



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## **Maybe You Will Be The Ones: To My Sons and Their Friends** in *Imagine: What America Could Be in the 21st Century*. Rodale Books, June 2000

I am on Lake Powell in the Southwest United States, drifting along the borders of Utah and Arizona, thinking about America's next fifty years. I am floating in deep redrock canyons that are several hundred millions of years old. Whenever I look up from my computer, I see awesome slickrock wantonly displaying its entire evolutionary history. These rocks are here today because the beaches of ancient seas were compressed into sedimentary rock that formed into thousands of layers that were then uplifted by massive earth upheavals to form these towering red mountains, which were then carved into canyons by relentless rivers only ten million years ago. I tell you this just to keep things in perspective.

Lake Powell highlights more than evolutionary time-it was created by human imagination wedded to unwavering arrogance. In the 1950s, American engineers proceeded to dam up several canyons and rivers in order to produce electricity, create reservoirs, and develop recreational areas. Lake Powell was created by flooding Glen Canyon; next on the list to be dammed was the Grand Canyon (!). We were spared that incomprehensible act because of public outrage at the loss of Glen Canyon.

Lake Powell is a dramatic testament to the troubling American impulse to use our technology and daring to coerce nature to our own purposes, our belief that the planet is here for whatever use we can make of it. And while the redrocks of Powell speak to the planet's history of creative forces, they also alert us to the ahistoric moment we occupy now. For the first time, the consequences of our acts affect the entire planet, all peoples and all beings. As I imagine what the next fifty years might bring, I know that we either will have learned to be responsible planetary stewards of our human creativity, or have wreaked unimaginable havoc with our only home.

We have never been here before. Human imagination has given us powers unlike anything in the past. Our immediate challenge is to deal with the consequences of human imagination, and to use this special gift of the human species on behalf of all life. (But whatever happens to us, the rocks will continue their cycles of emergence and disintegration.)

Human imagination thrives in the United States; we entice everyone to our shores by its magical lure. As a nation, we have given the world many things, but our keen defense of individual freedom has allowed imagination to soar and to explore the limitless sky of human creativity. No where else have I experienced the boundless sense of possibility that is so easily available in Americans. We are the most optimistic nation on earth, and people risk everything to get here so that they might breathe in this great space of possibility.

During the next fifty years, we need to keep making this gift of human imagination available to

the world. But our particular challenge as a nation is to use our creativity to embrace and support every living thing, not just a few of us. We will need to both raise and resolve this question: *How will we use our gifts of human imagination? Who do we need to be?*

Lake Powell is not my only companion as I think about this question. I am spending the week on a 54' houseboat with thirteen teen-age boys between the ages of 15 and 20. Lest you doubt my sanity or survivability, know that I learned a long time ago that my teen-age sons move as a clan, comfortable and happy only when surrounded by friends. This vacation was planned for the clan, not our family, and I am having a wonderful time on this houseboat in this redrock landscape tuning into life as seen by strong, creative, young American men.

The next fifty years depends on our young men and young women. In fifty years, they will be 65 to 70 years old. I expect they will not even know what "retirement" means-that concept will have long disappeared by then. This America I am trying to imagine is really theirs to create. What they do in the next five decades will be the determinant. The world they will have created by then will be the world their grandchildren inherit.

As soon as I realize that I am surrounded on this houseboat by one of the generations responsible for the future, I put aside my notes and ask if we can talk. Some are already gathered in the cabin and I ask them to tell me what they imagine for the future, when they are 65, what do they hope the world will be? Within minutes of beginning this conversation, other boys flock in, and soon all thirteen teen-agers are gathered around. For the next hour I just listen to them, honored that they want to be in this conversation with me. I revel in how intent they are, how no one drifts out of the room, how much they love being asked their views on something this big and important, how most of them have very strong views about the future, how they're in this conversation with each other, not just me.

This is what I hear them say: They want less hate. They fear for the planet. They want robots to do dull work. They want schools to stop being so awful. They expect pure (electronic) democracy by then. They want to stop violence. They want to stop being desensitized by the media to violence, suffering, warfare. They want families, they want to be loving, supportive parents. They want to stop taking America for granted.

I ask them what do you hope for? They reply: I want to know I've given my best, no matter what. I want a lot less negativity. I want the Second Coming of Christ. I want to know that I have encouraged another human being. I want children. I'm afraid to have children. I want something to happen that will unite us as humans-maybe this will happen if we make contact with extraterrestrials. I want to end the greed of corporations. I want to teach my family good values. I believe one person can make a difference, like Gandhi did. I don't think one person can do anything. I want us to stop being hypocrites and to take responsibility for our own behavior.

Who are these children, these thirteen beings camped in a houseboat among ancient redrocks looking into the future they will help create? They are wonderfully American-among these thirteen is one South African immigrant, one first generation American with parents from Argentina and the Cherokee and Chickasaw nations, many of northern and southern European descent, one with Choctaw nation ancestors, and one descendent of U.S. General and President, Ulysses S. Grant. President Grant's descendent has had a very difficult life and is in

foster care; many of the others (including my two sons) are children of divorce. Socioeconomic status ranges from struggling to make ends meet to easy affluence.

And they are representative of America in other ways. We all agree that we are living the American paradox. We know the things we do are destructive to the planet, or use too many of the world's resources, and yet we can't stop living the life we live. We want to help the environment, but every day of this vacation, we're burning up thirty gallons of carbon-based fuels to play on our jet skis. We want a world that works for all, but we willingly consume far too much of the world's resources as evident in our daily three bags of garbage. We know that the Earth is running out of critical resources such as water, but we ourselves run out of water on the boat because we don't appropriately monitor our usage. We want everyone in this world to enjoy a better life, but we can't stop ourselves from living the good life which we know is destructive to others.

One other thing I notice about them, not only in this conversation, is the quality of their relationships. Instead of the anticipated contesting, competing, and generally-expected macho behavior, I observe consistent levels of support and concern. When one young man freezes on a cliff, paralyzed by vertigo, three others work with him patiently and lovingly to help him down. Vertigo strikes him a second time on another hike, and again I witness an intense desire to help him. These incidents are never brought up, never thrown in his face.

And they don't even notice how different they are from earlier generations when competition kept us separate from each other. At night, they sit on the roof of the boat and write music together. There's no sense of individual ownership. One person develops a musical theme, others chime in with their instruments, and the banter back and forth is playful, excited, complementary to each other.

They love to create together-I watch them composing together, coaching each other, teaching each other, admiring each other's talents. I admire their talents also. One is a genius at creating websites; several are musicians; two are writers; four of them play high school football and are strong athletes. All in all they are funny, talented, and astonishingly convivial-with me, each other, and any adults who will pause to talk with them.

These young people not only care about each other; I am surprised by their sensitivity to human psychology. They seem to know what's going on at deeper levels; they use this awareness to explain each other's motivation--why any one is doing what he's doing. When any two start arguing or get angry at each other, there are others who step forward to help them work it out. I'm amazed at how well they process things-listening to all sides, figuring out ways to move into new behaviors, creating compromises. They are far more skilled than many adults I know.

Most of these children are embodiments of American optimism-they believe in themselves, each other, and the future. But surprisingly, they do not seem to act from the same fierce nationalism that has plagued many earlier generations, including mine. Their hearts are more wide open. The world they know is much smaller than the one I grew up in. They are connected to children all over the world through a global teen culture of music, movies, and sports. Many of us have (quite rightly) decried the loss of local cultures and the Americanization of the planet, but when I observe how easily my sons talk with teens they

meet in Brazil or Zimbabwe or Europe, I realize something good is happening as well. They don't have the concept of "foreigner." Their world isn't filled with strangers-they can instantly talk about a musician or a movie and have an energetic conversation where cultural differences dissolve. They live in a world that feels connected, not Americanized. It is impossible to motivate them by calling for traditional patriotism.

In the fifty years these children have to create something new, they can't create anything but a networked, boundaryless world. My generation has tossed these words around, but these kids live it. Even when they develop into "tight" groups, cliques, and gangs, they know there's a very big world out there that is as close as their music, TV, or computer screen.

So are my boat companions a "normal" group of teen-agers, those to whom I have entrusted America's and the planet's future? I hope so. I think these kids are quite typical, and I feel extraordinarily privileged to have lived with them so intimately for six days. Here is what I want to say to them. Thank you for letting me see you.

Thank you for being people that it's fun to be with, to think with, to dream with. Thank you above all for not taking at face value what my generation has believed and tried so hard to teach you. We would have you believe that the world is ruled by competition, that only the strong survive, that you must look out always and only for yourself, that to survive in this world you must practice deceit, greed, selfishness, and violence. We haven't taught you about honor, sustainability, community, or compassion. We failed to show you how to be wise stewards of the earth, how to care for one another, how to resolve conflicts peacefully, how to enjoy others' creativity as well as your own.

Yet miraculously, you are learning these things! These more humane capacities have captured your attention, more than our incessant messages to the contrary. Maybe you're reacting to watching your parents compulsive pursuit of self-interest and individualism. Maybe you're expressing the fundamental need of humans to be together. (As a species, for eons we humans have struggled to live together more than we have fought to be apart.)

I am excited that you seem to be figuring it out for yourself. I only want to encourage you in the direction you're already moving. If you pay attention to certain strengths you already have, then I believe that the future we talked about is truly possible.

**Here is one strength I see. You know how to enjoy each other's gifts.** You don't feel diminished by each other's talents. You take delight if one of you is a great guitarist, one writes terrific songs, one doesn't like music but loves computers, one plays sports, one plays computer games. You don't need to be alike. You seem to know that your diverse talents are your collective strength. I love how you revel in your diversity-this is something that other generations never figured out. If you keep reveling in how individual uniqueness adds to your collective ability, you will have moved past one of the most troubling issues of this time, this year 2000 when there are more than sixty wars going on in only 230 nations. Maybe you will be the ones to help all humans take the leap into the great gift of human diversity.

**Another strength. You need each other.** I believe we adults have inadvertently helped you here-we have ignored you, denied you, seen you as a problem. You learned to stay together because other generations couldn't or wouldn't invite you to join them. You learned to support

each other when older people withdrew from you. (Outside of Columbine High School, you huddled in each others arms, guiding each other into sudden adulthood in a world where violence was random, but did make sense.)

I believe you understand more about the terrors of separation than I do-you experience so much violence, so much stereotyping, so much exclusion, that you must know that feeling separate does terrible things to the human spirit. I hope you can carry that awareness with you into adulthood-I hope you are the ones that hold onto each other and refuse to move into the competitive space of feeling better than, feeling different from, feeling holier than. To succeed where all we others have failed, you will have to hold onto your present sense of outrage over exclusion, and turn that anger into compassion. You will have to keep your hearts open rather than contract them. You will have to help rather than judge the kids all around you who choose to protect themselves by forming exclusionary groups. I hope you remember, as you said on the boat, that "you can't solve violence with more violence."

**Another strength. You love creating and you claim that freedom.** You do not tolerate nearly as much confinement, rules, repressive structures as I and your parents did. You walk away from disrespectful employers, boring work, uninteresting activities. As parents, we have been quick to criticize you-we fear you have no work ethic, no standards, no values. But you make me hopeful, because your refusal to conform and comply might save you from being diminished. I see you standing up for who you are, I see you reclaiming the freedom and respect that every human spirit requires if it is to flourish. If you are successful here, you will have claimed a future where many more people feel welcome to offer their unique creative gifts.

Here is something I'm not sure you know. These three strengths must work together. Things go terribly wrong when only one is emphasized. Many generations and civilizations have failed because they supported only one of these essential aspects of human nature. In America, we have fought to develop and sustain individual freedom, and we have ended up with a litigious society where everyone knows their "rights", but few know how to be in community. Many indigenous cultures honor the diversity of individual gifts, but hold those gifts as belonging to the community. Individuals are not free to express themselves as they might want; they are there to serve the community, not themselves. Many societies know the human need to be together, but they build up their collective by separating themselves, drawing hard barriers between themselves and others. This is the world you grew up in, a world populated by enemies and strangers, where ethnic wars, genocides, and border conflicts predominate.

And now it's your turn to experiment with the mystery of human society. What will be its next form? You may be the ones who learn how to weave these three strengths together, a swirling spiral of our unique gifts, our desire for community, and our need for individual freedom. If you figure this out, we will move forward as a planetary community where people experience what it means to be fully human. I believe this is the next evolutionary leap of our species-how to take our diversity, our personal freedom and our creativity, and use it to create a planetary community where all life can flourish. No generation before you has figured this out, but we've chronicled our experiences and they are there to help you.

None of these three human strengths is particular to Americans--they are common human longings-but because you are maturing in America, you have the gift of freedom and

opportunity to explore them, to observe them, to learn from others. In that way you are unique, and if you succeed, you will be creating a new world for all, not just for Americans. And I know you already know that.

In fifty years, maybe you'll be back on Lake Powell, being with the redrocks. If the lake is still here functioning as a healthy ecosystem, that will be the first sign that you have succeeded. And if you are still friends who want to be together, that will be the sign that you have truly succeeded.

You may be the ones. I pray that you are.

This article was written for **Imagine: What America Could be in the 21st Century** (Rodale Books, 2000), a collection of original essays from leading authors, academics, and activists on their visions of a better America, and what can be done to turn these visions into reality. Imagine, which was edited by Marianne Williamson, will be available this November wherever books are sold. All author proceeds go to the Global Renaissance Alliance, a nonprofit network of citizen groups interested in spiritual-based activism.



**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)