



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## **What did you hope America would have learned from September 11?**

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In July, I had the great privilege of asking this question to a group of twenty-four people from fifteen countries. They ranged in age from 22 to 66 although the majority were in their twenties and thirties. They lived throughout Europe (several were from Eastern Europe), North America and South America. The setting was an 11th century, crumbling castle in Slovenia. We sat in a circle, surrounded by strong fortress walls made more interesting by decay, looking out over the peaceful and fertile plains of Hungary. As we gathered in circle, I was surprised by how grateful they were that I had invited them into this conversation. As one young man said: "I've been desperately wanting to have this conversation with an American, but no one has wanted to talk with me." Here are several things they said:

**The opportunity was lost for other countries to partner with America.** After the initial outburst of volunteerism in America (which everyone admired,) and other nations readiness to leap in and support America, the U.S. chose to go it alone and become the world's policeman. The possibilities for openness and collaboration gave way to a campaign against evil waged in isolation. Some of the eagerness to partner with the U.S. came from a desire not to repeat the sins of the past. "Europe jumped in to help so quickly because we are filled with remorse for what we didn't do to prevent the massacres in Bosnia." "Germany was hoping that America would do its dirty work so it wouldn't have to."

**America is consumed by a great myth.** The story that has gripped the U.S. is the classic one found in science fiction and many myths. "A few good people must fight great evil, overcoming all odds to triumph." After 9/11, Americans asked "Why do they hate us?" The answer given was that "They hate our freedom." In this story, America is the brave and determined defender of freedom-loving people for the entire planet. A young leader from England and Pakistan who had just returned from the States described this story as "internally consistent. It has its own logic that you can't argue with." A young Slovenian woman added that many Americans, even before September 11th, believed that all people were envious of them. But for her, the term "American" is pejorative.

**America has nothing to learn.** This theme kept circling through our conversation--it is a source of great frustration and emotion. Why doesn't America listen to anyone else? Why isn't America asking for other opinions? Why is it so arrogant and shut off from the world? How can Americans believe they have nothing to learn from the rest of us? A European who noted how, in Europe, you can't avoid meeting those from other countries, gently asked: "How can we help Americans become curious to meet others?"

**What goes around comes around.** A young leader from Ireland spoke of the financial support Irish-Americans had given over the years to Irish terrorist groups. ""Your money has

been responsible for the deaths of over 3000 people in Ireland." A young Ecuadorian woman spoke of the impact of current U.S. policies in Colombia against cocaine growers. "People are fleeing to Ecuador, causing great problems for us. I believe in part because of U.S. policies in this area, that things are going to continue to get worse over the next five years." Many in the room found these two examples consistent with their experience of U.S. foreign policy since the end of World War II.

As the conversation deepened, it moved into an exploration of our shared grief for what is happening in the world. I was saddened to hear that all but one of us felt that we were not at all represented by our governments, and felt powerless to change this. Decisions are being made in our name that we absolutely disagree with. (Only one person felt they were living in a country where democracy was gaining strength, and that was The Netherlands.) As one young leader from England now living in Holland remarked: "I see all these decisions being made by men in ties. I feel so f----- angry. I see the youth not being heard, getting pissed off and going to the streets in protest, and look at what happens to them!"

These expressions of shared powerlessness helped shift us into a conversation about our own capacities. What was the role we wanted to play in this world, right now? We spoke about the new story we wanted to help birth, shifting the storyline from violence, greed and economics to compassion and humane values. Some, who had just heard the Dalai Lama speak in the Balkans, quoted him as saying, "War is out of date." A woman from Bulgaria asked if we could start to make something ourselves and not wait any longer for organized efforts to solve these problems. One young leader urged us to "Be your own leader, work with your own fears. Choose to live your life honoring and serving life."

Together we explored how we might move out of the debilitating sadness and fear we so often feel. The Bulgarian woman noted that we each need to transform our own violence and fear, in our own way. "There is no once recipe for doing this." A young European encouraged us to go into the depths of our despair, for there we would find our most empowering moments. An older woman commented, "It's better to show the sadness behind the anger. We are sad that the connection between us has been broken."

There was one last comment about America. A physician and mother from Mexico expressed her fear for the influence that America was having on her children being raised in Mexico. She did not want her children to become Americans, because she found us to be lonely, fearful, and disconnected from our spiritual natures. Very quietly she said: "We need to help bring spirit back to those humans who have forgotten that they're part of us."

As a troubled American, I can only say "Amen".



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

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