THE WORK OF SANE LEADERSHIP

Margaret Wheatley

What would it be like to work together again in creative and generous ways? What would it be like to expect kindness and generosity? What would it be like to want to contribute as fully as possible, to feel welcomed and appreciated for my contribution? What would it be like to be curious about who you're with rather than judging or fearing them? What would it be like to engage together exploring possibilities rather than withdrawing in conflict or disagreement? What would it be like to be working well together?

It is still possible to create the conditions for people to engage together for work they care about. But this work requires devotion, discipline, and faith. It requires sane leaders who have unshakable confidence that people can be generous, creative, and kind. It requires setting ourselves apart as an Island of Sanity.

I have worked with leaders on all continents and at all levels for fifty years now and I state with full confidence that leadership has never been more difficult. The perfect storm is here, created by the coalescence of climate and human created catastrophes, insatiable greed, fear-based self-protection, escalating aggression and conflict, indifference for the well-being of others, and continuing uncertainty. In the midst of this unparalleled tsunami, yet as leaders dedicated to serving the causes and people we treasure, what are we to do? My answer to this is also stated with full confidence: We need to restore sanity by reviving the human spirit. We can only achieve this if we undertake the most challenging and meaningful work of our lives: creating Islands of Sanity.

At this time when lives and possibilities are destroyed by casual, selfish, and mean-spirited decisions, I aspire for us to be sane leaders devoted to awakening and restoring the finest qualities of being human—our generosity, creativity, and kindness. We will not change

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the world, but we can create Islands of Sanity where our human spirits come alive and people contribute in ways that make more possible. We humans, with our wondrous capacities for generosity, creativity, and kindness. We humans, with our wondrous capacities buried beneath oppression, venality, and indifference. We humans, with our wondrous capacities forgotten or never known or told we don't have them.

What an insane world this is to be destroying these qualities when they are most needed! For whatever future awaits us, we need human beings being fully human. As we aspire to restore sanity and awaken generosity, creativity, and kindness in ourselves and in our organizations, we do not have to create, fill in the gaps, motivate or train for these qualities. Humans innately possess these qualities by virtue of being human. We know these qualities in ourselves. Our work is to know, with unshakable confidence, that these are human, not personal, qualities. Just like me, everyone prefers to be generous, creative, and kind.

Sanity

What is sanity? Not in the psychological sense, but in our day-to-day lives, where "crazy" is the most popular adjective to describe events, comments, decisions, and fun experiences. What is sanity? Is it a standard of conduct? Is it common sense? Is it rational behavior?

Yes, and so much more. Sanity is an honest relationship with reality. Sanity is seeing clearly, free of our filters, judgments, biases. When we see what's going on, then we can discern what actions might be useful. Sanity creates possibilities.

Sanity creates possibility because we see reality. We work with what's here, not what we want or hope is here, but what is truly present. One of my spiritual teachers said repeatedly, "You must work with circumstances."

Sanity creates the possibility for wiser actions. When fantasies fade, when hopes and fears no longer obscure our vision, we see what's needed and discern what's possible. We choose our actions from consciousness, not fear. Even if our actions fail, we are more awake, more discerning, more fully human. We can persevere and meet our challenges with greater confidence.

Virtues, for Aristotle, were character traits or psychological dispositions particular to humans, giving us the capacity to relate well to any situation. Rational behavior was a distinctively human quality, not known in animals. Using reason was a virtuous act.

Native Americans did healing practice for the colonizers who broke their treaties with Indigenous tribes. They knew that such people must be insane because they were not in touch with reality. And so they prayed for those truly crazy people.

Sane Leadership

Sane leadership is the unshakable confidence that people can be generous, creative, and kind. The leader's role is to create the conditions for these qualities to be evoked and utilized to accomplish good work.

Among so many fine human qualities, why are these three—generosity, creativity, kindness–singled out as the basis for sane leadership? Why not intelligence,

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courage, love? Of course other qualities are important, but these three are essential to develop trustworthy relationships free of judgments and biases, and to use everyone's talents and perspectives in solving problems they care about. While these qualities are innate in people, it takes certain conditions to evoke them. If we're better off doing it alone or excluding certain people, there's no need for generosity, creativity, and kindness. Competition and aggression will do just fine.

Sane leadership recognizes these gifts of being fully human. Sanity is recognizing them as real. Leadership is devoting ourselves to creating the conditions so people can manifest generosity, creativity, and kindness in service to genuine needs and problems.

Islands of Sanity

An Island of Sanity is a place of possibility and refuge. It is a true island because it sets itself apart from the destructive dynamics, policies, and behaviors that are afflicting people on the mainland. It needs to be an island because there is no other way to preserve and protect our best human qualities. We are not seeking sanctuary; we are seeking contribution. We are magnetized by the island's offerings–the possibility of working together in harmonious relationships to accomplish meaningful work.

This current culture, with people locked down in fear and self protection, is destroying our relationships, our work, and our future. It is easier to withdraw than to step forward. It is safer to protect oneself than to be visible. This is the harsh reality that defines the need for Islands of Sanity.

We do not withdraw. We are not seeking self protection. We commit to creating a community where generosity, creativity, and kindness are the norm—what we expect from each other and easily offer in return. We realize that the current culture cannot create the conditions for these behaviors. Although they are natural to the human spirit, this culture has normalized greed, aggression, and life-destroying behaviors. In this ruthless environment, what's needed is not individual acts of heroism, but island communities where sanity prevails.

We cannot do this alone.

What is this island? It's rarely a physical form. It's an orientation, an aspiration, a commitment born from our deepest motivation to contribute to this time in meaningful and purposeful ways. We realize we can no longer participate in the general culture because its dynamics are overpowering us. Even though we want to be generous, creative, and kind, we too often find ourselves caught in aggression and fear. We notice that, although we know better and have behaved better, we're now becoming distrustful, angry, fearful–just like everybody else.

How do we stop this downward spiral of bad behaviors? We need to create a boundary, a protective way of being that reduces the impact of these negative forces. We need to set ourselves apart and claim who we choose to be. We choose to be *Warriors for the Human Spirit*, people dedicated to creating the conditions for more people to realize their best human qualities. And for those who will never be released from their fear and anger, we want to be generous and kind.

We cannot do this alone. We need to gather together with others who are motivated from the same sense of call. We develop an island mentality not to exclude but to increase our capacity to serve. An Island of Sanity takes form from our intentions and aspirations. It develops strength and capacity as we work hard, struggle, stay together, figure things out, fail, succeed, learn, forgive, laugh, persevere.

This concept of protected spaces is well-established in biology. *Refugia* (reh-FU-jee-ah) is a biological term describing places of shelter where life endures in times of crisis, such as a volcanic eruption, fire, or stressed climate. Ideally, these refugia endure, expand, and connect so that new life emerges.

Unshakable Confidence

Sane leadership is the unshakable confidence that people can be generous, creative, and kind. Yet to develop unshakable confidence, we need to be grounded in faith, not casual beliefs.

Faith and beliefs are very different. Beliefs are easy to acquire—so many folks out there eager to tell us what to believe. We believe what we are told rather than experiencing things directly. Beliefs lack staying power–they come and go and, as they waiver, so do we. If we're motivated by beliefs, not faith, we'll give up when people disappoint us. We may have had a few revelatory moments of witnessing people's capacities, but these vanish with the next disappointment. We lose confidence in people and ourselves. What was I thinking? Why did I ever believe this was possible?

To acquire faith in the human spirit, we need direct experience working with people. Yet our experiences are filtered by beliefs, biases, opinions—we can't help but use interpretive lenses. So we need to train our perception to see more clearly, without our filters. And we need to create and engage in practices that give us direct experience with people's best qualities. Practice makes perfect. Practice makes faith. As our faith deepens, so too does our confidence in both people and ourselves to do this work.

Faith in human nature is the ground of being for a sane leader. Without it, we won't keep trying. We won't stay. We'll pick up our exhausted selves and go in search of an easier life. With faith in people, we will stay and keep trying. We will persevere.

When we trust ourselves to not withdraw, when we realize that giving up is not an option, our confidence has become unshakable.

Design Principles to Engage Our Human Spirits

Where are we with attempts to create more harmonious and productive relationships through diversity, equity and inclusion efforts? We had strong intentions to value differences, to put an end to years of exclusion and separation, to create equity and justice as norms not policies. We wanted to undo and repair, to make amends and heal this time of oppressive and fractured relationships. But now we experience the opposite of what we intended–more separation and resentment, more distrust and conflict, more withdrawal and fear of the other.

With sane leadership, there is the possibility of reviving human spirits to work well together. It requires new levels of curiosity about one another and perseverance to stay and not withdraw. Practices must be carefully structured to bring people together in meaningful and productive ways with fewer unintended consequences, practices that awaken generosity, creativity, and kindness. These qualities reside in our human spirits, not our separate identities. When we bring people together, we are not interested in assembling categories of difference. We create conditions that depend upon difference—perspectives and insights unique to each person because of who they are, what they've experienced, what they care about. These yearnings and capacities cannot be defined by categories of identity. They come to light as we work together. They are valued as we discover how creative we can be together.

These ten design principles work with basic human longings. Today, there is a wealth of good processes designed to empower, engage, create, solve, develop healthy interactions, healthy conversations, healthy communities. Use these principles in their totality to select from this abundance of processes that support people working well together.

1. *Diversity: Complex issues demand difference to find solutions.*

Complex problems (what's not complex these days?) require multiple perspectives to bring them into focus. Difference maximizes understanding. No single person, expert or group sees sufficiently.

2. *Inclusion: People need to feel needed.*

"Necessity is the Mother of invention." It is also the Mother of Inclusion. Who needs to be here? If they're absent, what information will be lost? The issue/problem defines who needs to be here: everyone

Difference maximizes understanding.

who's played a role or been affected by this. Every person invited must know that this work can't be done without them.

3. *Equality: Begin and end as equals.*

We never know whose contribution will be essential. The form of the first meeting must assert equality–circle is the form of equality. Use it when everyone's voice is necessary, when power dynamics need to be equalized, when a person's culture inhibits their participation. Always start and end in circle. But it's not the only form—form follows function. Define what needs to be accomplished and choose the right form for that work.

4. *The Work: Place the work in the center and keep it there.*

The issue/problem/crisis/opportunity is why we're here. It is the work, not relationships, that brings us together. As people contribute their perspectives, the issue's complexity expands and deepens. As we absorb the complexity, most people become more curious and engaged. And humbled. (Experts get quiet.) Even though we feel overwhelmed by complexity, we want to stay together, we want to resolve this issue. The work keeps us together. An unusual but predictable consequence of being overwhelmed by complexity is the group emerges with a clear and relatively simple path forward, a solution nearly everyone will support. This simplicity the other side of complexity always feels miraculous.

5. *Motivation: Strong emotions are to be channeled not feared.*

People often join out of frustration or anger. But they're here, they haven't withdrawn. They bring energies to work with, not to pacify or dismiss. These have the potential to transform into positive creative energy if people experience others being genuinely curious about their perspective. As their view gets woven into a tapestry of understanding, fiery energies channel themselves into ways to contribute. Everyone would rather be generous, creative, and kind.

6. *Learning: Learning from experience keeps us alive.*

Everything alive chooses its adaptive responses, how it will continue to survive amidst changes in its environment. As I was told when observing the rich learning going on in the U.S. Army's combat training, "It's better to learn than be dead." How strange that in most organizations (and lives) we feel too busy to reflect and learn from our experience. For every issue and in every process, times to learn together are essential, not as a casual wish for whenever we might find time, but as a commitment to frequent times to learn, reflect, adapt, and survive. These times are sacrosanct, not to be shortchanged or abandoned. The more intense the crisis, the more often we must meet to reflect and learn.

7. *Experimentation: Life always gives us feedback.*

Everything is an experiment whether we like it or not. Traditional project planning methods are a setup for failure and consequent blame. When they fail, nobody learns anything as everyone rushes for the door. To set up an experiment, determine what you're testing–an hypothesis of cause and effect: if we do this, we expect that. When results contradict that hypothesis, develop a new one. When fueled by curiosity rather than certainty, all facts are friendly. The scientific method is a powerful way to learn from experience. And when there's no fear of blame, people get amazingly creative.

8. *Confidence: Both success and failure build confidence.*

As people take on issues and challenges important to them, as our human spirits display themselves in useful and wondrous ways, we want to continue, we want to find more opportunities to use our new capacities and new relationships. If our first solutions fail, so

what? We'll go back in and try again. And if our first attempts succeed, give us a bigger challenge. People's finest capacities have been awakened and put to good use. Of course they/we want to keep going.

9. *Community: The well-being of our community supersedes all other concerns.*

Everything in these design principles contributes to nourishing community. As people feel valued for their contribution, they willingly participate. They now feel part of something beyond themselves and are nurtured by relationships. But things go wrong and relationships fracture. Evaluate every practice for where it directs people's attention: Does it focus on individual needs, or on the community's well-being? Does it strengthen community or protect individuals? Community must be the first and last concern because its strength or weakness determines success or failure.

10. *Evaluate: Are these design principles working?*

As the leader, if you're not seeing these results, review these design principles. They work as a whole, so notice which one(s) may have been ignored or overlooked. Approach your discernment with generosity and kindness to yourself—how good that you're experimenting with this! Learn from your experience and try again. And again.

These design principles work because they are based on our innate human longings and capacities. They create the conditions for people to be generous, creative, and kind. Creating these conditions is the work of sane leaders who, because of their direct experience, have unshakable confidence in people. Do you choose to be a sane leader? Do you feel you have a choice?

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Dr. Margaret Wheatley has been a consultant, senior-level advisor, teacher, speaker, and formal leader, working on all continents (except Antarctica) with all levels, ages, and types of organizations, leaders, and activists since 1973. Her global work now focuses on developing leaders as Warriors for the Human Spirit. These leaders put service over self, stand steadfast through crises and failures, and make a difference for the people and causes they care about. She is author of twelve books and dozens of articles. She has her doctorate from Harvard (1979) in Organizational Planning and Social Policy, and an M.A. from NYU on the impact of technologies on cultures.