



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## **Restoring Hope to the Future through Critical Education of Leaders**

**Margaret J. Wheatley ©2001**

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This is a dark age, when everything must justify its existence in terms of how it benefits the economy. The economy is no longer seen as the means to create just and good societies; it has become the end in itself. Nowhere is this clearer than in the field of education. We educate students so they can get jobs; we collect statistics that demonstrate the monetary benefits of education to the individual; we increasingly focus schools and higher education on training, teaching those subjects defined as important by the workplace. As with all other aspects of modern life in the era of globalization, education has become just one sector of the economy.

But stretching back over millennia, education has always been the means to change society, to create new ideas and practices, and therefore new futures. And in the 20th century, the practice and theory of Critical Education emerged as a powerful demonstration of how education, used with the poorest, could develop the skills and understanding needed to change their world. Quite recently, as I've been increasingly distressed over how education everywhere is being usurped by the economy, I have returned to the work of Paulo Freire, Cesar Chavez, and other Latin American revolutionary thinkers. They have helped me determine what I can do to try and reverse the destructive and dehumanizing trajectory created by the New Economy. I would like to describe how their inspiration has materialized in the work that I now do.

When I feel brave enough to say it (which I do now) my new work is to create a populist revolution among leaders everywhere. I, with many talented and exceedingly dedicated colleagues around the world, are working to establish leadership circles in local communities everywhere. We believe that as leaders meet regularly and talk about their practice, their concerns, their hopes, that they will develop enough clarity and courage to stand up to the pressures of globalism and act as leaders who support and nourish the human spirit and all life.

It's important for me to state at the outset that we have a rather revolutionary definition of "leader." We believe that a leader is anyone who wants to help at this time. We meet these people everywhere-of all ages and in all communities and professions. It can be a mother who wants her children's school to change; a local nurse who wants clean water in the many villages she serves; a teen-ager who refuses to wear the clothing of a corporation that uses sweat shops; a corporate executive who wants to stop unethical practices or the day-to-day

disregard of the needs of employees; a farmer who wants to preserve traditional farming methods.

These new leaders are appearing at an increasing rate in local communities around the world. They each are motivated by a desire to change some aspect of their world. They are not motivated by self-interest or greed. They want to help others. But they often feel isolated and alone. Few of them realize their concerns and generosity are shared by an increasing number of people. And it is difficult to act with courage when you feel you're the only one.

Isolation is one barrier to courageous action. Time is a second one. In most countries, time is evaporating. Technology has played a large role in this, speeding up human interactions to the speed of light, even though we can't, as living beings, work any faster than the speed of life. In highly technological societies, leisure time and private life are fast eroding by the ever-invading demands of cell phones, e-mail, and the assumption that workers should be available 24/7. In societies where technology is not yet so invasive, the very complexity and multiplicity of problems that confront leaders is destroying their time to deal well with any one issue.

Under the relentless pressure of time vanishing, we are losing many essential capacities of being human: the time to think and reflect; the time to be in relationships; the time to develop trust and commitment. In essence, we are forfeiting our unique human qualities in exchange for speed.

There is at least one other great destructive force at work globally, and that is the American management model. Leaders everywhere, no matter what their culture or tradition, are pressured to focus on numeric measures of efficiency and narrow measures of success, i.e. growth and profit-making. These practices are not sufficient to create a healthy and robust workplace or planet. American businesses that only focus on these narrow goals fail as well. As these too-narrow measures roll out around the world, they create the conditions for large-scale destruction of cultures, habitats, and the human spirit. Yet few local leaders can withstand the pressure to be "modern" and so they forfeit their own experience and wisdom about what works best within their own traditions and practices. It isn't just pop culture and fast food that is creating a monoculture across the planet; it's also the spread of one management model, a model that is inherently destructive of life.

Paula Freire said that "reality doesn't change itself." If this is an accurate portrait of today's reality, then we-people everywhere--must be the agents of change. We need to create the conditions where we can think, where we can notice what's going on, and where we develop companions for the work that is required. It is the opportunity to develop these conditions for critical education and action that energizes me now. Our initiative is called: "From the Four Directions: People Everywhere Leading the Way." And this is what we do.

In local communities everywhere, leaders are invited (by a small group of local hosts) to meet regularly to think together, develop clarity about their practices and values that work to affirm and sustain people, and to support each other's courageous acts. Each circle is a site for critical education. People become more knowledgeable about what is going on in their world, and they develop new strategies for how to influence their world. They teach one another, relying on their experience and compassion. Over time, these local circles become good communities of practice-leaders emerge with greater skills to affect change in their world,

wherever they are called to be leaders. *Working locally, we act as a global leadership development effort, raising the standards of effective leadership in thousands of communities and changing the global definition of what good leadership means.*

For these circles to give birth to new ideas, new courage, and new companions for the journey, we use the simple and ancient practice of good human conversation. We provide support for how to create the conditions for meaningful and deepening conversation. We also insist that these leader circles include as diverse a mix of people (age, gender, organizational type) as is possible in that community. A core value of *From the Four Directions* is that "we depend on diversity." We know that people need to be talking to one another again, across all the boundaries and hurts that have been created. And we know also that new solutions are only available when new people are in the conversation. Most communities in the world struggle with diversity—be it ethnic, religious, gender or age-based. *In every circle, in every country, we strive to gently open the boundaries and extend welcome to those formerly excluded. We want to help reweave the broken bonds that are a major dilemma of all societies.*

Our second core value is: "We rely on human goodness." We believe that the solutions needed at this time are not at all technical, but profoundly human. We will find the answers to complex issues, and we will find the courage to push back against the destructive practices of globalism, only if we find each other. In this time when there is growing evidence for human badness, there is the growing need to rely on the fact that most people, no matter their culture or physical conditions, have goodness in them. They, we, want to live with other people in more harmonious and humane ways. *We develop greater clarity in leaders everywhere about human potential and the positive impulses that motivate people—the search for meaning, the need for good relationships, the opportunity to grow and contribute to others.*

The focus of conversation in a From the Four Directions circle is leadership—those values and practices that are life-affirming rather than life-destroying. We aspire to support changes in the leadership of local communities everywhere, developing leadership practices at the local level that can restore hope to the future. But we also aspire to change the direction of our global future. We want to create a global voice on behalf of those practices and values that nourish and sustain the human spirit and all life. To achieve this, we are relying on a change theory taught to us by other living systems.

In nature, change doesn't happen from a top-down, strategic approach. There is never a boss in a living system. Change happens from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously. When these local actions learn about other local actions, their own activity is strengthened. But even more is available. As local groups network together, they can suddenly, and always surprisingly, emerge into a global force. This global force is far stronger than the sum of the parts, and it is also different than the local actions that gave birth to it. These global forces are the result of *emergence*, and they are known as *emergent phenomena*. Always they possess great power, and always they are a surprise.

Globalism is a perfect example of an emergent phenomenon. No one planned it. It emerged from many local actions on the part of corporations and nation states, actions available in the absence of laws and policies for a new, inter-national environment. Globalism organized around only a few values—those of growth and profit-making. And suddenly, we live in the midst of its powerful pressures, organizing societies and organizations in ways that few people

want, and that only a very few are benefiting from.

Once an emergent phenomenon has appeared, it can't be changed by working backwards, by changing the local parts that gave birth to it. You can only change an emergent phenomenon by creating a countervailing force of greater strength. This means that the work of change is to start over, to organize new local efforts, connect them to each other, and know that their values and practices can emerge as something even stronger.

*From the Four Directions* seeks to use emergence intentionally. Now that many local circles are up and running, we are beginning to network them together, experimenting with multiple ways of doing that. When a leader circle in Montevideo, Chile discusses the same issue as a circle in New Delhi, or when a Zimbabwean circle talks with a Danish circle about their experience with citizen democracy—we know that such connections have a powerful impact on personal leadership behavior.

We also believe that as people realize the problems they face are shared by others in different parts of the globe, that they instantly recognize these as *systemic* issues. There is no better way for people to become skilled systems thinkers than to realize their problem is not unique to them, but is affecting many others in diverse parts of the global system. One outcome of *From the Four Directions* is to create thoughtful and practical systems thinkers around the world.

*Our greatest intent is to create a global voice for change in the practices and values used in all types of organizations everywhere.* To create such an emergent phenomenon, we consciously connect circles to one another, publicize our efforts, and soon hope to host regional, in-person conferences, and engage in any other means of developing good, meaningful connections.

Using the great goodness of many, and actively developing the critical thinking and relational skills that make us human, we intend to astonish the world with what becomes possible when we nourish and sustain the human spirit.

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As of this writing (March 2002), *From the Four Directions* has trained people to be circle hosts from more than 30 countries: in Africa, all of Europe, India, South America and North America. For more information on this initiative, and if you'd like to join us, please go to:

[www.fromthefourdirections.org](http://www.fromthefourdirections.org) or phone, The Berkana Institute, 801.376.8847.



#### 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

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