

Margaret J. Wheatley

Supporting Pioneering Leaders as Communities of Practice How to Rapidly Develop New Leaders in Great Numbers

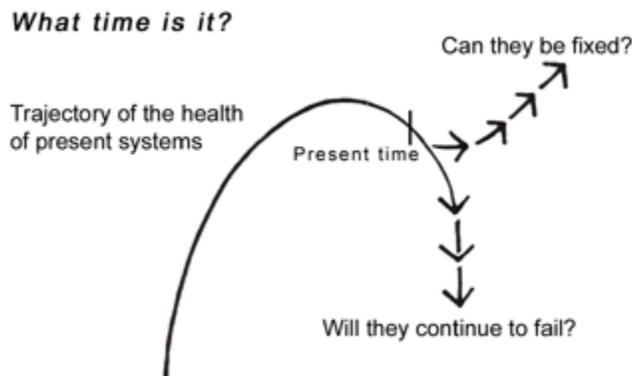
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What time is it?

Do you ever stand back and try to see the big picture, the view from 50,000 feet of what's going on in organizations, communities, the world? From up there, how would you describe these times? Is it a time of increasing economic and political instability, of growing divisiveness and fear, of failing systems and dying dreams? Is it a time of new possibilities, of great examples of hope, of positive human evolution, of transformation? Are we succeeding in solving major problems, are we creating more? Is it any of these things, is it all of these things?

It's important to think about how we answer this question, because that answer affects our choice of actions. If we think that, generally, things are working, that at present we're going through a difficult but temporary downturn, then we don't question current systems or their operating assumptions. Instead, we work hard to revive and improve them. We support initiatives and programs focused on *process improvements*, developing present systems to work more effectively and more efficiently.

If we believe that the old system cannot be repaired, if we expect to see only more system failures, then the work is not to fix. Instead, support needs to be given to radically different processes and methods, new systems based on new assumptions. The work becomes not process improvement but process revolution.



I frequently think about this question of what time is it. My answer is that we are living in a period when many of our fundamental beliefs and practices no longer serve us or the greater

world. Worse than that, they are causing great harm and disabling us from being effective sponsors and facilitators of healthy change. I believe that the longer we continue to use familiar Western beliefs and practices, the more impotent we become to create the world we want.

We have caused many messes in the world, many of them unintentional, because we acted on beliefs and assumptions that could never engender healthy societies. We wove the following beliefs into our practices: that humans are motivated by selfishness, greed, and fear. That we exist as individuals, free of the obligation of interdependence. That hierarchy and bureaucracy are the best forms of organizing. That efficiency is the premier measure of value. That people work best under controls and regulations. That diversity is a problem. That unrestrained growth is good. That a healthy economy leads naturally to a healthy society. That poor people have different motivations than other people. That only a few people are creative. That only a few people are willing to struggle for their freedom.

These beliefs are not true and they have created intractable problems that cannot be solved within current systems of thought and practice. The destructiveness of these beliefs materializes in the major problems afflicting local communities around the globe, problems that persist and grow in spite of years of attempts to solve them: loss of cultures, ecological degradation, poverty, deteriorating health, war and dislocation, economic disempowerment of nations, accrual of power and wealth into fewer hands. While millions of people are working earnestly to solve these problems, and billions of dollars are poured into efforts to reverse the destruction, we need to take an honest look at whether our current approaches work. I believe that we are living out Einstein's well-known maxim: "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

Where have all the leaders gone?

There is a well-noted and alarming trend reported throughout the world--a desperate shortage of good leaders and talented professionals. These shortages appear at a time when the world is reeling from years of failed leadership. Leaders either have struggled valiantly with ineffective means, such as bureaucracy and command and control, or they have held onto power through brutal and corrupt means.

We are not yet free of this legacy of bad leadership, of abuses of power and profound disrespect for the human spirit. As this era grows more turbulent, some leaders are becoming desperate in their grasp for power. Daily, we learn of greater corruption, more extremes of abuse, more belligerent behaviors on the part of leaders.

Many individuals and organizations, in increasing numbers, are attempting to intervene to resolve the most pressing problems of this time: health, human rights, poverty, hunger, illiteracy, environmental issues, democracy. Far too many of these well-intentioned efforts are subverted by the lack of talented leadership. Money for projects disappears because of mismanagement, inexperience, or corruption. Change efforts fail because of inappropriate implementation processes. In developing countries we say there's a leadership vacuum. In developed countries, we ask, "Where have all the leaders gone?"

So the need for new leaders is urgent. We need new leadership in communities everywhere. We need leaders who know how to nourish and rely on the innate creativity, freedom, generosity, and caring of people. We need leaders who are life-affirming rather than life-destroying. Unless we quickly figure out how to nurture and support this new leadership, we can't hope for peaceful change. We will, instead, be confronted by increasing anarchy and societal meltdowns.

Thus, new leadership becomes a central and pressing challenge of our time.

The story of CIDA City Campus

Recently I met a remarkable young South African leader, Taddy Blecher. Together with his colleagues, and many professionals who volunteer their time, he has created the most amazing university in Johannesburg--CIDA City Campus. In existence for just two years, CIDA already serves 1200 students from the poorest rural areas in South Africa. Soon, CIDA will double in size with the admission of the next class of one thousand students. This entering class was chosen from several thousand applicants, and the selection was done entirely by present students.

Taddy has an unshakable belief in the potential of people: "Everyone is a leader and needs to be cherished for that." At CIDA, thousands of young students are developing as new leaders for South Africa. Nothing about CIDA resembles traditional models of education. Instead, they rely on the deep communitarian values of Africa. One thousand students take the same class and the same exams at the same time. They live together in formerly elite, now abandoned hotels in downtown Johannesburg. They advise each other, look out for each other, go job hunting together, sing together, cook together. They live, work, and study as a community. In this community, no one struggles alone and no one succeeds at the expense of another. CIDA students out-perform traditional students academically and in the work place, and radiate belief in themselves and their potential to serve their nation.

They also know how to manifest their leadership with exponential power. When I visited CIDA, I met a group of thirty students who had been specially trained in AIDS awareness education, and then gone back to their rural villages to teach their communities about HIV/AIDS. Each student had pledged to visit with one thousand people. They had just returned from this week-end effort, and proudly announced that they had brought AIDS education to 300,000 villagers in four days. Another group was about to be trained to educate local people in how to handle their money, credit, and banking.

The enthusiasm and joy that radiates in CIDA stand in stark contrast to other educational institutions. But rather than treat CIDA as an interesting exception to the norm. I want to illuminate them as representative of our future. The young leaders developing at CIDA demonstrate how powerful their idealism can be when held in community, how serving others is a source of joy and energy, how together we might possibly change the world. No one at CIDA acts in isolation. Working together in supportive community, each develops their unique skills and capacity as a leader. And they sustain their enthusiasm for leadership at a time when the problems faced by their nation and the African continent are overwhelming and seemingly without solution.

The new leaders are already here

Not only at CIDA, but everywhere there are aspiring leaders who have a firm commitment to lead in new ways, to not repeat the mistakes and abuses of the past. They exist in all communities, clear in their resolve to lead differently. They often say that leadership has chosen them, that it is their vocation to lead at this time. But they are trying to forge new leadership while living in countries and communities characterized by either corrupt leaders or well-intentioned bureaucrats. From whom can they learn new ways? Who are their mentors? How can they quickly learn alternative modes of leadership? And if they've grown up under oppression and colonialism, told for centuries that they're worthless and powerless, how do they let go of that conditioning and truly empower themselves as leaders?

I believe that the old leadership paradigm has failed us and that our current systems will continue to unravel. This has changed what I do and who I choose to support. I no longer spend any time trying to fix or repair the old, or to improve old leadership methods. I spend all of my time now supporting those giving birth to the new, those pioneering with new approaches to organizing and leading. In communities all over the world, there are many brave pioneers experimenting with new approaches for resolving the most difficult societal problems. These new leaders have abandoned traditional practices of hierarchy, power, and bureaucracy. They believe in people's innate creativity and caring. They know that most people can be awakened to be active in determining what goes on in their communities and organizations. They practice consistent innovation and courage-wherever they see a problem, they also see possibility. They figure out how to respond. If one response doesn't work, they try another. They naturally think in terms of interconnectedness, following problems wherever they lead, addressing multiple causes rather than single symptoms. They think in terms of complex global systems and yet also understand this world as a global village.

Presently, many organizations and individuals are engaged in supporting these new leaders, often known as social entrepreneurs. However, the majority of these efforts support these leaders at the level of the individual, awarding them fellowships and scholarships, bringing them from their own communities to study at universities, foundations, and leadership programs. But as yet, no one has determined how best to develop these new leaders in the large numbers that are needed. If we are to resource our communities with new, life-affirming leadership, we need a very different model for how to educate and nourish leaders at a new level of scale.

The challenges of paradigm pioneers

While those who want to support new leaders are struggling with the dilemma of scale, individual leaders face very challenging conditions. They act in isolation, often criticized, mocked, or ignored by the prevailing culture. They have no way of knowing there are many more like them, pioneers struggling with new ways of leading. It is a constant struggle to maintain focus and courage in the midst of such criticism and loneliness.

And, there are other challenges for these pioneers. These arise from the dynamics of paradigm shifts and how people generally behave when confronted with a new world view.

New leaders must invent the future while dealing with the past.

In speaking with these new leaders, it is very clear that they refuse to carry the past into the future. They do not want to repeat the mistakes of the past having, in many cases, personally suffered from ineffective or brutal leadership. They want to work in new ways, but these new ways of organizing, the new processes for implementing change, have yet to be developed. It is their work to invent them, and so they do double duty. They must simultaneously invent a new process or organizing form, and also solve the problems created by past practices.

It is difficult to break with tradition

It is not easy to invent the new. It is difficult to break free of the training, history, and familiar practices of the prevailing culture. New leaders certainly know that bureaucracy doesn't work, that corruption destroys communities, that aid administered from the top down most often fails. They refuse to repeat these practices, but they, like all of us, have been raised in these traditional ways. Past habits of practice exert strong pressures. When crises mount and people feel fearful and overwhelmed, we default back to practices that are familiar, even if they are ineffective.

Supporters want them to look familiar

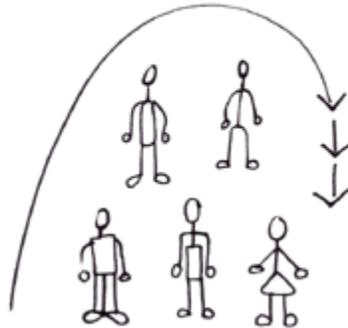
Those with the means to support new leaders often complicate their pioneering work by wanting them to use familiar and traditional leadership processes. Those with resources often feel it too risky to support experiments with new practices. It feels safer to ask for traditional strategic plans, business plans, measurements, and reports, no matter what the context of the initiative. On the surface these seem to be important skill sets, but there is now substantial research demonstrating the failure of these methods to produce desired results in the most traditional of organizations. Perhaps supporters are risk-averse, perhaps they are unaware that these methods don't work. Whatever the reason, sponsors insist that pioneering leaders conform to the past. Resources are not available unless new leaders can demonstrate competency in familiar leadership practices, even those that have consistently failed to achieve sustained change.

And when resources are scarce, and competition grows among different projects, it is easy for pioneers to lose their way. Against their best judgment of what works in their community, they agree to comply with procedures and practices they know can't succeed. Over time, they fail, not from lack of vision or willingness to experiment, but because they have been held back from those experiments. We destroy these pioneers by insisting that they conform to the mistakes of the past.

There is no room for failure

As pioneers, it is impossible to get it right the first time. No one has yet drawn accurate maps--explorers learn as they go. The maps that pioneers create will make it easy for large populations to migrate easily to the future, but their own explorations require great sacrifice and constant learning. Our present culture doesn't support this kind of experimentation. We want right answers quickly; we ask people to demonstrate success early in their ventures. We evaluate them based on short-term measures. We seldom give adequate time for the explorations and failures that are part of mapping a new territory. Instead of offering additional resources to their explorations and experiments, we abandon them in favor of safer projects that employ familiar, flawed means.

Paradigm pioneers struggle in isolation to create the new in the context of the old.



We want them to fail

This is the greatest, unspoken difficulty pioneering leaders encounter. Society does not want them to succeed. To acknowledge their success means we will have to change. We will have to abandon the comfort of our familiar beliefs and practices. People naturally flee from such changes and thus, even as the old ways fail, we hold onto them more fiercely and apply them more zealously.

In his seminal work on paradigms, Thomas Kuhn described the behavior of scientists when confronted with evidence that pointed to a truly new world view. (see *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1996, 1974) When the new evidence clearly demonstrated the need for a change in paradigms, scientists were observed working hard to make the evidence conform to their old worldview. In defense of the old, they would discard or reinterpret the data. (This was always done unconsciously.) And in the most startling instances, they actually would be blind to the new information—even with the data in front of them, they literally could not see it. For them, the new did not exist.

When the paradigm is changing, it is common to experience each of these dynamics. How often do we see an innovative approach, and then characterize it as traditional? How often do we observe new leadership practices and deny their existence? How often do we treat their successes as anomalies or as exceptions to the norm? How difficult is it for us to acknowledge them for what they are, radical departures from tradition, the first trail markers of our way to the future?

Mohammed Junus, the founder of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and pioneer of micro-lending to the poor, tells the story of trying to get support from traditional bankers for his first loans to poor people. Dr. Junus wanted to loan very small amounts of money (often not more than a few dollars) to give Bangla people the means to start their own businesses. Whatever evidence he presented, the bank's reply was always the same: "The poor are not credit worthy." Frustrated, he then loaned his own money to the poor, and was paid back on time. But the bank's response was the same. Even after several years of successful lending to the poor, Dr. Junus was still greeted with the same old belief, "The poor are not credit worthy." He realized that no matter how much evidence he might accumulate to demonstrate the contrary, the banks would never see his evidence nor change their beliefs. (Grameen has since loaned millions to the poor, and developed a model for micro-lending that is used worldwide.)

Learning occurs in community

Because of the world's pressing leader shortage, and these paradigm-shift dynamics, there is an urgent need to support, strengthen, and nurture pioneering new leaders. They are eager learners, willing to try new approaches, hungry for methods and ideas that will work. Yet traditional approaches to leadership development are woefully inadequate to meet their learning needs.

Fortunately, research and work done on both adult learning and on "communities of practice" offer solutions to this leadership development challenge. Two quite different approaches—one from working with the poor in Brazil, the second from working with global corporations—come together to mark a clear path.

The first is the pioneering work of Paulo Freire. Working among the poorest of the poor in Brazil, Freire developed the practice and theory of *Critical Education*. (See *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,) He demonstrated that people who had never learned to read could quickly develop skills of literacy and complex reasoning if those skills would help them improve their lives. If they learned to think critically about the forces creating their poverty, they quickly learned the skills and analytic tools that could help relieve their condition.

Freire's work has since been substantiated by many others, in a wide variety of cultures and populations. The essential lesson is this: When people understand the forces creating the adverse conditions of their life, and how they might change those forces, they become eager and rapid learners. They are capable of learning sophisticated skills that far surpass traditional assumptions about their intellectual capacity. And they learn these skills faster than anyone would have thought possible.

The second body of practice and research is that of "Communities of Practice." This work has been pioneered in modern corporations, where training needs and efforts at knowledge management consume billions of dollars. Some core questions have been: How can people most quickly learn new skills? How is knowledge developed and shared within an organization? The concept "community of practice" was developed to illuminate that learning is a social experience. We humans learn best when in relationship with others who share a common practice. We self-organize as communities with those who have skills and knowledge that are important to us. Etienne Wenger, a pioneer in this field (see, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 1998), states: "Since the beginning of history, human beings have formed communities that accumulate collective learning into social practices—communities of practice. Tribes are an early example. More recent instances include the guilds of the Middle Ages that took on the stewardship of a trade, and scientific communities that collectively define what counts as valid knowledge in a specific area of investigation. Less obvious cases could be a local gardening club, nurses in a ward, a street gang, or a group of software engineers meeting regularly in the cafeteria to share tips."

Communities of practice demonstrate that it is natural for people to seek out those who have knowledge and experience that they need. As people find each other and exchange ideas, good relationships develop and a community forms. This community becomes a rich

marketplace where knowledge and experience are shared. It also becomes an incubator where new knowledge, skills, and competencies develop. In corporations, many of the core competencies (the core skills that are the organization's unique strengths) develop within these informal, self-organized communities, not from any intentional strategic or development strategy.

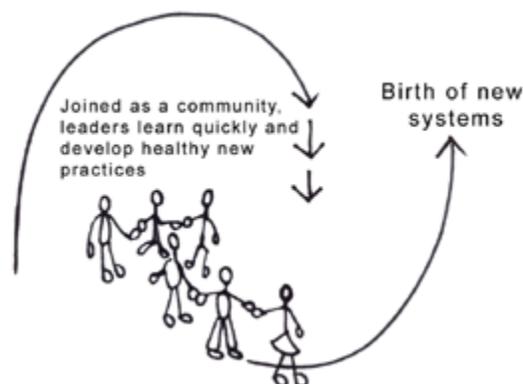
The literature on communities of practice is filled with stunning examples of how workers learn complex skills in rapid time when seated next to those who have the skill. And of how workers reach out electronically across the globe with a question to colleagues, and receive back immediate, expert advice that resolves a crisis or dilemma.

These two very different fields-Critical Education and Communities of Practice-teach the same lessons. People learn very quickly when they have a need for the skills and information. If it will change their lives, if it will help them accomplish what is important to them, everyone can become a good learner. We learn complex competencies and knowledge in a matter of weeks, not months or years. And people learn best in community, when they are engaged with one another, when everyone is both student and teacher, expert and apprentice, in a rich exchange of experiences and learnings.

Supporting and sustaining new leaders

There is important work to be done to effectively support and nurture the pioneering new leaders that are appearing everywhere. It is possible to strengthen and develop these leaders in great number if we work from a new unit of scale, that of communities of practice rather than individuals. It is in these communities that learning accelerates and healthy and robust practices develop quickly.

There are four key areas of work that can support the development of new leadership-in-community. Each of these four areas describes work for foundations, NGOs, governments-all organizations focused on supporting new leadership as the means to create sustainable change.



I. Name the Community

Pioneering leaders act in isolation, unaware that they are part of a broader community. They act on intuition and experience, struggling to not revert to the practices of the past. They feel alone and strange, often criticized, even ridiculed, by their community. They bear such labels as idealists, dreamers, innocents, for believing that they can lead in new ways, solve entrenched problems, and create sustainable progress.

All this changes when they learn that they are part of a community, that there are many more like them. They gain confidence and courage. They find new energy to stay in the challenges and struggles of pioneering the new.

The community they belong to is a community of practice, not of place. The community forms among people acting from the same values and visions. Their practices are varied and unique, but each practice develops from a shared set of values. In this way, the community is very diverse in its expression, and very united in its purpose.

Only certain organizations --those who observe many communities or nations and who see more of the whole--have sufficient scope to name this community. It is never identified by those engaged in the day-to-day work in their separate communities.

II. Connect the Community

In nature, if a system is in distress, the solution is always to connect it to more of itself. As the network of relationships is rewoven and strengthened, the system processes new information and becomes healthier. A human community becomes stronger and more competent as new connections are formed with those formerly excluded, as it brings in those who sit on the periphery, as communication reaches more parts of the system, and as better relationships are developed.

We live in a time when connecting across distances has become much easier. Technology facilitates the formation of communities of practice, through dedicated websites, on-line conferences, list serves. But technology is only a supplement to necessary human and intimate connections, including gatherings of the community, publications specific to the community's interests, exchanges of people and resources.

Members of the community are too busy to develop the connections that would assist them. Again, those who have the privilege of seeing the whole of the community need to support multiple ways for members to connect with one another.

III. Resource the Community

Communities of practice need to be nourished with many different resources. They require ideas, methods, mentors, processes, information, technology, equipment, money. Each of these is important, but one great gap is that of knowledge-knowing what techniques and processes are available that work well. For example, they may be leading a community development process, yet know nothing of new means to engage the whole community, or new processes for valuing all of a community's assets. Without this knowledge, they either

reinvent the wheel, or latch too quickly onto whatever process they hear about, even inappropriate or substandard ones.

To bring good resources to eager learners is such a simple and powerful means to promote the learning and practices of these pioneers. And these new leaders are already highly efficient users of resources--they've been stretching meager means for years.

IV. Illuminate and Interpret the Community

There is a critical need to tell the stories of this community, to get public attention for their efforts. Remember how difficult it is for any of us to see a new paradigm, even when it's right under our noses. People, if they even notice them, are most likely to see these new pioneers as inspiring and temporary deviations from the norm. It takes time, attention, and a consistent media focus for people to see them for what they are, examples of what's possible, of what our new world could look like. To develop this level of public awareness requires skillful working with the media.

Berkana's experience with this fourfold approach

This model emerged from the work of The Berkana Institute during the past two years. We didn't design the model, we just noticed that it was an accurate description of the work we found ourselves doing. For example, we'd been working with a global network of younger leaders, Pioneers of Change. (www.pioneersofchange.net) Some of their members had participated in our initiative, From the Four Directions, where we support the creation of on-going conversations among local leaders in many countries. (www.fromthefourdirections.org) We had noted a trend among some of the pioneers-they were intent on establishing leadership learning centers in their own communities. They either were dreaming of how they might do this, or were already engaged in creating an organized response to the needs of their communities for new leaders. A group of them serendipitously found themselves together at a meeting, most of them unaware of the dreams they shared. In fact, a few of them commented on how they'd been hesitant to express their idea of a leadership center because it felt too strange. Two staff from Berkana were present at that meeting, and were quick to "name the community." We then entered into conversation with them as to what they needed, and how we might best support them with connections and resources. Since that time in July 2001, Berkana and Pioneers of Change have partnered in supporting six new leadership centers developing in Croatia, England, India, Mexico, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. We've held gatherings for those initiating these centers, provided on-line conferencing, information, mentors-and most recently, partnerships (that will include financial support) between our U.S. From the Four Directions leadership circles and these centers.

There are two other communities of practice that Berkana has named and is now supporting. These include a broad community of practice among African leaders who are giving birth to a new, African-based form of leadership; and a global community of practice among those using circle/council/conversation processes for societal change.

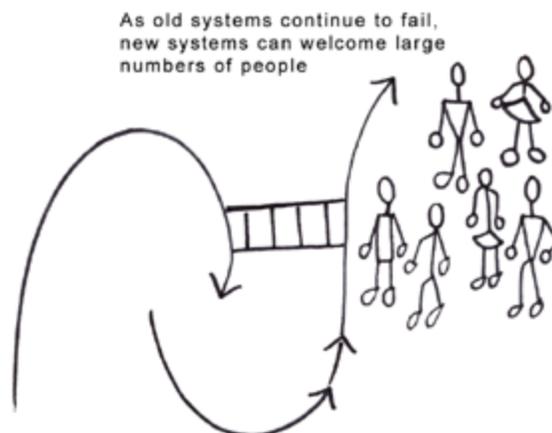
The power of this approach

We live in a time when coalitions, alliances, and networks are growing. People have created many networks, and some are now creating networks of networks. These networks will be essential for successful change, but they are not as intentional as is a community of practice. Exchanges among members of a network tend to be less focused and more dependent on how and when individuals choose to engage with those in the network.

Communities of practice develop from a need to do one's work more effectively. Because there is such a great need to connect with other members of the community, their work together can emerge quickly as a body of new competencies and methods that spread rapidly throughout the community. Therefore, facilitating communities of practice among pioneering leaders is a deliberate strategy to speed-up the emergence of new ways of organizing, of new global leadership practices that affirm rather than destroy life.

Emergence is life's process for taking local actions to achieve global impact. In nature, change never happens as a result of top-down, pre-conceived strategic plans, or from the mandate of any single individual or boss. Change begins as local actions spring to life simultaneously around the system. If these changes remain disconnected, nothing happens beyond their own locale. However, if connected, then local actions can emerge as a powerful influence at a more global or comprehensive level. (Global here means that the system operates at a larger scale, not necessarily the entire planet.) These powerful emergent phenomena appear suddenly and, most often, surprisingly. Think about how globalization and corporate power suddenly came to dominate, or how the Berlin Wall suddenly came down. Emergent phenomena always exert much greater power than the sum of their parts, and they always possess unique qualities that are different from the local actions that engendered them.

Emergence happens through connections. Therefore, any process that can catalyze connections becomes the means to achieve change at a global level. We are working intentionally with this powerful process when we name, connect, resource, and illuminate communities of practice. Inside these communities, leaders learn quickly, create new practices, and feel supported in their pioneering work. And through emergence, their relatively small, local efforts can become a global force for change, powerful enough to create the world we all desire, a world where the human spirit flourishes as the blessing, not the problem.



About the author: This article was written by Margaret Wheatley, based on long conversations and work with a number of colleagues, including (alphabetically) Manish Jain, Cire Kane, Marianne Knuth, Carole Schwinn, Bob Stilger, Tenneson Woolf and the Berkana Wisdom Board.



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