

Readings-

From "Who Do You Choose to Be?" Margaret Wheatley

From "The Shambhala Warrior" by Joanna Macy (Jul 08, 2002)

Interesting readings today – no? Margaret Wheatley describing how the world is going to hell in a handbasket - and a prophecy describing in eerie detail the place we find ourselves today. Prophecies aren't something we usually traffic in on Sunday mornings in Unitarian Universalist congregations. We live in the here and now. We trust science and observation; repeatable results. But we also look to wisdom that has been passed down for generations – especially if it seems to fit the moment.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a revered teacher & leader who brought Buddhism to the west after escaping Tibet in 1959, received this prophecy called a terma. I'm sure it felt like his world was on the brink of destruction. That's a perfectly rational explanation for an apocalyptic vision. But a close read, and the fact that he received many more termas over the course of his life, seems to indicate that he was looking ahead to a place like we find ourselves today.

Barbarian powers have arisen... they waste their wealth in preparations to annihilate each other, ...weapons of unfathomable devastation and technologies that lay waste the world. It is now, when the future of all beings hangs by the frailest of threads...

I don't know about you, but I am struggling to find solid ground in the world that we live within today. Watching the insanity coming out of Washington, the increasingly destructive weather, people who believe children are pawns rather than to be protected. Divisiveness, hate-speech, distrust – institutions which seemed invulnerable, crumbling before our eyes. The future does seem to hang by the frailest of threads. How do we live in this time as whole, human, and loving beings?

Some of you may remember that I attended a retreat in Crestone Colorado last April. The retreat was part of a program called Warriors of the Human Spirit that was being offered by the Berkana Institute, led by Margaret Wheatley. I had stumbled across a webpage and found this description:

Warriors for the Human Spirit are leaders, activists, and citizens who want to make a meaningful contribution in this time of increasing assaults on the human spirit and all life. To serve well, to be effective with their energy and influence, they train with discipline and devotion to refrain from fear and aggression and to embody the best human qualities of generosity, insight and compassion.

I felt an intense pull to this path. It called my heart.

I've been a fan of Wheatley ever since I first encountered her book, "Leadership and the New Science," in seminary. She is a writer and organizational consultant who has studied human relationships through the lens of science. As the co-founder and president of the Berkana Institute, a global non-profit (Home page, 2018), whose tagline is "*Whatever the problem, Community is the answer.*" Wheatley has long

been an advocate of mining our human-ness to find solutions to the problems we face. She studies self-organization in systems and how chaos births creative new beginnings. Hopeful -right? She's also a student of Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun who trained with Chogyam Trungpa -- now it all begins to come together!

I had no idea what I would be getting into when I arrived at the Blazing Mountain Retreat center. Crestone is beautiful –set on a high mountain plateau in an area sacred to the native peoples for thousands of years – a place where the only sound you can hear is the quiet whisper of the wind. Amazing.

Our days began at 7am and lasted until 9pm with only an hour break after lunch. I arrived exhausted coming out of the challenging year I'd had, but by the end of the week had found an energy and connection to some deep source that I hadn't felt in a long time. What were we doing?? I'm still in the process of figuring that out. I meet virtually with my cohort each month and the training will conclude in October with a final retreat.

Mostly, we are learning the tools of the Shambhala warriors: compassion and insight. We started with the insight – taking a vow to be present to the world as it is. Each day there were teachings – and much of the teachings focused on what is going on around us.

The world is disintegrating – our society and democracy are reaching the end of 10 generations – the time frame within almost all great civilizations in history crumble under their own weight. Climate change is real and humans have not shown the will to do anything about it. Fear is dividing families, communities & countries. Hoo boy – not exactly the energy I was looking to find.

But I have to admit it felt very true. I've been hesitant to bring this work to you because it feels contrary to the role of the minister. I have believed my job is to bring hope – to uplift – to encourage and send you out into the world with the ability to feel good about yourselves and your relationship with the world. This work is not that exactly, but I've come to believe it essential because it is based in reality, it is much more powerful than mere inspiration. Looking at the world as it is actually giving us the solid ground from which to live.

I have a theory that everyone in the world – the climate deniers, the oil executives, the people voting for autocratic, authoritarian leaders – everyone knows at some deep level that things in our current reality are very wrong. That the world cannot continue much longer in the direction we have been going. The shadow of this deep knowing hangs over us, but most are not willing to really look closely at it. So they bury it and fear grows. Fear is powerful and the motivator for much of our political discourse. Rather than name what is really threatening, we name an easy scapegoat.

It's the immigrants – even though they are really just the first wave of victims. It's black people. It's white men. It's Jews. It's Palestinians. It's Muslims. It's Evangelicals. It's queer people. It's trans people. It's free trade. It's Unions. It's the rich. It's the poor. It's the other political party.

Always something that a simple solution will fix. Build a wall. Deregulate. Leave the European Union. Create a national language. Ban somebody.

But I believe even the people advocating for these quick and unhelpful fixes are aware, deep down, that it won't help. Which explains the rising anxiety, the anger, the growing violence and acting out.

This is just my experience, but almost every single 20 – 30 something I know is on anti-anxiety or mood altering meds. Opioids are a national crisis. A huge percentage of the children I know are diagnosed with ADHD or placed somewhere along the autism spectrum. Folks blame vaccinations – easy solution right? – but I believe our society - the place we are in history - is really to blame. Our children are fine – it is our shattered and insane society which makes them unable to fit in – so we declare them broken.

The world is not a healthy place – where does that leave us? What is our response to a world in crisis? In our reading Chogyam Trungpa told Joanna Macy –

The weapons are compassion and insight. Both are necessary. We need this first one," he said, lifting his right hand, "because it provides us the fuel, it moves us out to act on behalf of other beings. But by itself it can burn us out. So we need the second as well, which is insight into the dependent co-arising of all things. It lets us see that the battle is not between good people and bad people, for the line between good and evil runs through every human heart. We realize that we are interconnected, as in a web, and that each act with pure motivation affects the entire web, bringing consequences we cannot measure or even see.ⁱⁱ

Each of us doing our own work, acting with pure motivation, effects the entire web.

As fledgling warriors, we took a vow:

I cannot change the way the world is, but by opening to the world as it is, I may discover gentleness, decency and bravery are available not only to myself but to all human beings.

We cannot change the way the world is. It's a big frickin world – and much better people than me have devoted their whole lives to changing it. We cannot change the world. It is what it is right now. But - we can be present to what is. By opening to the world as it is – by being present to what is in front of me; by paying attention to what I am doing, what I am seeing and hearing and experiencing. This means letting go of distractions. Whatever they are – TV, shopping, gaming, gambling, drinking, drug abuse, overwork – so many ways to numb the grief we experience from destroying our planet.

This is hard, but it has a wonderful promise – by opening to the world as it is, I may discover that gentleness, decency, and bravery are available, not only to myself but to all human beings. Gentleness, decency and bravery are available. That's a place I want to be.

I found an article by Danielle Simon Brand, talking about the challenges of raising children today. She said that they had been criticized by her fellow parents because they were not hiding the harsh realities of life from their kids, but giving them tools to live connected, compassionate lives. She writes:

When my mom visited a few weeks ago, she bought dozens of deodorant sticks, toothbrushes, handy wipes, snacks, and rolls of toilet paper. Then she oversaw while my kids allocated the materials into bags with handwritten notes like, "I hope you find a home soon."

They took those care packages out to give to people living on the street. Brand knows "giving out care packages makes no dent in the immense problem of homelessness," but says "it reminds us that even though our family struggles to afford a lot of things, we are more fortunate than many, and so we have a responsibility. My kids say that it feels good to see a small bag of toiletries and food make a difference in someone's day. I feel it, too."ⁱⁱⁱ

Activist Grace Lee Boggs said that "Sanity is in treating people as human human beings. Humans being human are wonderfully talented"^{iv} end quote. Seeing the humanity of those around us, restores and strengthens our own. The promise is not that everything will be okay in the whole world. The promise is that, if I can live fully present to this moment – and to the people who are around me in this moment – those qualities which make life good will be found and made manifest. It's not pie in the sky thinking; it is steeped in Buddhist tradition.

Part of my work has been cultivating the spiritual practices of meditation and Qi Gong; finding places of stillness and connection to the deeper whole – places of decency and sanity. When we do that work, we invite – by our actions and our own sanity – people around us to join.

So what exactly is an island of sanity? In an article titled "Who Do We Choose to Be?" Wheatley says:

An island of sanity can be a literally bounded group, such as a team, function, or community. It can also be an interior space bounded by our integrity: we know who we are, what we value, and what we stand for.^v

Who we are, what we value, and what we stand for – those are questions we explore here in this UCH community on a regular basis. As a faith community we gather to try to figure out those questions – try to understand how to be present to one another and to ourselves in ways that are life affirming.

Our groups gather regularly, the men's group is meeting today after church; the non-fiction book club; the movie club; Theology on Tap – even the shawl knitting group; to wrestle with the thorny questions and to find wisdom and guidance from other people of good will. We explore many different ways of being human together – ways to drop self-protection & filters – ways which help us to recognize the goodness, generosity, and creativity in ourselves and our fellow humans. When I leave church, I am buoyed up, having witnessed many tiny moments of kindness, compassion, and generosity.

The Berkana Institute's website says "We prepare for an unknown future by creating strong and sustainable relationships, by wisely stewarding the earth's resources"^{vi}, the same things that our UCH community aspires to each week. Focusing on humans living humanly in tiny gestures and local acts of community helps us to reject the values that have gotten us into this mess and start living sanely – with the knowledge that all we may have is how we live.

We have deep resources, resiliency and creativity when we really look to one another instead of going along with the flow outside our doors. No one is going to rescue us from the chaos going on. We are the ones we've been waiting for.

Again Wheatley writes:

Leaders must reclaim the very thing our culture has so casually given away: Time to think together and learn from our experiences. ...Every single... (good leader) is grounded in an ethic that puts people at the center of all decisions and actions.^{vii}

This year we will continue to explore what it means to create an island of sanity. You are invited to join in these conversations in many ways:

Conversations around our seven principles and what it means to live them in the world.

Conversations around the promises we make to one another when we begin forming a congregational covenant.

Conversations around what kinds of spiritual practices help us to find our own deepest truth – with opportunities once a month to try a new type of practice.

We cannot change the world – but we can change our experience of the world.

I invite you to join me in this vow – to look clearly at the world as it is; to know that we cannot change it, but that we can be present to ourselves and one another. Together, we can live lives of gentleness, decency & bravery in the here and now - for ourselves and our children and for the world around us.

Amen & blessed be.

ⁱ <https://berkana.org/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=236>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://theweek.com/articles/792531/how-raise-children-deeply-troubling->

^{iv} https://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Margaret-Wheatley-2017-Leader_to_Leader.pdf

^v Ibid.

^{vi} <https://berkana.org/>

^{vii} https://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Margaret-Wheatley-2017-Leader_to_Leader.pdf