

A Review of Who Do You Choose to Be? 2nd Edition, by Margaret Wheatley

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Abstract

This is a review of Margaret Wheatley's *Who Do You Choose To Be?* (2nd Edition).

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Who Do You Choose to Be?, 2nd Edition, by Margaret Wheatley, is not a book to read in the evening if you seek a dreamy drift off to sleep. Wheatley counsels us to read her book slowly, using a “dwelling mind”, a term borrowed from Martin Heidegger, so that is what I did. It is so content-rich it requires a slow pace and self-care. Some days I read a bit, and then took a walk, allowing myself nourishment from nature and time to think. Other days I put her book down and picked up my phone, reading about tragedy, hunger, mass migration, starvation, war, heroes dying and liars lying. Occasionally I found myself in tears.

Who Do You Choose to Be? carries a daunting message, as Wheatley shares her grief about what has happened to our planet, and as she firmly rejects any hope that we humans can fix what we have broken. Our clinging to hope, she writes, is an addiction to what she calls hopium, dangerous because of predictable despair and loss of

motivation when expectations are dashed. Even though I see what she sees, I know I have allowed myself some hope - hope that the energetic, intelligent people with good intentions can make the necessary difference, or that projects that promise ecological salvation or political sanity will actually be enough. It is not for lack of many of us trying that chaotic change has overtaken us. Wheatley writes that “we are dealing with an emergent, changed world, [and that] “Emergent phenomena can never be undone” (276).

So here we are, in difficult, complicated times, and Wheatley invites us to find ways to seek a path of contribution. She has spent her life helping us understand how organizations might function more effectively, and how best to lead them. She continues that work in this book. Strong, thoughtful, observant leaders – warriors, she writes, are needed now more than ever. She encourages us to find motivation not in hope, but in the satisfaction and joy of doing what can be

done and what will help. As she has in other books, she draws insight from Western science, Indigenous wisdom, Yogic science, and the science of the living system, using those many sources of information to understand our world. She describes the possibility of well-functioning, connected, self-organizing human institutions that mirror the rich web of networked communities within the natural world.

For students of Wheatley's work, much of this will sound familiar. But, in this book, she introduces another lens through which to look at the world – that of the study of the remarkably predictable development and collapse of complex human civilizations. Referring primarily to the work of Sir John Glubb and Joseph Tainter, she describes the seven "ages" complex civilizations always pass through as they develop, and eventually collapse. I found this information fascinating, and once again, was led to look away from my book to consider the characteristics of the last stages of a highly complex society – ours. All the signs are there, even the timing, as Glubb notes. Having studied 13 complex civilizations, he observes that it takes a civilization around ten generations, or 250 years, from ascendancy to collapse. (40) It's not hard to do the math.

If Wheatley is right, and her extensively footnoted book is compelling, leaders of today are those who must be "willing to serve an inhumane, indecent time." (57) Our world today, exhibiting signs of two unfixable collapsing systems – our ecological system, and our complex human social systems, is as much in need of leaders than it ever has been, and the task of being a leader is, according to Wheatley, more difficult than it has even been. Yet Wheatley sees the way, and eloquently describes the characteristics of a leader today, as well as the characteristics of the organizations

they might lead. She introduces two terms in this book – Islands of Sanity, and Warriors for the Human Spirit, and offers an open-armed welcome into a community of leadership.

I have spent my life working with children and teachers, so as I read about Islands of Sanity, I immediately thought of schools full of joyful, curious children and wished for them all the support and encouragement we can offer. I thought of courageous teachers holding class in the subways beneath cities in Ukraine, and knew my wish was shared by many. As educators, we develop schools that, ideally, have the very characteristics Wheatley describes as Island of Sanity. She describes nurturing connection, relationship, and community. Islands of Sanity, she writes, are created by groups of people working together – collaborating - within a world that often feels insane. She counsels that expecting growth and change on a global level is not possible today, but that positive action is available to us locally, within our communities, as she repeats the Berkana Institute's mantra: "Whatever the problem, community is the answer." (247)

As we build our schools, and as their leaders, Wheatley invites us to become Warriors for the Human Spirit. Borrowing from the Shambala Buddhist tradition of Warriors who appear in times of dire need, she invites us to ask of ourselves: "What is needed here? And am I the right person to contribute to this need?" (310) As I read her description of the characteristics of Warriors for the Human Spirit, I imagine a job interview for a school leader which would ask questions like this: Do you have a vision of the goodness of the human spirit? In what ways might you nurture belonging within the school community? How do you share information?

(Wheatley counsels leaning into conversation and stories.) Can you persevere in the face of discouragement and conflict?

Like excellent books of any topic, *Who Do You Choose to Be?* left me with questions, and not just the one that is used for the title of this book, although that is perhaps my biggest question.

Who do I choose to be in my community, my family, my Islands of Sanity? I admit to being unable to live entirely without hope, and even wonder if being hopeful is part of the human DNA, just as Wheatley writes that the inevitable patterns of the rise and fall of advanced civilizations seems to be “the true DNA of our species” (11). But I have shifted the focus of my hope to more local happenings. Being a gardener, I can’t help hoping my hollyhocks will bloom this summer, or that my fig trees made it through the winter.

Here are some of the questions *Who Do You Choose to Be?* leaves with me.

I believe I can name Islands of Sanity in my life, but I wonder if they all have semi-permeable boundaries that allow, like healthy living systems, the exchange of ideas, and the inclusion of diverse people, or are they, instead, protective bubbles that seem to protect but instead, wall off growth?

As I stand outside a locked door waiting to be buzzed into my granddaughter’s school, I think of Wheatley’s definition of a sane leader as one who creates Islands of Sanity so that followers are “protected from the external environment” (38). I doubt locking school doors is all she referred to, but if not that, what are ways to protect the human spirit, especially as it develops within our youngest and most vulnerable? As I wait, I look forward to reading more about Islands of Sanity.

Do I consider myself a Warrior for the Human Spirit? In what ways? In what organizations? And if not, how might I nurture those qualities within myself? And, as Wheatley suggests, we ask: “What needs to be done, and am I the right person for this job?” (310)

I encourage you to pick up this book and to read it slowly, taking the time to absorb and ponder its message. Not everyone will have read all of Wheatley’s books and followed her work, but if you have, you will see that this book fits right onto the path. Despite sharing her grief and even fury in this book, Wheatley warmly invites us to join her in doing what is possible. She knows our planet is beautiful, generous, orderly, richly connected, and that nature makes sense. She knows that often humans in places of power simply chose to ignore that sense. However, Wheatley still believes humans have the potential to do meaningful work, even when the worst of human nature has done irreparable harm to our planet. In fact, she notes that difficult times often produce some of our most creative leaders, remarkably courageous individuals who are willing to sacrifice even their lives in the face of evil. We can all name several of these powerful Warriors of the Human Spirit. She writes: “Sane leadership is the commitment to create the conditions for the finest human capacities – generosity, creativity, kindness – to blossom protected from the external environment.” (38) As we take up the mantle of leadership, we are not alone.

References

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Author Bio

Kathryn Ross has been a Montessori educator for over 50 years. She received AMI training at the assistance-to-infancy level, and the 3-6 level, and also holds an AMS diploma at the primary level. She and her late husband founded the Mt. Sopris Montessori School in Carbondale, Colorado in 1982, where she taught for 25 years. She also taught in Philadelphia, PA, and has served as head of school at Children's Garden Montessori School, in Denver, Colorado. While in Denver, she served as the founding president of the Colorado Montessori Association. She served as an instructor at the Montessori Education Center of the Rockies for over 20 years and was part of the AMS faculty at Oklahoma City University, working with their sister program in Taipei, Taiwan.

Kathryn has a M.Ed. from Regis University with a focus on educational technology, as well as a M.Ed. in Montessori Integrative Learning from The Institute for Educational Studies (TIES) Her thesis for TIES won the AMS best Montessori-focused Master's thesis in 2009.

Since retiring from daily Montessori classroom work, Kathryn has focused her energy on serving on the TIES faculty, and learning what she can about gardening. She is both a Master Composter and Master Gardener. She is currently developing a native plant and vegetable garden in her new home in Stillwater, Oklahoma.