

# WHO DO YOU CHOOSE TO BE?

## AN INVITATION TO THE NOBILITY OF LEADERSHIP

*by Margaret Wheatley*

Several years ago, in the face of irreversible global problems and the devolution of leadership, I began to challenge every leader I met with these questions: Who do you choose to be for this time? Are you willing to use whatever power and influence you have to create *islands of sanity* that evoke and rely on our best human qualities to create, relate, and persevere? Will you consciously and bravely choose to reclaim leadership as a noble profession, one that creates possibility and humaneness in the midst of increasing fear and turmoil?

We live in *VUCA World*, defined by the U.S. military as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.

Every day we experience disruption, swerves in direction, short-term decisions that undo the future, propaganda, slander, lies, blame, denial, violence. Communities and nations are disrupted by terrorist acts, cumbersome bureaucracies cannot deliver services, people retreat in self-protection and lash out in fear, angry citizens strike back at their governments, leaders stridently promise security and outcomes that they know can't be delivered, tensions between

people reach hateful proportions, and confusion and exhaustion sink us into despair and cynicism. This is the age of retreat: from one another, from values that held us together, from ideas and practices that encouraged inclusion, from faith in leaders, from belief in basic human goodness.

This cycle is in process and will continue: systems that are failing now will continue to deteriorate. Uncertainty, confusion, and fear will continue to predominate. People will withdraw further into self-protection and strike out at those different from themselves. Corrupt leaders will intensify their false promises, and people will subjugate themselves to their control.

Probably the greatest sadness, especially among activists, is to recognize that the global problems of this time—poverty, economics, climate change, violence, dehumanization—cannot be solved globally. Even though the solutions have long been available, the conditions for implementation are not: political courage, collaboration across national boundaries,

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compassion that supersedes self-interest and greed. (These are not only the failings of our specific time in history; they occur in all civilizations at the end of their life cycles.) Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical "On Care for Our Common Home" (*Laudato Si*) was a brilliant systemic analysis of causes and solutions to climate change. But these solutions require a level of cooperation between nation-states, dissolution of the huge egos of those in power, and sacrifice from developed nations that is not happening even though the consequences of self-protection rather than intense cooperation are terrifyingly clear.

This world is depressing to contemplate, but it also is the truth of where we are. As leaders, we have a choice. We can courageously and willingly step forward to serve, or we can withdraw into denial and self-protection. We can be *Warriors for the Human Spirit*, leaders willing to defend and support people, leaders who remember and value what humans are capable of creating together. We need to turn our attention away from issues beyond our control and work with the people around us who are yearning for good leadership. We need to engage them in work that is within reach, that matters to them. **We need to use our influence and power to create *islands of sanity* in the midst of this destructive sea. We can use our sphere of influence, however large or small, to do as Theodore Roosevelt**

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enjoined us: "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

## Leadership on an Island of Sanity

I know it is possible for leaders to use their power and influence, their insight and compassion, to lead people back to an understanding of who we are as human beings, to create the conditions for our basic human qualities of generosity, contribution, community, and love to be evoked no matter what. I know it is possible to experience grace and joy in the midst of tragedy and loss. I know it is possible to create islands of sanity in the midst of wildly disruptive seas. I know it is possible because I have worked with leaders over many years in places that knew chaos and breakdown long before this moment. These extraordinary leaders, with great effort, dedication and personal sacrifice, created islands of sanity where good work still got done and where people enjoyed healthy relationships in the midst of chaotic conditions, fierce opposition, heart-breaking defeats, lack of support, isolation, loneliness, and slander.

And I have studied enough history to know that such leaders always arise when they are most needed. Now it's our turn.

**An island of sanity can be a literally bounded group, such as a team, function, or community. It can also be an interior space bounded by our integrity: we know who we are, what we value, and what we stand for.**

Sanity is in treating people, as the great activist Grace Lee Boggs said, as human human beings. (The technical name for our species has another double descriptor: *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Seems we need the reminder.) Humans being human are wonderfully talented. Generally, people are internally motivated when they believe in what they're doing. We are naturally creative when we want to contribute. All people want to belong and feel part of a community. And we want our children to be safe and healthy. It is for these reasons that high engagement leadership works so well: it engages people for a cause they care about, and relies on their hearts and minds to find

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ways forward to solving their own problems. This is the dynamic of self-organization, life's wondrous process for creating order without control. People determine their activities and responses from a clear, coherent sense of who the organization is, what it values, and what it's intent on accomplishing.

Even as destructive dynamics tear us apart and take over our culture, we still have life's creative and order-seeking dynamics available to us. We are living systems and we need to take advantage of this! Living systems are open systems; they partner with their environments, exchanging information and resources, processing that information, and then self-determining how best to respond in sensible and sustainable ways. It is this awareness and responsiveness to change that gives living systems their life force. Instead of wearing down as machines and closed systems do, they stay vibrant and adaptive, avoiding rigidity and death.

The work of sane leaders is to ensure that the organization, community, or team stays open to information and uses that information to make realistic and intelligent responses. In our cyber-speed lives, people can't help but hunker down as the only means to get through endless tasks and demands. But the busier we are, the more we close down to everything else going on, thus assuring our future demise. One result is obvious in our rapid-fire approach to solving problems that succeed only in creating more problems. Eric Sevareid, a famed newscaster, commented that "the cause of problems is solutions."

As we speed up everything, we can't help but descend into orthodoxy and certainty. We do what we've always done, using the same perceptual lenses, unable to notice what the environment now demands, what new information is of importance, uninterested in the impact we create through our short-sighted, frantic decisions.

This is where good leadership is needed. Leaders must reclaim the very thing our culture has so casually given away: Time to think together and learn from our experiences. Without question, this is the most critical act of leadership. It is how we restore sanity and possibility to our work within our sphere of influence. It is how we work with the dynamics of living systems and use our intelligence in life-preserving ways as all other species do.

## Questions for Opening to the Environment

Here are questions that are guaranteed to engender excellent conversations and critical insights. These questions require time. If you feel powerless to create time to think, stop reading now. You're too busy anyway. But if you want to create health and possibility, if you are seeking to empower staff, to raise the level of intelligence available for decisions, and to create a true sense that "we're all in this together," then please read on.

These questions are intended to open us to the information we've ignored, overlooked, or just been too busy to notice. As you and colleagues answer them, think in terms of trend lines. How would you have answered these a few years ago in contrast to how you answer them now?

*Quality of relationships.* From a few years ago to now and looking ahead a few years, how are people relating to each other? Has trust increased or declined? Are people more self-protective or less so? Are we more willing to be there for one another, to go the extra mile, or not? What's the evidence for any of our answers?

*Fear versus love.* Many believe, myself included, that these are two ends of the spectrum of human

emotions. Consider where you see examples of each. Also look for patterns: which reaction, fear or love, is more likely in specific situations or with specific issues? Are either of these emotions coming to dominate as time goes on? In your leadership, what role does fear play? Are you becoming more fearful? Are you using fear to motivate people?

*Quality of thinking.* How difficult is it to find time to think, personally and with others? How would you assess the level of learning in the organization? Are you applying what you've learned? Is long-term thinking still happening (in conversations, decision making, planning)? Do you consider the future? Has it made an impact?

*Willingness to contribute.* What invitations to contribute have you extended and why? How have people responded? Ongoing, what are your expectations for people being willing to step forward? Are those higher or lower than a few years ago?

*The role of money.* How big an influence, as a percentage of other criteria, do financial issues have on decisions? Has money become a motivator for you? For staff? Has selfishness replaced service? What's your evidence?

*Crisis management.* Any incident is an extraordinary opportunity for learning, not only relevant to the incident, but also to the organization's culture. What do you do when something goes wrong? Do leaders retreat or gather people together? How well did people communicate during the crisis? Where did trust or distrust factor in? Were your values evident in behaviors and the choices you made?

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## Leaders Who Persevere No Matter What

I have worked with extraordinary leaders for more than forty years and been richly blessed by what I've learned from them. These leaders have created enlivened places that resist the disorder happening around them by using their hearts and minds well and by relying on the strength of their community. Every single one of them is grounded in an ethic that puts people at the center of all decisions and actions. Their unshakable faith in human capacity is continually rewarded by acts of creativity, generosity, and compassion from those they lead.

In the tragedies of the refugee crisis, in the complexities of a broken health care system, in communities torn apart by fear and hatred, in exhausted professionals who find new ways to serve—everywhere there are communities, programs, and organizations that are learning, adapting, and creating effective islands of sanity that are making a true and positive contribution. But it is important to keep their work in perspective even as we are inspired by their leadership.

These leaders cannot prevent the unraveling of our global civilization, and that is not their ambition. They know they can make a profound difference locally, in the lives of people in their communities and organizations.

They also know that their successful initiatives that took such dedication and endurance to create are vulnerable to the destructive politics and behaviors too familiar in today's culture. At any moment, they or their programs may be swept away or severely hampered by thoughtless or venal political decisions. There are no assurances they will achieve long-term impact or be rewarded for success from the leaders above them who are possessed by fear and panic.

And yet they persevere because they are committed to doing the best they can for people. They have learned that nearly all people desire to do good work in good relationships with their colleagues. In full awareness of the trials and tribulations that will not cease, they offer their leadership skills to create islands of sanity, places

of possibility and sanctuary where the destructive dynamics of this time are kept at bay.

They continue to persevere in the face of obstacles, setbacks, slander, and hate. They have made a choice to do the right thing, clear about their values, connected to those they lead, unwilling to succumb to fear or aggression. They are committed to staying in their work, exemplars of integrity and possibility no matter what is occurring in the external environment.

This is difficult work whose rewards are not in some distant future. Right here, in the moment, we find satisfaction in what we've made possible for those we serve. We've done work we value with people we care about and for causes to which we are committed. Even if we fail to create positive change, we can be satisfied that we did the work well independent of outcomes. One CEO voiced her resolve to continue in spite of grueling opposition and pressures to give up: "We do good work because we do good work."

This article is adapted from her Margaret's book (June 2017), *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality| Claiming Leadership| Restoring Sanity*.



*Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is cofounder and president of a global nonprofit, The Berkana Institute ([www.berkana.org](http://www.berkana.org)), an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored nine books, beginning with the classic *Leadership and the New Science* (1992). She has created a website rich in resources, and her numerous articles are available for free downloads at [www.margaretwheatley.com](http://www.margaretwheatley.com).*