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Reclaiming Gaia, Reclaiming Life

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Seven millennia ago, the Babylonians honored the goddess Ishtar. She had led them from the chaos of their origins and brought lawful, loving harmony to their existence.

Queen of Heaven, Goddess of the Universe,
the One who walked in terrible chaos
and brought life by the law of love
and out of chaos brought us harmony.

From chaos She has led us by the hand. . .

(in *Chaos, Gaia, Eros*, Ralph Abraham, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994, 126)

We now walk into a new millennium from a culture that has let go the hand of the creation goddess. But who will lead us through our terrible chaos? Who will bring us to life by the law of love?

Throughout all time and in all societies, this goddess of creation has been known. In some cultures she has been honored, in others reviled, but she is always present at the dawn of creation. In Western thought she appears in Hesiod (about 600 B.C.) as Gaia, one among the creation trinity of Chaos and Eros. It is Gaia who reaches into the void that is Chaos and pulls forth life. It is Gaia who works with the creative impulse that is Eros and creates the world. She is the created universe, the mother of all life, the great partner of chaos and creativity. In modern science, she is planet Earth, a living being who creates for herself the conditions that nourish and sustain life. And in this millennial era, Gaia is us. She is the feminine energy that compels us to care about the future of Earth. She is the feminine sensibility that inspires us to dream of harmony among all beings. She is the feminine voice that yearns to speak through us of the law of love.

I hear Gaia speaking quietly and forcefully through many women these days. But while her message is clear, too many of us question what it means. Instead of celebrating our clarity, instead of understanding that we have gifts of insight that need to be spoken, we ask "Am I crazy?" And some of us feel so strange and disconnected from our society that our self-doubt escalates to: "Am I from another planet?"

The Tibetan teacher Trungpa Rinpoche described a dark time as one in which people forget who they are, lose confidence, and so lack the courage to speak. Courageous acts are born when we can acknowledge our goodness. How then, can we speak for Gaia if we believe we're crazy?

It is time to stop feeling crazy. It is time to acknowledge that we represent the new sanity. This

new sanity (which is the ancient teachings of many peoples) tells us how to be with life in a way that blesses, nurtures, and creates. It tells us how to extend our Gaian reach into the genuine chaos of this age and from it secure the wisdom that will transform us.

In my own work, I am seeking to bring the Gaian voice I hear into organizations of all varieties. How can we create organizations worthy of human habitation, where life flourishes and creativity is a delight? How could we organize human endeavor if we understood how our Gaian planet has organized herself? In asking these questions within organizations, I hope to have us realize that we have choice in how we organize, that there are other beliefs and methods available to us that are far more life sustaining than our current practices. I know that I am giving new voice to beliefs that were once widely known. I also know that I am speaking them into a world that effectively deposed and banished them from public speech about three hundred years ago when the image of a clockwork, mechanical universe gained hegemony.

A few years ago, as the Gaian voices competed with those that told me I was insane, I discovered a new role for myself and all those haunted by ancient images of peace and possibility. I discovered that I could describe myself as the teller of a new story, a new cosmic creation story.

I was introduced to the critical nature of this teller-of-new-stories role in reading the work of physicist Brian Swimme. Brian, partnering with Thomas Berry, has spent the past several years developing a new story of the universe. They believe that only by creating a new cosmic story can we usher in a new era of human and planetary health. (see *The Universe Story*, with Thomas Berry, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992)

Lest you believe that cosmic stories belong only to physicists or theologians, their idea of a cosmic story is one that answers such questions as: What's going on? Where did everything come from? Why are you doing what you do?

Gaian voices answer these questions with a new story that differs in all ways from our current Western cosmology. Because Gaia's story is about life, I know that as women we embody a profound sensibility to this story. And I have come to believe that it is our responsibility to lend our voice and authority to this new cosmic story that Gaia is sharing with and through us. I would like to contrast in some detail the new and the old stories. My hope is that in seeing the great polarities between these two, you will feel that you have no choice but to give courageous voice to the new.

The old story is a story of dominion and control, and all-encompassing materialism. Western culture has been developing this story far longer than three hundred years, but it was in the 17th century, with the advent of modern science, that it became destructively pervasive. Modern science promised that it was within human province to understand the workings of the universe, and to gain complete mastery over physical matter. This promise grew from the image of the universe as a grand, clockwork machine. If the world was a machine, we could understand it through minute dissection, we would engineer it to do what we saw fit, and we would fix it through our engineering brilliance. This hypnotic image of powers beyond previous human imagination gradually crept into everything we looked at: our bodies were seen as the

ultimate machines; our organizations had all the parts and specifications to assure well-oiled performance; and in science, where it had all begun, too many scientists confused metaphor with reality and believed life was a machine.

This dream still wields immense power over us. In most endeavors--in science, health, organizational management, self-help--the focus is on creating better functioning machines. For every problem, we quickly leap to technical solutions, even if technology is the cause of the initial problem. Science will still save us, no matter the earthly mess we've created. In our bodies, our greatest ills, perhaps even death, will vanish once we conquer the challenges of genetic engineering. We replace the faulty part, reengineer the organization, install a new behavior or attitude, create a better fit, recharge our batteries. The language and thinking is all machines. And we remain seduced by this image because it's the only vision that promises us we can conquer life's cyclical nature, our one hope of escape from Gaia's incessant demands for creation and destruction.

This story of complete dominion over matter was given life by control's faithful partner, fear. We seek to control that which we fear. When it resists our control, we become even more afraid. We seek to find other, more successful means of controlling it. We become entangled in a cycle of exerting control, failing to control, exerting harsher control, failing again. The fear that arises from this cycle is notable in many of us. It is especially notable in our organizations. Things aren't working as we had hoped, our control is failing, but we know of no other way to proceed. The world becomes ever more fearsome as we realize the depths of our ignorance and confront our true powerlessness. Yet it is from this place, from an acknowledgment of our ignorance and lack of power, that the call can go out for a new story.

But the old story has further dimensions worth noting. This story has had a particularly pernicious effect on how we think about one another, and how we approach the task of organizing any human endeavor. When we conceived of ourselves as machines, we gave up most of what is essential to being human. We created ourselves devoid of spirit, will, passion, compassion, even intelligence. Machines have none of these characteristics innately, and none of them can be built into its specifications. The imagery is so foreign to what we know and feel to be true about ourselves that it seems strange that we ever adopted this as an accurate description of being human. But we did, and we do. A colleague of mine, as he was about to work with a group of oil company engineers, was warned that they had "heads of cement." He cheerfully remarked that it didn't matter, because they all had hearts, didn't they? "Well," they replied, "we call it a pump."

The engineering image of ourselves has led to organizational lives where we believe we can ignore the deep realities of human existence. We can ignore that people carry spiritual questions and quests into their work; we can ignore that people need love and acknowledgment; we can pretend that emotions are not part of our worklives; we can pretend we don't have families, or health crises, or deep worries. In essence, we take the complexity of human life and organize it away. It is not part of the story we want to believe. We want a story of simple dimensions: people are machines and can be controlled to perform with the same efficiency and predictability.

It is important to recognize that in our experience, people never behave like machines. When given directions, we insist on putting our unique spin on them. When told to follow orders, we resist in obvious or subtle ways. When told to accept someone else's solution, or to institute a program created elsewhere, we deny that it has sufficient value.

When we meet with such non-mechanical responses, we've had two different options. We can criticize our own leadership, or we can blame everyone else. If we as leader are the problem, perhaps it's due to poor communication skills; perhaps we aren't visionary enough; maybe we chose the wrong sales technique. If our colleagues (or children, or friends) are the problem, it must be that they lack motivation, or a clear sense of responsibility, or it could be that this time we've just been cursed with an obstinate and rebellious group. With so much blame looking for targets, we haven't stopped long enough to question our basic beliefs about each other. Are expectations of machine-like obedience and regularity appropriate when working with other people?

Trying to be an effective leader in this machine story is especially exhausting. The story says that he or she is leading a group of lifeless, empty automatons who are just waiting to be filled with vision and direction and intelligence. The leader is responsible for providing everything: the organizational mission and values, the organizational structure, the plans, the supervision. The leader must also figure out, through clever use of incentives or coercives, how to pump energy into this lifeless mass. Once the pump is primed, he or she must then rush hither and yon to make sure that everyone is clanking along in the same direction, at the established speed, with no diversions. It is the role of the leader to provide the organizing energy for a system that is believed to have no internal capacities for self-creation, self-organization, or self-transcendence.

As I reflect on the awful demands placed on leaders by the old story, I wonder how anyone could survive in that job. Yet the mechanistic story has created roles for all of us that are equally deadly. It has led us to believe that we, with our unpredictable behaviors, our passions, our independence, our creativity, our consciousness - that we are the problem rather than the blessing. In fact, our rebellious and untrustworthy natures are the very reason we need to create organizations as we do. How else could we structure such recalcitrance into vehicles of efficient production?

In this story, such key human traits as uniqueness, free will, and creativity pose enormous problems. Machines are built to do repetitive functions that require no thought and minimal adjustment. Conformity and compliance are key values. Creativity is unwanted, because it is always surprising and therefore uncontrollable. If we tolerate creative expressions, this leads to unmanageable levels of diversity. A machine world is willing to sacrifice exploration for prediction. Guaranteed levels of performance are preferable to surprising breakthroughs. In our machine organizations, we try to extinguish individuality in order to reach our goal of certainty. We trade uniqueness for control, and barter our humanness for petty performance measures.

It is one of the great ironies of our age that we created organizations to constrain our problematic human natures, and now the only thing that can save these organizations is a full

appreciation of the expansive capacities of us humans.

So it is time for the new story. Our old one, with its alienating myths, is eating away at us from the inside, rotting from its core. Fewer of us can tell it with any conviction. Increasing numbers of us have heard the Gaian voice and seen in our experience ways of being together that celebrate and affirm life. More and more we are in conversations where we speak of the great forces of life-love, purpose, soul, spirit, freedom, courage, integrity, meaning. The new story is being born in these conversations. We are learning to give voice to a different and fuller sense of who we really are.

The new story is a tale of the primal trinity of Gaia, Chaos and Eros. Once our machine glasses have been set aside, we can see life's ebullient creativity and life's great need for other life. We see a world whose two great organizing energies are the need to create and the need for relationships. We see a world where there is no such thing as an independent individual, and no need for a leader to take on as much responsibility as we've demanded in the past.

As I develop some of the major themes of this new story of life, I draw first on the work of modern science. However, science is only the most recent voice. We hear Gaia's story in primal wisdom traditions, in today's indigenous tribes, in most spiritual thought, and in poets old and new. It is a story that has never been forgotten by any of us, and that has been held for us continually by many peoples and cultures. Yet for those of us exhausted by the old mechanistic tale, it feels new. And it certainly opens us to new discoveries about who we are as people, as organizations, and as women.

For me, one of the most wonderful contrasts of the old and new stories came from thinking about a passage I read in Kevin Kelly's book, *Out of Control* (Addison-Wesley, 1994). As he reached for language to describe life, he moved into sheer exuberance. (I always pay attention when a scientist uses poetry or exuberant language-I know that something has touched him or her at a level of awareness that I don't want to ignore.) Kelly was trying to describe the ceaseless creativity that characterizes life. He said that life gives to itself this great freedom, the freedom to become. Then he asked, "Becoming what?" and went on to answer:

Becoming becoming. Life is on its way to further complications, further deepness and mystery, further processes of becoming and change. Life is circles of becoming, an autocatalytic set, inflaming itself with its own sparks, breeding upon itself more life and more wildness and more 'becomingness.' Life has no conditions, no moments that are not instantly becoming something more than life itself.

Kelly's passionate description of Gaian processes that inflame, breed more life and wildness, and create more deepness and mystery, stands in stark contrast to the expectations we have held for one another. Contrast Kelly's description of life with the lives we describe when we design an organizational chart. The contrast between the two is both funny and sobering. Could we even begin to tolerate such levels of passion and creativity in our organizations? But can we survive without them?

In the 1960's, the great American poet A.R. Ammons told the same story in different and precise language (*Tape for the Turn of the Year*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc. 1965) :

Don't establish the
boundaries
first
the squares, triangles,
boxes
of preconceived
possibility,
and then
pour
life into them, trimming
off left-over edges,
ending potential:
let centers
proliferate
from
self-justifying motions!

In both recent science and poetry we are remembering a story about life that has creativity and connectedness as its essential themes. As we use this new story to look into our organizational lives, it offers us images of how we could be together that are both startling and enticing. It offers us images of organizations where our diversity--our uniqueness--is essential and revered. It offers us an arena big enough to embrace the full expression of our infinitely creative human natures. And for the first time in a long time, it offers us the recognition that we humans are, in the words of physicist Ilya Prigogine, "the most striking realization of the laws of nature." We can use ourselves and what we know about ourselves to understand the universe. By observing with new eyes the processes of creation in us, we can understand the forces that create galaxies, move continents, and give birth to stars. No longer intent on describing ourselves as the machines we thought the universe to be, we are encouraged now to describe the universe through the life we know we are.

As we look at life through the lens of human nature and human desire, we are presented with some wonderful realizations. Our own desire for autonomy and creativity is reflected in all life. Life appears as boundlessly creative, searching for new possibilities and new capacities wherever it can. Observing the diversity of life forms has become a humbling experience for many biologists. At this point, no one knows how many different species there are, or where the next forms of life will appear, except that now we even expect them to appear elsewhere in our solar system.

Life is born from this unquenchable need to be. One of the most interesting definitions of life in modern biology is that something is considered alive if it has the capacity to create itself. The term for this is autopoiesis-self-creation--from the same root as poetry. At the very heart of our

ideas about life is this definition that life begins from the desire to create something original, to bring a new being into form.

As I have read about and observed more consciously the incredible diversity of life, I have felt witness to a creativity that has little to do with the survival struggles that we thought explained everything. Newness appears not for simple utilitarian purposes, but just because it is possible to be inventive. Life gives to itself the freedom to become because life is about discovering new possibilities, new forms of expression. Two Chilean biologists, Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, observe that life responds not to "survival of the fittest," but to the greater space of experimentation of "survival of the fit." Many designs, many adaptations are possible, and organisms enjoy far more freedom to experiment than we humans, with our insane demand to "Get it right the first time."

The freedom to experiment, to tinker oneself into a form of being that can live and reproduce, leads to diversity that has no bounds. In my own telling of the Gaian story, I believe that the very purpose of life is to explore newness, that newness is a primary value embraced by all life, a primary force that encourages life into new discoveries. The need and ability to create one's self is a force we see quite clearly in human experience, but which we have greatly misunderstood in our organizational lives.

The second great force to add to this cosmic story is that life needs other life. Life needs relationships in order to exist. Gaia is not lonely. It is impossible to look into the natural world and find a separated individual. As an African proverb states: "Alone, I have seen many marvelous things, none of which were true." Biologist Lynn Margulis expresses a similar idea when she comments that independence is a political concept, not a biological concept. Everywhere life displays itself as complex, tangled, messy webs of relationships. From these relationships, life creates systems that offer greater stability and support than life lived alone. Organisms shape themselves in response to their neighbors and their environments. All respond to one another, co-evolving and co-creating the complex systems of organization that we see in nature. Life is systems-seeking. It seeks organization. Organization is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Self-organization is the powerful force by which Gaia created herself through relationships, creating all the living systems we see. She knows how to organize from the inside out, from partnering with neighbors rather than from imposition and control.

These self-organizing systems have the capacity to create for themselves the organizations that we thought had to be provided to them. Self-organizing systems create structures and pathways, networks of communication, values and meaning, behaviors and norms. In essence, they do for themselves most of what we believed we had to do to them. Rather than thinking of organization as an imposed structure, plan, design, or role, it is clear that in life, organization arises from the interactions and needs of individuals who have decided to come together. We see the results of these relationships in the forms that arise; but it is important, especially because we are so easily seduced by material forms, to look past these manifestations to the desire for relationship that gave birth to the forms.

It is easy to observe the clash of the old and new stories in many places, but one arena where it is painfully visible is in organizations that we create to fulfill some special purpose, some

important call. People came together in response to the call; they joined because they knew that more was possible by organizing together than by staying alone. Their dream of contribution required an organization to move it forward. In their desire to find meaning in life, to bring more good into the world, to seek out others, they are bearing witness to the new story.

But the clash with old beliefs and images occurs as soon as we embark on the task of creating an organization. We move back to machine ideas about structures, roles, designs, leaders. We create organizations from the outside, imposing these limiting designs on the rich desires of those who have come together. We sever relationships by creating boxes; we ignore meaning by focusing on procedures. Over time, the organization that was created in response to a deep call becomes a rigid structure that impedes fulfilling that call. People come to resent the organization they created, because now it is a major impediment to their creativity, to their faith, to their purposeful dreams.

Gaia holds out different images of organization - she teaches us that we, when we join together, are capable of giving birth to the form of the organization, to the plans, to the values, to the vision. All of life is self-organizing and so are we. But her new story also details a process for organizing that stands in shocking contrast to the images of well-planned, well-orchestrated, well-supervised organizing. I can summarize Gaia's organizing process quite simply: Life seeks organization, but it uses messes to get there. Organization is a process, not a structure. The process of organizing is difficult to chart because it happens in many places, simultaneously, within messy and expanding webs. It involves creating relationships around a shared sense of purpose, exchanging and creating information, learning constantly, paying attention to the results of our efforts, co-adapting, co-evolving, developing wisdom as we learn, staying clear about our purpose, being alert to changes from all directions. Living systems give form to their organization, and evolve those forms into new ones, because of exquisite capacities to create meaning together, to communicate, and to notice what's happening. These are the capacities that give any organization its true liveliness, that support life's desire to self-organize.

In the Gaian story, we are introduced to a world where life gives birth to itself in response to two powerful forces, the need to create one's self as an exploration of newness, and the need to reach out for relationships with others. I could similarly describe these as the force of Chaos, where creativity and freedom abound, and the force of Eros, where we are impelled to create through attraction. These forces never disappear from life. Even if we deny them, we can never extinguish them. They are always active, even in the most repressive human organizations. Life can never stop asserting its need to create itself, and life never stops searching for other life.

We fail to acknowledge these unstoppable forces of life whenever we try to impose direction and control. But life always pushes back against our demands for obedience. When this happens, instead of learning about life, we tend to see others "difficult" behaviors as justification for a more controlling style. I believe that most of the failures and discontents in our organizational lives can be understood as the result of this denial of life's forces, and the pushing back of life against a story that excludes them.

As an example of these competing forces, think about how many times you have engaged in conversations about "resistance to change." I have participated in far too many of these, and in the old days as a consultant, when I still thought that it was me who was "managing" change, my colleagues and I always were thoughtful enough to plan a campaign to overcome this resistance. Contrast this view that humans resist change with Kelly's images of life as "further processes of becoming and change . . . circles of becoming, inflaming itself with its own sparks, breeding upon itself more life and more wildness." Who's telling the right story? Do we, as a species, dig in our heels while the rest of life is engaged in this awesome dance of creation? Are we the only problem, whereas the rest of life participates in something wild and wonderful?

The old story asserts that resistance to change is a fact of life. In a world that sought stability and control and feared chaos, change has always been frightening. But Gaia has always partnered with Chaos and Eros. Resistance is not a fact of life, but evidence of an act of insult against life. Life is in motion, constantly creating, exploring, discovering. Newness is its desire. Nothing alive, including us, resists these great creative motions. But all of life resists control. All of life pushes back against any process that inhibits its freedom to create itself.

In organizations of the old story, plans and designs are constantly being imposed. People are told what to do all the time. As a final insult, we go outside the organization to look for answers, returning with experts that we offer up as great gifts. Yet those in the organization can only see these external and imposed solutions as insults. Their creativity has been dismissed, their opportunity to discover something new for the organization has been denied. When we deny life's need to create, life pushes back. We label it resistance and invent strategies to overcome it. But we would do far better if we changed the story and learned how to invoke the resident creativity of everyone. We need to work with these insistent creative forces or they will be provoked to work against us.

And most organizations deny the systems-seeking, self-organizing forces that are always present, the forces that, in fact, are responsible for uncharted levels of contribution and innovation. These fail to get reported because they occur outside "the boxes of preconceived possibility." There is no better indicator of the daily but unrecognized contributions made by people than when a municipal union decides to "work to rule." These unions are prohibited from going on strike. But they have developed an effective form of protest against problematic working conditions. They work only according to the rule book. They only follow policies and job descriptions. Even though the rule books and policy manuals were designed to create productive employees, as soon as they take them literally, cities cease running, effective civil functioning stops. What they demonstrate so forcefully is that no organization can function on the planned contributions of its members. Every organization relies intensely on its members going beyond the rules and roles. The organization relies on its members to figure out what needs to be done, to solve unexpected problems, to contribute in a crisis situation. But although organizations depend on this self-organizing activity, leaders seldom acknowledge it.

We also deny these system-seeking forces when we narrow people to self-serving work, when we pit colleagues against one another to improve performance, when we believe people are

most strongly motivated by promises of personal gain. If we deny people's great need for relationships, for systems of support, for work that connects to a larger purpose, they push back. They may respond first by embracing competition, but then lose interest in the incentives. Performance falls back to pre-contest levels, in both children and adults. In organizations driven by greed, people push back by distrusting and despising their leaders. In organizations that try to substitute monetary rewards for a true purpose, people respond with apathy and disaffection.

It is possible to look at the negative and troubling behaviors in organizations today as the clash between the forces of life and the forces of domination, between the new story and the old. Once we realize that we cannot ever extinguish these creative forces, that it is impossible to deny the life that lives in our organizations, we can begin to search for new ways of being together.

We who live in the new story can help others understand themselves differently by the way we are with them. We can trust their humanness; we can welcome the surprises they bring to us; we can be curious about our differences; we can delight in their inventiveness; we can nurture them; we can connect them to one another. As Gaia has trusted us, we can trust them to create wisely and well. We know they have the best interests of our organization and our community at heart; we know they want to bring more good into the world.

We who hold this story feel both its beauty and its promise. What might we create if we lived our lives closer to the spirit of life? What might our organizations accomplish if they trusted and called on that spirit? I want us to be telling this story in every organization we engage with. When we hear the old story, from a boss, a counselor, a politician, I want our voices to emerge with what we know to be true. I want us to stop being persuaded away from the deeper realities we know. I want us to feel the new sanity that we hold within us, and to give it voice.

We have been given a new story. When it is time for a new story to emerge, holding onto the past, whether from self-doubt or fear, only intensifies our dilemma. We experience daily the failures of the old story, and if no one voices an alternative, we descend into a profound sense of lost.

So what is asked of us, the tellers of the new story, is our voice and our courage. We do not need to create a massive training program, a global-wide approach, a dramatic style. We only need to speak our story when we are with others. We need to break our silence and share the Gaian vision we have come to know.

If this story has been given to you, it is time to tell it, wherever you are, to whomever you meet. Brian Swimme compares our role to that of the early Christians. They had nothing but ". . . a profound revelatory experience. They did nothing-nothing but wander about telling a new story." As with these early believers, we need only become wanderers, telling our new story. Yet through our simple wanderings, we will "ignite the transformation of humanity."

And Swimme leaves us with this promise (from *Evolution Extended*, Connie Barlow Ed., MIT Press, 1994, p 297):

What will happen when the storytellers emerge? What will happen when 'the primal mind' sings of our common origin, our stupendous journey, our immense good fortune? We will become Earthlings. We will have evoked out of the depths of the human psyche those qualities enabling our transformation from disease to health. They will sing our epic of being, and stirring up from our roots will be a vast awe, an enduring gratitude, the astonishment of communion experiences, and the realization of cosmic adventure.

What a wonderful promise. Gaia has invited us into the telling.



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