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Love and Fear in Organizations

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Thomas Aquinas, writing in the 13th century, presented a powerful vision of how we humans could be together. He wrote: "We change one another with delight and pleasure." Aquinas believed we change through pleasure and appreciation, through positive energies that inspire us. I like to believe that he also meant that change is delightful. And that life's continuous change is intended to give us delightful surprises.

But his images, and my imaginings about his images, are very different from what I hear today. I hear only the conviction and assertion of the "fact" that humans change through fear, that we change only when forced by serious threat or crisis. In the twentieth century we have changed Aquinas' hopeful statement into: "We change one another through fear and terror."

We have strayed very far from the images of delight and possibility of the 13th century. A few years ago I wrote that the things we feared most in organizations were change, disorder, loss of control. But now I believe that the greatest fear I witness is fear of one another—not just fear of certain individuals, but fear of ourselves as a species, fear of life in general. We assume that people are selfish, resistant to change, dependent, deceiving. We fear what people will do to us if we take away the controls and safeguards we've carefully created. We are bombarded with stories of scams, schemes, and betrayals. We read of wars of ethnic cleansing past and all too present. Our fears seem to be well-justified, and we wonder if we're taking sufficient precautions in this terrorizing world.

Perhaps Aquinas was writing from a simpler time, when it was possible to trust other people, when community truly existed and modern warfare was unknown. But I know this is not the case. The terrors of life in the Middle Ages were just as overwhelming. I believe Aquinas spoke to us from a spiritual perspective beyond the realm of human history, and that his statement applies in all times to all peoples. I also believe it is time to recall ourselves from the fear-filled lives we inhabit and begin to explore again what it would be like if we approached one another through love, with delight and pleasure.

We human beings have a great need for each other. Like all forms of life, from microbes to ecosystems, we need to be together. We cannot exist in isolation. Nothing living lives alone. And we see this need for each other even in the West where we've revered independence and individualism. How many of us today are longing for community, wanting to belong?

It's important to remember that every time we join an organization, community or group effort that we do so in order to accomplish more. People never join together to accomplish less. We want to create, to find more meaning, to contribute, to belong, and we know we can only achieve this by joining with others. So every act of joining, every organizing effort, has powerful and positive energies present at the inception.

Aquinas' dictum has led me to look at my own experience in organizations, to notice where I see people changed not by fear but by love. And once I began looking, I realized that there were many examples testifying to the truth of his statement. I have witnessed the great possibilities that surface whenever two or more people are willing to listen to one another, to be present to one another. It doesn't matter who they are, how adversarial they've been, or what's going on. The simple act of truly listening to another, with respect and curiosity, changes everything.

Recently I was in a group conversation where someone commented, "We have to meet people on their own terms, speak their language." This statement sounded like an obvious truth, and it recalled me to the many years of training on diversity awareness, cultural sensitivity, individual differences, that I and others in that room had experienced. But I heard the statement differently this time, and replied: "We don't have to meet people on their own terms. We simply have to meet people." What I meant is that we have to want to know who that person is, listen to how they describe their life. We have to be curious and respectful.

When we're curious about the story someone is telling us, when we're respectful of them as they tell it, then we are honoring that person. We are welcoming them into a relationship with us. And we're creating the conditions that support our working together. There is something much simpler about good human relationships than we have believed. Whenever a person feels acknowledged, they want to be in a relationship with us. They and we need little else in order to want to work together. I learned this watching the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa. People were welcomed in to tell their experiences under apartheid, and the entire nation listened. As one elderly man said after he recounted the horrors and losses he had endured: "Today I know the whole nation cried my tears with me." He didn't need counseling, or fixing, and he didn't demand monetary reparations for his suffering. He just needed to know that people had listened to him. And just by listening, a community had welcomed him in to the task of reforming a nation.

We spend so much time in complex group processes focused on team building, problem-solving, effective communications, etc. But what happens when we forget about technique and just try to be present for each other? Have you experienced what happens in you and others when we really listen to each other? In my experience, the techniques and methods actually keep us from one another—we stay focused on whether we are doing the technique correctly rather than becoming focused on who is in the room and what they want to say.

Curiosity is a trait we love in children but forget to develop in ourselves. My own commitment to being curious grew as I realized the truth of what I had learned from cognitive science: No two people are capable of seeing the world exactly the same. As I began believing this, my curiosity increased. I expected that everyone would have a different view of what just happened or what something meant. I became curious about their interpretation and less adamant about the validity of my own. And I saw a new capacity develop in groups that were

curious. As they expected and explored their differing perceptions, they became able to agree on a concerted course of action. This was quite paradoxical, but over and over I witnessed people able to agree on a common future because they had listened to very different perceptions of their past. In honoring these unique perceptions, they were developing a richer picture of who they were. Simultaneously, they were creating a strong sense of unity for moving towards who they wanted to be.

In focusing on respect and curiosity I am not quite up to Aquinas' description of delight and pleasure. But I believe they are steps on the same path. As we learn to be curious and present, we are letting go of our fear. As our fear dissipates, we enter the path where we are capable of encountering one another with love. And with love, as we have learned elsewhere, all things are possible.



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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