

# Who Do We Choose to Be?

Facing Reality ~ Claiming Leadership ~  
Restoring Sanity (2017)

by Margaret Wheatley

A call to leaders—to create  
"Islands of Sanity" in the midst of  
a raging destructive sea.

Many of us feel that we have  
no choice but to protect ourselves  
from the increasing harshness and  
horrors by withdrawing, staying  
busy, suppressing emotions (despair,  
grief, powerlessness)

Some seek comfort by denial,  
creating personal bubbles to shut  
the world out.

Her invitation—Why she is  
summoning leaders for this  
time as things fall apart:

→ The energy spent on self-  
protection can be converted  
into positive energy.

→ Facing reality is an empowering  
act—it can liberate our mind  
and heart to discern how best  
to use our power and influence  
in service for this time.

→ Denial robs us of the very  
energy we need to be good  
leaders.

→ Now is the time we need to  
prepare for the chaos cycle—  
for when the systems (naturally)  
fall apart because of changes  
in the environment, and we  
abandon our old ways and  
respond to the new.

— Either it can reorganize using  
new belief and structures that  
work well or it can insist on the old ways  
and die.

Premise: to engage with reality  
and face it bravely

Where  
we  
are

How we got  
here

Her call:

For leadership to be a NOBLE  
profession that contributes  
to the common good.

③

Her stance:

Both rebirth and death  
are possible as an outcome  
through the chaos

Her conclusion:

But we can't get there  
from here without  
traversing through the  
falling apart stage. ↗

We cannot simply leap  
to new ways of being;  
first we must prepare for  
disintegration & chaos.

WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?

In this critical moment?

In  
denial?

④

Self

preservation?

Defending  
status  
quo?

Caught  
in the  
"ambush  
of  
hope"?

She asks leaders:

Are you willing to use whatever  
power and influence you have to  
create islands of sanity that  
wake and rely on our BEST  
human qualities to create,  
produce, and persevere?

Who do we choose to be?  
Because we CAN choose.

## Beliefs:

- ✓ 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. (5)
  - ✓ The chaos cycle predicts this has to happen, that things must fall apart.
  - ✓ Human history documents in astoundingly clear detail the pattern of collapse that all civilizations go through.
- see Glubb + Tainter's research

## AND...

- ✓ It is possible to experience grace and joy in the midst of tragedy and loss.
- ✓ It is possible to create islands of sanity in the midst of wildly disruptive seas.
- ✓ Leaders who know how to move through chaos and breakdown tend to arise when they are most needed. (6)
- ✓ It's tough to take this in and strong emotions will arise.

# Two Lenses

1. The New Science of Living Systems

A powerful explainer of human behavior and the world we inhabit

- ✓ We are alive
- ✓ We inhabit a living planet
- ✓ We are subject to the dynamics of living systems whether we acknowledge them or not.

\* New Science revealed, through decades of experimentation + evidence, that living systems organize using dynamics that include self-organizing based on identity, relationships woven together in complex networks, an inherent order displayed in chaos + complexity, the role of shared meaning.

2. The Pattern of Collapse in Complex Civilizations

It's remarkably consistent, describing how humans behave down to specific behaviors

the study of history is that we humans fail to learn from history

to learn about this pattern is at once very troubling and very relieving

## \* 6 Stages of a Civilization's Growth and Collapse

1. The age of pioneers
2. The age of conquest
3. The age of commerce
4. The age of affluence
5. The age of intellect
6. The age of decadence

\* Source: Sir John Glubb studied 13 empires, same pattern for each. Takes 10 generations (250 years) for each. We are here

see more



## Age of decadence (Stage 6)

- ✓ after too long a period of wealth and power, empires decline in identical ways
- ✓ Frivolity, cynicism, pessimism, narcissism, consumerism, materialism, fatalism, nihilism, fanaticism, and other negative behaviors and attitudes suffuse the population (9)
- ✓ politics is increasingly corrupt, life increasingly unjust
- ✓ A cabal of insiders accrues wealth and power at the expense of the citizenry—fostering a fatal opposition of interests between haves and have nots
- ✓ worships celebrities instead of divinities—the majority lives for bread + circuses
- ✓ throws off social + moral restraints
- ✓ shirks duties but insists on entitlements.

Danger: getting caught in the "ambush of hope"—where the reality of our situation is laid out in stark detail, but then there is the need to say something hopeful, even though it contradicts the argument.

↙ I have no interest in grasping after or reviving possibilities that have already passed  
—we think we're special (10)

## Danger: The False Promise of Progress or Olinear

### The Myth of Progress

We assume that human societies and our species are on an upward evolutionary path, always improving—yet concept of "progress" is recent addition to human thought. Other cultures organize on a cycle. we're linear

# Notes on concept of hope

"Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something <sup>is</sup> worth doing no matter How it turns out."

Vaclav Havel, Czech leader

I have been encouraging people to explore the place beyond hope and fear for more than 2 decades

I've learned that it's the **HOTTEST** hot button among us activists. HOPE is the bedrock motivator of our work.

My experience is that we think the opposite of HOPE is DEPAIR and because we so desperately want to be of service we do everything we can to avoid falling into the abyss of despair.

# invitation to leaders: #1 Competancy

Learn to spend time in the **Dwelling Mind** as an alternative to the Rational mind

all about fixing and rushing to action to quickly figure out a response

\* See SANE leadership pg 19

this is a very human approach to dealing with uncertainty and strong emotions

this will support the emergence of clarity  
we allow the profound discomfort to arise from difficult emotions and information  
Asks us to tune into what's going on and allow Grief and rage to be present

(12) given time + space to combine + recombine, it will self-organize. Asks us to WELCOME everything: thoughts, feelings, sensations then: breakthrough! Ah ha!

## Notes on Hope

We cling to hope to prevent the fall.

The times we're at the edge of the abyss of despair... overcome by bad news, trapped, no where to run, no where to hide, no exit, just screams of outrage into the black silence.

I have learned from these times at the edge.

✓ I don't need to cheer myself up or inflate myself with optimism and resolve. (13)

✓ I don't need to ignore my emotions and just get back to work.

✓ I need to accept where I am and just stay there for a while.

✓ I'm not going to jump AND I'm not going to turn away.

✓ I'm going to find my ground right here, staring into this darkness.

✓ and slowly, without hope, without fear, clarity begins to dawn.

✓ This is what is.

✓ I know who I aspire to be.

✓ I know what to do.

✓ I get on with doing what I can, where I am, with those who are with me.

Long ago I realized that the efforts to stay hopeful are a waste of time + energy. Hope is not an innocent motivator. It's bipolar: fear is its other nature. Everytime we get lifted up by a hoped-for outcome, we get dragged down when we don't succeed. Hope then Fear. The endless cycle.

(14)

↖ heretical stance!



Hope is a filter we willingly  
place on reality,

instead of  
noticing what is

"Don't  
expect  
applause"

Hmmm...

We obscure it  
with our  
needs and  
dreams, with  
our eyes.

15

When I don't,  
I notice the  
world beyond  
what I want it  
to be, free of me,  
free of hope + fear.

When we move beyond the  
filters of what we hope for,  
we can see what needs to  
be done - RIGHT action -  
and act appropriately.  
We can act with  
compassion and insight.

The place beyond hope + fear



✓ You're called into spontaneous  
action by something in a  
situation - and you act  
from this place without  
calculating costs and  
benefits

16

This is the definition of  
courage: actions that spring  
from an open heart  
without premeditation

hopeless + fearless

You did what had to be  
done as it appeared in that  
moment.

Courage is the  
capacity to confront  
what can be imagined



## Where we are: Now

- ✓ For the first time in history, humans are changing the global environment rather than adapting to it.
- ✓ Our belief in never-ending progress is fueled by our inexplicable arrogance that
- ⑪ we can supersede the laws of the universe
- ✓ In our arrogance, we believe we can use our superior intelligence, changing history, ~~not~~ bound by time.
- ✓ We believe we are at the height of human evolution rather than collapse
- on the brink of
- ✓ We are ignoring scientific laws, acting as Masters of The Universe, asserting we can invent anything we want to suit ourselves.

- ✓ This is not the behavior of a living system interacting skillfully with its environment. This is hubris of ahistorical proportions and we are failing miserably, as you may have noted.
- ✓ We can no longer solve the global problems of this time at large-scale levels: poverty, ⑫ economics, climate change, violence, dehumanization. Even though the solutions have been there for a very long time, they require conditions to implement [that we don't possess]
- ✓ These are not the failings of our specific only time in history, they occur in all civilizations at the end of their life cycle.

## \* SANE Leadership

What is it?

It is the unshakable faith in people's capacity to be generous, creative, and kind.

✓ Not blinded by the false promise of progress—see the dire state with clear eyes & an open heart

(19)

✓ Don't complain for what's been lost, succumb to grief, give up, cocoon in protective bubbles

✓ We acknowledge where we are and step forward to serve

✓ open to what is, not what you hope or fear.

✓ Cyclical orientation, Not linear

this is no longer available at the global level. there, the pattern of collapse is manifesting with astonishing speed and accuracy.

But within our sphere of influence "island of sanity" there is much we can do.

(20)

✓ Understand the forces at work (myth of progress, ambush of hope, culture focussed on individual freedom, not common good)

✓ An ever deepening faith (in something more than self)

✓ Hold onto our best human qualities (connection, empathy)