



THE SERVANT-LEADER: FROM HERO TO HOST  
—AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET WHEATLEY

On November 15, 2001, Larry C. Spears, CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership in Indianapolis, and John Noble, Director of the Greenleaf Centre-United Kingdom, met with Margaret Wheatley in Indianapolis, Indiana. What follows is a record of the conversation that took place.

**Larry Spears:** *Do you recall when you first encountered Robert Greenleaf's writings and any remembrances of your initial impressions?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** I've been trying to remember. I think it was through Max DePree. What I enjoy most about Greenleaf's work is realizing that every time I go back, I read something that feels completely new and relevant. And each time I'll read a paragraph or an article it suddenly feels completely contemporary and relevant and it's different from what I noticed last time. In that way his work stays very contemporary and exceedingly relevant. I think that's the mark of a great thinker. It's not just that he was a visionary and saw the need for the servant as leader. It's truly great concepts and ideas that are timeless and fundamental. That's what I enjoy most. Every time I pick up anything of his to read I realize that I'm going to be surprised again. It's not the same old thing.

**Larry Spears:** *Is there any particular thought or idea about servant-leadership that has struck you as a source of wisdom or importance?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** I was recently struck by Greenleaf's admonition to "do no harm." I've been saying to a number of colleagues that doing no harm is becoming exceedingly difficult. It's not just about doing "good," it's actually avoiding harm. We don't see the consequences of our actions. America is in the midst of a huge wake-up call about what is the cost to the rest of the world for us to be living the life we are living. It isn't about



terrorist activity; it's about noticing that we put an extraordinary demand on the rest of the world for resources and energy, and that our way of life does not work well for most other people because of the demands we put on them. So that's what I've been feeling about "doing no harm"—we don't even know what we're doing that's causing harm. I know Greenleaf wrote that in a much simpler time, but I was really struck by that this time through.

**Larry Spears:** *In light of the events of September 11th, 2001, have you any thoughts as to what servant-leadership has to offer to the world today that might be useful, and what we who are involved in this work may be thinking positively about?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** That's a very important question. I have been asking: "What is the leadership the world needs now and what are we learning about leadership from actually being followers?" By this I mean some of us who have been leaders are now followers, watching our government and our military trying to lead us. What are we learning about all this? I think the questions are writ large. "What are you learning now that you are a follower? What makes for effective leadership?"

Now more than ever, we have to fundamentally shift our ideas of what makes an effective leader. We have to shift them away from this secretive, command and control, "We know what's best." We have to leave all that behind, even though it may be effective in the moment. I'm certainly learning that there are different needs at different times when you are a leader. Different styles, different modalities. But what I find in servant-leadership that I still find missing in the world is this fundamental respect for what it means to be human. And I think that right now the greatest need is to have faith in people. That is the single most courageous act of a leader. Give people resources, give them a sense of direction, give them a sense of their own power and just have tremendous faith that they'll figure it out.

We need to move from the leader as hero, to the leader as host. Can we be as welcoming, congenial, and invitational to the people who work with us as we would be if they were our guests at a party? Can we think of



the leader as a convener of people? I am realizing that we can't do that if we don't have a fundamental and unshakable faith in people. You can't turn over power to people who don't trust. It just doesn't happen. So what I think I'm learning from September 11th is that it's possible that people really are motivated by altruism, not by profit, and that when our hearts open to each other we become wonderful. The level of compassion and gentleness that became available, taking a little more time with each other, all of that, I think, has shown me the things that I have treasured for a long time in people. But I think it's very clear, and so we have an opportunity to notice how good we are. If you don't have faith in people, you can't be a servant. I mean, what are you serving? If you're not serving human goodness, you can't be a servant. For me it's just that simple. There is no greater act on the part of the leader than to find ways to express that great faith in people.

The other part about the timelessness of servant-leadership is, what do you do if you can't control events? There is no longer any room for leaders to be heroes. I think one really needs to understand that we have no control, and that things that we have no control over can absolutely change our lives. I think it will take a little while for Americans to really accept that there is no control possible in this greater interconnected world. There are lots of things we can do to prepare, but there is no control. One of the great ironies right now is that no matter how good you were as a business before September 11th, and no matter how skilled you were at planning, and no matter how skilled you were at budgeting, everything has shifted. The only way to lead when you don't have control is you lead through the power of your relationships. You can deal with the unknown only if you have enormous levels of trust, and if you're working together and bringing out the best in people. I don't know of any other model that can truly work in the world right now except servant-leadership.

Even within the military, *command and control* is not what's making it work right now, and it hasn't for a long time. I was just reading about a huge fiasco with the Delta Force as they went into Afghanistan at the start



of our military action there October 2001. Instead of their normal procedure, which is to operate as small teams, and work in quiet and stealth, they were parachuted in—100 of them—because that’s how central command decided they should be used. And they were furious, absolutely furious! They nearly got killed, they got out by the skin of their teeth, and they had several casualties. They exclaimed, “You can’t do this to us! We know how to fight. You can’t create these huge theatrical events and you can’t have centralized control and expect us to do our job.” So, even under the facade of command and control, one of the things I’ve always noticed in the military is that it works on the basis of deep relationships, long-term training, and relying on every individual soldier—especially in special operations. I can’t think of any other model than servant-leadership that works in times of uncertainty. Our time is now!

**John Noble:** *What were the markers in your life, the people and events that have shaped your thinking and helped to get you to where you are now?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** The list of people changes depending on where I am right now in my life. But I do believe that there were seminal events, there were a few moments that I will always remember. And the reason I don’t want to go for people is that the list keeps changing. Just now, the people who inform me most are the earlier historians, like Otto Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, who had an organic theory of civilizations as living beings, which is quite similar to how I’m feeling about this time in history. It’s one of decline, the winter of Western civilization.

In terms of events I think that the one that is still really pertinent to me was when I realized that as consultants, no matter what we did, we really didn’t succeed. I was working as consultant to a large consultancy firm and asked them to recall a successful engagement and what made it work. I realized that people couldn’t, and if they did, it was one little event in a long stream of work. I’ve had the same experience of feeling completely frustrated and I wrote about this in *Leadership and the New Science*. I think it was that realization that opened me to asking if there might be another way of looking at all of this. That’s when I really started looking back to my





former discipline, science. I feel very grateful to have studied what I studied so that at one point I could bring it all together. I was comfortable reading science and loved the scientific imagination and also had the historical imagination and love of literature, and loved to be in philosophical questioning. And all of those weren't connected for me until I grew to notice that they could be connected. What I'm doing now is not anything I actually created. It really does feel like the work I've been prepared to do.

**John Noble:** *Over the last few years we have increasingly heard the phrase "spirituality in the workplace." What does that phrase mean to you and where have you seen spirituality in the workplace particularly epitomized?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** For a long time I was terrified by the phrase, the combination of spirituality and the workplace. I was afraid of how we might use spirituality rather than simply honoring the fact that people are spiritual beings, people have spirit. This is not even a religious viewpoint. There is such a thing as the human spirit. It's an awareness that people have—something beyond the instrumental or the utilitarian. People have deep yearnings, a quest for meaning, and an ability to wonder. This is a non-religious view of what spirituality might mean.

When did we forget this, about being human? When did human beings become so instrumentally viewed, and when did we start to see ourselves as objects, just to be filled with information and sent to work? When did we lose that awareness? It's just mind-boggling if you think about it. I feel the same sort of puzzlement at the whole focus on emotional intelligence now. When did we forget this? It really shows you the bizarre side of our Western civilization that we have to relearn what is so obvious in other cultures.

When spirituality became connected with the workplace in the 1990s it was initially just another way to motivate people. There were many of us saying, "Be careful here." Because, if the only reason a boss is going to acknowledge that someone has a spiritual life is to figure out how to get more work out of them, and if they don't get more work out of them, are they then going to forget the fact that we all have spirit?

Then we had a nice shift to the idea that if you don't acknowledge that



people have spirit, you really can't have a productive workplace. It wasn't using spirit for productivity; instead, it was acknowledging who the person is, who the whole person is. Now I see our spirit in the questions we're asking. People are questioning the meaning of life. The meaninglessness of just working harder, consuming more, becoming disconnected from your children, these large questions have started to well up in people. *We do all have spirits.*

In terms of organizations, I look to see those organizations that describe back to me a real understanding of what is a human being. They don't have to use the words "soul" or "spirit," but I get from them that they have a deep appreciation of fundamental creativity and caring, that they really rely on the wholeness of the people who work there. I haven't seen it in a lot of large corporations recently. Even those that had those strong values, they've been whipped around in the past year. But I consistently hear this from smaller manufacturing companies. I've had some wonderful conversations with those folks because they really understand and rely on the people who work there. They do all sorts of innovative things without consciously talking about spirituality in the workplace. What they talk about is human beings. That's more than enough for me! You know, if we can just understand what it means to be human then that brings in our spirits.

**John Noble:** *It's a Wonderful Life has been a favorite film of mine for as long as I can remember, and George Bailey a personal hero. How did you make the connection with servant-leadership and how did you set about making that wonderful video?* [It's a Wonderful Life: Leading Through Service, 22 minutes, available through The Greenleaf Center]

**Margaret Wheatley:** Well, I have to give credit to the producer, who didn't know a lot about servant-leadership and just said to me, "I think this movie is about servant-leadership." I just said, "Please let me write this." It was interesting for me knowing the lens they were going to use to go into that movie, which I hadn't really watched *carefully*—it's always on at Christmas. I think it came at the right time because I was into my own



developing awareness of how confining it was to believe we knew what our life purpose was, and I had just written about that in what was a sort of spiritual autobiography.

I got into the film having already had that awakening in my own consciousness—that you really need to stay available to life and to what life wants you to do. When I looked at the movie, it was just such a great teacher for me, personally, about what it’s like to be present and respond to the needs of people as they come to you. To be able to see that at the end of your life there was direction, there was guidance, but the only way you were aware of the guidance was to just surrender. And, of course, that’s the highest spiritual practice.

**Larry Spears:** *Can you elaborate a little on some of the qualities that George Bailey has as a servant-leader?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** What’s interesting about George Bailey is his unintentional servant-leadership, which is also spontaneous and from the heart. I think it’s an interesting question for any of us if we just felt free to go where our hearts led us in the moment. How do we respond to someone instead of hiding behind a role or some old rule—this is something that I think Jim Autry’s poetry really captures. If, in a workplace, someone comes to you with a deep need and you can only respond with, “Well, this is the policy.” Or, “I’m sorry. I’d love to make an exception, but if I make an exception for you I’d have to make an exception for everybody.” It’s just one of the most crippling phrases and thoughts we have in our society. You know, we just can’t seem to respond at the level of the individual. We think that if we do, everyone else will be angry at us or want the same thing, yet it’s not how life is at all. It is about what George Bailey did, that individual response, in the moment where he let his heart open and lead him. And when you do that you don’t actually feel that you are sacrificing something. It’s really interesting that when you are responding as your heart leads you, you are actually deeply satisfied even though, as in the case of George Bailey, it led him to an entirely different life. It didn’t lead him away from Bedford Falls, and it didn’t lead him out into the world. His



heart just kept him responding to current crises at home. But I don't think in those moments that we experience it as sacrifice. We experience it as very fulfilling always to just respond to a person who needs something.

What I see in organizations are the boxes of our understandings of who we can be for each other. And those boxes in our organizations, which are also boxes of the psyche, really make it impossible for most people to act spontaneously the way George Bailey did, to just help when help is needed. When there's a crisis of any kind, whether it's a crisis like in that movie, or in real life like the crisis we've recently gone through, we don't see people hesitating to figure out how to serve. People don't hesitate; they just hope that what they're doing at a very instantaneous and spontaneous level will help somebody else.

What I think about crisis is that it's an easy opportunity to see how good we are, spontaneously. But if you look at life in organizations, it's amazing how fear-based they are, so that we are afraid of spontaneity. We are afraid of people's spirits, actually. We are afraid that if we give people any room they'll go off on some crazy direction with the work. I encounter this all the time. A manager will say, "We can't just give people choice here, we can't give people enough room to define meaningful work for themselves because God knows what they'll do." We always assume that they'll take the organization in a completely different direction. We are so afraid of each other that we want to box it into a plan, to a job description. And the loss of that, what we lose with that fear of each other, is extraordinary.

I am frequently struck by the great tragedy of how we have constructed work, the great loss. We've made it so hard to be in good relationships, we've made it so hard for people to contribute, we've made it so difficult for people to think well of themselves and then we say, "As a leader I'll come and I'll pump you up and I'll give you my vision, I'll make you feel we can do it." But it's not based on a deep love of who people are, a deep respect. As a leader, how do you pump up what has been killed?

I actually had an experience of this on a symbolic level. I was with a



group of nuns in a chapel and one of them fainted, and before the medics came (apparently this was not unusual, because she had some sort of condition) nobody panicked. They called 911, but before help got there we just sat there in prayer for this person as other sisters went up and held her—it was all very gentle. And then the medics rushed in and they had oxygen and they had defibrillators, all sorts of high-tech equipment, and they surrounded this woman and just started clamping machines onto her body and then pumping in oxygen. I thought they were blowing up a balloon!

The symbology of it for me is that we are in our organizations and we've actually created a lot of death and destruction and a complete loss of people's confidence in themselves. Leaders don't have confidence in people. And then we rush in with this high-tech machinery, and just try and pump up people and motivate them with a new initiative or a new computer system or a new leadership vision. But what goes on in organizations is often not based on people being human. It's based on people being objects to be used for the accomplishment of goals of a very utilitarian kind.

"Whom do we serve as leaders?" I've asked that question of a lot of people. Whom do we serve? We are serving human beings. That is a radical shift in this culture at this time. But we are serving human beings, and the best way to know who another human being is, is to notice yourself fully, what you need, what's meaningful to you, what gives you heart in your work. If we could just notice our own humanness it would be a very big step forward to being able to relate to other people. If we are a leader, especially if we notice our own humanness, we notice that we have spirit, we notice that we have questions of meaning. I think all of the work that is done in helping leaders to wake up to their own humanity and their own spirituality is very essential work. It also keeps us away from using servant-leadership as the next instrument of control.

**Larry Spears:** *There's one more theme in It's a Wonderful Life that strikes me. There is a Quaker phrase, "speaking truth to power." Have you found ways in your work to encourage people to lovingly confront the people in*



*power when things are not right and need to be addressed, but in a way that also honors those in power as human beings?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** I have. In the past I have relied on processes that would allow people to listen to each other, and I haven't relied on what I would rely on now, which is personal courage. I was just reading a survey of 50,000 workers in which half of them said they'd never dream of speaking up at work. And we are dealing with many, many years now of people having tried to give voice to their concerns and then being met with rebuff or ridicule or being told, "It's not your job!" And so we have had now for a long time an incredibly dependent workforce that is quite hostile. So we get *Dilbert*! *Dilbert* is the best representative of our deep cynicism for all those years of disrespect and maltreatment. People say to themselves, "Well, I'm not going to tell them anything, because they don't listen and they're a bunch of idiots, and I tried and it didn't work." We have our own internal conversation that keeps us from stepping forward. But then as employees we just get angrier and angrier and sometimes that erupts at meetings. This sometimes happens if there's a leader who says, "Well, I really want to find out what the pulse of the organization is. I'm going to start doing breakfast meetings." And then all they get is grief from people. I think it's one of the worst things you can advise a leader to do, especially if you know there's all that pent-up anger.

What I found works is if I can shift the content of the conversation and the dynamic, so as to move it from cynicism and anger to something more helpful. To do this, I change who is in the conversation. If the organization is struggling with something, and it's stayed within a certain level of employees and the boss, or we are trying to think through an issue but it's just our small little team; whenever we're stuck, then is the time to invite people in who aren't normally included.

It's the simplest solution, but it's so powerful. It's actually a biological principle, which is when a living system is suffering and in ill health, the way to create more health is to connect it to more of itself. You create feedback loops from different parts of the system. It works at the level of



our own bodies as a living system in that if we're suffering from some disease it doesn't help to just treat the symptom, we have to look at our whole life and look for information from other parts of our system. What are our sleeping patterns, what is our anxiety level, what's our exercise level? It doesn't work to look at just the one problem. We need information from our whole system.

This same activity also works brilliantly in organizations, to bring in customers, to bring in students, to bring in congregants, to bring in the people we think we don't need to hear from. Usually we fear hearing from them, because we believe we'll only hear complaints and anger. But in fact when you create more diversity, more plurality in the conversation, people step forward and demonstrate that they too care about the organization. As a process I rely on this now to an extraordinary degree. If we are in a certain pattern, if we are angry with each other, if we can't figure out how to solve the problem, bring in new voices. And then all the dynamics shift and you get really useful information that helps you then to see the problem differently.

I have a great belief in the power of whole systems, getting the whole system in the room. And it changes us from being angry and rigid: It changes us as individuals to realizing that, "Wow, I never thought of that! Gee, do you really see it that way?" We're going through that at a national level right now. I mean, there are new voices in the room. We're learning a lot about Islam, we're learning a lot about oil and Arab-U.S. relations, we're learning a lot about globalization. We have available now a lot more information that can really help us change our minds, as long as we are willing to be in that conversation.

If you want to change the conversation, you change who's in it. That doesn't mean that you have to coach people on how to be empathic presenters to a leader. You don't have to coach a leader on how not to get angry if someone's giving them terrible feedback. You just get out of those intensely personal and confrontational moments because you have a lot of new voices in the room. And people really do get interested as soon as they



realize there is a fundamentally different perspective available. Most people actually get interested in that. I have been in hierarchical situations where the voice that shocked everyone with its perspective was a young woman. A new employee, female, who suddenly said something and everyone went “Wow!” I’ve also seen it happen in faculties when we listen to students for the first time, or we listen to the people who hired our graduates. You never know where these comments are going to come from. They’re usually so shocking that people are humbled and climb down off their soapboxes.

I want very much to say something about personal courage. One of the things that is sorely lacking in our lives is a necessary level of courage to stand up against the things we know are wrong, and for the things we know are right. There has been a kind of complacency—it feels more fear-based to me—where people, especially in organizations, are too afraid to speak up, and we have become, I believe, moral cowards in a way. We give all sorts of reasons why we can’t speak up. There are so many grievances in organizations that I think people have developed a sense of helplessness about it, and I understand that feeling of helplessness and saying, “I would never speak up.” But I also live with an awareness that if we don’t start speaking up we are going down a road that will only lead to increased devastation and destruction. Edmund Burke said, “*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*” Julian of Norwich said, “*We must speak with a million voices: it is the silence that kills.*”

I think we’re in that place right now, and what I find personally so uncomfortable is that as much as I want to raise my own voice on behalf of several different issues, I notice that I feel more powerless than at any time in my life. I think that’s part of the tension of this time, realizing that we have to lift our voices for the things that we believe in, whether it’s inside an organization, or as a nation, or as a planetary community. We feel that there are serious things that require our voice, and yet we also feel that it may not make a difference. That’s the place I’m in every day right now. The other forces at work are exceedingly more powerful. I wonder whether





we can rally ourselves as people around the things we care about and really make the change. The essence of my work right now is based on that belief that we can get active in time, but I also realize that this is a time when there are exceedingly strong countervailing forces from our leaders. For example, leaders pursuing aggression as the solution, or business still wanting to maintain its hegemony in the world without assuming responsibility for broader needs, or America still believing it can act in isolation; can we raise our voices on behalf of a different form of capitalism, a different form of compassion in our foreign policy, a different form of leadership in our organizations? I know if we don't raise our voices I can predict the future and it's very dark. If we *do* raise them, well, it has worked in the past. I am hopeful that it will work now, but I'm not nearly as certain as I'd like to be.

**John Noble:** *In Leadership and the New Science you said that vision could no longer be the prerogative of the leader or CEO, and increasingly vision would have to be the shared vision of everyone in an organization. From your experience, are you seeing that happening?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** The deeper theory under those statements was that vision was a field and that fields are those invisible forces that shape behavior. I find a lot more credence is being given to the understanding that there are fields we can't see, invisible influences that affect behavior. People would have called that far-out thinking before, but I find that people are much more open to that today than ten years ago. Creative vision is a powerful influence in shaping our behavior and you don't need to specify a lot of controls or roles if you have vision. People can do what they think is right and it can lead to a very coherent organization that is moving in concert towards achieving its vision. I have certainly come across a number of organizations that are working that way now, but I've also experienced in the last year or two that we've been in an enormous leap *backwards* organizationally since times started to get uncertain. And now we'll just have to wait and see whether this level of uncertainty leads us forward into new ways of leading, or even further backward into command and control.

One of the possibilities is that try as we might, we will realize that



command and control just doesn't work because you can't control! We might be learning that. But recently, I have seen an enormously retrogressive movement in organizations based on fear, based on a weakening economy, based on what I think is a normal human reaction that when you get scared, you go backward; you default to what didn't work in the past! The power of vision to rally people or to give people a reason to live, to work hard and to sacrifice—we are seeing that at the national level right now. I don't necessarily think we're seeing it in its best form. It's true that in human experience, "if there is no vision the people perish," and whether there's a scientific explanation for that, or a spiritual explanation—I'd be just as happy these days with the spiritual definition—which is that a vision gives us a sense of possibility, a vision gives us a sense of working for something outside our narrow, self-focused efforts and therefore it rallies us at our deep human level to be greater than we are.

I'm happier with that explanation than field theory, and the reason I'm happier with it is that it is much more focused on what are the capacities in being human and how we can bring these forth. Science helps people be comfortable with that, and feel a little more trusting that you can create order through having a clear vision. But the next part of that is just as important. Once you have a clear vision you have to free people up. This is where autonomy comes in. People need to be free to make sense of the vision according to their own understandings and their own sensitivity to what's needed. If you combine the sense of great purpose and human freedom, if you can combine a vision that brings out the best of who we are and then gives us the freedom in how we're going to express that, that is how things work, in my experience.

**John Noble:** *I previously worked for an organization where I once suggested that the leaders should begin to stand aside and ask the next generation of leaders for their vision and then begin to work with that in order to create a new future. My thought was that the current leaders could assume the role of stewards, supporters, servants. It didn't happen. Have you come across an organization that has worked in this way?*



**Margaret Wheatley:** Yes. It was the U.S. Army, under General Gordon R. Sullivan. I am in absolute support of what you were trying to do. When General Sullivan was Chief of Staff, which was in the early to mid 1990s, he said he spent 50% of his time thinking about the future and how to create an army for the world that was not yet known. He did simulations, he did think tanks, he did all sorts of scenario planning on what would the world be like and how could you create the army and technology to defend it. He had to think 15 years ahead, minimally. He was really pushing out as far as he could see, using very good minds. So I did find that kind of thinking in the armed services. Then the Marines got into it seriously, and the Air Force did, too. But I think it's the only place I've seen it.

What I see in common contrast to that is organizations where to even *ask* younger people what their vision is feels like a breach of cultural norms, like "They should be respecting *us*! Who are they? They don't know anything!" This is what I run into when I ask educators to involve students. We don't look to our younger generations as a source of any kind of wisdom, and partly I think that's because, as a culture, we so fear dying and we so fear aging. You created the role of elder there, and you were asking the senior people to become wise people who would be acting in service to the next generation. That's really counter-cultural in the West. You could have found support for that in most other cultures, but not in the West where we have so feared aging. As one of my African friends says, "You call your elders elderly, and that's part of the problem!" To actually ask leaders to think of themselves as elders and stewards for the future is a radical proposition. I think it's very important work and I'm not surprised it didn't go anywhere because of the weight of the culture.

One of the things I've been quite intrigued by is the number of younger leaders I have encountered who are college age, who are now intent on training high school kids to be leaders. They're not even looking to us anymore! They'd love it if we talked to them, but they acutely feel the need to steward younger people. I find that quite remarkable. I'll tell you why it's so difficult, I think, in the corporate arena. Maybe our short-term



focus is shifting now, and one of at least the temporary consequences of September 11th is the realization that you just can't spin these organizations for the short term, because you don't even know what the short term is. When General Sullivan retired from the army and went to serve on corporate boards, he was dismayed that nobody was thinking about the future. He said they'd spend hours figuring how to get the stock price up by half a penny, yet nobody was talking about how to develop the next generation of leaders.

I think it's for us to develop intergenerational collaboration. You were suggesting something much stronger than that. But just to call in the voices of the future into our present deliberations is not happening enough, and yet it is one of the most powerful things. Once you get people into these intergenerational conversations it is so inspiring for everyone to be talking with each other. It's the right work, but very difficult to do.

**Larry Spears:** *In Leadership and the New Science you wrote, "Love in organizations is the most potent source of power we have available." What do you think that servant-leaders inside our many organizations can do to unleash love in the workplace?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** It's simple: *just be loving!* Why has expressing love become such a problem when it's a fundamental human characteristic? This is where I think we have overanalyzed and overcomplexified something that is known to everyone alive. Babies know how to unleash love. It's all about our relationships and being available as a human, rather than as a role. It's about being present and being vulnerable and showing what you're feeling. You know, we don't want to reveal who we are. Even the best of leaders try to be objective rather than relational, and that's supposedly adding value to our work lives if we treat each other objectively. But it's again one of those huge things we get wrong. You can't have love if you can't have relationships, and you can't have relationships with one another if you have this curse of something called *being objective*, or *one size fits all*, as a policy, or having to go by the manual. I can feel the fear that so many of us have that, "Well, if it's not objective, we couldn't possi-



bly live in the messiness and the intimacy that would come about by treating each human being as their own unique self.” But I think that objectivity makes it impossible to be loving. Objectivity doesn’t allow love, because love takes you to intimacy and uniqueness and very personal territory. We need to get away from the belief that you can run an organization using what are called objective measures or objective processes, which are actually just completely de-humanized. The fear of love in organizations is that it makes your life as a leader far more complex. But it also makes you much more effective.

I was just listening a few days ago to a woman who had recently retired as the chief of the Calgary Police Force, and she talked about what it took to be personally available and present for each of those officers, so that she was always embodying the values, finding ways for them to embody the values, and believe in the values and become the kind of police officers they wanted to be. She worked from a very clear perspective that it’s not the corporate values that count, it’s whether people can enact their personal values inside the corporation. I thought that was a brilliant re-thinking of that. She would work with everyone on what they were trying to accomplish and the values they were trying to bring forth. And from those, of course, you get a wonderful corporate culture and very strong values. But she kept saying that this was enormously time-consuming and was very difficult work that required her to be there all the time. And so I understand why leaders don’t want to go down this *love* path or the *relationship* path, because it requires so much. But that’s where I think you have to want to believe in people. I believe on September 11th there were numerous corporate leaders who suddenly realized that people really were the most important thing to them, even though an hour before they’d been working a system that ignored human concerns. But then they got the wake-up call of their life. When I said that you have to want to believe, you really have to want to have relationship, and there are an awful lot of people in our workplaces, not just leaders but whole professions, who have never wanted rela-



tionships. They've wanted the work, and hopefully we are now realizing, most of us, how important relationships are.

**Larry Spears:** *For many, serving others is inextricably tied to their own sense of spirituality. Are there practices you have found useful in terms of how we can better develop our own servant's heart?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** Well, I think first I would just underline where you're focused. We do need practices to develop this, and I would say the "this" we need practices for is to open our hearts. For most people it's not something you can rely on as spontaneously occurring. For some it is, but, especially if you're in the workplace, your heart gets pretty hardened. You shut down, or you just find that you can't express your love and compassion and so you take it elsewhere. So, even if you start out with a naturally open heart and a generous spirit towards others, there are many, many structures and processes in modern work and modern life that actually close us down. So we do need a practice to maintain an open heart.

I am a strong believer in meditation personally, but I think any process by which you withdraw from the world and focus on your own inner grounding is useful. For some people, that's running; for some people, it's playing tennis. I can get very similar grounding when I horseback ride, because you can't lose your attention for too long without losing your seat! For some people it's walking, or flower arranging. Whatever it is, it's just to notice what it is that revives your sense of feeling grounded, present, and peaceful. I have often felt that I need to leave my room peaceful in the morning because I don't expect it to get any more peaceful while I'm out doing work. So that's the first discipline—practicing what gives you your grounding and your peace, and to not let it slip away. The world just keeps pulling at you and I find that every so often I have to say, "Okay, Meg. Just notice you're spending less time cultivating your peacefulness and let's get back to serious practice." People of any religious order know the value of a routine to one's practice, whether it's a daily liturgy or a daily practice. Whatever it is, it's the routinization that really helps over time. So, it's not just episodic, or only when you feel like it. Your whole being benefits from



knowing every morning you're going to pray or run or whatever. So, I find it needs to be routinized.

Once I decided that the work was really how to keep my heart open, that led me to a number of practices beyond my own meditation, although some of the meditations I work with now are traditional practices to keep your heart open. One of the ones I've loved the most is to realize that when I am suffering, whatever it is—whether it's anger, fear, feeling discounted or treated rudely, or whatever—I remember that the experience I've just had is an experience that millions of people around the world have, just by virtue of being human. If I'm sitting in a hotel room one night feeling lonely, just for a moment I might reflect that, "Just like me, there are millions of people around the world feeling lonely at this very moment." This practice has been an extraordinary gift, of going from your personal experience outward to the human experience. Your own private experience is being felt by countless other human beings, and somehow this changes the experience from personal pain and anxiety to your heart opening to many others. And then when I see someone else I think, "You're feeling just the way I do." That practice has opened my heart more than any other single practice and has made me feel part of the human experience and the human family.

**Larry Spears:** *What do you find most compelling about Buddhist practices?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** What I find to be enormously helpful about a Buddhist perspective on life is that it really isn't a religion. It is actually just a way to live your life. I have my own very eclectic theology. I was raised Christian and Jewish, so I started out with that eclecticism, and Buddhism has really introduced me to the day-to-day practices that I feel have really opened my heart and made me far more understanding and gentle. And, what is more important to me, it has made me far less likely to condemn quickly and far more willing to be in the presence of suffering and not to run from it. And to bear witness, to just be with whatever's going on and not to be afraid of it. All of that is not a theology, it's a practice. In my



book *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* [Berrett-Koehler, 2002], there's this very strong influence about the practice, and I have a whole section on bearing witness—of just being with another person's experience and not having to fix it, or counsel someone away from their grief. It's actually very fulfilling, and it takes the stress off when you stop feeling that you have to fix people's human experience. You just have to be there. These are capacities I didn't have, but now have, since I started doing these practices.

I have found that many Buddhist practices have helped me be with people differently and have changed my expectations of what needs to happen if I'm just with someone. Just being with someone has become really important rather than saying the right phrase or the right word that will fix it. Now, the irony of this is that I'm still a public speaker who gets up on stage allegedly to say things that will fix things, and yet what I'm finding—and I've heard this from other speakers as well—is we are realizing it's who we are when we *are* up there, and not what we're *saying*. And so I very much want to be the presence of peace and possibility for people. I feel that is something I can be, and have been, and in order to be that, I need to experience peace fairly regularly from this much deeper place which is available to me through my different practices.

I think that the central work of our time is how to be together differently. Can we live together with our hearts open, with our awareness that we can't stop suffering, and that we can certainly be with it differently? Can we notice where we are causing harm and try at least to do no harm? And can we be together without fear of what it's like to be together, to really just not be afraid to be with other people? That would be a huge step forward for a lot of us. And we're all crying for it, we're all crying to be together in more loving ways because this is what it is to be human. So many of us were overwhelmed by the experiences of September 11th, but we saw people being together without the divisions that had separated them moments before. Buddhism is a series of practices that keep my heart open





and keep me being present, rather than fleeing from what is day-to-day life. In that way I think it has also saved my life.

**John Noble:** *In many organizations the word “change” has become a noun rather than a verb and all too often phrases such as “You are afraid of change” are used to hurt each other. When you have encountered this in organizations how have you addressed the problem?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** There’s a wonderful quote from a contemporary Buddhist who said, “Change is just the way it is!” I’ve worked a lot and written quite a bit on how we are actually responsible for creating resistance to change. I don’t know who said it first, but “We don’t resist change; we resist being changed.” Most organizations fail to involve people in the design of change, in the re-design of organizations, or they don’t involve people soon enough or substantially enough. What we get is something that is predictable in everything that is alive, from bacteria on up. When you do something to another living being, that being has the freedom to decide whether it’s even going to notice what just happened or what somebody has done. So, the first freedom is you *choose whether you notice or not*. And the second freedom is you are then completely free to *choose your reaction to it*.

You can’t impose change on anything alive. It will always react, it will never obey. This is one of the principles I’ve embraced for many years. Life doesn’t ever obey, and yet we still think in organizations that we’ll find the perfect means, the perfect vision, the perfect writing, the perfect PowerPoint presentation to get people to say, “Great! This is just perfect!” And instead, what people do is change the plan, file it away and never look at it again, or modify it. We look at all that and we say they are resisting change, but they’re not. They’re responding like all life does—they are reacting. And they’re actually being quite creative. I’ve asked people to just look at that dynamic which is so fundamental.

We get in organizations and we forget about that dynamic which we all know so well and we say, “I’ll tell you what to do and you’ll do it.” And it doesn’t happen. I must have asked this of tens of thousands of people:



“Can you think of a time in your experience when you gave another human being a set of directions and they followed them perfectly?” And in the few cases where people have followed the directions perfectly I’ve asked, “Did you actually like that person?” Because those people are robots, those people aren’t there. We’ve destroyed their spirits. If they do just what we say we have killed the spirit. And we don’t like being around those people. We have a profound disrespect for people who act like automatons, even though, if you look at most managers, they still think they want an automatic obedient response. So, if life doesn’t obey but it always reacts, then the other principle from that is that if you want people to support something, they have to be involved in its creation. This has been a very old maxim in the field of organizational behavior, that people support what they create. I say that people *only* support what they create.

What this means for any organizational change process, most of which have been appallingly disruptive and have failed (we now know that almost 80% of them fail), is that they should make sure that they only use participative processes. That doesn’t mean having everyone involved in every decision, but to be thoughtful and creative about how we are going to bring along everybody and involve people at different points so that this truly is owned by everyone, because it’s their creation. It’s a no-brainer; these things work! I find when I speak about participation, people still think that I mean everybody in the room doing all of the work at the same time. But it’s not that.

I’ve worked with small teams of employees and charged them with, *How are you going to involve everyone in your network, everyone in your department?* And they are much more creative! They’ll do TV shows, they’ll actually create simulations to put people through the same experience that they have just had. They’re enormously creative. I’ve also found, over time, that when you’ve charged a small group of employees with making sure that everyone knew about it, that the whole organization seemed to pay attention, and then it was very easy for people to know about it. I also work with the principle that participation is not a choice. If you don’t get



people involved, you're just breeding resistance and sabotage that you'll then spend months or years trying to overcome.

**Larry Spears:** *Leadership and the New Science is generally considered to be one of the most important books on leadership to be published. Did you have a sense when you were writing it that you were onto something?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** I didn't have a sense of what I was onto. I didn't really understand that I was presenting an entirely different world view. I thought it would be easier to convince people of the shifts that would need to take place because I didn't know it was about changing a world view, and changing a world view takes a long, long time. The original 1992 edition had a lot of questions, but as far as I can remember I hadn't the faintest idea what this work would mean. I just wrote it because it felt like the work I was supposed to be doing. I can't remember now who I was while I was writing it. I can remember some of the fear and hesitation, experimenting with a new voice as a writer, and all of that, but I don't remember what I thought.

**Larry Spears:** *Was your move to Utah significant in the writing of Leadership and the New Science?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** It was absolutely tied to that book coming forth. I told my friends in Massachusetts that had I stayed there I'd have written deep, introspective works in the tradition of some writers there, and I realized, retrospectively, that I needed the open space. The West for me is freedom, and the wilderness is for me the deepest experience of harmony. I live in the wilderness—or it's at my back. I had no idea why I was moving to Utah at the time. I think it was just to be liberated into life, really, into the experience of what is space and wilderness and sky. And also just the incredible beauty of Utah. The red rocks of Utah are still my most sacred place to go. Again, I had no idea of why I was going—it felt really weird—but now it feels like, "Of course! That was it!"

**John Noble:** *Your recent book is entitled Turning to One Another: Simple*



Conversations to Restore Hope for the Future. *What led you to choose the subject of conversation?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** Actually, I didn't choose the subject of conversation. I chose the action of *turning to one another*, and conversation is the simplest way to do that. To actually be willing to listen and talk to other human beings is the way throughout time that we have thought together and dreamed together. The simple act of conversation seems so far removed from our daily lives now, and yet we all have a vague memory of what it was like. Since September 11, we have been profoundly different conversationalists and felt the need to talk to each other and to be together. So I rely on the ancientness and primal-ness of human beings being together, and being together through this act of listening and talking as a way for us to surface, or to develop, greater awareness of how we are reacting to what's going on in the world. Therefore, hopefully, from that greater awareness of what we care about, what we're talking about or struggling with at a very personal level, we will become more activist. We will become more intelligent actors to change the things we think need changing.

That idea is based on a more recent tradition in Paulo Freire's work called *critical education*, which is, you create the conditions for change by educating people to the forces and dynamics that are causing their life. You can start that work through conversation (or through literacy training, as Freire did). In conversation, people can become more aware of what their life is, whether they're happy, what they might do to change it. Then people do become activists, because it's their lives and their children's lives that are affected. Those are the deeper underlying threads that led me to write the book, which is different from anything I've written before. It's not written just for leaders or people in organizations. I wrote it for the world. I don't mean that to sound pretentious; it's just that the people I work with now are in so many different countries, all ages, and I just kept them in my imagination when I was writing, and I wanted to make sure that it didn't assume anything except our common humanity and our common desires for a world that does truly work for all of us. A world that is based



on our common human desires for love and meaning from work and a chance to contribute.

The other piece that truly informed this was my experience with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which was life-changing for me. I only attended it once but followed the proceedings every time I was in South Africa during its three-year history. And the one day that I went was unbelievably impactful. It was when the parents of a young American Fulbright scholar who had been murdered, Amy Biel, were present. Their daughter had been slain in one of the townships after driving into a very angry crowd. Her parents were there listening to the description of her death by her killer, and they were sitting next to the mother of the killer, sitting two rows in front of us. It was an experience you don't normally have in your life, one of such forgiveness, and violence, and repentance. The primary thing I learned in observing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings was that the power of speaking your experience is what heals you. The power of feeling we are heard is what heals us. It made bearing witness a much easier act. *I don't have to fix the person—I just have to really listen.* And from that experience I started to see it in so many different settings how, when we truly listen to people, they can heal themselves. My trust in conversation is that it also allows that level of listening, and there are other people who have written specifically about conversation. I am using the process to restore hope to the future; that was the underlying theme. I wrote it in March, 2001, and I had no idea of what was to come on September 11. But I could already see that the future was looking pretty hopeless, and I had a lot of people saying, "What does this mean, restore hope to the future?" And now we all know.

**Larry Spears:** *Do you have any closing words of hope or advice for servant-leaders around the world?*

**Margaret Wheatley:** A few phrases come to mind from a wonderful gospel song, "We are the ones we've been waiting for." This is the time for which we have been preparing, and so there is a deep sense of call. Servant-leadership is not just an interesting idea, but something fundamental and vital



for the world, and now the world that truly needs it. The whole concept of servant-leadership must move from an interesting idea in the public imagination toward the realization that *this is the only way we can go forward*. I personally experience that sense of right-timeliness to this body of work called servant-leadership. I feel that for more and more of us we need to realize that it will take even more courage to move it forward, but that the necessity of moving it forward is clear. It moves from being a body of work to being a movement—literally a movement—how we are going to move this into the world. I think that will require more acts of courage, more clarity, more saying *this has to change now*. I am hoping that it *will* change now.

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Margaret Wheatley writes, teaches, and speaks about radically new practices and ideas for how we can live together harmoniously in these chaotic times. She has worked for nearly thirty years in organizations of all types, on all continents, and is a committed global citizen. Her aspiration is to help create organizations and communities where people are seen as the blessing, not the problem. She is president emeritus of The Berkana Institute ([www.berkana.org](http://www.berkana.org)), a charitable global foundation supporting life-affirming leaders around the world. Since 2000, Berkana's initiative, "From the Four Directions: People Everywhere Leading the Way," has been organizing conversations among people in their local communities in over thirty countries. These conversation circles have inspired many local leaders to take action in their communities. Berkana supports their activities with many different types of resources. These local leaders are also linked together as a worldwide web of life-affirming leaders.

Dr. Wheatley has been an organizational consultant since 1973, as well as a professor of management in two graduate business programs. She received her doctorate in organizational behavior from Harvard University, an M.A. in systems thinking from New York University, and has been a



research associate at Yale University. She has been a public school teacher and administrator in inner cities, and a Peace Corps volunteer in Korea. She has been recognized by several awards and honorary doctorates.

Her work appears in two award-winning books, *Leadership and the New Science* (1992, 1999) and *A Simpler Way* (1996), plus many videos and articles. Her book, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* came out in 2002. She is a powerful advocate for servant-leadership and has contributed articles to two previous Greenleaf Center anthologies, *Focus on Leadership: Servant-Leadership for the 21st Century* (2002) and *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership* (1998). Wheatley was a featured presenter at The Greenleaf Center's annual international conferences in 1995 and 1999, and she served as distinguished speaker at The Greenleaf Center's annual Leadership Institute for Education from 2000-2002, and 2005.