



Margaret J. Wheatley

Turning to One Another

***Keynote Address: Kansas Health Foundation 2000 Leadership Institute,
Spring 2000***

"At some time in your life," Dr. Wheatley said in her keynote address launching the Kansas Health Foundation's 2000 Leadership Institute, "your heart leapt out and you had no choice but to work with children." As the audience nodded its agreement, Dr. Wheatley observed that trying to act on this choice has become very problematic. Her remarks, she said, would address this issue by suggesting how to effectively organize our compassion.

In the past, our compassion has been organized into separate, specific programs, each tackling a different issue. Showing a typical organization chart, Dr. Wheatley described the ways a compassionate impulse tends to be organized: one agency to take care of single mothers, another for children with disabilities, and so on.

This approach can be found in many different sectors. For example, Dr. Wheatley described getting lost recently driving to an appointment in a vast medical campus. Within a mile, she drove by a cardiac care unit, a spinal center, a hand center, and a kidney center. Each organ and limb seemed to have its own building, bringing home to Dr. Wheatley the many ways in which complex problems are divided into specific responsibilities. This approach pays little or no attention to the whole entity or to the connections among these seemingly separate parts.

Another current example is the proliferation of relief agencies in Kosovo, now numbering 480. The presence of so many relief agencies springs from compassion for the plight of the refugees in Kosovo, and yet these separate efforts have unintended and unwelcome consequences. For example, Dr. Wheatley explained, local food prices have escalated as the various relief agencies have purchased food for their many workers in local markets, placing these items out of reach of local residents. Now, relief agencies are importing food to feed local citizens - in response to a problem to which they themselves contributed. "You would all have a story of equal craziness," Dr. Wheatley observed, again drawing nods of agreement and rueful smiles from the audience, "where in attempting to help, you created some problem you never thought of, some unintended consequence."

Coming Together

Just as our body parts cannot be separated into heart, lung, and hand buildings, Dr. Wheatley said, the concerns of the populations we are trying to serve cannot be separated. "We can't continue to believe that you can best give your gift - your

compassion - to children by being in this kind of structure," she said. Instead, people are realizing that we must re-weave connections and come back together.

"Does the agency, organization, or system you are in allow you to deliver as much compassion as you want?" Dr. Wheatley asked. "I would bet the answer is no." Indeed, she said, people in all types of work tend to enter their field with some type of dream - a sense of hope that by their labor, they will contribute to the benefit of some group in society. Citing examples as diverse as workers in dog food manufacturing plants and high technology research labs, Dr. Wheatley suggested that most of us really do want to work for each other. "It's in us, in everybody," she said. "It may be buried, but it is in us."

Dr. Wheatley asked the Leadership Institute participants to call out their dreams of what they might accomplish, at the time they took on their current professional positions. Responses included making a difference on behalf of the business community, improving child care quality, energizing good teachers, and integrating young people back into the community. Dr. Wheatley pointed out that no one mentioned fame or fortune. Instead, she said, "what brings you together is your compassion -- your dream of how to make a difference for good.

" Learning from the Flowers

Dr. Wheatley read a poem by Gary Snyder, *For the Children*:

For the Children

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.
To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

stay together
learn the flowers
go light

- Gary Snyder, from *Turtle Island*

The poem, written in the 1960s, anticipated the 21st century very well, in Dr. Wheatley's opinion. "Most poets and artists," she noted, "have a 30-year leap on us. They see what's coming."

In contrast to the poem, Dr. Wheatley said, we have tended to think of ourselves as machines. Like the medical center buildings, we have ripped ourselves into parts because the imagery of machines suggests that if we take out one malfunctioning part out and fix it, we can fix the entire machine. "The imagery of the machine," Dr. Wheatley explained, "says that if there's a problem, you can isolate it and replace it and everything will work well." We do this all the time in organizations, she continued. When something goes awry in an organization, we look for someone to blame - a board member, a law, a team, a department. This approach usually does not work, but it does have a silver lining: it forces us to become aware of all the other parts. In other words, it forces us to become systems thinkers.

Dr. Wheatley then showed a complicated chart, ironically titled "Emerging Regional Integrated Network: A Simplified Example." Indeed, Dr. Wheatley noted, if any of us tried to chart the people we call, the networks and individuals that influence us, it would look similarly messy and complex. "This is the world we're all trying to make sense of," she said, "trying to deliver our compassion."

It is no longer enough to simply say that relationships are important. A good part of effective work, Dr. Wheatley said, is knowing exactly who is in each box on such a chart. As former American Red Cross President Elizabeth Dole put it, "When the river is rising and it's 2:00 a.m., that's not the time to start a relationship." The relationship has to be there first. "If you don't have the web or fabric of good, trusting relationships," Dr. Wheatley said, "You can't suddenly pick up the phone and say, 'I need you.'"

"Relationships are not only primary, but are the only way we can operate now," she concluded.

Passion First; Structure Later

Dr. Wheatley quoted essayist Roger Rosenblatt:

"The best in art and life comes from a center - something urgent and powerful, an idea or emotion that insists on its being. From that insistence, a shape emerges and creates its structure out of passion. If you begin with a structure, you have to make up the passion, and that's very hard to do."

Dr. Wheatley pointed out that this is exactly the opposite of what most of us have been taught. Our failures, she believes, stem from our inability to understand this process. Usually, Dr. Wheatley suggested, we sit alone or perhaps with a small group and create something - a program, a response, a new policy, a statement. Our passion is in it; we know it is important for our agency and we devote our best efforts to it. Then what happens? We take the finished product and give it to a colleague. Instead of kudos, enthusiasm, and action, we are met with indifference, at best. "We don't pick up other people's work and express gratitude," Dr. Wheatley explained, "not because we're selfish and uncreative or don't have good work ethics. It's because we are creative individuals and as a precept for all life - not just humans - we will

only support what we create."

This is the same point that Roger Rosenblatt made. We can't expect to create structure first, and then pour people's passion into it. Yet we do this all the time. We call it getting buy-in, enrolling people, selling to the board of directors. "The best in art and life starts from your passion," Dr. Wheatley said, "but instantly welcomes in other people's passion." Out of that passion, she continued, a structure will emerge - but it starts first and foremost with people coming together and sharing their concerns.

The Power of Conversation

Dr. Wheatley described several examples of structure following passion. One was the story of a friend whose determination to help a Vietnamese orphanage began with a phone call to hospitals in search of an incubator. This quest mushroomed, within a matter of weeks, into a shipment of four 40-foot containers of medical equipment to Vietnam - including not one but 12 incubators.

The history of social movements is full of similar examples, Dr. Wheatley observed. Poland's powerful labor movement, Solidarity, began with only 9 people and grew to 9 million people within 3 weeks - and that was before e-mail. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) grew from an individual mother's grief to a national movement. "We completely underestimate the power of human conversation to change the world," Dr. Wheatley said.

Margaret Mead's famous quote is repeated often, Dr. Wheatley said, because it is so true:

"Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has."

For Dr. Wheatley, this is one of the messages of Gary Snyder's advice to learn the flowers. "One of the things we need to learn," she said, "is that very great change starts from very small conversations, held among people who care." But talking about what really matters - the issues that really concern you - requires courage. "Forget about the politics or the staff person who is driving you crazy," Dr. Wheatley advised. "What are the things you really have deep, abiding concern for? What is it you really have some passion for? If you go into that question for yourself, you will find the energy to go forward." The conversation should not be based on complaint, Dr. Wheatley added, but should be based on both passion and a sense of hope.

Asking "What's Possible?" and "Who Cares?"

In most organizations, we are trained to ask, "What's wrong?" and "How can we fix it?" This is a demoralizing process, and a typical one. Instead, Dr. Wheatley said, she has learned to ask two very different questions: "What's possible here?" and "Who cares?" When we ask "Who cares?", we invite in others who are also passionate about an issue. And when we ask "What's possible?", it opens us up to unprecedented creativity. Dr. Wheatley's friend searching for an incubator to send to Vietnam did not hang up the phone when the first hospital she called said it had no extra incubators to donate. Instead, by asking "What's possible here?", she was able to secure other medical equipment that was useful to the orphanage staff. This openness, in

turn, led to a much broader contribution than a single incubator - and, ultimately, to the structure to support that contribution.

The Future, Waiting to be Born

"You're trying to deliver your compassion, which knows no bounds, but are trying to deliver it within a very bounded society," Dr. Wheatley pointed out, sympathetically. Despite these obstacles, she noted that finding new ways of delivering our compassion is up to each of us. "You can do that any time you extend past your organizational boundary and ask someone else in. Collaborate around passion, not around fixed policy," she suggested, by asking the revolutionary but absolutely necessary questions: "What's possible?" and "Who cares?"

In closing, Dr. Wheatley offered a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, written over a century ago:

You must give birth
to your images.

Fear not the
strangeness you feel.

The future must enter
you...

Long before it
happens.

"Every time your heart leaps out and you want to serve better," Dr. Wheatley concluded, "that's the future, speaking through you."



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