



Margaret J. Wheatley

Relying on Human Goodness

Shambala Sun, Summer 2001

We have a great need to rely on the fact of human goodness. Human goodness seems like an outrageous "fact." Everyday we are confronted with mounting evidence of the great harm we so easily do to one another. We are numbed by frequent genocide, ethnic hatred, and individual violence committed daily in the world. In self-protective groups, we terrorize each other with our hatred. Of the 240 or so nations in the world, nearly one-fourth of them are at war.

In our daily life, we encounter people who are angry, deceitful, intent only on satisfying their own needs. There is so much anger, distrust, greed, and pettiness that we are losing our capacity to work well together. Many of us are more withdrawn and distrustful than ever. Yet this incessant display of what's worst in us makes it essential that we believe in human goodness. Without that belief, there really is no hope.

There is nothing equal to human creativity, human caring, human will. We can be incredibly generous, imaginative, and open-hearted. We can do the impossible, learn and change quickly, and extend instant compassion to those in distress. And these are not behaviors we keep hidden. We exhibit them daily. How often during one day do you figure out an answer to a problem, invent a slightly better way of doing something, or extend yourself to someone in need? Very few people go through their days as dumb robots, doing only repetitive tasks, never noticing that anybody else needs them. Look around at your colleagues and neighbors, and you'll see others acting just like you--people trying to be useful, trying to make some small contribution, trying to help someone else.

In these times of turmoil, we've forgotten who we can be and we've let our worst natures prevail. Some of these bad behaviors we created because we treat people in non-human ways. We've taken the very things that make us human--our emotions, our imagination, our need for meaning--and dismissed them as unimportant. We've found it more convenient to treat humans as replaceable parts in the machinery of production. We've organized work around destructive motivations--greed, self-interest, competition.

After years of being bossed around, of being told they're inferior, of power plays that destroy lives, most people are exhausted, cynical, and focused only on self-protection. Who wouldn't be? These negative and demoralized people are created by the organizing and governance methods in use. People cannot be discounted or used only for someone else's benefit. If obedience and compliance are the primary values, these destroy creativity, commitment, and generosity. Whole cultures and generations of people have been deadened by such coercion.

But people's reaction to coercion tells us a great deal about the goodness of the human spirit. The horrors of the twentieth century show us the worst of human nature, and the very best. How do you feel when you hear stories of those who wouldn't give in, those who offered compassion to others in the midst of personal horror, those who remained generous in the face of torture and imprisonment? The human spirit is nearly impossible to extinguish. Few of us can listen to these stories and remain cynical. We are hungry for these tales—they remind us of what it means to be fully human. We always want to hear more.

Noticing our beliefs about human goodness is not a philosophical inquiry. Our beliefs are critical influences for what we do in the world. They lead us either to action or retreat. Courageous acts aren't done by people who believe in human badness. Why risk anything if we don't believe in each other? Why stand up for anyone if we don't believe they're worth saving? Who you think I am will determine what you're willing to do on my behalf. You won't even notice me if you believe that I'm less than you are.

Trungpa Rinpoche taught the relationship between our beliefs about each other and the willingness to act courageously. He defined our present historic time as a dark age because we are poisoned by self-doubt and thus become cowards. In his teachings and work, as Pema Chodron describes them, he aspired to bring about an era of courage in which people could experience their goodness and extend themselves to others.

Oppression never occurs between equals. Tyranny always arises from the belief that some people are more human than others. There is no other way to justify inhumane treatment, except to assume that the pain inflicted on the oppressed is not the same as ours. I saw this clearly in South Africa, after apartheid and during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. In those hearings, white South Africans listened to black mothers grieving the loss of their children to violence, to wives weeping for their tortured husbands, to black maids crying for the children they left behind when they went to work for white families. As the grief of these women and men became public, many white South Africans, for the first time, saw black South Africans as equally human. In the years of apartheid, they had justified their treatment of blacks by assuming that the suffering of blacks was not equal to theirs. They had assumed they were not fully human.

What becomes available to us when we greet one another as fully human? This is an important question as we struggle through this dark time. We need everybody's creativity, caring, and open hearts to find our way. In my own organization, we've been experimenting with two values that keep us focused on what's best about us humans. The first value is "We rely on human goodness." In conversations even with strangers, we assume they want from their life what we do from ours: a chance to help others, to learn, to be recognized, to find meaning. We have not been disappointed.

Our second value is "We assume good intent." Instead of developing a story about another's motivation, we try to stop the storyline from developing, and simply assume that there must be a good reason why they just did something hurtful or foolish. It takes mindfulness to stop the stream of judgments that pour from our lips, but when we can stop them, we've been well rewarded. People's motives usually are good, even when they look hurtful or stupid. And if we pause long enough to ask them what they intended, there's another benefit—we develop a better relationship with them. Working together becomes easier.

I encourage you to try these simple practices, or any others you might invent. For these dark times to end, we need to rely as never before on our fundamental and precious human goodness.



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