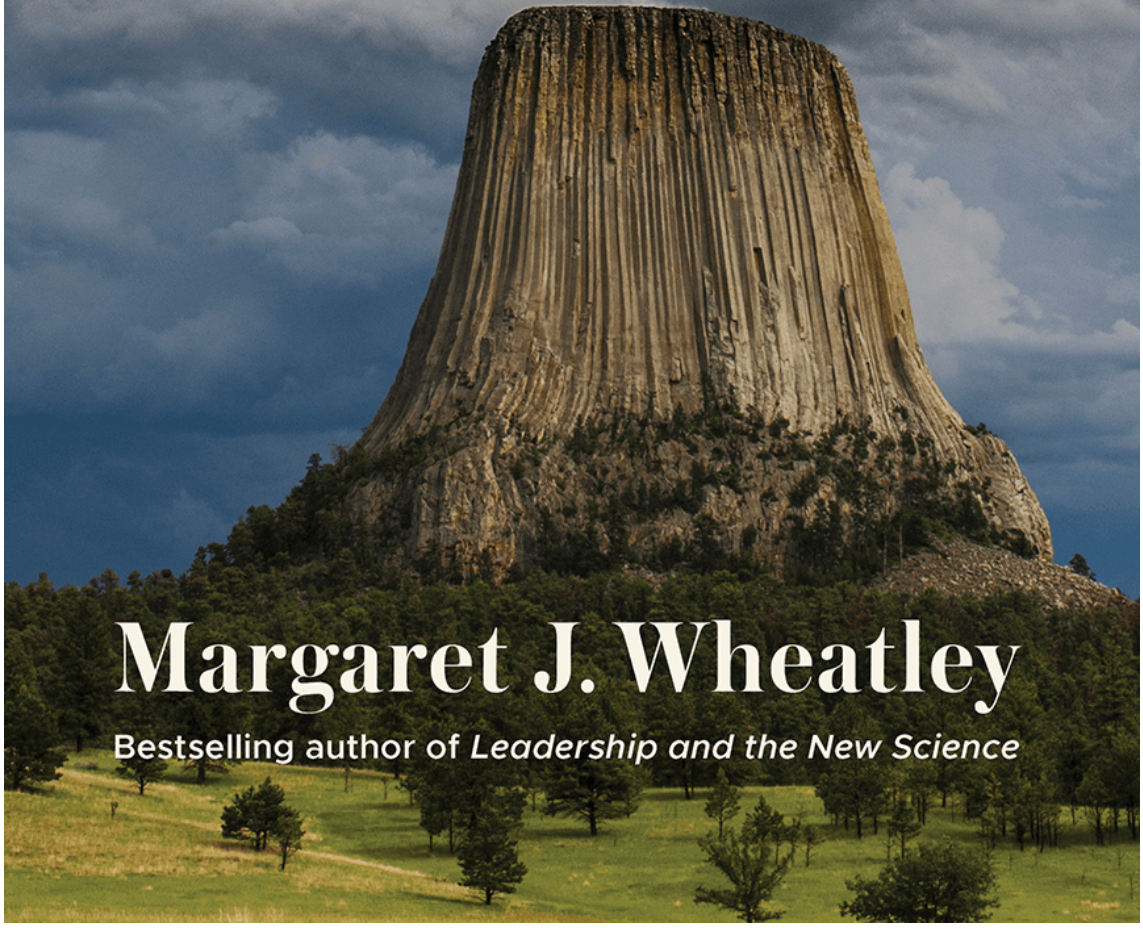
Second Edition—80 Percent New Material

Who Do We Choose to Be?

Facing Reality
Claiming Leadership
Restoring Sanity



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Bestselling author of *Leadership and the New Science*

Who Do We Choose to Be?

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

— Chögyam Trungpa, Buddhist teacher

OPENING

Finding Our Path of Contribution

In a world we cannot recognize, how do we find a way forward? In this world we do not understand, how do we know what to do? When so little is comprehensible, what is meaningful work, what is genuine contribution?

These questions are asked only by those who want to contribute, to make a difference, who want to stay rather than withdraw, who want to use their power and influence in service to others. Because you are reading this, I assume this is you, a seeker intent on discovering a path of meaningful contribution in this strange and confusing time. I am glad you are here, and I welcome you wholeheartedly into this inquiry. Our journey will take us into the wilderness and wildness of this time so that we learn the underlying patterns and dynamics that explain where and why we're here, and how these will play out in the future. Only when we know where we are will we be able to choose a meaningful path forward.

—

My aspiration is for you to see clearly so that you may act wisely. If we don't know where we are, if we don't know what to prepare for, then any path we choose will keep us wandering in the wilderness, increasingly desperate, increasingly lost.

—

People who are lost in mountain wilderness or at sea go through several stages of denial.[1] First, they refuse to believe that they're lost. They hold onto the old map, insisting they know where they are. But then, when there are no signs to confirm their map, they become increasingly frantic to find any sign that proves the map is still relevant. Fear and desperation

blind their perception; they only notice what would confirm their map, and they miss the information that could help them identify where they are. For the lost, the only way to be found is to surrender to their situation, to lay down the old maps and admit they are truly lost. Then, and only then, can they look around and see where they are. They can realize that "I'm here. I'm not lost, I'm right here." With astute perception no longer clouded by fear or loyalty to old maps, they find their way home.

Are we lost? Yes, if we keep insisting on the old maps that described the territory where we found success, accomplishment, and meaning in our work and life. Without a doubt, these were good maps—we achieved real results, we contributed in meaningful ways and could feel genuinely proud of what we accomplished with hard work, training, experience, good values, faithful companions, and grace. But these maps no longer work, not because of us, but because of the world that has changed so dramatically as to render them useless.

We need new maps to discern a path of contribution. We need to know where we are in order to know what to do. We need to know *here* in order to get *there*, and even our ideas of *there* will change as the world changes and we gain experience on the path. Ultimately, we discover the power of now—I'm right here, I'm not lost.

Let's acknowledge that we want to reject where we are; we don't want to be here. We want to deny this new territory because it is terrible, painful, and the source of increasing fear and suffering.

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I invite you on this journey into reality as the only path to discover meaningful work. Using new lenses, we are able to see what's going on, the dynamics that have caused this, and how these dynamics will play out in the future. This journey requires fierce bravery. We have to be willing to see clearly and then have the courage to not retreat from what we see. This journey also requires perseverance. We commit to staying on the path no matter what happens or what we're feeling. The Chinese character for "perseverance" is a knife suspended over a human heart. However you may choose to interpret this, it describes this journey.

I know this journey into reality from the inside out. Since 2015, I have led many hundreds of people on this path. We all struggle with accepting this world of trials and tribulations; we all experience the pain of clear seeing and the very strong emotions that arise in response to what we see. And we all, at the end of this journey, feel inspired, energized, and able to identify the work that is ours to do. In seeing many opportunities for meaningful service, we find firm ground, we stop being dragged under by despair, grief, rage, powerlessness.

We have found a path of contribution as Warriors for the Human Spirit.

Where Are We?

It is accurate to label this time as uncertain and chaotic, spinning wildly out of control.[2] Even that doesn't quite capture it. Every day, at ever increasing frequency, we experience disruption, propaganda, slander, lies, blame, denial, violence. Populations of people are disrupted by pandemics, famine, and wars; terrorism threatens peoples on all continents and also from within; nations choose war over negotiation; morbidly obese bureaucracies implode rather than provide services; inequalities and injustices of care and governance intensify; people retreat in self-protection and lash out in fear; streets are crowded with angry citizens protesting against their governments; leaders smugly promise security and outcomes they and we know aren't true; tensions between people reach dangerously hateful proportions; and we, confused and exhausted, sink into despair, depression, and cynicism.

This is the Age of Threat, when everything we encounter intensifies fear and anger. In survival mode, we flee from one another, abandon values that held us together, withdraw from ideas and practices that encouraged inclusion and created trust in leaders. And, most harmfully, we stop believing in one another.

As you will learn here, we can no longer stop the forces of harm and destruction that have been set in motion by decades of denial, ignorance, greed, oppression, and indifference. Systems that are failing now will continue to collapse. Uncertainty, confusion, and fear will continue to

grow. People will withdraw further into self-protection and strike out at those different from themselves. Corrupt leaders will intensify their false promises, and fearful people will subjugate themselves to their control. And the elites will frantically grab for everything they can, no matter the consequences to people and planet.

We are walking the well-trodden path of collapse documented in the history of all complex civilizations. We cannot stop the descent, so we must find a new path of contribution.

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

The Pattern of Collapse of Complex Civilizations

As many have commented, the only thing evident from the study of history is that we humans fail to learn from history. Yet those who do study the history of civilizations have illuminated the pattern of the rise and fall of complex human societies. The pattern of collapse is remarkably consistent, describing how humans always behave, even down to specific behaviors. To learn about this pattern is at once very troubling and very relieving. It's good to understand where we are so we don't keep struggling against inevitable behaviors. And it's grievous to see where we are and what can't be changed. I have delved into the excellent body of literature on the collapse of civilizations for decades; for this work I'm primarily working with two references: *The Collapse of Complex Societies* by Joseph Tainter and *The Fate of Empires and the Search for Survival* by Sir John Glubb. (Tainter's and Glubb's scholarship is detailed in the appendix.)

Both Glubb and Tainter have derived the pattern of collapse from studying complex human civilizations since Sumer, 3000 BCE. (I have also brought in anthropological research that reveals patterns of behavior going back more than three hundred thousand years, before hominids were sapiens.) Tainter's work, first published in 1987, is acknowledged as the seminal work in establishing the pattern of collapse. He is a superb and dedicated scholar, both humble and clear. Over several years he studied in depth many different societies; as he did so, the pattern became so clear that he felt no need to continue to study others in detail. "Collapse

is a recurrent feature of human societies, and indeed it is this fact that makes it worthwhile to explore a general explanation. . The picture that emerges is of a process recurrent in history and prehistory, and global in its distribution."[3]

Tainter's analysis of collapse included civilizations on all continents and focuses primarily on the sociopolitical and economic aspects. Glubb studied thirteen civilizations in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, observing the process of moral decay from generation to generation that ends in collapse after ten generations. "The life-expectation of a great nation, it appears, commences with a violent, and usually unforeseen, outburst of energy, and ends in a lowering of moral standards, cynicism, pessimism and frivolity."[4] As you will learn, he describes specific behaviors and attitudes of each age that read like the nightly news of our current time but that are characteristic of all civilizations in their final days.

While each scholar highlights different aspects, the pattern is the same: No matter the geography, ethnicity, or spiritual traditions, humans most often develop high culture, hierarchy, civic institutions, religion, infrastructures, courts, arts, roles, and class distinctions. And then, when in decline, negative destructive behaviors, both personal and political, are also identical. I feel confident in labeling this the true DNA of our species, how we organize and behave through generations of creation and decline, no matter who we are culturally, where we are geographically, or when we lived in human history.[5]

The DNA of Human Civilizations: What We Always Create

When the Spaniards reached the American mainland in the early sixteenth century . . . what took place was truly exceptional, something that had never happened before and never will again.

Two cultural experiments running in isolation came face to face and each could recognize the other's institutions. When Cortes landed in Mexico he found roads, canals, cities, palaces, schools, law courts, markets, irrigation works, kings, priests, temples, peasants, artisans, armies, astronomers, merchants, sports, theater, art, music, and books.

High civilization, differing in the details but alike in essentials, had evolved independently on both sides of the earth.

—Ronald Wright[6]

What Is Meaningful Contribution?

The intention of this book is to bring the present and the future into clear seeing so that we can confidently choose a path of contribution that makes a difference, that is meaningful. But no longer can we decide on our own what is meaningful work. This must be determined by what's going on, what the world needs from us, not what we want from it.

Our self-help, goals-driven culture encouraged us to define our purpose and values, and then seek work where we could enact those. Meaningful work was that which allowed us to fulfill our self-determined purpose. Using purpose to choose our work was very powerful for many of us, myself included. But now it is a pathway to frustration and despair. You probably have already experienced this, heartbroken and/or enraged to see your good work swept away by forces beyond your control.

All of us who worked so hard to change this world are heartbroken. We are good people who had noble aspirations for how we wanted to contribute. And now, with that same potent aspirational energy, we need to step forward into the world with a different orientation.

Our purpose transforms to serving whatever is needed, not what we predefined as purposeful. We open to the world that is, curious to discover what is needed from us, willing to engage on the world's terms, not ours.

And then meaning finds us. Not in grand gestures and large-scale projects, but moment to moment when we are available and willing to stay present: to someone who needs to talk; in meetings when a heated atmosphere is cooled by our calm presence; in team sessions when we attend to how people are doing, not just what they do; in our families when we are more patient, more available; in processes where we create the conditions for thinking and reflection, refusing to leap into action before we have understood the problem.

What Is Meaningful Leadership?

There is an undeniable need for leaders to create the conditions for people to remember who they can be when free of fear, engaged and creative in work that matters to them. Meaninglessness is a dark shroud that has smothered people's aspirations and darkened the memory of what it feels like to be engaged with colleagues in purposeful, challenging work. It's not victories or achievements that need to be recalled; it's the quality of energy, inspiration, and creativity that we've experienced when engaged in responding to great challenges, in understanding complex problems, in making bold attempts that may or may not work but are satisfying in the attempt.

—

Sane leadership is the unshakable confidence that people can be generous, creative, and kind. The leader's work is to create the conditions for those capacities to manifest in meaningful work.

—

As leaders survey their shrinking workforces, as people withdraw their energy and ambition from the workplace even while still working, while many prefer to work from home, it is easy to condemn or bemoan who workers have become. But as leaders, we aspire to restore sanity. So whatever past experiences you've had with engaged, vibrant people working for a purpose they believe in, now is the time to bring that experience—that faith in the human spirit—into the present and future moments. It is more difficult than in the past to engage people, but it is

more necessary, not only for the organization's or community's benefit but for the majority who have forgotten what it feels like to be fully human beings.

I am not encouraging you to take up the role of sane leadership from idealism or optimism. Over several decades I have worked with extraordinary leaders who created Islands of Sanity where good work still got done and people enjoyed healthy relationships in the midst of chaotic conditions, fierce opposition, heartbreaking defeats, lack of support, isolation, loneliness, betrayal, 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 these extraordinary leaders in this book.

I know leadership is hard and challenging work, and growing more demanding by the day. In my experience leadership has never been more difficult. Yet I know it is still 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 rise when they are most needed.

It's just our turn.

Humans have a responsibility to find themselves where they are,
in their own proper time and place,
in the history to which they belong
and to which they must inevitably contribute
either their response or their evasions,
either truth and act, or mere slogan and gesture.

—Thomas Merton, Eco activist, priest, mystic

OPENING

Seeing with Multiple Lenses

Many lenses can be used to bring our current time into focus. Clear seeing is available by studying history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, spirituality, neurobiology, and specific sciences. Each of these disciplines provides concepts and beliefs that explain human behavior at the individual and collective level. I draw on all of these, particularly focusing on what can be seen using the lenses of four different sciences and two historical lenses.

For science, I use Western science (physics and neurobiology); the new science of Living Systems; Indigenous science; and Yogic science.

For history, I use the pattern of collapse in complex civilizations as detailed in the work of Joseph Tainter and Sir John Glubb.

Each of these is a powerful lens on its own; together they offer tremendous explanatory power for where we are, how we got here, where we're heading, and the choices we leaders must make as we bring the future into focus. Here's identity seen with three lenses.

Identity in Living Systems Science. The primary organizing dynamic in life is identity. The first act of life is to define a self, whether a microorganism or a human being. How we humans define ourselves determines our perceptions, beliefs, behaviors, and values. Today this primary dynamic of identity drives politics, social media, and individual behaviors. Nationalism, identity politics, political polling, self-created identities devoid of cultural grounding, identities determined for us by social media, echo chambers that increase anger and conflict—each of these working in concert have created profound and violent incoherence in the social sphere. We can

decide who I am, but not who we are. Personal integrity, ethics, taking a stand—these all dissolve in the maelstrom of identities created by individuals and the internet to serve popularity or power.

Identity in Indigenous Science. These notions of self-creation are abhorrent to many of us and to the Indigenous worldview. We are not self-made but part of a rich tapestry of beings interwoven as the fabric of life. The false Western belief in individuals has led to a crisis of belonging. Without belonging, people go mad. They become angry and depressed, victimized and desperately alone. A false perception that identity is individual rather than collective is the reason we have landed here, this life-destroying culture of arrogance, deceit, greed, and war.

Identity in History. The role of identity in present-day culture can be easily plotted against Glubb's Six Ages of Collapse. In the first age, the Pioneers, identities form from a sense of honor and commitment to a cause. Sacrifice and service are the guiding values. Midway, all civilizations evolve into the Age of Commerce, where money and wealth organize identities and behaviors. Service gives way to getting rich. In the final stage, the Age of Decadence, celebrities—athletes, musicians, and actors—are revered and people lose themselves in wanton pleasures while demanding ever-increasing entitlements. (Since 2016, the majority of Presidential Medals of Freedom have been awarded to athletes, musicians, and actors.) People also retreat into distraction and withdrawal, threatened by all that is collapsing.

This is one example of how a variety of lenses, each with a different perspective, enriches our understanding of complex issues and phenomena. I use this mode of exploration in every section, for every topic. May you enjoy this depth of inquiry!

The Design of This Book

For many years I have needed to know what to do, how best to use my heart, mind, energy, and influence to meaningfully serve as things fall apart. The three subtitles of this book describe my process: We first must understand what is going on, striving to see as clearly as possible beyond our usual filters. Only then can we discern what to do, how to use our skills and open hearts in ways that benefit people and situations. In everything we do, we hold the intention that our work restores sanity—discovering new and ancient ways to evoke our best human qualities. This book is organized using this same process:

1. *Facing Reality*. Where are we and how did we get here? As dynamics play out, what lies ahead?

2. *Claiming Leadership*. What is good leadership in this crazed, conflicted world? What skills and sensitivities do leaders need in order to serve well in this time? Can we choose to be Warriors for the Human Spirit?

3. *Restoring Sanity*. How do we lead as an Island of Sanity, creating the conditions for people to be generous, creative, and kind?

Each section is organized using these three stages. Short essays, quotes, and poems are used to inform, provoke, disturb, and inspire you. My first purpose is for you to see clearly and, for that, provocation and disturbance

are necessary. We cannot see clearly using our habitual ways of seeing. And if we don't see clearly, we will not be able to discern wise actions.

My second intention is for you to develop the confidence and capacities as leaders who are Warriors for the Human Spirit. I want to support you to know what to do, so there are questions and practices throughout the book. Some essays end with "For You," questions and practices for you to contemplate. These offer the opportunity to pause and notice what's happening with you and/or your organization, using the lenses developed in that essay.

I include stories of three exemplary leaders I worked with closely, each of whom had to respond to situations of chaos, crisis, or threat. These three leaders are very diverse in who they led—nuns, educators, military commanders—but unified in how they worked with people and partnered with life's dynamics. People admire them for their achievements; I admire them for the depth of their intelligence, integrity, and great hearts and minds. It is an honor to bring these leaders into these pages and into your awareness.

Each is a Warrior for the Human Spirit and, in the concluding section 7, I invite you to discern whether this is your role. Since the late 1990s, I've been teaching, coaching, and advising leaders to take on the Warrior role to protect, defend, and preserve the human spirit. Since 2015, I have trained hundreds of leaders, in a wide variety of leadership positions from thirty-five countries, in the skills of Warriors for the Human Spirit—work that I expect to continue for as long as I am able.

I can't imagine a more important task than to consciously choose who I want to be as a leader for this time. We must understand the time we're in, focus our energy on what's possible, and willingly step forward to serve the human spirit.

—

My sole purpose in leading you on this journey through our harsh, challenging reality is to make clear the need for leaders to use their power and influence as Warriors for the Human Spirit. At its conclusion, I welcome you into this role while honoring that the choice is yours to make.

Entering the Chaos Cycle

This is a complex work because it needs to be, so I've intentionally designed it to be read slowly and contemplatively. Curiosity and openness are important generally, but I'm sensitive to the emotional impact of understanding this material, absorbing where we are as a civilization and what lies ahead. I expect that you will be both inspired and overwhelmed, depressed and strengthened in your commitment to serve. I have these experiences on a nearly daily basis as I absorb the news of unfolding cruelty, tragedy, and suffering. The openness of the pages and the photos are there to get you to rest and absorb the material. It's tough to take this in, and strong emotions will arise.

To support your transformation, I'm relying on the Chaos Cycle. This is life's process for transformation and growth, and it's always unsettling, discouraging, and depressing. But it's the only route to profound change (so please keep reading). The cycle begins with a profound loss of meaning—nothing makes sense the way it used to, no familiar strategies work, confidence and certainty disappear, and we are taken over by doubt, loneliness, and despair. We no longer struggle to make sense using old maps; we've given up. In different spiritual traditions this is the "dark night of the soul," or surrender of the ego, or initiation into a new way of being. Western psychology demeans this most profound, essential spiritual experience as clinical depression.

But when understood, the loss of meaning is the only route to new possibilities, new meaning, new capacities. The journey into existential

darkness is not what we would choose but, once in it, transformation is possible if we abide, if we wait patiently for new meaning to appear.

In my own personal experience, and in accompanying hundreds of leaders, this is the journey we must take. We can't skip over the terrors of current and future reality and blithely rely on hope to direct us to meaningful work. We must encounter the truth of this world and let it change us. We must become familiar with despair and depression, not as a destination but as recurring emotions on our journey. And we must never lose sight of our true destination, discovering our path of contribution.

The Chaos Cycle doesn't end in chaos. It ends with heightened clarity and intensified meaning for how we can use our power and influence to serve this time. We can trust this path—it leads us out of the dark woods into a bright clearing where we realize what is truly meaningful in our lives and work.

You can read this description of the Chaos Cycle as spiritual wisdom, or as a trigger warning for what you are about to encounter.

In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell what a wild, and rough, and stubborn wood this was, which in my thought renews the fear!

—Dante Alighieri (1265–1321)

OPENING

Dwelling Mind

Any journey to discover new meaning demands patience and focus. You can't go through this material quickly—you do a profound disservice to yourself if you try. I have put in a great deal of information and included many chapter notes; these are necessary to develop depth of understanding. I wondered if anybody reads footnotes any more—my publisher tells me that people read the back cover, the front cover, and perhaps the introduction. If you've read this far, it seems you're not that sort of person.

This book invites you into *dwelling mind*.[7] Most of us have the tendency to read something quickly and then rush into action, to quickly figure out a response. We find comfort in action, not in discernment. As leaders and consultants, this is what we get paid for. It's also a way to deal with uncertainty and strong emotions—we rush to fix rather than allow the profound discomfort that arises from difficult information.

As the notable newscaster Eric Sevareid said: "The chief cause of problems is solutions." Yet if we dwell with the increasing uncertainty of this time and not rush to that comfortable but useless place of action, dwelling mind supports the emergence of clarity for our chosen role as Warriors. This is my frequent personal experience. As I tune in to what's going on and allow my grief and outrage to be present, they quietly transform into ever-deepening motivation to offer my best service wherever opportunities present themselves.

I urge you to let go of the comfort of a quick response and instead, in the spaciousness of your mind, welcome in everything: thoughts, feelings, sensations. Allow them to just be there, meeting up with one another, combining and recombining. Nothing is immediately clear, but given time and the workings of nonlinearity and Grace, your ideas and feelings will self-organize into insights. Many scientific breakthroughs were the result of this process of relaxing the mind, allowing things to dwell without any need for resolution, and then the aha moment. Sometimes scientists were so fatigued or frustrated that they walked away from the problem. They took a stroll or a nap and then were surprised by a clear insight, image, or solution.[8]

As is my style, I often pose questions in the text as well as in the specific practices. Wherever these appear, I encourage you to pause and take time with the questions. I know you will gain benefit from doing this.

If we are to step forward with true confidence as leaders for this time, if this is the role you choose for yourself, please give your mind and heart time to dwell in the difficulties that lie ahead, and the frequent opportunities we will have to serve the human spirit. In a memorable scene in *Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf counsels Frodo, who is rebelling against his assignment to destroy the ring of power. Frodo wants to refuse his destiny. Gandalf puts his rebellion in perspective, placing him with all those who went before, all those others who struggled with the darkness of their time.

**So do all who live to see such times.
But that is not for them to decide.
All we have to decide is what to do
with the time that is given us.**

—*J. R. R. Tolkien,* The Lord of the Rings

OPENING: NOTES

[1] Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies and Why* (New York: Norton, 2005), 166–67, 240.

[2] The acronym, coined by the US military, is VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. In the past few years, I think we could add even more descriptors to how we are experiencing this time, both personal and societal! I'd add a term used to describe hurricanes that develop overnight: "rapid intensification."

[3] Tainter states the objective of his work is to develop a general explanation of collapse, applicable in a variety of contexts, and with implications for current conditions. This work relies on archaeology and history but focuses on economics and social theory. Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (New Studies in Archaeology, 1987), Kindle location 124.

[4] Sir John Glubb, *The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival* (Edinburgh, Scotland: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd, 1976), 18, http://people.uncw.edu/kozloffm/glubb.pdf. Also see the appendix at the back of the book.

[5] A different and, for me, controversial view of human history and the development of civilizations is brilliantly explained in David Graeber and David Wengrove, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021). And here's an important and insightful critique of Big History: Ian Hesketh, "We Should Be Wary about What Big History Overlooks in Its Myth," December 16, 2021, aeon.com.

[6] Ronald Wright, *An Illustrated Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004), 68–69.

[7] The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) introduced the term "dwelling mind" in contrast with "rational mind."

[8] One of the most well-known examples of this phenomenon is the story August Kerkulé told of how he discovered the ring shape of the benzene molecule in the 1860s. In a reverie or
daydream he saw a snake seizing its own tail (the ancient symbol of the Ouroboros). This vision, Kerkulé said, came to him after years of studying the nature of carbon-carbon bonds.