



Dancing in the Dark: Coming Back Together in Difficult Times

by Margaret Wheatley

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It is really wonderful to see you all here. There is a great open-heartedness in all of you.

I want to talk about enlightened society, but from my own particular frame of reference. In my work, I get to see many unenlightened societies, as you do. There are more than enough examples of what an unenlightened society is like. I know that is what compelled some of you to come here.

Prior to listening to Michael [Chender] this morning, "enlightened society" was not a phrase I would have even used. Michael said that an enlightened society has wisdom, and it has compassion. I have thought a lot about this in slightly different terms over the past year or two. What is keeping us from being wise, and what is enabling us to be wise? What is keeping us from being compassionate, and what is enabling or facilitating us to be compassionate?

I personally believe this is an extraordinarily dark time. Now, that is not new. Trungpa Rinpoche taught me something that was startling when I first read it many years ago in *When Things Fall Apart*, by Pema Chödrön. Pema quoted Rinpoche as saying, "It is a dark time when people lose faith in one another and so lack courage." Reading that quote was the first time I had even thought about the relationship between our faith in one another and our faith in the species, and in what it means to be human. It was the first time I saw the fact that if we don't believe in each other, we cannot act courageously. We are not worth it.

To many people lately, we are not worth it. The human species is getting an increasingly bad rap, a bad reputation, which is growing in volume. Sometimes you see it in off-handed comments: "Well, it is just human nature to be greedy." "It is just human nature to be selfish." "It is just human nature to be cut-throat and dishonest." "What can you do about it? That is just who we are."

For many years I have been very upset anytime somebody starts a sentence with "Well, it's just human nature," because I know that what is coming next will be negative. And the belief that these qualities which are so dark in and of themselves—greed, selfishness, dishonesty—are part of who we are naturally as a species is a pretty difficult thing to overcome.

Lately, what I have been hearing—and I've heard it from my own mouth as well, which is probably why I am noticing it—is a general feeling that the environment is devolving. For those of us who are paying attention to the environment and to what is happening on the planet, when we look, that is what we see. This was even said this morning, at the beginning of meditation: this is a time when poverty is increasing, health is deteriorating, literacy is deteriorating, democracy is deteriorating. These are all things we thought we had succeeded in overcoming through modern science and technology. But that is just not true. More and more people are becoming aware that the planet is devolving at the material level. And I do want to make that distinction. I do think it is evolving at the level of consciousness and spirit. But for those of us who are tracking the physical dimensions of this great debacle that we have created on the planet, what is being said more and more is that we don't deserve to be here. We have made such a mess of it as a species that we don't deserve to be here any longer.

I recently heard His Holiness the Dalai Lama say that. He didn't exactly say that we don't deserve to be here, but he said, "If we want world peace, probably the easiest way to gain it is to have humans go off to heaven." Of course, the Dalai Lama doesn't believe in heaven, so you have to notice that. One of the great American biologists, Edward O. Wilson, aptly pointed out that if human beings were to leave the face of the earth, every other

species would benefit. If any other major species were to leave—ants, honeybees, mosquitoes—whole ecosystems would collapse.

So there we are. We have really made a mess of it. We have been experimenting by playing with our rules rather than life's rules. We have decided that we can just use things in a way that is quite rapacious. And in the midst of all that bad behavior, we have created an impression of ourselves that I find very far removed from who we are. This impression has mainly come from my own country, America. We have said that human beings are naturally selfish and are only interested in self-interest. We have said that competition is the way the world works. This actually came from Charles Darwin, who is English, so I want to give credit where credit is due. But then in the United States we took that up as an economic theory and created the monstrous belief of social Darwinism. We have said that people are not naturally generous and open-hearted and loving. In fact, we have made such a religion of the individual that we say that we first go after our own needs. We have put out a really disgusting theory called the Hierarchy of Needs, which says that you can't possibly be asking spiritual questions unless you are well fed. Now that is the ultimate materialistic approach, but most of us believe it without even thinking about whether it is true in our experience. You only have to go to India to know that Maslow cannot explain Indian spirituality.

So we are in a time when we are striving—those of us here and millions of us around the world—towards an era of enlightened society. We want this to be a time of planetary transformation. It does seem to be just out there. And yet we are operating under this terrible belief system about who you and I are. And when I say "you and I," I want to include all six billion others of us.

If we are talking about wisdom and compassion, for me, one of the things we need to start asking is, What do we know? What do we really know about the human species, about each other? Who are we? I find when I ask that question that we all speak very well of one another. Clearly, we all know people who are nasty, selfish, highly competitive, and very destructive. Unfortunately, there are a few more of those people on the earth right now, wielding more power, than in the past. I am speaking primarily

about the growth of organized crime in many different regions of the world, which is particularly evil.

However, if we think about most people we know, I believe we would describe those people as being like us—interested in helping other human beings, interested in working together, interested in having a deep sense of what fairness is. Not interested in rampant greed and destructive competition. That is not who we are, and it is not who anybody is except for those very few. So the first thing I would like us to think about is, What do we believe about each other? And how does that show up in our behaviors? Do we try and walk generously and open-heartedly into situations, or do we prepare ourselves for competitive, adversarial engagement? It is important to look at our different kinds of behaviors and where we act competitively.

A long time ago, some of my graduate students pointed out that my competitive self would come out when I was boarding an airplane—an attitude of, "Get out of my way, I want my seat." Of course it is so foolish, because the plane isn't going to leave until everybody is on. So it is just a kind of senseless, competitive, aggressive behavior. But we all have those moments.

It is important to contrast our beliefs about each other with our behaviors towards one another. As we are trying to become enlightened individuals focused on creating enlightened society, I think we first have to spend some time reflecting on our own behavior towards one another. And where there is competition and criticism and an assumption of bad intent, all of those things actually block us from our own open-hearted expression and our own open-hearted receiving of one another.

I think that the wisdom I am seeking in enlightened society is already in us. But what I am finding is that most of us don't spend any time thinking about what we believe about the other people around us. And especially, we don't spend time reflecting in our organizations. We could ask ourselves how we are participating in this somewhat vile description of human beings. Do I tailor my actions in order to create competition? Do I tailor my actions in order to motivate people on the basest measures? Do I act competitively when it's not absolutely the terms of the

game? I think these are all things we need to reflect on. If we reflected on what we really want, we would probably find that it is not those behaviors. I don't think anyone in this room wants to put forward such a negative reputation for human beings any longer. Because it is a dark time and we do lack courage because we lack faith in one another's fundamental human goodness.

This is a time when human badness is in our newspapers every day and often in our faces every day. That is another reason that it seems so dark—because there are so many awful things going on. I want to share a poem that was written by the British poet and playwright Christopher Fry [from the play *A Sleep of Prisoners*]. He wrote this after World War II, but I think it also describes these times perfectly.

*Dark and cold we may be, but this
is no winter now. The frozen misery
of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
the thunder is the thunder of the floes,
the thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong
comes up to face us everywhere,
never to leave us till we take
the longest stride of soul men ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
is exploration into God.*

When I read that passage—*Thank God our time is now, when wrong comes up to meet us everywhere, never to leave us till we take the longest stride of soul humans ever took*—I said, "Yes, yes, that is why we are all here." That's why we are pursuing this notion of enlightened society together. Because events that we face each day are soul sized. We cannot handle the dilemmas and the crises and the evil of these times alone. And so we are at a point when our very negative images of one another, and when the glorification of the individual, the hero, the individual savior, are part of the problem. I believe that the single most important act and gesture of our times, given how dark and cold we are, is coming back together.

I am intrigued by how many of the modules here are about how we come back together, through conversation and dialogue, through mediation, through participation. These are all ways of bringing us back together. One of the terrors of this time is that we exist in such lonely isolation. Human beings have never been alone before. In fact, we are so fearful of one another that we are moving farther and farther away from each other. Think of the public processes that you have been in—school board meetings, town meetings, hearings, what you see on television, what might be going on in your own organization. How many of what could be processes of engagement are in fact places where people are just yelling and screaming at you, and where people, in order to be heard, have just raised the volume? And think of the outrageousness of their actions. People now stand up on tables to get attention, or do very weird things in public places. We have created a whole amplification of ridiculous behavior through talk shows that are not just in the United States and Canada, but that you can now find in England and on European television. Even in Singapore. I was just in Singapore watching television. The public expression of idiot behavior is now worldwide, through television.

Given all of that, we are in a real dilemma. I think this is where courage is called for, because this is a time when we need to be together and this is also a time when we are more afraid of one another than ever before. As a global phenomenon, we are retreating from each other at the very moment when I believe we need to be moving towards one another.

So it is a dark time, especially when people lose faith in each other and so lack courage to act. I would ask you to examine where your own fear of the other, whoever that "other" is, has led you to retreat. Since we are spending a week learning many different processes of engagement, it will be important to notice where our experience and fear of other people is impeding us.

Many years ago, Ralph Nader said that the easiest way to control people is to lower their expectations. That is also happening. The more that we think we are mindless, the more we allow ourselves to be controlled in many different dimensions, from public

advertising to who we allow to be president of the United States.

But something else is going on. The overwhelming amount of information that we have about what is wrong with the world has also led many of us to be exhausted. And so we retreat not just in fear of people but also from a sense of our own inadequacy. Overwhelming amounts of information control us into believing that we can't make a difference. Although I don't think there is anyone in this room—because otherwise I assume you would not be here—who still believes they can't make a difference.

For me, one of the sources of greatest energy to stay in this work is people—the extraordinary goodness of people I meet everywhere. We each have to explore in our own lives those moments when we have been confronted by the glories of the human spirit, and how that always nourishes us. It is not just about the nice stories you read in Readers Digest. But where in your day-to-day life do you encounter a surprise? Someone who stands up, someone who just doesn't give up, someone who has overcome tragedy and great problems. When we meet these people, they are always gifts to us.

I want to tell you one story that I heard first-hand from a former prisoner on Robben Island off Capetown, South Africa. For a long time, Robben Island was a prison island, and it was where Nelson Mandela and many other freedom fighters were imprisoned for 25 years or so. This island has terrible energy. What is so tragic is that you get a beautiful view of the African continent and of Capetown from this island, so it's not just that you were removed from society, but you could still see it, which had to be a particular kind of torture. The island was a leper colony at some point, and in the twentieth century it was a place where very violent criminals were sent.

The Apartheid government deliberately sent political prisoners to Robben Island because they hoped that the violent prisoners there would kill them or harass them or torture them. They expected that the dominant population would continue dominating. In fact, just the reverse happened. After all of those glorious freedom fighters had been there for awhile, they changed the whole environment. They actually changed the

guards and the other prisoners because they were so consistently loving and generous.

That is just background. I was standing in what had been a large cell, maybe 40 feet wide at most and 60 feet long. It was all concrete, and it was horrendous. There was nothing there, except open toilets and showers at the very end. So there had been no privacy. On Robben Island, all of the tour guides are former prisoners, which is a very powerful experience for the visitors. It is also rather tragic, because they can't find any other work. Some of them love being there and some of them don't. This one guide did love being there, and he is now mayor of Robben Island. He is also an artist. As we stood in the cell, he was describing how brutal it had been, although he spared us the details. I read about them later. In the early years, it had been a very brutal prison. You couldn't make noise, you couldn't laugh, you couldn't do anything. Prisoners were randomly abused and tortured.

We stood in this long cell, and it was quite cold and raining outside. He just looked down the cell length and he said, "There used to be about 40 of us living in here." Then quietly he said, "Sometimes, to pass the time, we would teach each other ballroom dancing." What an incredible image. It has stayed with me. I wanted to ask him, "Did you hum music? Did you just do it in your heads because you couldn't make noise? How did you do this?" But that is the human spirit. That is who we are. We are enormously generous, filled with the potential for compassion. We want to be together. One of the great tragedies of a highly individualistic culture like the United States, which is now being foisted on many other countries, is that we lose each other.

In some tribal cultures, being an individual is highly feared. Being an individual is just not a possibility and is regarded as a tragedy. No one would think to give themselves airs, to put themselves above their neighbor, or to try and stand out. In one of Malidoma Some's books, he tells a story about taking a village elder to the capital city of Burkina Faso for the first time. The elder, who had never seen a two-storey building, was just standing there staring at a tall building. Some asked, "What are you thinking?" The elder replied, "I'm thinking the one who built

this must be a really crazy man." He couldn't understand why someone would build something that would set him apart.

As a species, we are not competitive and ruthless and highly individualistic. We are not "me-firsters." We love being together, we want to be together. In fact, we are a herding species in that way. One of the scientific colleagues of Francisco Varela, Humberto Maturana, has a new book called *The Biology of Love*, in which he explores the beginnings of language. He believes that we began to talk to one another when we were in intimate family relationships. So the reason we created speech was because we wanted to know each other better. The impulse was intimacy, and then that led to language.

So here we sit in this crazy unenlightened society, wanting to create new connection, wanting to create new relationship, wanting to discover new wisdom or old wisdom. The impulse that led you here and the impulse that led to the creation of modules that really have to do with different kinds of coming together is just something that I glory in. I think it is wonderful.

But there is another piece to being here that is also very important for me to speak about. That is the practice of mindfulness. I think I would title this part of what I have to say as, "How I started life as a scientist and became a Buddhist." Because for me, the path was that I started to explore how life works through the eyes of science, and then I was led to the further explanations that are found in Buddhism—explanations such as co-dependent arising, which says that everything is profoundly interconnected and that everything exists because of everything else in the universe. As John Muir, the U.S. naturalist and preserver of great parks in the United States, said, if you just pluck the web of life at any one point, then you will bring everything else along with it. That is also a Buddhist teaching. Whatever anything is, it only exists because of everything else. And we co-create it constantly through our relationships.

Understanding how life organizes was my foundation in science. Then that led me to Buddhist teachings. Dark and cold we may be, and dark and cold I am—and I think it is only going to get

darker and colder. And the only way I know how to be of service in a time when there is so much darkness afoot, and the only way I know how to stay peaceful, is to have a practice. It doesn't mean that everyone has to have a Buddhist practice. But it does mean that probably the most peace you will experience in any day is before you leave the house in the morning. So however we can just know that peace and reinforce it in some way, grow it in some way, for me is life saving, and certainly life changing. We cannot be in the level of stress and violence that exists around us and stay in a place of peace and open-heartedness unless we have some way to know that that peace is within us. We also have to have some place of mindfulness in which we are just staying aware and not being grabbed by the emotions and the graspings of those around us.

So I encourage you to take advantage of all these wonderful meditation teachers we have with us this week. The practice is a life-saving process that some of us are discovering and some of us are refining. I don't know any other way to be in the world right now, except to really pay attention to my interior state and to be mindful enough to know when I am getting hooked by someone else's aggression or anger or rudeness or whatever it is that hooks me.

There is one other aspect of Buddhism that I have found to be life-giving, and that is the practice of compassion. It is impossible to look at the suffering of the world and take it all in if you don't have some framework for that. I have learned the most about this from Bernie Glassman, who has a wonderful book called *Bearing Witness*. Can we learn to just bear witness to the suffering rather than feel we have to rush in and fix it? In my own experience, for years I didn't want to be with people who were grieving because I felt I didn't know what to say. That was fairly arrogant—the belief that some people would know what to say to relieve the grieving.

Especially in America—and this is true in England and Canada now also—whenever there is a traumatic event, like a school shooting or a car bombing, the first thing that is said is, "Counselors will be available." I don't mean to deny the

important role of trauma counselors, but I do want to highlight the fact that in our culture, we believe it is possible to go very quickly from profound tragedy and trauma to healing. Instead of just sitting with the person and bearing witness that something very terrible has happened, we believe we can talk our way out of these things. But in fact, what I'm learning from Bernie Glassman is that if I just sit with the person, that is the healing act right there—to just be there, silent, affirming that this is a terrible situation.

That practice of bearing witness has led me to be able to take in the suffering of the world in a way that nothing else has. I now try—I don't always succeed, but I try—to not close my eyes when something is on the news. I recently learned something very interesting from an MTV executive. As you probably know, music videos on MTV are all about violence and sex. I asked him, "How are young children reacting to these videos?" Because I'm increasingly horrified at what is showing up on music videos these days—the kind of violence and degradation—and I don't have very high standards. He said that according to their surveys, young children know the difference between fantasy and reality. They will watch a music video quite happily, but if you ask them to watch the evening news, they are terrified.

That's good news and bad news, right? The kids can watch the music videos easily enough, but what is happening on the evening news is worthy of tears. How many of us have stopped reading the news? How many of us, in the face of so much suffering, are turning away rather than turning towards? I think the greatest act we can do for those who are suffering is to turn towards them and just be with them. I didn't know how to do that, until I had a practice—and specifically in this case, until I really contemplated what it would mean to just be there for someone, rather than hold myself accountable for either doing something to fix it or running the other way.

The practice of open-heartedness, of generosity, is so much easier if we get in touch with and understand our own wisdom about who we are. As we go through this week, I would encourage all of us to notice how good we are, and then to generalize from this group to the greater world. Annie Dillard, in

her most recent book *For the Time Being*, asked, "How do we know what six billion people is? How do we grasp the number six billion?" She said, "Just take your own fears and anxieties and joys and yearnings and multiply that by six billion. That's how you know how big six billion is." That is, in fact, what we have to do.

So this week is an opportunity to live enlightened society, and I hope we do. I hope that we act with compassion towards ourselves and one another, I hope that we explore the wisdom that is in this group. And then we can go back and just keep spreading the good news out—that we are committed, we have a little bit of a hint of how to do it, and we'll just try.

So I'd like to close. I appreciate all of you sitting in this heat. I'd like to give you a wonderful poem by Galway Kinnell, in which he talks about our beauty. He is describing a bud on a tree, and he says:

*The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers from within, of self-blessing*

*though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on the brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing*

That is my blessing for us all. Thank you very much.
[Applause.]

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