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Disturb Me, Please!

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If we are people exploring the unknown, if we are to be the pioneers and discoverers of the new world, then I'd like us to notice the presence of some essential but unusual companions. One of our greatest friends on this journey of discovery is a very strange ally--disturbance. It feels important to me to highlight disturbance's role as a friend because I have come to see certainty as a curse. This was not a realization that came easily to me. I, like most of you, was raised in the traditions of Western schooling. Knowing the right answer was always rewarded. Intelligence was equated with how well I did on tests, and most tests were about knowing the right answer. Later, as a leader, I was promoted for my certainty-I had the vision, I knew how to get there, and people would follow me based on how well I radiated that certainty, how well I disguised my fears.

But everything has changed since those sweet, slow days when the world seemed knowable and predictable, when we actually knew what to do next. The growing complexity of our times makes certainty about any move or any position much more precarious. And in this networked world where information moves at the speed of light and "truth" mutates before our eyes, certainty changes and speeds off at equivalent velocity.

But in spite of these new realities, it is very difficult to surrender certainty-our positions, our beliefs, our explanations. These things lie at the core of our identity-they define us as us. Yet in this strange new world, I believe we can only succeed in understanding and influencing this world if we are able to think and work together in new ways. Our most cherished beliefs, our greatest clarity must be offered up. We won't necessarily have to let go of everything we believe and know, but we do have to be willing to let them go. We have to be interested in making our beliefs and opinions visible so that we can consciously choose them or discard them.

There's another reason that our certainty needs to be surrendered. We live in a dense and tangled global system. Inside this complex and interconnected world, everyone has a different vantage point. It is true biologically that there is no one else exactly like us. But we are less sensitive to the fact that we each see things differently. Because everyone sits in a different place in the systems of work, community, and individual lives, we will each see the world from a unique vantage point. As complexity grows, we need more colleagues, not fewer, to describe to us what they see, what it looks like from their perspective.

The very complexity of life ensures that no one person can explain what is going on to everyone else, or assume that their point of view is the right one. We can look at this complexity as a new Tower of Babel, where we can't hear each other because of so much diversity. Or we can look at it as an invitation to come together and truly listen to one another-

listen with the expectation that we will hear something new and different, that we need to hear from others in order to grow and survive.

The need to relinquish our certainty lies at the heart both of modern science and ancient spirituality. From the science of Complexity, Ilya Prigogine tells us that, "The future is uncertain. . .but such uncertainty lies at the very heart of human creativity." It is uncertainty that creates the space for invention. We must let go, clear the space, leap into the void of not-knowing, if we want to discover anything new.

In Tibetan Buddhism, "the root of happiness" lies in the acceptance that life is uncertain. If we expect life to change, we have an easier time of letting go. We won't hold on quite so long to what has worked in the past, and we'll resist grasping painfully for temporary securities. Only in our relationship with uncertainty are we able to flow gracefully with life's inevitable cycles and to experience true happiness.

Every mystical spiritual tradition guides us to an encounter with Mystery, the Unknowable, the Numinous. If spirit lives in the realm of the mysterious, then certainty is what seals us off from the Divine. If we believe that there is nothing new to know about God, then we cut ourselves off from the very breath of life, the great rhythms of spirit that give rise to newness all the time.

Now why am I telling you all this? Because I believe our own need for certainty is as destructive to our human relationships as it is with the relationship we seek with the Divine. And because I believe that so much more is possible if we can be together and consciously look for the differences, those ideas and perspectives we find disturbing. Instead of sitting in a group and looking for confirmation, what is possible if we listen for disturbance? Instead of looking for safety in numbers and noting those who feel like allies or fellow travelers, what might we create if we seek to discover those whose insights are the most different from ours? What if, at least occasionally, we came together in order to change our mind?

In graduate school, I had one professor who encouraged us to notice what surprised or disturbed us. If we were surprised by some statement, it indicated we were assuming that something else was true. If we were disturbed by a comment, it indicated we held a belief contrary to that. Noticing what disturbs me has been an incredibly useful lens into my interior, deeply held beliefs. When I'm shocked at another's position, I have the opportunity to see my own position in greater clarity. When I hear myself saying "How could anyone believe something like that?!" a doorway has opened for me to see what I believe. These moments of true disturbance are great gifts. In making my beliefs visible, they allow me to consciously choose them again, or change them.

What if we were to be together and listen to each other's comments with a willingness to expose rather than to confirm our own beliefs and opinions? What if we were to willingly listen to one another with the awareness that we each see the world in unique ways? And with the expectation that I could learn something new if I listen for the differences rather than the similarities?

We have this opportunity many times in a day, everyday. What might we see, what might we learn, what might we create together, if we become this kind of listener, one who enjoys the differences and welcomes in disturbance? I know we would be delightfully startled by how

much difference there is. And then we would be wonderfully comforted by how much closer we became, because every time we listen well, we move towards each other. From our new thoughts and our new companions, we would all become wiser.

It would be more fruitful to explore this strange and puzzling world if we were together. It would also be far less frightening and lonely. We would be together, brought together by our differences rather than separated by them. When we are willing to be disturbed by newness rather than clinging to our certainty, when we are willing to truly listen to someone who sees the world differently, then wonderful things happen. We learn that we don't have to agree with each other in order to explore together. There is no need to be joined together at the head, as long as we are joined together at the heart



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