

Awakening the Human Spirit

A review of “Restoring Sanity – Practices to Awaken Generosity, Creativity & Kindness in Ourselves and Our Organizations”

Margaret Wheatley, 2024

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Abstract

Author, teacher, and school leader, Steven Arnold, reviews Margaret Wheatley's most recent publication “*Restoring Sanity -Practices to Awaken Generosity, Creativity & Kindness in Ourselves and Our Organizations.*”

Keywords: *restoring sanity, awakening kindness, awakening creativity, human spirit, islands of sanity, awakening generosity*

Introduction

Why wouldn't I dedicate a book focused on awakening the human spirit to all of us, eight billion spirits and counting?

So, I do.

From the beginning we are aware that Margaret Wheatley, has our best interests at heart. So much so, she has devoted her professional and personal life to the pursuit of understanding leadership to promote the human experience. Wheatley is already an accomplished author, and

this her 12th book, augments her status among the great and innovative thinkers of our time.

Leadership And The New Science

I first connected to her writing through the book *Leadership And The New Science - Discovering Order In A Chaotic World* (1992) In this book Wheatley paired the emerging field of management science, with the unlikely partner of complexity theory. The book still holds my attention, in its ability to link two emerging fields from data driven computer science, through to human resource management and leadership.

The notion of complexity is key to this high level of thinking.

A reviewer at the time wrote: *Review Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (1992)

We live in a time of chaos, rich in potential for new possibilities. A new world is being born. We need new ideas, new ways of seeing, and new relationships to help us now. New science—the new discoveries in biology, chaos theory, and quantum physics that are changing our understanding of how the world works—offers this guidance. It describes a world where chaos is natural, where order exists "for free." It displays the intricate webs of cooperation that connect us. It assures us that life seeks order but uses messes to get there.

This book will teach you how to move with greater certainty and easier grace into the new forms of organizations and communities that are taking shape. You'll learn that:

- *Relationships are what matters—even at the subatomic level*
- *Life is a vast web of interconnections where cooperation and participation are required*
- *Chaos and change are the only route to transformation*

In this expanded edition, Wheatley provides examples of how non-linear networks and self-organizing systems are flourishing in the modern world. In the midst of turbulence, Wheatley shows, we create work and lives rich in meaning.

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/270897.Leadership_and_the_New_Science

Time has moved on. However, perhaps the path of humanity is not so easily changed. Wheatley has since said "My great idealism [30 years ago]... assumed that ideas change the world. That's the false assumption of my early work."

<https://daveursillo.com/is-my-podcast-over/>

The Changing World

The World continues downward on a one-way spiral, and Wheatley has paid attention, as found in this transcript of an interview with Jed Diamond:

Many of the changes that we have brought about, including the destabilization of the climate, are not reversible. We will have to live with the consequences. But that does not mean there is nothing we can do. Here's what Meg says to those who are ready to hear the truth and feel called to do something constructive:

The perfect storm is here, created by the coalescence of climate and human-created catastrophes, insatiable greed, fear-based self-protection, escalating aggression and conflict, indifference for the well-being of others, and continuing uncertainty. As leaders dedicated to serving the causes and people we treasure, confronted by this unrelenting tsunami, what are we to do?

<https://menalive.com/warriors-for-the-human-spirit/>

So Wheatley, in her own admission, has changed tack. If you like, she was once the see-er and now she is the healer. Her perspective changed

through the recognition of the rhythms and rhymes and cycles and circles of life, the repeating pulses, and patterns, of the tidal rise and fall, each plotting the intimacy that humans have with Gaia. The connections humans have with their environment, and that all life communities face change. We are trapped in a linear model of purporting myths of progress and looking for answers from “technological majesty”. *As if we can figure it out!*

Islands Of Sanity

The new book, *“Restoring Sanity -Practices to Awaken Generosity, Creativity & Kindness in Ourselves and Our Organizations,”* shows an intellectual growth and change. Wheatley’s evolution is astounding moving from science to sanity, from knowledge to community, from seeing to healing - the book opens with a letter to the reader, an extract follows:

“To restore sanity by awakening the human spirit: We can only achieve this if we undertake the most challenging and meaningful work of our leader's lives: creating Islands of Sanity.”

-“Dear Reader” p xi.

Restoring Sanity takes a more instructive turn at the midpoint and provides a manual level template for producing the change as leaders which as she instructs the establishment of *Islands of Sanity*.

“Restoring sanity is the work of this time. I define sanity as that which creates possibility, behaviours that awaken our innate and glorious human qualities. Insane behavior is that which destroys possibility, that denies or ignores what we

humans are capable of”

<https://margaretwheatley.com/perseveretorestoresanity/>

The simple narrative style of the book gently entices the reader down what appears to be a comforting autumnal lane, the lane is colourful, and there are great warm patches of sunlight. The walk is calming, and pleasant, until the reader comes to understand the challenges within the text:

“The opposite of hope is not hopelessness, but fear” Wheatley.

The colour of the leaves clung to by the trees as the light and temperatures fade, represent the ideas that we have allowed ourselves to cling to, which ultimately have led us astray, and possibly to our own extinction. Even the sunlight - beams of hope, are slowly revealed to be an addictive intoxicant she calls Hopium.

Throughout the book, Wheatley gathers tantalising quotes.

“If you only look at the positive side of life, you’re going to miss half of it.”

From a poem by David White Quoted by Wheatley in interview with Dave Ursillo

<https://margaretwheatley.com/library/current-thinking/favorites/>

Wheatley deconstructs our previous approaches to leadership and problem solving. Her previous stance that the vision of enlightenment will come through understanding of complexity- now informed by indigenous and Eastern philosophies, evolves into the acceptance of the rhythms of life, and ultimately becomes, ‘who needs a hug?’. Wheatley recognises that We are in a cycle in history. It is not a question of change, but of

acceptance. Wheatley quotes the late American President “Do what you can, where you are, with what you have.” Teddy Roosevelt.

The Sharman in days past was both the future forecaster, ‘the seer’, and the medicinal touchstone, ‘the knower’, both warning of potential challenges, and providing cures. In her books, Wheatley plays both of these roles.

*“I used to ask, “What’s wrong? How can I fix it?” Then I realized the right question was: “What’s possible and who cares?”
Marvin Weisbord Author, consultant, OD elder” Restoring Sanity 203*

WARRIORS for the HUMAN SPIRIT

There are challenges within a text that covers this much ground. Wheatley has faced some opposition. There is also a societal cynical view of realism, an allergy to adversity. A dismissive critique of the realist as simply a pessimist. A craving of the celebrity happy-ever-after fairy tale success. Wheatley has worked hard to re-invigorate wisdom of times gone by, in this case inspired by teachings of the Shambhala buddhism warriors, which out of context can cause some misunderstandings, mixes the old and the new.

The Shambhala teachings cover art, society, and politics and the goal of creating an enlightened society. This is thought of not only as a social and political process but a practice requiring individuals to develop an awareness of the basic goodness and inherent dignity of themselves, of others, and of the everyday details of the world around them. This is

facilitated by cultivating gentleness and bravery.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shambhala_Training

Wheatley, it seems, is firmly placed in many world views.

This warrior approach speaks of a prophecy

“There comes a time when all of life is in danger, and hangs by the frailest of threads; Great Barbarian powers, have arisen which threaten one another with weapons of mass destruction. It is at that time” as the prophecy states that, “the warriors appear”, The warriors will have two ‘weapons’: compassion and insight”

Wheatley is clear that both are needed.

-Wheatley Ursillo interview.

Are we ready for what is to come?

However, ever practical Wheatley echoes the refrain “*Whatever the problem, community is the answer*”. This phrase becomes a comforter, which somehow returns the disorientated reader back in their own world of real problems to solve.

Wheatley reminds us to question, following her mantra – *what is needed here?*

Cycladic Images

The layout of the book follows a simple pattern: pages of text, mixed with a generous array of meaningful quotes superimposed over carefully constructed images. The quotes are collectables, useful acorns for our pockets from our meander down the country lane, which later turn into oaks of wisdom.

The images themselves have a story, and a meaning.

“All imagery in this book is taken from wall murals discovered on the Greek island of Thera (now Santorini). These rooms were painted during the height of Cycladic culture, somewhere around 2000 BCE. This glorious, deeply Feminine culture was destroyed when the volcano at its center erupted about 1500 BCE.” *Wheatley*

Just as the writings themselves provide a clear arc of thought and development in leadership thinking, so too is the 4000-year-old history of the location of the original images, which has a story to tell of the twin states of human supernatural and supernatural:

The later Greeks called these islands Cycladic, from the Greek *kyklos* (circle), as they encircle Delos, the sacred birthplace of the Olympian twins Artemis, goddess of nature, fertility, and childbirth, and Apollo, God of music, medicine, and the sun.

[\(Who Were the Early Cycladic Figures? | The Metropolitan Museum of Art\)](#)

Restoring Sanity contains much to ponder, even as it may appear a simple read. It holds a strong message to all of us, as we face the future - hopefully holding hands together.

Epilogue

The final words here reinforce Wheatley’s commitment to community, her choice for her own epitaph, the origins of which she credits with the mists of time.

We were together. I forget the rest.
(*Wheatley et al.*)

Author Bio

Steven Arnold is a Montessori educator and a member of TIES faculty. TIES is an online Masters Programme offering both Montessori Integrated Learning, and Integrated Learning degrees. He is a secondary school principal at Auckland Montessori College, in Auckland, New Zealand, previously a Senior University lecturer at AUT (New Zealand). Steven works in the Montessori world where peace is a core concept. We embrace peace, and we share a positive outlook on humanity. Steven first came across Wheatley’s work in “Leadership and the New Science” and has been an enthusiast in the world of education and complexity ever since. Steven has been a teacher of all ages from childhood through to adulthood. Relationships, Ecologies and interactions make the world a complex and exciting place.