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Perseverance: Lost in the Gulf of Mexico

I have several dear friends who live along the Gulf of Mexico. One, an Academy Award winning film-maker who had developed a multi-part TV series on the Gulf, "America's Sea," emailed me a few days ago :

"My sadness over our American Sea is becoming unspeakable. Few, and not I, can imagine the damage that will be done for generations to come. It has not even begun and the idea of cleaning it "all" up is folly."

Another friend, in early May, just as this cataclysm was beginning, wrote:

"I was at a friend's birthday party, and an oil company executive I've known for years whispered in my ear, "I've been in the deep water drilling business for years and none of us can figure out how this happened. Nothing that should have stopped it worked. And the damage is limitless. 25,000 barrels a day is the more realistic number. It will take months to stop it much less clean it up. Nobody knows how to do this." And I said, "Hurricane season is here." "Game over", he said.

For my cousin's shrimp and fishing company --- game over forever. For Louisiana wetlands - game over. For Cajun culture, game over. SYSTEMS FAIL. The Gulf Coast has always been sacrificed for oil and industry. By everyone. SYSTEMS FAIL. Game over.

I call in their voices to deepen our understanding of what's happening in the Gulf, and what it means for our future. And what it means for us right now. What do we do with our anger, our outrage, our frustration, our impotence as we tune into what's happening there? How do we avoid being consumed by these dark, swirling emotions that, like oil in the Gulf, destroy life's capacities? How do we persevere, and find the strength and faith to keep working for what we believe in?

If you're watching or reading the news, do you feel as I do how broken we are as a people? Just like the storms we fear this hurricane season, we're lashing out wildly, raging, blaming, screaming for fixes, grasping blindly for life rafts.

Our anger is righteous, yet anger always blinds us and keeps us apart. Our need to find someone to blame is predictable, yet it's not how we ever learn to understand complex causes. Our desire to punish, to seek retribution is natural, but it never heals the future. Our frustration and impotence are real, yet they rob us of the energy and relationships we need at this time.

We have choice here, as a nation, and as individuals. We can recognize that we're in new territory, that we're truly lost. And we can resolve not to be carried out to sea by the undertow of anger and blame coursing through our nation right now. Zen teacher Ezra Bahda notes that the antidote to blame "is to directly face the pain we are trying to avoid." Could we directly face the painful truth of this present disaster, that we're lost, that the only way to find our way through is to work together?

Are we lost? Well, nothing is working as it should. We find ourselves prisoners of arrogant technology magnified by insistent greed. As the oil exec whispered to my friend, "None of us can figure out how this happened....Nobody knows how to do this." People who're lost in the mountains or wilderness, who either survive or die by the choices they make, at first fight to make their old maps work. They do everything possible to make the old maps fit the present circumstance—but they never can. In wilderness situations, this grasping goes on until the person is confronted with the fact that they're about to die. They will survive only if they acknowledge that there's no way out of their present peril; they must give up their old maps and acknowledge that they're truly lost. Once they recognize this, they begin to notice where they really are, what's going on, what's useful information available here and now. They make new maps and find their way home. Laurence Gonzales, in his book *Extreme Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, writes: "Not being lost is not a matter of getting back to where you started from; it is a decision not to be lost wherever you happen to find yourself. It's simply saying, "I'm not lost, I'm right here."

I hold in my heart the vision of what's possible if we could stop screaming accusations across our huge divides, if we could quiet down long enough to realize that, with the Gulf tragedy, nobody knows what to do, we're in new territory, we're lost. From that recognition, from the heavy weight of reality that would silence us, we could gather together—the scientists, the oil execs, the communities, the fishermen, the politicians, the local business people. If we could sit together, surrendering our need to blame, reclaiming our capacity to think, taking in all the information available, I believe we'd find our way through to solutions. And even though these solutions won't and can't alleviate the destruction and suffering that's happened and that will continue for decades to come, we'd feel renewed by working together. We'd find energy for the work ahead. We'd shift from impotence to creativity. And we'd discover, as countless people have demonstrated over millennia, we humans can persevere through anything as long as we're together.

I don't think we have a choice here, we have to come together to find what's needed for the Gulf, its people and all its living beings. But will we make this choice? I have no idea.

Margaret Wheatley is a well-respected writer, speaker, and teacher for how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubling time. She has written five books: *Perseverance* (2010); *Leadership and the New Science* (18 languages and third edition); *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (7 languages and second edition); *A Simpler Way* (with Myron Rogers); and *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (3 languages). An organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a professor in two graduate business programs, she has been awarded several honorary degrees and distinctions. You may read her complete bio at <http://margaretwheatley.com/bio.html>, and may download any of her many articles (free) at <http://margaretwheatley.com/writing.html>.