



Margaret J. Wheatley

"Partnering with Confusion and Uncertainty"

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Most people I meet want to develop more harmonious and satisfying relationships--in their organizations, communities, and personal lives. But we may not realize that this desire can only be satisfied by partnering with new and strange allies-uncertainty and confusion. Most of us weren't trained to like confusion or to admit when we feel hesitant and uncertain. In schools and organizations, value is placed on sounding assured and confident. People are rewarded for stating opinions as if they're facts. Quick answers abound; pensive questions have disappeared from most organizations. Confusion has yet to appear as a higher order value, or a behavior that organizations eagerly reward.

And as life continues speeding up (adding to our confusion,) we don't have time to be uncertain. We don't have time to listen to anyone who expresses a new or different position. In meetings and in the media, often we listen to others just long enough to determine whether we agree with them or not. We rush from opinion to opinion, listening for those tidbits and soundbites that confirm our position. Gradually we become more certain, but less informed, and far less thoughtful.

We can't continue on this path if we want to act more intelligently, if we want to find approaches and solutions to the problems that plague us. The world now is quite perplexing. We no longer live in those sweet, slow days when life felt predictable, when we actually knew what to do next. In this increasingly complex world, it's impossible to see most of what's going on. The only way to see more of the complexity is to ask many others for their perspectives and experiences. Yet if we open ourselves to their differing perceptions, we will find ourselves inhabiting the uncomfortable space of not knowing.

It is very difficult to give up certainty-these positions, beliefs, explanations define us and lie at the core of our personal identity. Certainty is a lens to interpret what's going on and, as long as our explanations work, we feel a sense of stability and security. But in a changing world, certainty doesn't give us stability; it actually creates more chaos. As we stay locked in our position and refuse to adapt and change, the things we hoped would stay together fall apart. It's a traditional paradox expressed in many spiritual traditions: By holding on, we destroy what we hope to preserve; by letting go, we feel secure in accepting what is.

I believe that this changing world requires much less certainty, and far more curiosity. I'm not suggesting we let go of our beliefs, only that we become curious about what someone else believes. As we open to the disturbing differences, sometimes we discover that another's way of interpreting the world actually is essential to our survival.

The global system we inhabit is dense and tangled. We each live in a different part of this complexity. And, no two people are identical. Therefore, it's impossible for two people to see things exactly the same. You can test this out for yourself. Take any event that you've shared with others (a speech, a movie, a current event, a major problem) and ask your colleagues and friends to describe their interpretation of that event. I think you'll be amazed at how many different explanations you'll hear. You'll end up with a rich tapestry of interpretations much more interesting than your single one.

I find that the first step to becoming curious is to admit that I'm not succeeding in figuring things out alone. If my solutions don't work as well as I'd like, if my explanations of why something happened don't feel sufficient, I take these as signs that it's time to begin asking others about what they see and think. I try to move past the lazy and superficial conversations where I pretend to agree with someone else rather than inquire seriously into their perspective. I try and become a conscious listener, actively listening for differences.

There are many ways to sit and listen for the differences. Lately, I've been listening for what surprises me. What did I just hear that startled me? This isn't easy-I'm accustomed to sit there nodding my head as someone voices what I agree with. But when I notice what surprises me, I'm able to see my own views more clearly, including my beliefs and assumptions.

Noticing what surprises and disturbs me has been a very useful way to see invisible beliefs. If what you say surprises me, I must have been assuming something else was true. If what you say disturbs me, I must believe something contrary to you. My shock at your position exposes my own position. When I hear myself saying "How could anyone believe something like that?" a light comes on for me to see my own beliefs. These moments are great gifts. If I can see my beliefs and assumptions, I can decide whether I still value them.

If you're willing to be disturbed and confused, I recommend that you begin a conversation with someone who thinks differently than you do. Listen as best you can for what's different, for what surprises you. Try and stop the voice of judgment or opinion. Just listen. At the end of this practice, notice whether you learned anything new. Notice whether you developed a better relationship with the person you talked with. If you try this with several people, you might find yourself laughing in delight as you realize how many unique ways there are to be human.

We have the opportunity many times a day, everyday, to be the one who listens to others, curious rather than certain. And the greatest benefit that comes to those who listen is that we develop closer relationships with those we thought we couldn't understand. When we listen with less judgment, we always develop better relationship with each other. It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together.

Sometimes we hesitate to listen for differences because we don't want to change. We're comfortable with our lives, and if we listened to anyone who raised questions, we'd have to get engaged in changing things. If we don't listen, things can stay as they are. But most of us do see things in our life or in the world that we would like to be different. If that's true, we have to listen more, not less. And we have to be willing to move into the discomfort of uncertainty and confusion.

We can't be creative if we refuse to be confused. Change always starts with confusion;

cherished interpretations must dissolve to make way for the new. Of course it's scary to give up what we know, but the abyss is where newness lives. Yet if we move through the fear and enter the abyss, we rediscover we're creative.

As the world grows more strange, perplexing and difficult, I don't believe most of us want to keep struggling through it alone. I can't know what to do from my own narrow perspective. I know I need a better understanding of what's going on. I want to sit down with you and talk about all the frightening and hopeful things I observe, and listen to what frightens you and gives you hope. I need new ideas and solutions for the problems I care about. I know I need to talk to you to discover those. I need to learn to value your perspective, and I want you to value mine. I expect to be disturbed, even jarred, by what I hear from you. I expect to feel confused and displaced-my world won't feel as stable or familiar to me once we talk.

One last thing. As I explore partnering with confusion and uncertainty, I'm learning that we don't have to agree with each other in order to think well together. There is no need for us to be joined at the head. We are joined already by our human hearts.



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