

*An echo that turns itself into many voices, into a network of voices that, before the deafness of
Power,*

*opts to speak to itself, knowing itself to be one and many,
acknowledging itself to be equal in its desire to listen and be listened to,
recognizing itself as diverse in the tones and levels of voices forming it.*

— the Zapatistas
2nd Declaration of La Realidad

Section Four: Growing Hope for the Future

Restoring Hope to the Future Through Critical Education of Leaders

Margaret Wheatley

This is a dark age, when everything must justify its existence in terms of how it benefits the economy. The economy is no longer seen as the means to create just and good societies; it has become the end in itself. Nowhere is this clearer than in the field of education. We educate students so they can get jobs; we collect statistics that demonstrate the monetary benefits of education to the individual; we increasingly focus schools and higher education on training, teaching those subjects defined as important by the workplace. As with all other aspects of modern life in the era of globalization, education has become just one sector of the economy.

But stretching back over millennia, education has always been the means to change society, to create new ideas and practices, and therefore new futures. And in the 20th century, the practice and theory of *Critical Education* demonstrated how learning can lead to revolutions without excessive violence. Paulo Freire demonstrated this in his work with people who couldn't read, who allegedly were incapable of analytic thinking. People in the poorest communities in South and North America quickly became skilled thinkers once they saw how reading and analysis gave them the means to fight back against their poverty. Freire's work teaches the power of *people learning in community* in order to change their world.

This is my vision of a learning society — places where people, in their natural communities (geographic and/or by interests), have the skill and means to understand the dynamics that are creating their current state, and also use that learning to act on their world to change it.

During the past year, as I've been increasingly distressed over how most human endeavor is being usurped by the economy, I returned to the work of Paulo Freire, Cesar Chavez, and other Latin American revolutionaries. They have helped me determine what I can do to try and reverse the destructive and dehumanizing trajectory created by the New Economy. I now believe we can change the direction of the future by developing critical thinking in communities around the world. Critical thinking is what's required, and this is a skill easily developed in all people. Wherever we live, we need to create local learning societies where people can think together, perceive and feel what's going on, and then decide what actions they will take to change current realities. This skill needs to be developed in thousands of communities simultaneously, and then we need to weave their learnings together into a collective global intelligence.

I would like to describe how my colleagues and I are working with this approach, to change the values and practices of most organizations.

When I feel brave enough to say it (which I do now) my new work is to create a grass-roots revolution among local leaders everywhere. Along with many exceedingly dedicated colleagues around the world, I am working to establish leadership circles in local communities everywhere. We believe that if leaders can meet regularly and talk about their practices, their concerns, their hopes, that they will develop enough clarity and courage to stand up to the pressures of globalization and act as leaders who know how to support and nourish the human spirit and all of life.

It's important for me to state at the outset that we have a rather revolutionary definition of 'leader'. *We believe that a leader is "anyone who wants to help at this time."* These are not do-gooders, saviours, or those who simply write a check to solve someone else's problems. These are local people, in their communities, who want to help change things. We meet these people everywhere — of all ages and in all communities and professions. It can be a mother who wants her children's school to change; a local nurse who wants clean water in the many villages she serves; a teen-ager who refuses to wear the clothing of a corporation that uses sweat shops; a corporate executive who wants to stop unethical practices or the day-to-day disregard of employees' needs ; a farmer who wants to preserve traditional farming methods.

These new leaders are appearing at an increasing rate in local communities around the world. They are motivated not by ego but by a desire to improve some aspect of their world. They are not motivated by self-interest or greed. They want to help others. They do not want power, they want better conditions for those they care about. They are not interested in devoted followers; they want devoted companions who work together to make change.

Although many more of these new leaders are now stepping forward, they often don't know that there are many others like them. They feel isolated and alone. Few of them realize that their concerns and generosity are shared by an increasing number of people. And it is difficult to act with courage when you feel you are the only one, or when those around you tell you that you're strange.

Isolation is one barrier to courageous action. Time is a second one. In most countries, time is evaporating. Technology has played a large role in this, speeding up human interactions to the speed of light, even though we can't, as living beings, work any faster than the speed of life. In highly technological societies, leisure time and private life are fast eroding by the ever-invading demands of cell phones, e-mail, and the assumption that workers should be available 24/7 (twenty-four hours, seven days a week). In societies where technology is not yet so invasive, the very complexity and multiplicity of problems that confront leaders is destroying their time to deal well with any one issue.

Under the relentless pressure of time vanishing, we are losing many essential capacities of being human: the time to think and reflect; the time to be in relationships; the time to develop trust and commitment. In essence, we are forfeiting our unique human qualities in exchange for speed.

There is at least one other great destructive force at work globally, and that is the American management model. Leaders everywhere, no matter what their culture or tradition, are pressured to focus on numeric measures of efficiency and narrow measures of success, i.e. growth and profit-making. These practices are not sufficient to create a healthy and robust workplace or planet. American businesses that only focus on these narrow goals fail as well. As these too-narrow measures roll out around the world, they create the conditions for large-scale destruction of cultures, habitats, and the human spirit. Yet few local leaders can withstand the pressure to be 'modern' and so they forfeit their own experience and wisdom about what works best within their own traditions and practices. It isn't just pop culture and fast food that is creating a monoculture across the planet; it's also the spread of one management model, a model that is inherently destructive to life.

Paulo Freire said that "reality doesn't change itself." If this is an accurate portrait of today's reality, then we — people everywhere — must be the agents of change. We need to create learning communities where we can think, where we can perceive and feel what's going on, and where we develop companions for the work that is required. It is the opportunity to develop these conditions for critical education and action that energizes me now. Our initiative is called: "From the Four Directions: People Everywhere Leading the Way." And this is what we do.

In local communities everywhere, leaders are invited (by a small group of local hosts) to meet regularly to think together, develop clarity about their practices and values that work to affirm and sustain people, and to support each other's courageous acts. Each circle is a site for critical education. People become more knowledgeable about what is going on in their world, and they develop new strategies for how to influence their world. They teach one another, relying on their experience and compassion. Over time, these local circles become good communities of practice — leaders emerge with greater skills to affect change in their world, wherever they are called to be leaders. Working locally, we act as a global leadership development effort, raising the standards of effective leadership in thousands of communities and changing the global definition of what good leadership means.

For these circles to give birth to new ideas, new courage, and new companions for the journey, we use the simple and ancient practice of good human conversation. We provide support for how to create the conditions for meaningful and deepening conversation. We also insist that these leader circles include as diverse a mix of people (age, gender, organizational type) as is possible in that community. A core value of *From the Four Directions* is that “we depend on diversity.” We know that people need to be talking to one another again, across all the boundaries and hurts that have been created. And we know also that new solutions are only available when new people are in the conversation. Most communities in the world struggle with diversity — be it ethnic, religious, gender or age-based. In every circle, in every country, we strive to gently open the boundaries and extend welcome to those formerly excluded. We want to help reweave the broken bonds that are a major dilemma of all societies.

Our second core value is: “We rely on human goodness.” We believe that the solutions needed at this time are not at all technical, but profoundly human. We will find the answers to complex issues, and we will find the courage to push back against the destructive practices of globalism, only if we find each other. In this time when there is growing evidence for human badness, there is the growing need to rely on the fact that most people, no matter their culture or physical conditions, have goodness in them. They (we) want to live with other people in more harmonious and humane ways. We develop greater clarity in leaders everywhere about human potential and the positive impulses that motivate people — the search for meaning, the need for good relationships, the opportunity to grow and contribute with others.

The focus of conversation in a *From the Four Directions* circle is leadership — those values and practices that are life-affirming rather than life-destroying. We aspire to support changes in the leadership of local communities everywhere, developing leadership practices at the local level that can restore hope to the future. But we also aspire to change the direction of our global future. We want to create a global voice on behalf of those practices and values that nourish and sustain the human spirit and all life. To achieve this, we are relying on a change theory taught to us by other living systems.

In nature, change doesn’t happen from a top-down, strategic approach. There is never a boss in a living system. Change happens from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously. These local actions are diverse; each is free to do things in their own way. They do not need to be the same; they are linked to others by a similar issue, idea, or problem. When these local actions learn about each other, their own individual activity is strengthened. But much more is available. As local groups network together, they can suddenly, and always surprisingly, emerge into a global power. This global force is far stronger than the sum of the parts, and it is also different than the local actions that gave birth to it. These global forces are the result of *emergence*, and they are known as *emergent phenomena*. Always they possess new capacity, and always they are a surprise.

All habitats and ecosystems are a result of emergence. Before the system emerges, individual species act in isolation, each adapting in order to survive. This is a time of many local changes, and few relationships. But gradually, relationships develop among the different species; competition is replaced by collaboration. From this web of relationships, an ecosystem emerges. This larger system has capabilities that none of the individual species possessed. The system even moderates the weather so that conditions within that ecology are more stable and less disruptive to individuals.

All living systems result from emergence. However, that only describes the *process* by which life creates systems. It says nothing about the values used to organize any particular system. Here is where man-made and other living systems diverge in ways that are essential to notice. Living systems, excluding human systems, always self-organize as collaborative networks of relation. This often shocks people, accustomed as we are to TV images of predators stalking their kill. But the biological record is exceedingly clear – it is cooperation that increases over time. Ruthless species enter a system, wreak havoc, and then either die off or learn how to be good neighbors.

We are living in a time of many emergent phenomena that are man-made and rarely based on nature’s value of collaboration. The Internet is an emergent phenomenon that has grown from values of local activities and cooperation—local inventions, freely shared, gave rise to the worldwide web. But Global warming has emerged also, a result of many local decisions based on selfishness, where no one thought their actions could possibly link with other actions to emerge as atmospheric catastrophe.

All systems develop from the process of emergence. But when we humans organize around greed, self-interest, or short-term advantage, we create systems that are distinctly un-natural. We create systems that are, because of these values, life-threatening.

Globalization is an emergent phenomenon. No one planned it. It emerged from many local actions on the part of corporations and nation states, actions based on destructive values and the absence of any useful regulatory laws and policies. And suddenly, we live in the midst of its powerful pressures, organizing societies and organizations in ways that few people want, and that only a very few are benefiting from.

Those who have lived under colonialism and imperialism for centuries may wonder why I use the word “suddenly” to describe the emergence of globalization. Is it any different from long-standing systems of oppression? Imperialism, colonialism, and globalization share a core of values: domination, coercion, dehumanization, the use of power by the few over many. But I believe that globalism is not just a continuation of the past; its scale and power represent a break with history. Never before has any power been able to dissolve all borders, severely impede the power of most nation states, and enforce only one law, the rules of the economy.

Currently the world is organizing using one economic value — profit. The entire planet is organizing as a monoculture. The sheer scale of globalisation makes it different than the past. Never have all cultures and peoples been asked to march to one drumbeat.

The other critical distinction is that the values of this monoculture are inherently destructive of life. By valuing short-term goals, unrestricted growth, and relentless accumulation of garbage, in using the planet as an economic resource rather than as home, we face the ahistoric possibility that we may destroy the planet, or at least the conditions that support human life.

Just these two characteristics of globalism — its global scale and the implications of its values and practices — make it more fearsome than any of the megalomaniac dreams of past conquerors.

There is one more thing to say about all emergent phenomena, not just globalization. Once an emergent phenomenon has appeared, *it can't be changed by working backwards*, by changing the local parts that gave birth to it. You can only change an emergent phenomenon by creating a countervailing force of greater strength. This means that the work of change is to start over, to organize new local efforts, connect them to each other, and know that their values and practices can emerge as something even stronger.

From the Four Directions seeks to use emergence intentionally. Once many local circles are up and running, we will network them together, using electronic means. When a leader circle in Montevideo, Chile learns that they are discussing the same issue as a circle in New Delhi, or when a Zimbabwean circle talks with a Danish circle about their experience with citizen democracy — we know that such connections will have a powerful impact on personal leadership behavior.

We also believe that as people realize that the problems they face are shared by others in different parts of the globe, they instantly recognize these as *systemic* issues. There is no better way for people to become skilled systems thinkers than to realize their problem is not unique to them, but is affecting many others in diverse parts of the global system. One outcome of *From the Four Directions* is to create thoughtful and practical systems thinkers around the world.

We have only just begun organizing circles. By the time you read this, there may be fifty circles going in various parts of the globe. This is just the beginning. But already, enough things have occurred to both delight and motivate those of us working on this initiative. For example, having worked in South Africa for years, I personally was moved to tears when a circle host from Uganda thanked us “for inviting Africa to the table first.” We did begin in Africa, partly because there was so much enthusiasm there, and we knew that most African tribal traditions use circle or council as a common family and community practice. But we had no idea what it signaled to our African colleagues. Instead of playing catch up, they are leading the way, teaching us many things that will make this initiative successful in Africa and elsewhere.

I have also seen that many leaders don't know there is any other way to lead except through bureaucracy and hierarchy. I watched the eyes light up of circle hosts from Russia, Hungary, Zimbabwe, and Colombia as they realized that there were simple council processes they could use to lead their organizations. It wasn't that they liked being bureaucrats; they just hadn't known they had a choice. Now that they are learning a participative and inclusive process for meeting and thinking together, they are more hopeful. They already see how to be more effective leaders on behalf of the issues of concern in their communities.

Our biggest intent is to create a global voice for change in the practices and values used in all types of organizations everywhere. This voice will not come from well-crafted mission statements issued from some central authority. It will emerge from thousands of local circles as they are networked together. To create such an emergent phenomenon, we will consciously connect circles to one another, publicize our efforts, host regional, in-person conferences, and engage in any other means of developing good, meaningful connections. But like all emergent phenomenon, the global voice of this initiative will appear suddenly, and I'm sure it will surprise us!

Using the great goodness of many, and actively developing the critical thinking and relational skills that make us human, we intend to astonish the world with what becomes possible when we nourish and sustain the human spirit.

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As of this writing, *From the Four Directions* circles have begun in: Cameroon, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, England, Gabon, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Senegal, Slovenia, South Africa, Sweden, Uganda, the U.S., the Ukraine, Zimbabwe. Circles will begin shortly in several more African countries, Eastern and Central Europe, Mexico, Canada, the United States and Latin America. We are exploring relationships in India, Asia, and Australia to begin circles there by the end of 2001. For more information on this initiative, and if you'd like to join us, please go to <www.fromthefourdirections.org> or phone The Berkana Institute at 001-801-377-2996.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Wheatley writes, teaches, and speaks about radically new practices and ideas for organizing in chaotic times. She works to create organizations of all types where people are seen as the blessing, not the problem. She is president of The Berkana Institute, a charitable global foundation, and was an organizational consultant for many years, as well as a professor of management in two graduate programs. Her work appears in two award-winning books, *Leadership and the New Science* (1992, 1999) and *A Simpler Way* (co-authored with Myron Kellner-Rogers, 1996,) plus several videos and articles. She draws many of her ideas from new science and life's ability to self-organize in systemic and cooperative modes. Increasingly, her models for new organizations are drawn from her understanding of many different cultures and spiritual traditions. Her articles can be accessed at <www.berkana.org>