

Are We All In This Together?

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One of the most commonly heard phrases today is, “We’re all in this together.” From high-level leaders to local school board members to teen-agers offering service, this is the mantra of our time. This mantra makes visible what, until lately, has been invisible: community, the web of our interconnections, the safety net of caring that we extend to one another when life is hard. Fortunately, more people now are discovering that humans only persevere through difficulties when we’re truly together.

Yet many of us, distracted by stress, anxiety, and busyness, have forgotten the power of community. We don’t have time for each other, and we hastily assign judgments and stereotypes to those we don’t know. Our pressure-cooked lives are driving us farther away from the very resource that could most help us—strong relationships with those in our local communities.

I am heartened by the continuing news coverage of workers who support each other’s continued employment by taking decreased hours; by the many foodbanks, shelters and other forms of care springing up in communities across America; by the new National Service Act that encourages public service and promotes volunteerism. On my most recent trip to New Orleans, the plane was filled with a church group volunteering a week of service to the rebuilding efforts, 3.5 years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The gentleman sitting next to me said quietly: “I’m going because it’s the right thing to do.”

Let’s hope that America is waking up to both the need and the rewards of being “in this together.” We may even be waking up to the fact that most people want

to help others, want to be generous, and care a great deal about the welfare of neighbors and strangers. We *can* rely on human goodness .

These are the first signs of a major turning in the United States—turning toward one another to discover what we might create together, how we might help each other, how we might console and strengthen one another. I, with many good-hearted colleagues, have been working deeply in Third World communities for many years. These communities in many different cultures have taught us that, in spite of the worst external circumstances—war, famine, abuse, societal collapse, ecological devastation—human beings can get through anything as long as we're together.

America needs to learn this undeniable truth of human experience. No matter what's going on around us, if we truly believe that we're in this together, and we work hard to be there for one another, we can make it through.

Yet there's a long journey ahead, and to make it through, we must give up our love of self and individualism and truly embrace community. Here are a few questions about the behaviors that need to change:

- Can we get over ourselves? Can we stop focusing on our private needs and open to the greater good, to what will benefit many?
- Can we realize that in this intertwined world, if the least among us benefit, we all benefit? If they suffer, we suffer.
- Can we let go of our need to blame, to judge, to scapegoat—all the thoughtless and hasty ways we separate from each other?
- Can we shift away from self-interest and self-protection? And do this everywhere—at work, at home, in public meetings?
- Can we give up fear and exchange it for generosity?

This is the experiment going on in America. Nobody knows the outcome. But we each need to make a choice, and it's our choices that will determine the

outcome. Will we choose to engage wholeheartedly with one another, working together to create healthier communities, persevering through the difficulties and frustrations of working together? Or will we withdraw and hunker down in self-protection? Or will we give up, overwhelmed and exhausted?

One of my friends works tirelessly as a CEO of a major non-profit that provides relief and leadership in areas of natural devastation. She said: "Everyday I have to choose not to give up."

I hope we realize that we too have a choice to make every day. We can choose to be in this together. Or not.

MARGARET WHEATLEY Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley is a well-respected writer, speaker, and teacher for how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubling time. She has written five books: *Perseverance* (2010); *Leadership and the New Science* (18 languages and third edition); *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (7 languages and second edition); *A Simpler Way* (with Myron Rogers); and *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (3 languages). An organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a professor in two graduate business programs, she has been awarded several honorary degrees and distinctions. You may read her complete bio at <http://margaretwheatley.com/bio.html>, and may download any of her many articles (free) at <http://margaretwheatley.com/writing.html>.