is nearby and she is a beautiful guide into the depths and heights of spiritual experience. I just completed my fourth such retreat.

**Q What's that retreat like for you and how do you spend that time?**

Well, I'm self-sufficient. I have a beautiful little cabin in the woods up on the tip of Nova Scotia. It is on the sea and it is very wild country – wild weather, wild animals, and a whole monastic community living just 100 yards from me. I am on my own and I don't talk to anyone except my teacher or in an emergency situation. I have no Internet, no phone, no computer. What I love most is what happens as I watch my mind come alive when it's free from distraction. And I

know we all could have this experience if our lives were not so distracted. On retreat, it is just me and my mind and the books I bring to study. I don't write – and that is a deliberate practice because writing solidifies your experience into a solid story line rather than keeping your experiences fluid and changing. It is a perfect environment to



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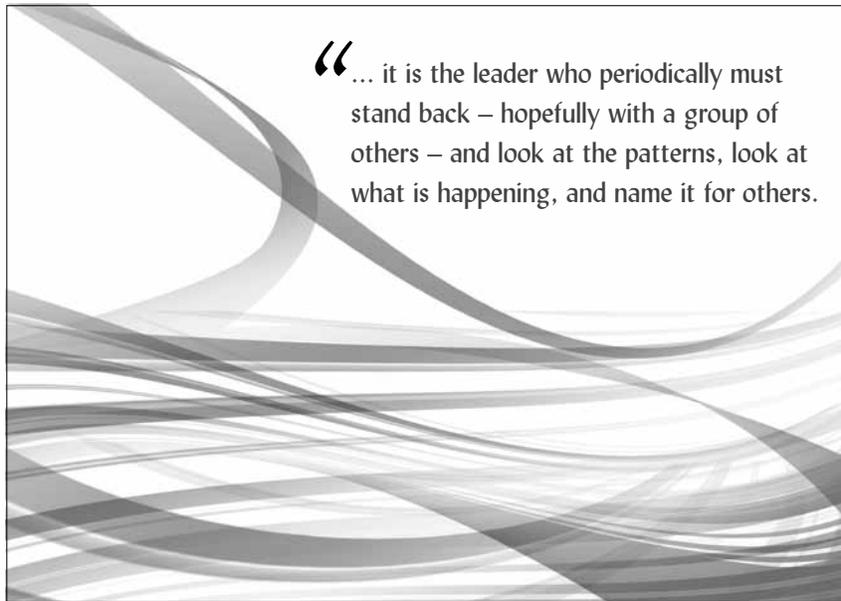
study pretty obtuse sacred texts. Those texts become so easy to understand in my little cabin, but then I come back here and the text doesn't have much meaning any more other than I vaguely remember it. So one of the things I observed in doing this regularly is that we are losing our great human mind capacities of memory, connecting the dots, seeing the big picture, thinking ahead, thinking in systems, and seeing interrelationships because we are so distracted and busy with minor disconnected tasks. This has given me insight into the costs of our distracted society and it is a deep, deep concern to me. We need to reclaim or reawaken our minds through finding undistracted time when we can settle down and reflect.

**Q What would you recommend for those of us who wouldn't be able to make an extensive yearly retreat?**

I think taking a day a month or even a half-day dedicated to contemplation or prayer would be very beneficial, as well as going to a weekend or week-long retreat. The main thing here is just to get silent with your mind so that you can see things clearly, which you cannot do day to day. It is a complete blessing in my life that I can take this extended time, and because I can, it increases my sense of obligation to be available to people and be in a place of peace instead of a place of rage.

**Q You put yourself in very difficult situations all around the world. What keeps you motivated? How do you keep going?**

Well, I never felt I had a choice. When you find your right work, it is the ultimate motivation. I can't think of doing anything else. I also feel I have it pretty



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see our large systems changing and I am quite concerned that we be prepared for life getting darker and more difficult for many more people. So, this is now my focus. The world is changing and I have tried to stay in touch with the major changes. I think the skill with which I come to these times is that I can spot trends, and I have been blessed to have a wonderful platform on which to share what I see.

easy at this point in my life. I go to where I am invited and get welcomed in by people who are simply happy that I show up for them. I have formed some beautiful relationships through this work. This is a change from my earlier years where my focus was on trying to get people to see from a different world view.

I live a vowed life and my vow in Tibetan Buddhism is to achieve an awakened heart and awakened action. Because we believe that we come back after death, my vow is not just for this life. I know I am going to come back and I just hope that I come back with a more enlightened mind and less ego.

**Q You mentioned the more difficult years of trying to help others to see from another world view. How do you account for how your ideas have gained so much attention in the more recent years?**

Age -- and the times! When I was speaking of chaos 20 years ago, people thought it was an interesting concept but that it didn't really apply to their lives. Now everyone is speaking of turbulence and chaos. What is interesting is that I have shifted from thinking that we can fix or change large systems. My work now has shifted away from trying to fix systems and is completely focused on individuals and how we can prepare ourselves to be warriors for the human spirit. It is a significant shift and the change was motivated by my experience. I don't

**Q One challenge so many of us face is how to draw out wisdom from all the data and information that comes our way. And a task of leaders is to not only draw out the wisdom but also to articulate its relevance for others. What insights might you share with women religious leaders who are attempting to do this in these complex times?**

I am glad you asked this question because I learned something about this by watching the Sisters of St. Joseph as they prepared for the apostolic visitation. In the beginning, there was no agreement among them on how to work with this process. But then, at a large federation gathering, someone named what they perceived to be the true dynamic that had spawned the visitation. From what the sisters told me, once the leaders were able both to name and agree that it was this dynamic--and even though the dynamic was an especially painful one to recognize-- once everyone accepted this, they trusted each of the communities to handle the visitation appropriately. Instead of trying to come up with one fixed way to deal with the visitation, they trusted one another to discern how they wanted to respond; the communities did not have to choose the same response. They believed that once the leader had identified what was really going on, then they could trust the members to respond appropriately.

What I take from that, and what I have seen in secular settings as well, is that there is a real need for leaders to name what is going on in a situation, and to name it truthfully, and then let that truth be what people talk through. Once a group has a common definition of what is going on, then the group can be free to self-organize and there is not a need for rules about how to respond. Then people can trust one another more. If, however, we are all operating from a different storyline on what the situation is, it only creates confusion. Then people do not act in accordance with one another.

I see this in my own work. Once we agree on what is going on, we trust one another to self-organize appropriate responses. But if we have competing stories about what is happening, then your behavior is going to be very different than mine.

Another crucial role for leaders is to recognize that they're the only ones who see the whole and its patterns. Leaders need to be "stewards of the whole" organization. No one else is even interested in seeing what is happening elsewhere because we are all so overworked and busy. So it is the leader who periodically must stand back – hopefully with a group of others – and look at the patterns, look at what is happening, and name it for others. This is the only way we can stop going down this path of blind action that doesn't lead us to anywhere good. So, it is really not about data; it's about seeing patterns and naming them correctly.

I have seen sisters able to take negative things they have experienced and see them as part of a larger pattern of oppression of women. Seeing from this perspective helps us find much more meaning in the particular negative experience in which we find ourselves, and rouses our courage to name it for what it is.

**Q Women religious are dedicated to bringing religious life forward in a form that meets the current needs of**

**the world and anticipates how it might meet the needs of the future. You have noted that thinking forward is impossible for people fearfully reacting to the present moment. Would you say more about how fear prevents us from thinking forward and hinders our ability to discern wise action for the future?**

I want to first say something about fear. There is a wonderful quote by the Persian writer Hafiz who said, "Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I would like to see you living in better conditions." Fear is the simplest place to occupy, and what is so bizarre about fear is that it is never found in the present moment. The paradox here is if we want to think forward we cannot do it from a position of fear, yet all our fear comes from thinking about the future. Fear comes from how we interpret the past and how we worry about what will happen in the future.

The first supposition about thinking forward free from fear is to be fully present in this moment, as well as open to all the information that is out there. Fear gives us such terrible lenses by which to view the future; it can become quite terrifying. When I find myself in fear, I try to come back to the present moment and what is going on right here, right now. What do I have? Who am I? Who is around me? I work at trying to prevent my mind from

going into some future fear-filled state. This also works when you are trying to develop a strategy for the future or think about who you want to be in the future. First, you have to take full stock of what you have right now. This gives us a really amazing capacity then to think forward.

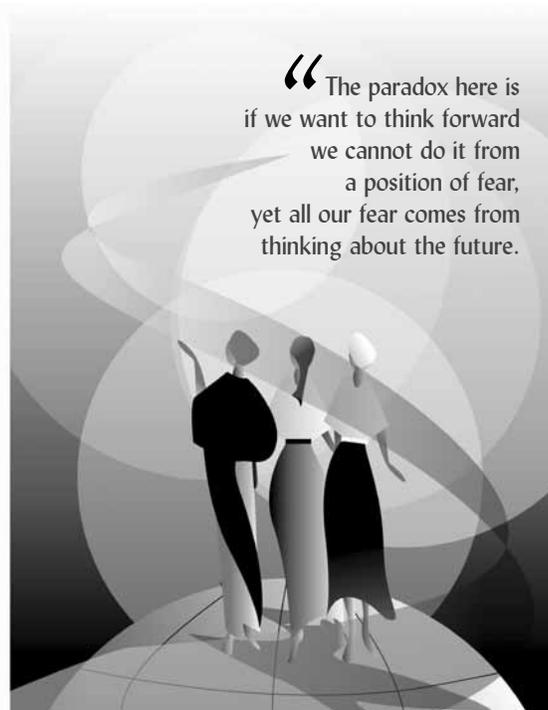
Fear has also become a deliberate political strategy. We are told that we have a lot of enemies and are presented with a lot of fearful prospects for the future. What is interesting is that some of those fearful prospects are true, such as those around climate change. But when we are presented with those facts in the context of fear, we tend to say, "Well, we can't do anything about this anyway, so let's just lead a great life while we can."

**Q What has drawn you to working with women religious? Is there a potential you see in women religious that we should perhaps attend to more?**

For a number of years I had been speaking about organizations that take all their direction from their strong sense of values. In 1992, one of my colleagues told me that if I was going to continue talking about such organizations, I should be working with two groups: the military and women religious. I have worked with both, and he was right.

Both of these groups are comprised of people who have a strong sense of commitment to their values, and of course very different means to achieve ends.

As I got to know sisters, I found they were the strongest can-do leaders on the planet. I came up with a slogan years ago which was: If you want it done, ask a nun. Sisters never seem to say no, you all seem to just make it work. I have loved that. I also love the focus on charisma, as well as ritual and liturgy. You have the means to create a strong container to hold your separate activities and work in the world. I loved learning what it means to bear witness and to stand with. All of this was so new to me at the time I first met sisters, but now it is just a part of who I am. I



also love the fact that sisters pray for me, and I really feel those prayers.

Another valuable lesson I have learned from you is how to create community. A number of years ago I was physically and emotionally exhausted and went on my first-ever spiritual retreat (in a Benedictine community). While on the retreat I met a sister who knew of my work. I was telling her how much I was out in the world working, traveling a great deal, moving from place to place. She just looked at me and said: "You need a community!" It was like a mother saying to a child: you need a coat on, it's cold out there. That understanding of community has really attracted me. One of the greatest needs we all have is coming back together and supporting one another in a very difficult time.

Several years ago, I joined with a group of sisters and lay women (we called ourselves "The Willing Disturbers") to explore this question: "What might be the next form of consecrated life for women who don't want to be nuns, but whose work is sacred? I love this question because it points to community. This question just keeps growing bigger and bigger in my own mind and in the minds of my colleagues. How do we want to be together, to support one another, and also help one another do great work in the world? This is a question that is percolating in a lot of places, and it isn't just focused on women religious. It's a question for me personally. I have a large family, so I feel I have support. But it is critical to also find a community where I would feel supported spiritually.

**Q From all the work you have done with women religious and all the potential you see, are there any liabilities that you have observed that may also hold us back?**

I would say a liability is believing the negative messages about yourselves that are directed to you. My observation is that those messages do not come from those you serve, but from elsewhere. My suggestion is that you look at the source of the negative messages before you accept and give attention to them. It's not easy to avoid internalizing the negative,

but I think we do that by observing from where it comes.

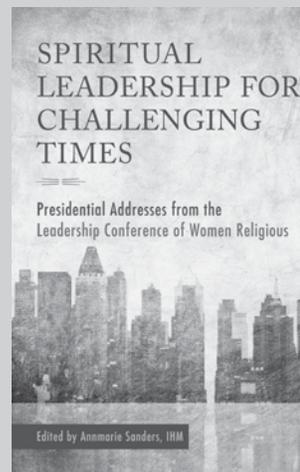
There is a great quote from Buddha who said nearly 2600 years ago: "They criticize the silent ones; they criticize the talkative ones. There is no one in the world who escapes criticism." As women stand up more and more in settings all around the world, we are getting more and more criticism. This is part of the last stages of desperation in any organization or culture. We strike out at one another, seeking to blame the others rather than examine ourselves. It is part of the times in which we live.

**Q Do you have suggestions for what women religious leaders can do to be the effective leaders for which these times call?**

Fully acknowledge that you are effective leaders for these times. But remember that this strength and confidence can only come from within. Don't wait or expect it to come from other sources. I encourage you to understand the power of your charisma. Understand the incredible stories of your founders. People who persevere usually come from strong lineages – and you have that.

This is a crazy and very anti-human time. Therefore your work – and my work – is rising in importance. Have the strength and the confidence to do it and continue to find ways for all of us to support one another in it. And realize that our faith in people, and in the Sacred, must always be attended to as our ultimate source of motivation and strength. □

## Explore How LCWR Leaders Have Discerned the Signs of the Times



Orbis Books has published a collection of 10 LCWR presidential addresses, entitled *Spiritual Leadership for Challenging Times*. Beginning in 1978 with the reflections of Joan Chittister, OSB on the changing models of religious life, followed by the 1980 address on the role of women in the church by Theresa Kane, RSM, these speeches reflect a period of momentous changes in the church and society. They conclude with the speech of Pat Farrell, OSF in 2012. Throughout these addresses, readers will find ideas and inspiration to formulate their own understandings of the type of leadership needed in the world and church today.

Information on ordering as well as a free reflection and discussion guide are available at: [www.lcwr.org](http://www.lcwr.org)