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Book Review

Wheatley, M. J. (2005). *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Bonnie McKay Harmer

Readers familiar with Margaret Wheatley's 1992 best-seller, *Leadership and the New Science*, will discover that her most recent book, *Finding Our Way* (2005), initially offers similar food for thought, but it is delivered in a more practical, less theoretical manner. Midway through the book, *Finding Our Way* takes an unpredictable turn in the road, eventually taking readers through Wheatley's personal journey of frustration, fear and hopelessness, finally to resurface in a very different place. Wheatley's writing flows easily with compelling imagery and personal insights that are apt to attract a broad general audience.

In her 1992 book, Wheatley beckoned readers to examine how recent discoveries in quantum physics and chaos theory were applicable to organizations and leadership. She unveiled discoveries within the 'new science,' including the ability of highly complex systems to adapt and self-organize. Then, highlighting the incongruence between the natural order—the way in which complex systems self-organize in science versus how human constructed organizations have formed in Western culture, she called for a paradigm shift in organizational leadership. This paradigm shift was aimed at finding a simpler way to lead organizations, seeking a way to partner with naturally occurring patterns rather than controlling or conquering them. One criticism of *Leadership and the New Science* was that it did not provide any directives to leaders to help them operationalize her new leadership paradigm. To be fair to Wheatley, she had clearly stipulated that her intention in the 1992 publication was not to provide such a book.

[*Leadership and the New Science*] is not a book of conclusions, cases, or exemplary practices of excellent companies. It is deliberately not that kind of book... I no longer believe that organizations can be changed by imposing a model developed elsewhere... the new physics cogently explains that there is no objective reality out there waiting to reveal its secrets. There are no recipes or formulae, no checklists or advice that describe 'reality.'

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There is only what we create through our engagement with others and with events. Nothing really transfers; everything is always new and different and unique to each of us. . . ." (Wheatley, 1992, p. 7)

Thirteen years later, it appears Wheatley has had a change of heart and is now quite willing to engage with the reader in a more personal manner, sharing conclusions and offering numerous examples of exemplary leadership. In *Finding Our Way*, the reader is immediately struck by Wheatley's candor, including her confession that in *Leadership and the New Science* she used science "to get the attention of those who could hear this message in no other form. 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... I am less focused on persuasion and more engaged in the telling of a story that gives hope and possibility to us all" (p. 16).

Finding Our Way presents a more practical picture of the steps to be taken to move individuals, groups, organizations and communities toward a simpler, more harmonious, self-organized existence based on living systems theory. In *Finding Our Way*, Wheatley's writing remains unpretentious and informal—often inviting readers to take a moment to reflect on their own experiences as she illustrates particular concepts. At other times, she writes with an almost spiritual quality. She blends poems, artwork, and short essays into the book, giving readers opportunities to read it in short increments without losing the flavor in the process.

Wheatley indicates in the introduction to *Finding Our Way*, that each of the essays in the book (all of which have been previously published in a journal, magazine or book) has been updated, revised or substantially added to prior to inclusion in this book. She emphasizes that this publication is not just a collection of articles, but it is actually "two stories" (p. 3) that present the story of the new leadership in a different manner. Acknowledging the book as two discrete stories may have been Wheatley's attempt to account for the dramatic change in tone and approach that occurs in the book. Perhaps it was an attempt to prepare the reader for the lack of a cohesive whole or the redundancy between some of the essays? The first 'story' (part

of the book could be considered a guidebook providing leaders with practical examples of how to implement the living systems theory. The second story of the book contains essays that are more reflective, introspective and much more personal in nature.

She describes the first story as the description and application of the new living systems paradigm. This first section familiarizes the reader with the concepts of self-organizing; changing, creating, learning and adapting that form the foundation of living systems theory. A variety of essays, poems and text address topics such as how leaders shift from control to order; how leaders can evoke the innate creativity of others; how healthy communities can be created and how leaders can lead when change is out of control or when their integrity is threatened. These essays, according to Wheatley, all represent her current thoughts regarding leadership within the living systems paradigm.

Wheatley's first essay provides an overview for those unfamiliar with living systems theory.

[The predominant Western model has viewed] the universe as a grand, clockwork machine... our bodies were seen as the ultimate machines . . . In most of our endeavors—in science, health, management, self-help—the focus is on creating better-functioning machines...The language and thinking is mechanistic. When we [humans] created this story of complete dominion over matter, we also brought in control's unwelcome partner, fear. Once we are intent on controlling something, we feel afraid when we meet with resistance. Since nothing is as controllable as we hope, we soon become entangled in a cycle of exerting control, failing to control, exerting harsher control, failing again, and panicking. The fear that arises from this cycle is notable in many of us. It's especially notable in our leaders . . . the world becomes scarier as we see daily the results of our ignorance and confront our true powerlessness. (p. 18)

Wheatley contends that when the inadequacies of the mechanistic model become more apparent, more individuals, groups and communities will seek out a new approach, a new story. They will choose a simpler way of organizing; a way which respects and trusts the natural order in ways that are simpler and more organic. Wheatley invites others to journey with her and to retell what she calls the "new story":

The certainty of cycles, the triumph of order over chaos, the diversity born from life's creativity, the innate artistry of each of us, the enduring beauty of the human spirit- these are what I write about. From Minoan times till now, the story hasn't changed. But it is important that we reclaim it and retell it before we are swept away by eruptions of our own making. (p. 8)

There are numerous examples provided of successful leadership within the new story, yet virtually all of these successes are in developing countries, not in Western culture. Nonetheless, these examples do celebrate some wonderful outcomes that have occurred through new forms of leadership. Wheatley shares the story of a South African university that has been created by a group of volunteers who set out to provide education for several thousand students from South Africa's poorest rural communities. Each entering class, of approximately one thousand students, is selected by the current students. The students rely on the deep communitarian values of Africa. All one thousand students take the same class together, the same exam, they live together, cook together, even go job hunting together. No one ever struggles alone; everything they do is within the community. They also spread their leadership in innovative ways. Wheatley recounts her visit at the CIDA University, where she met a group of thirty students who were trained in HIV/AIDS awareness. They had just returned from a four-day visit to outlying villages where each student had pledged to provide HIV/AIDS education to one thousand individuals per student. These thirty students had successfully educated thirty thousand villagers in only four days. The CIDA students outperform traditional students academically and in the workplace. Wheatley added, "They radiate belief in themselves and their potential to serve their nation" (p. 165).

The next section of the book, which Wheatley refers to as the second story, is presented in chronological order. By presenting this series of essays in order, she hoped the reader would discern how her emphasis has shifted, how her topics have changed and evolved over time. There is a definite change in emotional tone in these essays as Wheatley moves from the hopeful, inspired messages at the beginning toward an increasingly frustrated plea of desperation. One of the first essays in this second story is titled "Living our Interconnectedness." This essay begins with the following message of hope:

The dense and tangled web of life—the interconnected nature of reality—now reveals itself on a daily basis . . . think about how much you've learned about people, nations and ways of life . . . We're beginning to realize that to live peacefully together on this planet, we need to be in new relationships, especially with those far distant from us. (p. 204).

This optimistic attitude and celebration of the new shared meanings does not last into the next essays. Wheatley regrettably reports that the heightened uncertainty in the world within recent years has negatively impacted organizational leadership. In her opinion, this has spurred leaders to retreat to

their conventional command and control approach. Improvements which had occurred in the 1990s, spurred by new understandings in human motivation, learning organizations and innovation, have been quelled or extinguished. Wheatley includes an essay called "Raising our Children" where she gives examples of the "disturbing" indicators of stress and anxiety disorders in children. She contends that our society is acculturating children to be constantly busy; "Children's lives have become miniature versions of our own lives...children no longer need to wait until adulthood to feel overcommitted and overwhelmed" (p. 224).

Wheatley's desperation is foreshadowed in the beginning of the book as she announces, "Today, we need many more of us storytellers. The need is urgent; because people are forgetting there is any alternative to the deadening leadership that daily increases in vehemence. It's truly a dark time because people are losing faith in themselves and each other and forgetting how wonderful humans can be, how much hope we feel when we work well together on things we care about" (pp. 4-5).

The final essays of the book are described by Wheatley as being deeply personal, yet it is doubtful that readers will be prepared for the disclosures in her closing essays. They push beyond the previous nudges for reform; to a darker, lonely, hopeless place. These essays acknowledge feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty that are discomfiting. They force readers to join the author, wandering through the darkness, searching for new meanings and any glimmers of hope as leaders in this difficult new reality. Wheatley's poignant words of self-doubt penetrate these personal essays in an incredibly revealing manner. In her essay titled, "Beyond Hope or Fear", Wheatley begins;

As the world grows ever darker, I've been forcing myself to think about hope. I watch as people far from me and near me experience more grief and suffering. Aggression and violence have moved into relationships, personal and global... Decisions are made from insecurity and fear. How is it possible to feel hopeful, to look forward to a more positive future? . . . I am struggling to understand how I might contribute to reversing this descent into fear and sorrow, what I might do to help restore hope to the future. In the past, it was easier to believe in my own effectiveness. If I worked hard, with good colleagues and good ideas, we could make a difference. But now, I sincerely doubt that. Yet without hope that my labor will produce results, how can I keep going? If I have no belief that my visions can become real, where will I find the strength to persevere? (p. 261)

This last portion of the book presents the reader with confusion and uncertainty. Since Wheatley herself appears to have lost hope that her endeavor will lead to the outcomes that she, and presumably the reader,

desire; what lies ahead? What happens when the leader's hope is challenged? Writing with literary prowess, a tension arises in the reader when it is clear that Wheatley herself has become skeptical; a sense of urgency and a genuine desire for resolution is evoked in the reader—yet uncertainty prevails.

With the support of friends, whom she cites with gratitude, Wheatley challenges herself to journey through her despair, to gain new meanings, new knowledge and new appreciation for the emotions she is experiencing. She explores the relationship between hope and fear. She is reminded by a friend of the Buddhist teaching that hopelessness is not the opposite of hope; fear is. She discovers that when hope exists, fear is always present, ready to usurp one's confidence if the desired outcomes are not achieved. As Wheatley dwells with this realization, and allows the feeling of hopelessness to flood over her, she discovers that by replacing hope with hopelessness, the fear is abated. Without fear, without feeling a need to achieve specific measurable outcomes, but to carry on her work, to lead by sharing the 'new story' because of its inherent worth and truth, she transcends. She writes,

We are consoled and strengthened by being together. We don't need specific outcomes. We can live beyond hope or fear. All we need is each other. Hopelessness has surprised me with the gift of patience. As I abandon the pursuit of effectiveness and watch my anxiety fade, patience appears . . . This is how I want to journey through this time of increasing uncertainty. Groundless, hopeless, insecure, patient, clear. And together. (pp. 263-264)

At the outset of *Finding Our Way*, Wheatley invites readers to join her on a journey. The journey begins quite predictably, providing the exemplars that readers have sought. She provides relevant examples to illustrate creative, adaptive and empowering approaches to leadership that nurture and celebrate human capacities. Many of these examples are from enterprises in developing countries where the structure is more accommodating to the new leadership paradigm. The second part of the journey is very different; it is an emotional trek through difficult, uncharted territory. Yet, the journey is worthwhile; culminating in a rich new perspective that is liberating, leaving us in a radically different place than where the journey began.

It is one of the great ironies of our age that we created organizations to constrain our problematic human nature, and now the only thing that can save these organizations is a full appreciation of the expansive capacities of us humans. (p. 21)

References

Wheatley, M. J. (1992). *Leadership and the new science: Learning about organization from an orderly universe*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.