



WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?

FACING REALITY
CLAIMING LEADERSHIP
RESTORING SANITY

MARGARET J. WHEATLEY

Bestselling author of *Leadership and the New Science*

WHO DO WE
CHOOSE TO BE?

Other Books by Margaret J. Wheatley

So Far from Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World

Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now, coauthored with Deborah Frieze

Perseverance

Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time

Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future

A Simpler Way, coauthored with Myron Kellner-Rogers

Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World

How Does Raven Know? Entering Sacred World: A Meditative Memoir

WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?

FACING REALITY
CLAIMING LEADERSHIP
RESTORING SANITY

MARGARET J. WHEATLEY



BK

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
a BK Life book

Copyright © 2017 by Margaret J. Wheatley

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, inc.

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921

Tel: (510) 817-2277 Fax: (510) 817-2278 www.bkconnection.com

Ordering Information

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the "Special Sales Department" at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

Individual sales. Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; www.bkconnection.com

Orders for college textbook/course adoption use. Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

Orders by U.S. trade bookstores and wholesalers. Please contact Ingram Publisher Services, Tel: (800) 509-4887; Fax: (800) 838-1149; E-mail: customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com; or visit www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering for details about electronic ordering.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Printed in Canada

Berrett-Koehler books are printed on long-lasting acid-free paper. When it is available, we choose paper that has been manufactured by environmentally responsible processes. These may include using trees grown in sustainable forests, incorporating recycled paper, minimizing chlorine in bleaching, or recycling the energy produced at the paper mill.

Production management: Michael Bass Associates

Book design: Canace Pulfer

Cover/jacket design: Margaret Wheatley and Canace Pulfer

Cover photograph: West Temple, Zion National Park Utah by Margaret Wheatley

"Energy 1" and "Energy 2" paintings, pp. 148 and 153: Phil Robbins, used with permission

All other interior photos: Margaret Wheatley

Author photo by Filiz Telek

Cataloging information is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-5230-8363-3

First Edition

22 21 20 19 18 17

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedication

For Pema Chödrön who, with pure insight and compassion, led me onto
the path of warriorship and continues to guide me ever deeper

and

For the Warriors for the Human Spirit who have joined me in training so
we might learn how best to serve this time

**The Warriors arise
when the people need protection**





**We don't have to wait for
some grand utopian future.
The future is an infinite
succession of presents,
and to live now as we think
human beings should live,
in defiance of all that is
bad around us, is itself
a marvelous victory.**

— Howard Zinn, historian

What This World Needs

This world does not need more entrepreneurs.

This world does not need more technology breakthroughs.

This world needs leaders.

We need leaders who put service over self, who can be steadfast through crises and failures, who want to stay present and make a difference to the people, situations, and causes they care about.

We need leaders who are committed to serving people, who recognize what is being lost in the haste to dominate, ignore, and abuse the human spirit.

We need leaders because leadership has been debased as those who take things to scale or are first to market or dominate the competition or develop killer apps. Or hold onto power by constantly tightening their stranglehold of fear until people are left lifeless and cowering.

We need leaders now because we have failed to implement what was known to work, what would have prevented or mitigated the rise of hatred, violence, poverty, and ecological

destruction. We have not failed from a lack of ideas and technologies. We have failed from a lack of will. The solutions we needed were already here.

Now it is too late. We cannot solve these global issues globally. We can see them clearly. We can understand their root causes. We have evidence of solutions that would have solved them. But we refused to compromise, to collaborate, to persevere in resolving them as an intelligent, creative species living on one precious planet.

Now it's up to us, not as global leaders but as local leaders. We can lead people to create positive changes locally that make life easier and more sustainable, that create possibility in the midst of global decline.

Let us use whatever power and influence we have, working with whatever resources are already available, mobilizing the people who are with us to work for what they care about.

As President Teddy Roosevelt enjoined us:

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.



OPENING	2
An Invitation to the Nobility of Leadership	4
What Time Is It on the Clock of the World?	6
Who Do We Choose to Be?	10
Two Lenses	12
Science of Living Systems	12
The Pattern of Collapse of Complex Civilizations	13
Form Follows Function: The Design of This Book	18
Dwelling Mind	22

1. THE ARROW OF TIME **26**

Everything Has a Beginning, a Middle, and an End

What Science Teaches	28
Facing Reality	30
The Rise and Fall of Civilizations	30
The Decline of Civilizations in Ten Generations	34
The Myth of Progress	38
The Religion of “Technological Majesty”	44
Tipping Points	46
Claiming Leadership	48
Choosing to Lead Well in Collapse	48
Leading an Island of Sanity	51
Restoring Sanity	54
Where Is Your Organization on the Arrow of Time?	54
Leading from the Future	57

2. IDENTITY 62

Living Systems Change in Order to Preserve Themselves

What Science Teaches	64
Facing Reality	66
Identity Then and Now	66
The Rise of Celebrity Culture	72
The Compelling Call of Identity	76
Whatever Happened to Ethics?	80
Claiming Leadership	86
"We are faithful; therefore we are not afraid."	86
Restoring Sanity	92
Leading with Integrity	92

3. INFORMATION 98

It's Better to Learn Than Be Dead

What Science Teaches	100
Facing Reality	104
Information Makes a Difference	104
How the Digital Age Destroyed the Information Age	112
What Happened to Learning?	116
Neural Networks Can Herd Cats	122
Claiming Leadership	124
Restoring Learning to Decision Making	124
The Origin of a Great Line	128
Restoring Sanity	130
The Principles and Process of an After Action Review (AAR)	130
Dealing with the Impossible	133

4. SELF-ORGANIZATION 140

Order for Free

What Science Teaches	142
Facing Reality	144
When Humans Self-Organize	144
The Unstoppable Rise of Terror	150
Leading with Self-Organization: Social Movements and Terrorism	154
Claiming Leadership	158
Leadership Lessons from Social Movements	158
Restoring Sanity	162
Grace Lee Boggs: A Lifetime of Movement Building	162
Q: How Do You Self-Organize an Island of Sanity?	
A: You Rely on Human Human Beings	166

5. PERCEPTION 172

What You See Is All You Get

What Science Teaches	174
Facing Reality	178
The Blinders of Inexplicable Arrogance	178
Cognitive Dissonance	187
Cognitive Dissonance and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs)	191
Conspiracy Theories	193
Claiming Leadership	196
Depending on Diversity	196
Restoring Sanity	200
A Tale of Two Stories	200

6. INTERCONNECTEDNESS	210
Nothing Living Lives Alone	
What Science Teaches	212
Facing Reality	222
When There Is No Place Called Home	222
Emergent Systems Can't Be Changed	226
Claiming Leadership	230
Leading with Emergence	230
Restoring Sanity	234
The Joy of Interbeing	234
You Can't Build on Broken	238
7. WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?	244
Leadership and the Collapse of Complexity	246
Naming Ourselves	253
What Do You Stand For?	260
Where Do You Stand?	262
The Gift of Meaningful Work	267
8. NO MATTER WHAT	272
Unshakable Confidence, Unquestioned Humility	274
No Hope No Fear	278
Making Our Shoulders Strong	281
What Do You Want to Be Remembered For?	284
CODA: WHEN THERE IS NO REALITY	290
<i>Appendix</i>	299
<i>Recommended Readings</i>	309
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	312
<i>Index</i>	313
<i>Author: Margaret Wheatley</i>	319



OPENING

**Let your wisdom as a human being
connect with the power
of things as they are.**

— Chögyam Trungpa, Buddhist teacher

OPENING

An Invitation to the Nobility of Leadership

It is possible, in this time of profound disruption, for leadership to be a noble profession that contributes to the common good. It is possible, as we face the fearful complexity of life-destroying problems, to experience recurring moments of grace and joy. It is possible, as leaders of organizations, communities, and families, to discover deep and abiding satisfaction in our work if we choose not to flee or withdraw from reality. It is possible to find a path of contribution and meaning if we turn our attention away from issues beyond our control and focus on the people around us who are yearning for good leadership and engage them in work that is within reach. It is possible to use our influence and power to create *islands of sanity* in the midst of a raging destructive sea.

So much is possible if we consciously and wisely choose how best to step forward as leaders for this time.

This is a book that offers a path for leaders to engage well and sanely with the destructive dynamics of this time that now manifest at every level, from individual to organizational to global. We enter the path by bravely facing reality, willing to see with clarity and discernment where we are and how we got here. We seek to understand the forces at work that created this present world, not the one we have spent long years laboring to create, but a world that increasingly harms most and benefits scant few, a world stubbornly spiraling toward self-destruction.

Many of us feel that we have no choice but to protect ourselves from the increasing harshness and horrors of this world by withdrawing, staying busy with minor tasks, suppressing emotions of despair, grief, powerlessness. Some seek comfort by denial, creating personal bubbles to shut the world out. But the desperate effort that goes into withdrawal, suppression, and denial robs us of the very energy we need to be good leaders. The energy now spent on self-protection can be converted into positive energy if we're willing to encounter reality and see it clearly. Facing reality is an empowering act—it can liberate our mind and heart to discern how best to use our power and influence in service for this time.

**We cannot change
the way the world is,
but by opening to the world
as it is we may discover that
gentleness, decency and bravery
are available, not only to us,
but to all human beings.**

Chögyam Trungpa, Buddhist teacher

What Time Is It on the Clock of the World?¹

It is accurate to label this time as uncertain and chaotic, spinning wildly out of control.² Every day we experience disruption, swerves in direction, short-term decisions that undo the future, propaganda, slander, lies, blame, denial, violence. Communities and nations are disrupted by terrorist acts, cumbersome bureaucracies block services, people retreat in self-protection and lash out in fear, angry people strike back at their governments, leaders stridently promise security and outcomes that we know can't be true, tensions between people reach hateful proportions, and confusion and exhaustion sink us into despair and cynicism. This is the age of retreat: from one another, from values that held us together, from ideas and practices that encouraged inclusion, from faith in leaders, from belief in basic human goodness.

There are some who define this chaotic time as filled with potential, basing their hopefulness on the workings of chaos described in new science. They want to “blow up” the current system or contribute to its quick demise and use the ensuing chaos as the opportunity to create healthy new systems. Their hope is based on an innocent misunderstanding of the chaos cycle. Chaos can be a generative force for change, or a cause for disintegration and death. Either way, it requires a descent into chaos, when everything falls apart. It is this part of the cycle that we need to prepare for.

The chaos cycle is triggered by changes in the environment; these external changes force the system to abandon its old ways and respond to the new. Everything that held it together—its beliefs, meanings, and

structures—no longer work now that the environment has changed. And so the system falls apart. It descends into chaos and finally reaches a bifurcation point, where it has two choices: Either it can reorganize using new beliefs and structures that work well in the changed environment. Or it can insist on the old ways, fail to reorganize itself, and die. Both rebirth and death are possible as an outcome of the passage through chaos.

So there is a slight basis for those who welcome in this time of disruption and chaos as the means to create healthier, more humane and life-affirming ways of living on this planet, for as long as the planet will have us. But we can't get there from here without traversing through the falling apart stage. We cannot simply leap to new ways of being; first we must prepare for disintegration and collapse.

**The ceremony of
innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction,
while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.**

W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

OPENING

Systems that are failing now will continue to deteriorate. Uncertainty, confusion, and fear will continue to predominate. People will withdraw further into self-protection and strike out at those different from themselves. Corrupt leaders will intensify their false promises, and people will subjugate themselves to their control. The chaos cycle predicts this has to happen, that things must fall apart. And human history documents in astonishingly clear detail the pattern of collapse that all civilizations go through.

This book is born of my desire to summon us to be leaders for this time as things fall apart, to reclaim leadership as a noble profession that creates possibility and humaneness in the midst of increasing fear and turmoil.

I know it is possible for leaders to use their power and influence, their insight and compassion, to lead people back to an understanding of who we are as human beings, to create the conditions for our basic human qualities of generosity, contribution, community, and love to be evoked no matter what. I know it is possible to experience grace and joy in the midst of tragedy and loss. I know it is possible to create islands of sanity in the midst of wildly disruptive seas. I know it is possible because I have worked with leaders over many years in places that knew chaos and breakdown long before this moment. And I have studied enough history to know that such leaders always arise when they are most needed.

Now it's our turn.



Who Do We Choose to Be?

This needs to be stated clearly at the outset: we can no longer solve the global problems of this time at large-scale levels: poverty, economics, climate change, violence, dehumanization.³ Even though the solutions have been available for a very long time, they require conditions to implement them that are not available: political courage, collaboration across national boundaries, compassion that supersedes self-interest and greed. These are not only the failings of our specific time in history; they occur in all civilizations at the end of their life cycle.

This is a bitter pill for activists and all people with discerning, open hearts. We understand the complexity of global problems, we have thought systemically to define root causes, we have proposed meaningful solutions, but we are impotent to influence those in power who ignore our efforts.⁴

The powerful always defend the status quo because it is the source of their power and privilege. Any change that benefits others would destroy their position. And their position is all they care about defending.

As a lifelong activist focused on changing leadership in large systems, as one still inside those large systems as a consultant, advisor, and friend, I realized years ago that large-scale change was not possible. Leaders were grasping for control, overreacting to crises rather than thinking systemically, treating people as “units” rather than as humans. Yet I also

met and worked with extraordinary leaders who were creating islands of sanity where good work still got done and where people enjoyed healthy relationships in the midst of chaotic conditions, fierce opposition, heart-breaking defeats, lack of support, isolation, loneliness, and slander. I have been with them in circumstances that caused most other leaders to give up and walk away yet still they kept going. You will learn about a few of them in these pages.

Several years ago, in the face of irreversible global problems and the devolution of leadership, I began to challenge every leader I met with these questions: Who do you choose to be for this time? Are you willing to use whatever power and influence you have to create islands of sanity that evoke and rely on our best human qualities to create, produce, and persevere?

Now I'm asking you.