



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## **Speaking our Suffering** Margaret Wheatley ©2002

Speak the truth in a million voices. It is silence that kills  
Catherine of Siena (14th century)

In Western culture, it is common to keep our pain to ourselves. The greater the suffering, the more we tend to withdraw. We've been taught to do this, to bear trauma privately, to keep it inside, and to just get on with life. And we who have not suffered trauma directly often act in ways that keep the suffering ones silent. We don't want to hear their stories because we won't know what to say. When others voice their pain-their grief, their loss, their despair-we believe we must somehow fix it or make it go away. We believe we must respond with a solution, that it's not enough to just listen.

These are cultural burdens of growing up in Western society. We want to make life smooth and comfortable, to have life constantly improving. If something goes wrong, we internalize it as our fault. If someone shares their burdens, we think we have to fix them. We've lost the processes and rituals by which people grieve together, where we come together not to change life, but simply to experience it. We have forgotten how to walk through life--with its great cycles of darkness and chaos followed by rebirth and light--together.

We're experiencing this now with those most affected by Sept. 11th. Too many relief workers, widows, corporate workers, and children have gone silent, bearing their traumas alone. Perhaps they don't know how to talk about their experiences or to put words to the searing emotions they feel. Perhaps they are trying to spare those around them from the pain of knowing how they feel. Perhaps they have gone silent as a gift of love to the rest of us, not wanting us to suffer as they are suffering.

I don't know if this is why those suffering are so silent. But I believe that we who didn't suffer directly must find ways to evoke their stories and end the silence.

We don't save others by being silent. The tragic irony is that we create more trauma in those we are trying to spare. Parents that keep quiet in order to shield their children end up creating deep emotional scars in their children. In research done on the second generation of Holocaust survivors--the children of those who survived the death camps--the impact of silence became clear. If parents had spared their children and never told them the details of the horror they had experienced, the children grew up depressed and, in some cases, suicidal. Children know the secrets of their parents. They intuit that something very important is not being shared. They have no means to interpret the feelings that something is terribly wrong. So, as children do, they assume responsibility for these bad feelings. As they mature, this self-

loathing manifests as depression and, sometimes, self-destruction. The antidote for these children is to hear the stories, to break the silence. If they are adults and their parents have died, they need to hear the stories from other survivors of their parent's generation.

There are other reasons we must find ways to break the silence. When people tell their stories, they are capable of healing themselves. The act of telling our story, and feeling that we are being listened to, is one of the simplest ways to heal. A young South African woman taught a profound lesson about listening. She was sitting in a circle of women from many nations, and each woman had the chance to tell a story from her life. When her turn came, she began quietly to tell a story of true horror--of how she had found her grandparents slaughtered in their village. Many of the women were Westerners, and in the presence of such pain, they instinctively wanted to do something. They wanted to fix, to make it better, anything to remove the pain of this tragedy from such a young life. The young woman felt their compassion, but also felt them closing in. She put her hands up, as if to push back their desire to help. She said: "I don't need you to fix me. I just need you to listen to me."

That's all we need to do: listen. Not judge, not recommend, not fix. Just listen, bearing witness, keeping our hearts open. Parker Palmer said this beautifully: "The soul doesn't need to be fixed or saved. It needs to be received." (Spirituality and Health article on We all became contemplative on Sept. 11, \*\* Editor: please find exact quote.)

What can we do to receive those among us who are suffering? What can we do to invite them to tell their stories and reveal their sorrow? Here are just a few suggestions:

We can expect that triggering events, such as the 1st year anniversary, will stir up deep emotions. We can make sure we are available for those anniversaries, and offer ourselves as quiet companions, available to listen.

We can share our own vulnerability as a means to prime others to share theirs.

If someone does begin to tell their story, we can restrain ourselves from commenting, advising, or interrupting. We can exercise the discipline of good listening, and the faith that that is sufficient for healing. It doesn't help to say "I know just how you feel" or "I had that experience once also." The discipline is to just sit there with our hearts open, absorbing their story into our being.

It helps to visualize the story sitting there in the space between us. The story is what it is, it doesn't require comments or interpretation.

At the end of the story, we can express our gratitude that it was shared. And we can offer to listen again, to another story when it needs to be told.

If we are able to be good listeners, we will discover that it is possible for people to heal themselves. During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa, many of those who testified to the atrocities they had endured under apartheid spoke of being healed by their own testimony because they knew the nation was listening. A young man who had been blinded when a policeman shot him in the face at close range said: "I feel what has brought my eyesight back is to come here and tell the story. I feel what has been making me

sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now it feels like I've got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story."

May the silence be broken so that those most wounded may heal.

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**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](http://margaretwheatley.com). For more biographical information, see [margaretwheatley.com/bio](http://margaretwheatley.com/bio)