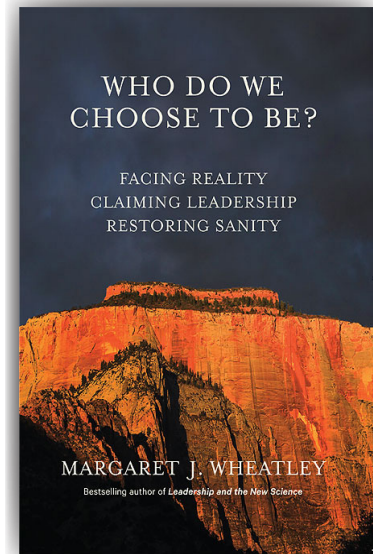


## Who Do We Choose to Be?

Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership,  
Restoring Sanity

Margaret J. Wheatley

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### KEY CONCEPTS

In times of turmoil and crisis, people must step forward as leaders and create possibility and positivity through their power, influence, insight, and compassion. To accomplish this, leaders must ask themselves three questions:

1. *Where are they, and how did they get there?* Leaders must assess the states of their environments and consider the causes of the behaviors that have led to their present reality.
2. *What are their roles in their environments?* After assessing their environments and the contributing factors that led to their current states, leaders should focus on the characteristics and actions that will provide the kind of leadership necessary for survival.
3. *How do they create sane environments that can sustain their best human qualities?* Leaders must determine how to bring sanity to their environments in order to sustain positive human qualities and ward off the fanatical and abusive behaviors that often coincide with cultures on the brink of collapse.

### INTRODUCTION

Many people today are experiencing fear and turmoil, and they require leaders who can step forward with insight, humaneness, and compassion to help them find grace and love amidst the confusion and chaos. In **Who Do We Choose to Be?**, Margaret J. Wheatley reveals how leaders can serve others by satisfying the basic human desires for generosity, community, contribution, and love in times of crisis. She believes that this form of sane leadership is the only path forward, and it is one that all leaders and people, in every line of work, must embrace to effect change.

## THE ARROW OF TIME: EVERYTHING HAS A BEGINNING, A MIDDLE, AND AN END

According to the *arrow of time* concept, everything in the observable universe occurs in a linear fashion and moves forward in one direction, from beginning to end, and from formation and order toward disorder, dysfunction, and death. Nothing is reversible, and everything is born from the events that proceed it. However, new studies reveal that this concept does not apply to open, living systems that have permeable boundaries, the capacity for sense-making, and the capability to exchange energy with the environment.

Living systems have the capacity to sustain themselves through crises, shifts, and catastrophes. They can learn and rely on their cognition and self-organization to adapt, and in doing so, they resist the universe's pull toward the arrow of time. It is only when they close themselves off from adaptation that they lose their potential for change and growth, which ultimately assures their death.

Many of the historians who study the collapses of civilizations urge people to embrace awareness and learning because these are the tools that are required to counteract and reverse the natural progression toward disaster. They emphasize that blind reactivity, fear, self-protection, and denial will not lead people to answers, but *sane leadership*—the unshakeable faith in the human capacity to be generous, creative, and kind—will propel them forward. When people take this approach to leadership, they can train themselves to see their circumstances more clearly, acknowledge the painful details of the present, and choose actions that are rooted in compassion, insight, and wisdom. They must also fortify and open themselves to restore sanity in their organizations rather than react in fear.

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## IDENTITY: LIVING SYSTEMS CHANGE IN ORDER TO PRESERVE THEMSELVES

Living systems create themselves around identities that differentiate them from everything else. Without identities, it would be impossible to organize with complexity and a sense of order, and life would be devoid of possibility.

Identities are the basis for how people define themselves, make choices, and manifest behaviors. On a personal scale, people use their identities to organize their actions and beliefs and find meaning in their lives, while on a larger scale, they rely on their shared identities to mobilize one another into purposeful action, such as restoring moral virtues or acting collectively on behalf of a cause. A shared sense of identity can be a powerful tool in mobilization efforts because it prescribes a common set of ethical standards that enables groups to shed ambiguity, hold one another accountable, judge actions, and move forward in the same direction.

## INFORMATION: IT'S BETTER TO LEARN THAN BE DEAD

Information enables living things to make sense of their environments and organize into systems that are capable of growth and adaptation. Through these means, information can serve as a powerful tool for advancement. In recent years, the study of information technology has emerged and excited people by the promise of enhanced human efficiency through mechanized means. Because of these advancements, the study of information has largely been relegated to machines. While these machines can provide previously unseen levels of efficiency, the relegation of information-based tasks has resulted in numerous negative outcomes for humankind, including increased levels of distraction, inability to concentrate, and withdrawal from the real world. People's natural

inclinations for caring, compassion, and intellect falter, and re-engagement is their only means for restoring these natural capacities.

Machine-generated intelligence, which consists of data-heavy analytics, does not support people's innate need for learning. Instead, it inhibits their ability to understand through an interpretive lens, increases their sense of confusion, and diminishes their decision-making capabilities. When people choose to learn through experience and apply the insights they gain to their decisions and actions, they regain power. As organizations and teams, they can become more creative, effective, and resilient, and as individuals, they can become more innovative, engaged, and collaborative.

*Living systems rely on self-organization to create order, growth, and potential and adapt as changes occur around them.*

## SELF-ORGANIZATION: ORDER FOR FREE

Living systems rely on self-organization to create order, growth, and potential and adapt as changes occur around them. While all living systems engage in self-organization to some degree, human self-organization is especially complex because of humans' powerful cognitive abilities. They internalize information from their environments and concoct new information in the forms of gossip, rumors, lies, and conspiracy theories. Further, they use information to

strengthen their group identities, close out divergent views, and gain a sense of belonging and acceptance that inspires them to work toward shared causes.

Leaders must recognize the power that comes with self-organization and collective momentum toward a shared cause. They must create a unifying sense of identity through formalized values, principles, patterns, norms, and expectations and grant personal autonomy that allows others to determine how to translate identities into actions. It is imperative for leaders to create conditions in which people can act collectively with a focus on sanity and not in ways that are fanatical or abusive. They must also learn to motivate others through a sense of devotion that engages them, encourages them to seek out the best courses of action, and dissuades them from abandoning their causes.

## PERCEPTION: WHAT YOU SEE IS ALL YOU GET

Humans use their sense-making abilities to understand the world, and they rely on their perception to answer some of the world's biggest questions, including who they are as a species and the functions of the universe. They also cling to paradigms to provide them with reliable guidance for how they might live in the world, even when these paradigms fail to provide them with steadfast guidance.

When people cling to baseless paradigms, they tend to resist change and become more fundamentalist and certain about their views. Leaders often fall prey to this way of thinking, but successful leaders cannot blindly pursue this false sense of certainty; instead, they must rely on perception to develop a clearer sense of reality.

When leaders create shared perceptions in their organizations that are grounded in their shared identities, individuals gain a sharper focus in their decision-making roles and learn to interpret situations the same way as others in their organizations. Leaders must be tasked with sharing their organizations' stories and forming empowering, comprehensive stories that link to their collective identities. This is the tool that will empower leaders to create shared perceptual filters, develop organizational coherence, provide frames of reference for individual actions, and define the future for their organizations.

## INTERCONNECTEDNESS: NOTHING LIVING LIVES ALONE

Life does not change through incremental movements, and it is not simply the sum of individual parts. Culture develops and changes through emergence and works through the networks of intertwined relationships to create something new. It cannot be changed through reductionism, but many leaders and individuals attempt to undo things to correct them and create better alternatives. However, this approach is ineffective in emergent cultures: Patterns of response cannot be reversed. Instead, people must simply start over.

Although individuals cannot change the emergent environment, they *can* free themselves from emergent cultures by returning to their identities and reclaiming their beliefs. They must be engaged, observant, committed to learning through experience, and willing to use what they learn to adapt and change. As they proceed, people must embed their values-driven beliefs, reclaim their life-affirming identities, and forge new cultures in themselves, their teams, and their organizations.

## WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?

In today's culture, it is evident that social, economic, and political policies are not only failing to solve the problems that are plaguing civilization, but they are also inciting anger and alienation among individuals. Some leaders respond to these failings in negative, unhelpful ways, but others step forward with compassion and insight, acting as warriors for the human spirit. Every leader must decide who he or she wants to be.

Leaders who choose the noble path persevere through difficult circumstances and devote themselves to their calling of protecting, championing, honoring, and serving others. They refrain from adding to the confusion, aggression, and fear that overwhelms those around them and, instead, act in ways that are ethical and decent. They choose their actions wisely and invite others to take a stand against injustice, inequality, and suffering, wherever it occurs, by applying compassion and insight.

## NO MATTER WHAT

People cannot trust themselves to behave perfectly all the time, to excel constantly, or to trust that they will never cause harm or hurt, but they can trust their ability to know themselves and learn their triggers, reactions, strengths, and weaknesses.

People must accept that as they try and fail to accomplish things, they must always try again. Once this truth is accepted, they will gain the confidence to take on difficult challenges and do whatever they can to help others. People must work toward building a legacy in their lives and in their organizations to create value and encourage others to continue working to create positive outcomes and make a difference for future generations.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Margaret J. Wheatley** writes, teaches, and speaks about how people can organize and accomplish work in chaotic times, sustain their relationships, and willingly step forward to serve. Since 1973, Wheatley has worked with a broad variety of organizations, ranging from the head of the U.S. Army to groups of Girl Scouts, from CEOs and government ministers to small town ministers, and from large universities to rural aboriginal villages. She has written and cowritten several best-selling books, including *So Far From Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World*; *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey Into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now*; *Perseverance*;

*Leadership and the New Science; Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future; Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time; and A Simpler Way.* Wheatley is also the cofounder and president emerita of the Berkana Institute, a leader in experimenting with new organizational forms based on a coherent theory of living systems.

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