



Margaret J. Wheatley

Leadership In Turbulent Times Is Spiritual

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Why has the topic of spirituality entered our organizational and professional lives? In the past several years, spirit and work have come together in many interesting questions. Is work a spiritual endeavor? Do we have a sense of vocation or calling? Can we bring our soul to work? Is it valid to even ask that question? Are leaders strengthened by faith in a higher power? Should good leaders act as "servant leaders" in the tradition of spiritual teachers or Jesus?

I don't think it accidental that questions from the domain of spirituality have moved into leadership. In fact, I think it's an unavoidable consequence of this time of turbulence. As our world grows more chaotic and unpredictable, we are forced to ask questions that have, historically, always been answered by spiritual traditions. How do I live in uncertainty, unable to know what will happen next? How do I maintain my values when worldly temptations abound? What is the meaning of my life? Why am I here at this time? Where can I find the courage and faith to stay the course?

Humans have sought answers to these questions for as long as we've been conscious and reflective. It is a fundamental human characteristic to ask "Why?" We are able to stand outside our immediate circumstances and look forward into the future, and to look backward and interpret the past. No matter how poor or desperate we are, we always need to know why things are happening. Every culture has its rituals and spiritual practices to answer the question "why?"

As our age has become more chaotic and complex, we've turned for answers to the real god of Western culture, science. We've asked scientists to explain to us how to deal with uncertainty, chaos, and catastrophes. We've hoped that the mathematics of complexity science would help us get a grip on the complexity of our organizations. We've wanted chaos science to reduce our fear of living in chaotic times, to teach us how to stop the unpredicted events that suddenly destroy lives and futures. We want the science of chaos to not just explain chaos, but give us tools for controlling the chaos.

But of course, this god of Science can only fail us. Chaos can't be controlled; the unpredictable can't be predicted. Instead, we are being called to encounter life as it is: uncontrollable, unpredictable, messy, surprising, erratic. One of my own spiritual teachers commented once that, "the reason we don't like Life is that it behaves like life."

Many people have a spiritual practice and rely on it to help them succeed as leaders and work colleagues. But in a more subtle form, I hear spiritual thinking whenever anyone talks about their work as a vocation or call. The notion of "vocation" comes from spiritual and philosophical traditions. It describes work that is given to us, that we are meant to do. We don't decide what

our vocation is, we receive it. It always originates from outside us. Therefore, we can't talk about vocation or calling without acknowledging that there is something going on beyond our narrow sense of self. It helps remind us that there's more than just me, that we're part of a larger and purpose-filled place.

Even if we don't use the word vocation, most of us yearn to experience a sense of purpose to our lives. People often express the feeling of life working *through* them, of believing there's a reason for their existence. I always love to hear a young person say that they know there's a reason why they're here. I know that if they can hold onto that sense of purpose, they'll be able to deal with whatever life offers them. We avoid being overwhelmed and discouraged by knowing there's a meaning to our lives. The stronger our sense of vocation, the more resilient and courageous we are. And we can only develop a sense of purpose or vocation from believing in a power and order greater than our own.

Another frequent indication of spiritual thinking is the commonly heard comment: "There are no accidents." If nothing happens accidentally, if we believe in synchronicity, then where does that order come from? That is a question only answered by spiritual thinking.

Leaders today face spiritual challenges

I believe that leaders today are faced with enormous challenges, most of them not of their own doing. As times grow more chaotic, as people question the meaning (and meaninglessness) of this life, people are clamoring for their leaders to save and rescue them. Historically, we've too often given away our freedom and chosen dictatorship over uncertainty. People press their leaders to stop the chaos, to make things better, to create stability. And even leaders who would never become dictators, those devoted to servant leadership, walk into this trap. They want to help, so they exert more control over the disorder. They try to create safety, to insulate people from the realities of change. They try and give answers to dilemmas that have no answers. No leader can achieve this, and it is always liberating to realize that.

Leadership through command and control is doomed to fail. No one can create sufficient stability and equilibrium for people to feel secure and safe. Instead, as leaders we must help people move into a relationship with uncertainty and chaos. Spiritual teachers have been doing this for millennia. Therefore, I believe that the times have led leaders to a spiritual threshold. We must enter the domain of spiritual traditions if we are to succeed as good leaders in these difficult times.

The essential work of leaders

Here are some principles that describe essential perspectives, beliefs, and work for leaders now. Each of these comes from spiritual thinking and traditions.

Life is uncertain. How can a leader help people understand that change is just the way it is? In Buddhist thought, the source of real happiness comes from understanding this fact. Instead of holding on to any one thing or form, we learn to expect that it will change. We become willing to move on rather than cling desperately to old practices. As a leader, it doesn't help to

accuse people of being resistant to change. We all are. But when leaders give people time to reflect on their personal life experiences, they notice that they've changed many times in their life. They know how to do this. They also may notice that at those times when they've "let go", they haven't died.

Life never stops teaching us about change. As leaders, hopefully we can be gentle guides and coaches so that people discover their own life's wisdom.

Life is cyclical. Poet David Whyte has noted: "If you think life is always improving, you're going to miss half of it." Life is cyclical- we pass through different moods, we live through seasons, we have times of rich harvests and times of bleak winter. Life uses cycles to create newness. We move from the old to the new only as we pass through the cycle of chaos. We need to let go of the old (which always feels terrible,) before new life and capacity can arise. Instead of fleeing from the fearful place of chaos, or trying to rescue people from it. Leaders need to help people stay with the chaos, help them walk through it together, and look for the new insights and capacities that can emerge.

In Christian traditions, times of chaos have been called "dark nights of the soul." In our present culture, we call these "clinical depressions." (I prefer the spiritual term.) In the dark night, we feel devoid of meaning, totally alone, abandoned by God. But this is the condition for rebirth, for a new and stronger self to emerge. You probably have walked through many dark nights and I encourage you to think how you changed, what new capacities you possessed when you emerged back into the light.

Meaning is what motivates people. There is nothing that motivates we humans more than meaning. I've seen many disillusioned and depressed staff groups develop high levels of energy and insight when they were asked to think about the meaning of their work. Consultant Kathy Dannemiller always asks groups to think about how the world will change because of the work they're doing. In such brutal times as these, when good work gets destroyed by events and decisions far beyond our influence, when we're so overwhelmed with tasks that we have no time to reflect for even a moment, it is very important that the leader create time for people to remember why they're doing this work. What were we hoping to accomplish when we started this? Who are we serving by doing this work?

I have always been astonished by the deep meaning people ascribe to their work. Most people want their work to serve a greater good, to help other people. People who make dog food reflect that "pets contribute to human health." Manufacturers of toxic chemicals in West Virginia want to do their work safely in order, "to make the world safe." We have an easier time of remembering the meaning of our work in certain professions, such as healthcare, education, and non-profits. But we seldom have time, especially in these professions, to pause for a moment and reconnect with the initial idealism and desire to serve that led us into our profession. But our energy and rededication is only found there, in our ideals.

Service brings us joy. Over the years, I've interviewed people who participated in disaster relief. I've always been astonished to notice that no matter how tragic and terrible the disaster, they always spoke of that experience with joy. They've led me to realize that there is nothing equal to helping other people. In service, we discover profound happiness. We all witnessed this in the days after September 11th. A comment that still brings tears to my eyes was made

by a survivor who said: "We didn't save ourselves. We tried to save each other."

The joy and meaning of service is found in every spiritual tradition. It was once expressed very simply to me. "All happiness in the world comes from serving others; all sorrow in the world comes from acting selfishly."

Courage comes from our hearts. Where do we find the courage to be leaders today? The etymology of the word courage gives us the answer. Courage comes from the old French word for heart (coeur). When we are deeply affected, when our hearts open to an issue or person, courage pours from hearts. Please note that courage does not come from the root word for analysis, or for strategic planning. We have to be engaged at the heart level in order to be courageous champions. As much as we may fear emotionalism, leaders need to be willing to let their hearts open, and to tell stories that open other peoples' hearts.

We are interconnected to all life. Every spiritual tradition speaks about oneness. So does new science. As leaders, we act on this truth when we're willing to notice how a decision might affect others, when we try and think systemically, when we're willing to look down the road and notice how, at this moment, we might be affecting future generations. Any act that takes us past the immediate moment, and past our self-protective ways, acknowledges that there's more to life than just us. I learned a wonderfully simple way to think about our actions from a woman minister. She told how anytime she makes a decision, she asks herself: "Is this decision going to bring people together? Will it weave a stronger web? Or will it create further disintegration and separation?" I like to ask another question as well. In what I am about to do, am I turning toward others, or turning away? Am I moving closer, or am I retreating from them?

We can rely on human goodness. This is the first value of The Berkana Institute, where I serve as president. We rely on the great generosity and caring of humans. We know that there's more than enough human badness in the world, but that badness only pushes us to rely even more on human goodness.

In your own leadership, what qualities of people do you rely on? I believe in these dark times that we can only rely on the hope, resiliency, and love that is found in the human spirit. Many people through history have suffered terribly. Those we remember and admire-Helen Keller, Nelson Mandela, Ann Frank, war veterans, Holocaust survivors, cancer survivors-demonstrate what is best about us. We love to hear their stories because they illuminate what is good about being human. Václav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, says that hope is not a result of the condition of our lives. It is fundamental to being human. (The state motto of South Carolina is similar: "If I breathe, I hope.")

We need peace of mind. All spiritual traditions teach us ways to find peace of mind and acceptance. In the research on mind-body health, cultivating peace is a prerequisite for health. And who do we like to be around? Do we seek out angry or peaceful people? Do we find relief in noise or in quiet? As leaders, we need to find ways to help people work from a place of inner peace, even in the midst of turmoil. Frantic activity and fear only take us deeper into chaos. I've observed the power of starting a meeting with two minutes of silent contemplation. Or, when the meeting gets heated, of asking people to stop talking and just be silent for a few minutes. It's amazing how differently we come back into the fray if we've had those moments to pause. Few of us want to work as crazily as we do; most of us hate meetings where tempers

boil over. Brief moments of silence can work wonders-silence is truly the pause that refreshes. Educator Parker Palmer tells of his discomfort at working in a Quaker organization, where they observed five minutes of contemplative silence before the start of every meeting. At one meeting, when there was a particularly difficult issue on the agenda, he was relieved to hear the leader announce that because of this serious issue, that today they would not spend the first five minutes in silence. But then, to his dismay, he heard her announce, "Instead, we'll take twenty minutes for silence."

Attending to your personal spiritual health

I'd like to offer just a few simple practices that I personally can't live without if I'm to maintain a sense of focus and peace as a leader.

- 1. Start your day off peacefully.** I've raised a large family, so I laugh as I state this. But I've learned that I can't expect to find peace at work. However peaceful I am as I enter the office, that's probably my peak peaceful experience of the day. So I have a strong motivation to find peace before work. There are many ways to cultivate peace at the start of your day. You can drive to work in silence. Or listen to a particularly soothing piece of music. You can reflect on a spiritual phrase or parable. You can take a few minutes to just sit, either meditating or focusing on a lovely object. You can look for something beautiful outside your window. As your day grows crazier, it helps to know what peace feels like. Sometimes you can even recall that feeling in the midst of very great turmoil.
- 2. Learn to be mindful.** Anytime you can keep yourself from instantly reacting, anytime you can pause for just a second, you are practicing mindfulness. Instead of letting your reactions and thoughts lead you, you step back and realize you can choose your reaction. Instead of being angry, you hesitate for a moment and realize you have other responses available. Instead of saying something hurtful, you pause and give yourself more options.
- 3. Slow things down.** If you can't slow down a group or meeting, you can at least slow down yourself. I've learned to notice how I'm sitting. If I find myself leaning forward, moving aggressively into the discussion or argument, I force myself to sit back in the chair, even for just a moment. If I find my temper rising, I slow down and take just one deep breath. These are small things, but they yield big results.
- 4. Create your own measures.** We all would prefer to be better people. We don't like to be angry, fearful, or to be creating more problems for other people. But how can we know when we're succeeding in becoming people we respect? What are our personal measures? Some people create a measure such as telling fewer lies, or speaking the truth to people more often. Some notice how they are more patient, or angry less often. I also use the question of "am I turning toward or away" as a personal measure of good behavior.
- 5. Expect surprise.** We're old enough now to know that life will keep interrupting our plans and surprising us at every turn of the way. It helps to notice this wisdom that we've been forced to accumulate. Surprise is less traumatic once we accept it as a fact of life.
- 6. Practice Gratefulness.** Most of us have been taught this, but how often do you take time, daily, to count your blessings? The wonder of this process is that as we take this daily inventory, we grow in gratefulness. We start to notice more and more-people who helped us, grace that appeared, little miracles that saved us from danger. The daily practice of gratefulness truly changes us in wonderful ways. And when you develop the practice of expressing your gratefulness to colleagues, your relationships improve dramatically.

I believe, because you are human, that you've already experienced the powers, fears and joys that I've described. It is more important to access your own wisdom than to seek advice from anyone else. Life is a consistent teacher. It always teaches the same lessons. Change is just the way it is. Peace is not dependent on circumstances. We are motivated by meaning. We want to express our love through service. And when we believe that, as leaders, we are playing our part in something more purposeful than our small egos can ever explain, we become leaders who are peaceful, courageous, and effective.



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