

The Rise & Fall Of Civilisations

An extract from "Who Do We Choose To Be" by
Margaret Wheatley

The movement of civilizations along the arrow of time has been a mesmerizing field of study from the time of classical Greek scholars such as Plato up to our present. Historians want to know what has gone before, not from intellectual curiosity, but from a desire that their current civilization avoid a similar fate. And there is a plethora of examples for study: Globally there have been dozens of complex civilizations during the last 5,000 years of recorded human history (by 3000 BCE there were already seven known to Western scholars).

Every one of them illustrates the same pattern of ascendancy and collapse. In addition, excellent archeological research on the causes of decline removes any doubt about the strong commonalities among these civilizations and the descriptive accuracy of the pattern of collapse.

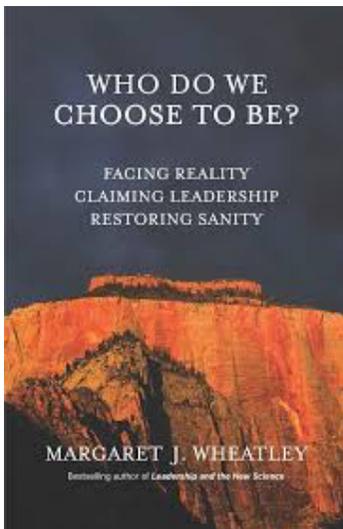
Still, it was astonishing to read of a ninth-century Arab moralist's lament about the celebrity pop singers who flooded the capital city in great numbers singing erotic songs, using obscene language, whose influence on young people degraded their morality and normalized vulgar. Or to read that in the eleventh century, education in the Arab empire changed from learning to technical training for high-paying jobs.

There is nothing new under the sun.

The pattern is crystal-clear. We humans, no matter where we are or what our cultural belief system is, always organize in the same way. We create glorious buildings, cities, transportation and trade routes, music, aqueducts, dance, poetry, theater, sewage systems, canals, pottery, fabrics, farms, statues, monuments. And yet, these magnificent cultural manifestations are guaranteed to disappear, destroyed at the end by disease, famine, or invaders that attack a society already weakened by moral decay and internal warring. We are incredible organizers and creators, and then are brought down by our arrogance, pettiness, and greed. Always.

But in our bright, shiny, techno-optimistic twenty-first-century global culture, we believe we have stepped off the arrow of time. Our technological and scientific genius gives us the capacity to bypass the fate that has overtaken all other complex civilizations. In our arrogance, we believe that we can use our superior intelligence as never before, changing history, bounding forward in great leaps, no longer subject to the arrow of time. We believe we are the height of human evolution rather than just its most recent, predictably problematic manifestation.

The belief in never-ending progress is fueled by our inexplicable arrogance that we can supersede the laws of the Universe.



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Our constantly expanding technologies and innovations may appear to be adaptive responses to the environment. But this is not true. Quite the opposite: for the first time in history, humans are changing the global environment rather than adapting to it.

We are ignoring scientific laws, acting as Masters of the Universe, asserting we can invent anything we want to suit ourselves, including artificial life. This is not the behavior of a living system interacting skillfully with its environment. This is hubris of ahistorical proportions and we are failing miserably, as you may have noted.

For those of us not blinded by the false promise of progress, we may understand the dire state of this civilization. If you're paying any attention to the news from everywhere, it's hard to avoid the specter of collapse. But then what happens? Do we, as most do, fall into private collapse consumed by fear and despair? Do we become one who does nothing but complain for what's been lost? Do we succumb to grief for the suffering of so many? Do we give up and spend whatever time is left in hedonistic pursuits? Do we cocoon in self-protective bubbles with a nine-foot TV screen and Surround Sound?

Or do we acknowledge where we are and step forward to serve? Those who have studied the pattern of collapse always conclude their analyses with an urgent plea that we take notice, that we wake up to where we are in order to positively change where we are. The natural march of time toward disorder can be counteracted and even reversed by awareness and learning. Blind reactivity and fear are not the answer. Self-protection is not the answer. Denial is not the answer.

What is sane leadership? It is the unshakable faith in people's capacity to be generous, creative and kind.

It is the commitment to create the conditions for these capacities to blossom, protected from the external environment. It is the deep knowing that, even in the most dire circumstances, more becomes possible as people engage together with compassion and discernment, self-determining their best way forward.

This leadership is no longer available at the global level. There, the pattern of collapse is manifesting with astonishing speed and accuracy. But within our sphere of influence, there is so much we can do. We can train ourselves to see dearly, to fully acknowledge this time in all its painful details; and then, wherever we are, whoever we're with, we can choose actions based on insight, compassion, and wisdom.

If we choose this role for ourselves, we are joining those few who, throughout history, always step forward to serve in a time of collapse. Copyright © 2017 by Margaret Wheatley

*Dr Margaret Wheatley is an author, systems theorist and management consultant. Margaret's book, **Who Do We Choose to Be**, is a deconstruction of the patterns of civilisation collapse and a call to action for courageous leadership in a time of demise. We dive into the factors involved in collapse, the progress trap, and how we can show up as leaders in these testing times.*

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