



BOOK REVIEW: FINDING OUR WAY: LEADERSHIP FOR AN
UNCERTAIN TIME

[MARGARET WHEATLEY, BERRETT-KOEHLER, 2005. HARDBACK, \$27]

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Wheatley (2005, p. 16) encapsulates the direction of *Finding Our Way* with these words:

What was “my message” from the new sciences has grown in depth and strength into a “new story.” It is sourced from many traditions, not just Western science, and I offer it to any individual or group that is willing to listen. I am less focused on persuasion and more engaged in the telling of a story that gives hope and possibility to all.

Wheatley begins by delving into the unknown and the metaphysical, rather than into the comfortable confines of Western positivistic scientific answers. Yet it is an overstatement to imply that Wheatley has disassociated herself completely from modern science; she remains enamored with that field. But in this book, she has also opened up the dialog to embrace “primal wisdom traditions, in indigenous tribes, in most spiritual thought, and in poets old and new” (p. 22). There is a confluence of left and right brain thinking in this book as the author explores the new ventures that lie ahead.

So, how does *Finding Our Way* address questions pertaining to leadership? The essays that are shared in this book focus on questions germane to organizations (p. 4):

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?

But these questions do not have application for institutions alone. The concepts that Wheatley wrestles with are presented through storytelling motifs that speak very personally to the reader. This book has every intention of purposefully engaging the mind as well as the soul.

In this *new story*, the issues of creativity and relationship dominate the conversation. With regard to the issue of creativity, Wheatley states that general, overarching *principles* should be utilized, not specific change processes. Her caveat is that organizational leaders sometimes become hypnotized by the latest book, process, or change model, and attempt to impose that theory on their employees. Often these change interventions fail. Why? Because “people *only* support what they create” (p. 89). Until leaders recognize the validity of this statement, change will never become transformational. Change will remain a temporary blip on the organizational landscape, until the next change theory is introduced.

Wheatley also devotes her attention to the import of relationships. She notes that as companies scrutinize the new vistas that lie ahead, the way to prepare for an unknown future is “to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another” (p. 117). She warns that American corporations must relinquish the top-down, autocratic, command-and-control styles of leadership that have become embedded in many companies, and instead look to their people for the answers. Whether the question revolves around global competition, mining knowledge exchanges, or leadership development, Wheatley provides a succinct and pithy rejoinder: “*The solution is each other*” (p. 118). There is a profundity in the simplicity of such a statement.

People are willing to become champions at work, resolving problems, enduring chaos, and evolving into superstar performers as long as they connect with the “idealism and desire to serve that led us into [the] profession”



(p. 128). This connectedness to meaning and desire provides a richness and purpose to work. And joy comes from service to others, as expressed by the Buddhist saying: “All happiness in the world comes from serving others; all sorrow in the world comes from acting selfishly” (p. 129). Wheatley, who pays tribute to Robert Greenleaf on several occasions, is in accord with servant-leadership principles here and throughout the book.

Examples of ways in which servant-leadership and *Finding Our Way* connect revolve around Greenleaf’s concepts of foresight, listening and conceptualization. In the first example, Wheatley implies that change comes from insight, and this insight comes about by listening—listening that is not just informational, but relational:

If you’re willing to be disturbed, I recommend that you begin a conversation with someone who thinks differently than you do. Listen as best you can for what’s different, what surprises you. Try to stop the voice of judgment or opinion. Just listen. At the end of this practice, notice whether you developed a better relationship with the person you just talked with. . . It’s not differences that divide us. It’s our judgments that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together. (Wheatley, 2005, p. 212)

From this meaningful dialogue can spring new directions and dreams. Wheatley is a strong advocate of collaborate efforts, or what Peter Senge would call *Team Learning*. As Wheatley, Senge, and Greenleaf agree, “There is no need to be joined at the head. We are joined already by our human hearts” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 213). This team learning process can lead to foresight, “enabl[ing] the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future” (Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. 7). As Wheatley examines societal aggression, the *devolution of core values* (Wheatley, 2005, p. 258), and other global issues, foresight and listening play a key role in finding solutions rooted in lasting change.

The second example centers on reclaiming time to think. Reflection has been usurped by urgency, and very few institutions champion this nec-



essary discipline. In essence, according to Wheatley, individuals as well as organizations are in danger of losing the ability to act intelligently. Wheatley writes (p. 216):

In U.S. culture, thinking is not highly prized. In our frenzy to make things happen, to take action, we've devalued thinking and viewed it as an impediment to action. We've created a strange dualism between thinking and acting. I find this dualism to be artificial and problematic.

If individuals and organizations are unable to bridge this nexus between thinking and acting, no meaningful conceptualization can occur. Without thinking, productivity shrinks and enthusiasm wanes. Without thinking, says Wheatley, we are dying a slow, protracted death as a nation and as a global community. To effect real change, and to engage genuine conceptualization, people must think in a clarified and intrepid manner.

For those who are undeterred in self-examination and organizational evaluation, *Finding Our Way* will provide a great deal of food for thought. As is noted on the back cover, Wheatley invites readers to join her "in this work of creating more capable, harmonious, creative, and generous organizations and communities." This is not an invitation to be missed.

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