

## One Book, Two Stories

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### M a r g a r e t W h e a t l e y

There is a simpler way to organize human endeavor. I have declared this for many years and seen it to be true in many places. This simpler way feels new, yet it is the most ancient story there is. It is the ancient story demonstrated to us daily by life, not the life we see on the news with its unending stories of human grief and horror, but what we feel when we're in nature, when we experience a sense of life's deep harmony, beauty, and power. It is the story of how we feel when we see people helping each other, when we feel creative, when we know we're making a difference, when life feels purposeful.

For many years, I've written and spoken about this ancient new story, and how we might apply it in organizations and communities around the world. I've learned that as we understand how living systems operate, that we develop the skills we need: we become resilient, adaptive, aware, and creative. We enjoy working together. And life's processes work everywhere, no matter the culture, group, or person, because these are basic dynamics shared by all living beings.

As we work with life, we also rediscover another gift, the great potential of the human spirit. I've worked in many places in the world of extreme material poverty. But that challenge fades in comparison to those of us who have forgotten how resilient and vast the human spirit is. Mother Teresa once said that the greatest poverty she saw was in the West because we suffer from spiritual poverty.

Western cultural views of how best to organize and lead (the majority paradigm in use in the world) are contrary to what life teaches. Western practices attempt to dominate life; we want life to comply with human needs rather than working as partners. This disregard for life's dynamics is alarmingly evident in today's organizations. Leaders use control and imposition rather than self-organizing processes. They react to uncertainty and chaos by tightening already feeble controls, rather than engaging our best capacities in the dance. Leaders use primitive emotions of fear, scarcity, and self-interest to get people to do their work, rather than the more noble human traits of cooperation, caring, and generosity. This has led us to this difficult time, when nothing seems to work as we want it to, when too many of us feel frustrated, disengaged, and anxious.

#### The Era of Many Messes

I find it important, periodically, to ask people to step back and try to see the big picture. This is difficult to do when we're stressed by so many pressures at work and at home. But when we shift to 50,000 feet, it's easier to see that our impotence is not a result of personal failings. Instead, failing to achieve good results is a consequence of living in this time when we've reached the end of a paradigm. Many of our fundamental beliefs and practices no longer serve us or the greater world. Worse than that, too many are causing harm and distancing us from the very skills, knowledge, and wisdom that would help.

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This is the era of many messes. Some of these we've created, (although not intentionally,) because we act on assumptions that can never engender healthy, sustainable societies and organizations. We act as if humans are motivated by selfishness, greed, and fear. That we exist as individuals, free of the obligation of interdependence. That hierarchy and bureaucracy are the best forms of organizing. That efficiency is the premier measure of value. That people work best under controls and regulations. That diversity is a problem. That unrestrained growth is good. That a healthy economy leads naturally to a healthy society. That poor people have different motivations than other people. That only a few people are creative. That only a few people care about their freedom.

These beliefs are false. They've created the intractable problems that we now encounter everywhere. If you look globally, it's hard to find examples in any country or any major sector—health, education, religion, governance, development—of successfully solving dilemmas. Attempts to resolve them lead only to more problems, unintended consequences, and angry constituents. While millions of people work earnestly to find solutions and billions of dollars are poured into these efforts, we can't expect success as long as we stay wedded to our old approaches.

We live in a time that proves Einstein right: "No problem can be solved from the same level of thinking that created it."

#### A Tale of Two Stories

There are many different essays in this book, each of which was first published in a journal, magazine, or book. They represent ten years of work, of how I took the ideas in my books and applied them in practice in many different situations. However, this is not a collection of articles. I updated, revised, or substantially added to the original content of each one. In this way, everything written here represents my current views on the subjects I write about.

This book tells two stories, each meant to serve as a guide for finding our way to a more hopeful future. The first story describes and applies the new paradigm of living systems. It tells how all living systems—which includes people—self-organize, change, create, learn, and adapt. I tell this story in great detail and offer many different applications.

I hope these essays provide answers to many of the fundamental questions of leadership: How do leaders shift from control to order? What motivates people? How does change happen? How do we evoke people's innate creativity? What are useful measurement systems? How do we solve complex problems? How do we create healthy communities? How do we lead when change is out of our control? How do we maintain our integrity and peace as leaders?

Leaders and people have struggled with these questions for many years. In my experience, when we shift the paradigm, we find answers, real answers.

The second story is of a different kind. In each section, the articles appear in chronological order. I did this so you would notice the evolution of these ideas—how my topics have shifted, my emphasis has changed, and my writing has taken on a different voice. These changes illustrate how the first story fared and evolved as I took these ideas out into a world that was changing rapidly, but not in the right direction. I'm sad to report that in the past few years, ever since uncertainty became our insistent 21st-century companion, leadership strategies have

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taken a *great leap backwards* to the familiar territory of command and control. Some of this was to be expected, because humans usually default to the known when confronted with the unknown. Some of it surprised me, because I thought we knew better. I thought we had learned something from all the experiments about innovation, quality, learning organizations, and human motivation. How is it that we failed to learn that whenever we try to impose control on people and situations, we only serve to make them more uncontrollable?

Whatever might explain this desperate retrenchment, for me it has made telling the new story even more important. Today, we need many more of us story-tellers. The need is urgent, because people are forgetting there is any alternative to the deadening leadership that daily increases in vehemence. It's truly a dark time because people are losing faith in themselves and each other, and forgetting how wonderful humans can be, how much hope we feel when we work well together on things we care about.

Because more story-tellers are needed, there are essays in this book that speak to you directly. I ask you to look at how these times are affecting you personally. Do you work in ways that support interconnectedness rather than separateness? Are you taking time to think? How well do you listen to those you disagree with? What's happening with your children? Do you speak up for what you believe in?

The last part of this book is very personal. I've shared the perspectives and feelings that have arisen in me as I've been out in this troubled world. I write about my children, my country, and how I no longer seek hope, only right action. I also describe the experience of living and working in the endless spiral of paradox, especially the paradox of feeling so blessed in the peace and abundance of my life, while more and more people on this beautiful planet must confront life's horrors.

My hope is that you will feel strengthened from reading this book. I hope that your clarity grows bright and undeniable, that you have greater confidence to tell the story that is true in your experience, that you act with courage, and that you know you are in company with millions of people around the world working to bring to life this ancient new story.

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Margaret Wheatley is an internationally acclaimed speaker, teacher, and writer. Her path-breaking book, *Leadership and the New Science* (1992, 1999), is credited with establishing a fundamentally new approach to how we think about organizations.

Margaret Wheatley and Geoff Crinean will lead a module at the 2005 Authentic Leadership Summer Program, on "Radical Leadership: Ancient Wisdom for Solving Problems and Transforming Aggression."

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