

FOREWORD

An Invitation
Margaret J. Wheatley ©2008

In 2002, I published *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, and went public with this statement: "I believe we can change the world if we just start talking to one another again." In the years since I made this rather simplistic albeit well-founded claim, the world has grown only more dark and complex. Because of this, I believe now in the power of conversation even more. It is a crucial and simple means to reverse the dangerous societal slide we're in of increasing fragmentation and fear of "the other." This slide will continue until we sit down and begin to talk with each other. If we can do this, if we can approach those we know and those we don't know with curiosity and anticipation, we will discover that he or she is just another human being with similar hopes, fears, motivations, and dreams.

These days, very few people remember the pleasure of being in good conversations. Especially in the workplace. We race past one another at tornado speed, frantic to get through our ever-growing list of tasks, consumed by and consuming meaninglessness. Nearly three-fourths of American workers are disengaged, which means they're doing the minimum of what's required and not offering anything extra--no creativity, caring or responsibility. I place the blame for this terrible apathy and indifference squarely at the feet of command and control leadership. When people are bossed around, treated like robots and discarded casually, any sensible person disengages. Why waste our human potential on a place or person that has no regard for us?

And there's no sign that it's going to get any better in organizations. Fear has become the primary motivator. Turning people against one another in aggressively competitive ways is now common practice. Speed is the synonym for productivity. Time to think has simply disappeared. We don't learn from our experiences, we just do the same thing over and over again, only faster. When things go wrong or

people refuse to engage, leaders get more demanding, more controlling, more imperious, and more destructive.

The destructive character of so many workplaces shows up in our bodies as well as our spirits. Stress-related illnesses account for at least one-third of worker absenteeism. Sleeping disorders, anxiety disorders, bad stomachs, bad backs—these are all signs of a society under acute stress. In 2007, fewer people took vacations from work than ever before; in one study 40% of workers didn't take vacation. In another, one-third of those who took vacation stayed connected to their offices electronically.

How much longer will this descent into ill health and ill-functioning organizations continue?

Into this current insanity comes this very sane book. This is a thoughtful and patient book, filled with clear examples drawn from years of experience. Its clear and simple processes truly are how we could stop this deterioration in the workplace and become fully human beings at work again. The authors are reminding us of basic truths about how human beings work well together—that we're adults, that we work best with intrinsic motivators of contribution and meaning, that we're creative, that we have a need for community, that work needs to be engaging, that people behave responsibly when they care; that conversation is the way we humans think well together

The gift of this book is that it gives us a pathway to the future. If we were to begin to engage one another again in earnest and honest conversation, if we would slow down sufficiently to reengage with each other and with the purposes of our work, we could find our way out of the messes we've created when we ignore each other and retreat into our fearful isolation.

However, let us remember current realities. The wisdom expressed here has receded so far into the background of how we work together that this book is

nothing less than a revolutionary manifesto. Like all real revolutions, this one reclaims what is noble and good about us humans, it offers us hope for a different, more positive future, and it embodies an idealism about what's possible that can inspire us to do all that we can to bring about this change.

If you don't already know that it's time for revolution, this book will help awaken you to this fact with its clarity and experience. We simply cannot let this disintegration go any farther. We cannot continue to work without being engaged. We cannot continue to pursue our separating, frantic ways and expect our lives and future to have any goodness in them.

The major tactic of this revolution is simple, straightforward and absolutely non-violent. Get people talking to each other. Engage in meaningful conversations. Practice non-denial—look truthfully at what's going on. Expect people to respond creatively. Expect generosity. Expect things to improve.

Why would we refuse such an opportunity? Why wouldn't we all rush to embrace this simple but profound tactic for creating real change through hosting conversations that matter? Why wouldn't we absorb this book and start right now?

I don't know your personal answers to these questions, but what I've observed is that, generally, people are terrified to begin a conversation. Many, many people comment that it takes extraordinary courage to begin a conversation. And they're right. What was a simple and natural human experience—talking together—has become a scary prospect. As our fear of the other has grown, as polarization has driven us farther apart, as dominating power over others has increased, conversation seems impossible.

Further proof that we're talking about a revolution.

So it's up to us. If we want the future to be any different than the present, we have to be the ones to begin the conversation. I can promise good things: we will be

surprised and delighted by the capacities that emerge when we take the time to speak honestly and thoughtfully to one another. We will be astonished by what we can create when we're engaged in authentic conversations.

I hope you will accept this invitation to the revolution.