



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## **It's An Interconnected World**

*Shambhala Sun*, April 2002

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The dense and tangled web of life--the interconnected nature of reality--now reveals itself on a daily basis. Since September 11th, think about how much you've learned about people, nations, and ways of life that previously you'd known nothing about. We've been learning how the lives of those far away affect our own. We're beginning to realize that in order to live peacefully together on this planet, we need to be in new relationships, especially with those far-distant from us.

When my children were small, I had a refrigerator slogan that read: "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." Perhaps that was my children's first lesson in systems thinking. We adults are learning this too. If others don't feel safe, we aren't safe. If others are struggling, we experience the consequence of their struggle. If others are poor, no matter how wealthy we are, we experience the consequences of their impoverishment.

Many great teachers have been trying to teach us this for thousands of years. Buddhism teaches that any one thing is here because of everything else. The great American naturalist, John Muir, commented that if we tug on any one part of the web of life, we get the whole web. But in spite of such timeless and ancient wisdom, we've been very slow to learn the lesson.

In fact, Western culture has spent decades drawing lines and boxes around interconnected phenomena. We've chunked the world into pieces rather than explored its webby nature. Think of all the lines and boundaries that exist: organizational charts, job descriptions, nation states, ethnic identities. These rigid boundaries have been a means to control people and events. The neat lines define what goes on inside each box, and the natural messiness of interconnectedness disappears--at least on paper. We run the world by these boxes. People are rallied to war by reinforcing the box of national or ethnic identity. At work, people are told which box they occupy on an organization chart. If they step outside the box with a idea or criticism, they're punished or ignored. Over time, people seek the protection of their box. They know what is, and what is not their job.

I had a powerful experience with this self-protective work attitude shortly after the first Anthrax incident. Anthrax first appeared in Palm Beach County, Florida. A friend of mine is a judge at the Palm Beach courthouse. Her secretary noticed that someone else had been at her desk; papers were disturbed, things moved around. Given the danger from Anthrax and other possible threats, the judge immediately called in building security. The security guard blandly told her that it was not his job to secure the secretary's office. "My job is to secure the judge's chambers, that's all." He could not be convinced otherwise. He knew his box, and remained

oblivious to this new world where danger knows no boundaries.

But I do not fault this security guard. He, like so many of us, had been given this message by his supervisors. He, like so many of us, had learned to lie low, not make waves, do what you're told, and then use his job description as a way to avoid being blamed. Most organizations, because they manage by the boxes, have created millions of withdrawn, dependent, frightened, and cynical employees.

This is now a huge problem, because our safety and future depend upon whether each of us can step outside the boxes and participate intelligently in a complex world of interconnections. Here are a few hard truths about living and working within a complex system that I hope we can learn in time: **In a complex system, there is no such thing as simple cause and effect. There's no one person to blame, or to take the credit.** We have yet to learn this. Watch how, in any crisis or success, people immediately step up to assign blame or to take all the credit. Why has crime decreased over the past few years? Police say its more police; judges say it's due to tougher sentences; parents say it's because of better parenting; teachers, economists, social workers, elected officials. . . Everyone believes it's because of their singular contribution. No one wants to share the truth that it was everyone's contribution, interacting in inexplicable ways, that gave birth to the success.

In order to incorporate this sensibility, we need to abandon the neat lines of cause and effect. And we need to notice the reality of a second fact about complex systems: **Focusing makes things fuzzier. The more we study a complex phenomenon, the more confused we are bound to become.**

Few of us like to feel confused, or be confronted by messiness. But interrelated phenomenon-Life-is very messy. The longer we study a system, the more complex it becomes. This is incredibly frustrating. Our attempts at understanding (reading the reports, listening to different commentaries, thinking about the issue) only serve to drag us into further complexity. Instead of clarity, we experience only more uncertainty. What gave rise to modern terrorism? What will make airports more secure? What leads to smarter students? Safer communities?

I believe that our very survival depends upon us becoming better systems thinkers. How can we learn to see the systems we're participating in? How can we act intelligently when things remain fuzzy? Where do we intervene to change something when we can't determine a straightforward cause and effect relationship? What kinds of actions make sense when we're confused and confronted with increasing uncertainty?

Here are a few principles I've learned. **Start something, and see who notices it.** It's only after we initiate something in a system that we see the threads that connect. Usually, someone we don't even know suddenly appears, either outraged or helpful. We didn't know there was any connection between us, but their response makes the connection clear. Now that they've identified themselves, we need to develop a relationship with them.

**Whatever you initiate, expect unintended consequences.** Every effort to change a system creates these, because all the interactions can't be seen ahead of time. Probably the most visible example of unintended consequences, is what happens every time humans try to change the natural ecology of a place. Fertilizer is introduced to farm fields without noticing

how rain water connects fields to oceans. Over time, we've got bountiful crops, but fewer fish. I know one corporation that created a Museum of Unintended Consequences. They wanted to notice all the impacts of any organizational change effort. When we're willing to look at unintended consequences, they teach a great deal about how a system operates.

**Reflect, often.** If we take time to notice what just happened, we learn how the system operates. Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful. It's amazing to me how much we do, but how little time we spend reflecting on what we just did.

**Seek out different interpretations.** Run ideas by many different people, to see things through their unique perception. Everyone in a complex system has a slightly different interpretation. The more interpretations we gather, the easier it becomes to gain a sense of the whole.

**Look for insights to emerge out of messiness.** Puzzling and messy situations often lead us to flee. Either we grab onto an easy answer, or decide to take actions that have no rational. But confusion can create the condition for intuitions and insights to appear, often when we least expect them. Once they appear, we can trust them and use them as the basis for action.



**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)