



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## Dark Night

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My nation now knows more about waging war than it does about anything else. We know what can be done with different guns, missiles, fighter planes, even the nicknames given to aircraft carriers. Retired military officers, now TV stars, have explained the details of battle strategy, demonstrated every weapon in America's arsenal, paraded soldiers on morning TV wearing the newest battle technology.

I remember listening to a pilot excitedly describe his night vision goggles, how he could see where his bombs landed. When the bombs hit, we saw only plumes of fire and shattered buildings floating eerily in the air, but this pilot saw the destruction in detail. I remember using those same night vision goggles. I was working for the Army Chief of Staff in 1993-94, supporting his efforts to create a military that could respond to this troubled world. It was dark night, and I was riding in a Hummer through the Army's desert center for tank training. We rode in total blackout, not a light anywhere, goggles on. At one point, I thoughtlessly raised my head and looked up. Instantly, the stars we can't see were glowing in my eyes. (Astronomers estimate that there are at least 50 million stars behind each one we can see.) I have never forgotten that rapturous glimpse into the universe provided by military technology. Nor the paradox.

I experience this as a dark time for America, where we have lost our way. I search to find the means for us to see clearly through the darkness. I want us to be able to see both the destruction, and the stars. I felt this even before we chose war, for more fundamental reasons. In the past several years, America has embraced values that cannot create a sustainable society and world. Presently, we organize our activities around beliefs that are inherently life-destroying. We believe that growth can be endless, that competition creates healthy relationships, that consumption need have no limits, that meaning is found in things, that aggression brings peace. Societies that use these values end up, as do all voracious predators in nature, dead.

I know that most Americans would be shocked at this list of national values, but I see them clearly in our behaviors and the choices we make. I also know that this is not who we want to be, so how did we get here? What happened to our ideals about life, liberty, democracy, independence, imagination?

This *devolution* frequently happens to individuals, organizations, and nations. It's a gradual and nearly invisible process where values quite contrary to those we treasure seep in and grow in power. As these contrary values are used in more and more decisions, higher principles recede into the background and have little influence. We may still think they matter, but they aren't guiding our behavior. Usually, it takes a crisis and deep distress for us to look honestly

at ourselves and notice who we've become.

I feel that America is standing on the edge of an abyss, a dark night of the soul. In a dark night, meaning is lost, identity disintegrates, and we move into that most creative of spaces, chaos.

W.B. Yeats powerfully describes a dark night in "The Second Coming."

Things fall apart, the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

There is only one way through a dark night, and that is by illuminating the truth of who we are, surfacing the grief and regret we feel, and then reclaiming those values and principles that would bring us back to life. We need to walk willingly into the abyss, peering through the darkness to find those values, that identity, that holds its own luminosity. As we reclaim our ideals, we find the way forward, the path illuminated by our refound clarity about who we want to be.

I want to see Americans, and those who care about America, in conversation about the values and behaviors that would restore America to her intended character and original founding principles. I regard the recent spate of books about the Founding Fathers, John Adams, the Constitutional Congress and the American Revolution, as evidence that America wants to be in this exploration. Even as I've been writing this, PBS is airing "Freedom: A History of US," while also advertising Walter Cronkite's upcoming series "Avoiding Armageddon." How much longer will we wait to talk about these deep and troubling issues?

I've begun to invite the people I meet into conversation by asking: "What is it that you love about America? What things must be protected at all costs?" This question leads to wonderful explorations. People are energized to talk about what they love, what it means to live here as an immigrant, what they've learned about freedom, imagination, the human spirit, creativity, democracy. Even if these ideals are receding from our day-to-day experience, we realize how important it is to claim them as our own.

However, I'm also learning that it's very difficult to look truthfully at these times. It's painful to acknowledge that these ideals are no longer vibrant, that, in fact, they are disappearing. It's even more difficult to acknowledge that we must stand up and do something if we are to prevent further deterioration. It takes patience and trust in one another before we dare venture into the darkness.

I have no idea if America will acknowledge this dark night that feels so obvious to me. I can only hope some of us will be brave enough to ask, "What do I love about America that I want to preserve at all costs?" This question takes us into deep territory, revealing the qualities of life and human community that truly inspire us. And our connection to each other strengthens as we dwell in this life-affirming space. I always leave these conversations reenergized, stronger, bolder.

At a personal level, I fear waking one morning from this awful trance that has dulled my imagination and heart, and wonder what happened to the energy and ideals I once had as an American. In his poem, "The Truly Great," British poet Stephen Spender warned that we must: "Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother with noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit." Sacred values erode so slowly, lost to our awareness through subtle, darkening forces. I hope we can find the means to see through this dark night.



**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)*