The Big Learning Event

Margaret Wheatley

In preparation for her work at The Big learning Event at the University of Wisconsin Madison, Meg Wheatley was asked to write about "three things to which you are paying attention" and their implications for UW-Madison

During the past many years, most of my time has been spent travelling out in the world, speaking and teaching in many different countries. However, this past winter I went into seclusion for 3.5 months (with virtually no outside communication) to do a personal spiritual retreat. Upon my return, I was able to both appreciate and see more clearly (I think) what's happening in America right now. Each of the three I cite here were trends I was watching before I retreated, but they seem even more important now.

- A growing sense of impotence and dread about the state of the nation.
- The realization that information doesn't change minds any more.
- The clarity that the world changes through local communities taking action—that there is no power for change greater than a community taking its future into its own hands.

1. A growing sense of impotence and dread. It seems that no matter where I go or who I'm with, the conversation inevitably changes into a long, sometimes despairing exploration of what's going wrong. (My recent conversations have been with educational leaders, everyday citizens and parents, airplane seat companions/strangers and senior leaders who run large federal agencies.) My sense is that people are beginning to experience at a visceral level the interconnectedness of our problems and our seeming incapacity to figure out how to address them as rational, thoughtful adults. There's also a growing awareness that the systems are failing, that they can't be made to work to solve the problems which they were created to address. These people aren't cynical of politics and politicians—they're *incredulous* that politics is now so vile, mean-spirited and laced with lunacy on a very frequent basis. Many of us have shared our feelings that we're no longer surprised by anything that happens in the political sphere, only to be surprised again and again by the latest outrage to rational or decent behavior.

     As these conversations go on (and people really want to talk about this), we inevitably start to describe our long-term fear for our children and their children. I have the impression that many more people are willing to look into the future, that they're not focused only on present-moment satisfactions, but as they do look out, they are confronted by a sense of 'no way out.'

     The emotions of this time are the deepest ones we humans experience—loss, grief, fear. Yet it helps us immensely if we can share these emotions and not push them away or pretend they're not present. I find that sharing our common experiences of grief, anger, anxiety allows us to move closer together in support of one another. It also helps quell the natural tendency to transfer impotence and grief into anger and rage. For the university, as in other organizations, I feel it is essential to name these emotions and to use them as an opportunity for solidarity. I've experienced how much capacity, creativity and even joy we humans can experience when we're sharing our despair and

grief. It's essential that we don't let our strong reactions to this time drive us farther apart.

Particularly in the university, where we excel as brilliant analysts and advocates, it's easy to stay at the intellectual level. But if we seek only intellectual power, we deprive ourselves of the more sustaining human energies that are available when we acknowledge the depth of our feelings. And as we stand together, even in the most overwhelming and despairing situations, we discover what humans have experienced through the ages—that we can get through anything, and discover new sources of motivation, energy and power, when we're together.

2*. Information doesn't change minds anymore.* For many years I've written about the role of information, how it's the essential element by which life forms itself, of how any change requires a change in perception. What I observe now is that information no longer in-forms us. We have moved quite literally into the Tower of Babel where people want their voices to be heard, but without any reciprocal listening. At the national, state, and most local levels, people are more interested in drama at public meetings than they are in being engaged in thoughtful exchanges. And this is happening worldwide now, as more and more countries that once valued public discourse and civility shift sharply to the right (e.g., Denmark, Holland, Canada, Finland, the U.K.—all previously societies with good public processes and active democracies).

I personally don't know how change happens when information loses its mind-changing capacity. But history is clear on this—demagogues prevail and people surrender their higher human capacities in exchange for alleged security. Orwellian societies arise and we become sub-human, manipulated by base human needs rather than higher order values.

Information's inability to change minds has many implications for the university. First, for researchers, there is a need to preserve the integrity of their work even as they want it to be influential. We've seen too many examples of late of researchers distorting their findings, or emphasizing certain implications and submerging others, because they want to get the public's attention. Long-term, this strategy backfires and only creates greater hostility and distrust towards researchers. And at this time when science and research in general are so discredited in the eyes of too many citizens, we must focus on maintaining our academic and moral integrity, as we persevere for a more rational time in the future.

Secondly, students and faculty need to realize the dynamics of this time, and not blame themselves when well-presented research doesn't affect policy decisions, public discourse or personal positions. It's tragic but seemingly obvious that we're living in a time when good information and well-developed arguments don't have the impact they once did. I'd like more researchers and students to realize that it's not their fault when their good work fails to make a difference (Gregory Bateson's classic definition -- information is a difference that makes a difference).

And lastly, I believe there's an imperative to teach students how to engage in rational and responsive discourse with opposing points of view. I long for the debates of old, which were entertaining, enlightening and fun, where ideas were batted around and no one would ever dream of the type of character assassination that now characterizes so many public and media forums. I wonder how many young people, including my grown children, have ever experienced this type of debate.

I also feel strongly that students have to learn to make and respect factual arguments, and to learn an alternative mode of reaction to being swayed by appearances and emotions. Everything is against students learning these skills—we live in a world of constant snap judgments, opinions and reified positions. Marshall McLuhan predicted this in his work in the 60s—a culture brought up on visual stimuli will choose instantly based on impressions rather than well-crafted arguments. Yet even McLuhan could not have envisioned our current media or social network environment. At least I don't think he did!

3. The world changes as local communities become self-determining. Now I can be genuinely positive! More and more people, especially women local leaders, are realizing that it's up to us, that governments, programs and savior leaders are not available. The current movement to local—local foods, local currencies, local schools, and more—is important to note and even more important to support. I observe many small communities changing, taking responsibility for their own futures and their quality of life; in these communities, it's women who are taking the lead and working hard to overcome centuries of oppression to create change for their children.

My own work, and what I've observed and participated in, has convinced me that global change always begins from small local efforts that then connect with other small local efforts; after many years of hard work, of experimenting and learning together, these small efforts may suddenly emerge as a powerful global system of influence. We need to recognize the failure of the popular change and development strategies that pursued one-size-fits-all programs or solutions-- we've wasted billions of dollars on these. Rather, we need to focus our efforts on strengthening communities, supporting local leadership to emerge from anyone, and trusting that people are capable, creative and motivated when it's their community and their set of problems.

There is a small group of activists and academics worldwide who are spearheading this approach to change; they've developed a devastating critique of the past decades of development work. Unfortunately, major philanthropists, such as Bill Gates, are still approaching large global problems with large-scale massive change efforts. Too few people are focused on developing health and resiliency at the local community level, even though this is where true change happens and takes root for generations.

For the University, I'd want to see work being done at the policy and research levels that could help strengthen the critique of traditional development strategies and collect more documentation of the progress being made community-by-community. It will take several more years probably to shift the good intentions of philanthropists away from large-scale roll-outs to small-scale cultivation projects, but it has to be done if we're to truly solve the major problems affecting communities everywhere, not just in the Global South.

My three trends resolve one another. If more people are active at the local level, they shift from impotence and grief to high energy and creativity. As they get engaged locally, they learn and develop; they come to understand how these large systems work and grow wiser in addressing their issues. Information again becomes important and

powerful. Having observed this process in so many different communities has led me to eagerly affirm: "Whatever the problem, community is the answer."

MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley is a well-respected writer, speaker, and teacher for how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubling time. She has written six books: *Walk Out Walk On* (with Deborah Frieze, 2011); *Perseverance* (2010); *Leadership and the New Science; Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future; A Simpler Way* (with Myron Rogers); and *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time.* Each of her books has been translated into several languages; *Leadership and the New Science* appears in 18 languages. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, which works in partnership with a rich diversity of people and communities around the world, especially in the Global South. These communities find their health and resilience by discovering the wisdom and wealth already present in their people, traditions and environment (www.berkana.org). Her articles appear in both professional and popular journals and may be downloaded free from her website: www.margaretwheatley.com . Wheatley received her doctorate in Organizational Behavior and Change from Harvard University, and a Masters in Media Ecology from New York University. She's been an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, a professor in two graduate business programs, a prolific writer, and a happy mother and grandmother. She has received numerous awards and honorary doctorates.