

## Warriors for the Human Spirit by Tami Simon

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You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today my guest is Margaret Wheatley. Meg is an American writer and management consultant who studies organizational behavior, her approach includes systems thinking, theories of change, chaos theory, leadership and the learning organization—particularly its capacity to self-organize. Meg is an author of nine books including the bestselling book, *Leadership and the New Science* and her new book, *Who Do We Choose To Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*, where she turns to the new science of living systems to help leaders persevere in this time of great turmoil.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Meg and I spoke about the cyclical nature of life and how we are currently in a destructive end phase of the cycle of history in the United States. How we need to see this clearly and also the despair we can feel in looking at this reality without buying into the myth of progress. We also talked about her teaching on becoming a "Warrior for the Human Spirit," and how such warriors refrain from fear and aggression and engage in meaningful work in the context of community. Finally, we talked about what it might mean for each of us to create "islands of sanity" right where we are, during this particular time in human history. Here's my very moving and deep conversation with Meg Wheatley.

Meg, I want to begin by saying that I'm so grateful to have this chance to speak with you. I'm very moved by your work and I think our audience is going to be very moved and interested as well. So thank you for making the time for this.

Margaret Wheatley: You're entirely welcome.

TS: I say I think our audience is going to be very interested because I've heard from many listeners that connecting our inner spiritual life with what's happening in the world at large is an issue that's really important to people and something that they're grappling with. And I think you're a perfect guest to address that. Part of what drew me to wanting to have you as a guest on Insights at the Edge, is your work with what you call, "training people to be Warriors of the Human Spirit." And so I want to begin there and understand more about what you mean by a person becoming a Warrior of the Human spirit.

MW: And I want to correct the preposition: it's "Warriors for the Human Spirit," which

is a very significant change.

TS: OK, thank you.

MW: We are mostly experienced leaders and activists, or people who are starting their career, but primarily the focus is mature people who are in the same questions that you just raised for your readers, which is: "What do we do?" How do we apply our spiritual ground or spiritual questing to be useful, to even understand what's going on right now? But primarily the focus is, "How can I serve?" What's correct service in this time of tremendous ... It's not just the chaos, [there are] actually very destructive forces at work now that are destroying the future, destroying people, destroying personal motivation.

And it was because of that, in response to that, that several years ago I started speaking about those in leadership positions or in community positions or just interested citizens learning how to use their influence and power for the good—not to change the world, and this was the most significant shift ... well, it's not really problematic anymore since Trump. But it was difficult for all of us to give up these greater dreams of doing good on behalf of changing the systems of restoring justice, of attacking climate change—all of the big issues, which are now so "in our face" that needed addressing.

We reached a tipping point with them, where we can no longer change them. And I got very clear about that from my science perspective, even. Just watching what was happening when beautiful documents were issued, such as the pope's Laudato Si'; On Care for Our Common Home, that we didn't have the means or the political will to create the changes that were so necessary. In response to that, I put out a call to people who, our whole lives, myself included, were working hard to create a world that benefited more people. And when it became clear that wasn't going to be the future, I switched my own thinking, my own work, and the call that I put out to people. Now we have to use our power and influence and caring on behalf of people wherever we are.

And so that was a profound switch for me and it still is a switch that many of us have to take, which is really understanding what is happening, what we can and can't do, and giving up these really passionate and compelling dreams of being activists at a great level of scale.

TS: I want to stop and talk about this, because I can imagine many people are thinking, "Wait a second. I thought we were in a time of great chaos that was going to turn into reinvention. What Meg is saying sounds quite a bit more dire." You're actually saying that the biggest issues of our time cannot be addressed right now through inspired reinvention and activism? That's what you're saying?

MW: I think we just have to look around us. I'm not saying anything new, I'm commenting on what has happened. And I have a bigger perspective on this, which is the pattern of complex civilizations—we can talk about that later. But what you put your finger on is the issue for people: We still believe we can turn things around. And we're not. What I see is people struggling to find the right voice to speak to people in power, to find the right program that can go to scale. I mean, this is all my field of work for many, many years. And what we need to understand now is that the more we persist in that endeavor ... What's happening to us? We're getting exhausted, we're getting despairing, we're getting ill, many more people are getting sick at this time, and it's not working. In the warrior training, we actually take a vow,

which is—it comes from Chögyam Trungpa—"I cannot change the way the world is." That's a level of deep acceptance that this is the current reality. We're not filtering it, we're not covering it with our optimism or our hopefulness.

The second part of our practice is, "I cannot change the way the world is but by opening to the world as it is." Really being able to take in and see clearly and understand what's happening. Because then the result, which is the third line: "By opening to the world as it is, we may discover that gentleness, decency, and bravery are available to us and to all human beings." So my quest—and this is working by the way. So now I'm speaking from experience of having trained people for a year and a half. When we truly just accept what is, we become better activists. We have courage and decency and bravery. And we see more clearly, because we're not we're not blinded by hope. We're not blinded by a need to feel positive and optimistic.

It's a much deeper motivation that I'm speaking of here and that we train for, which is, I want to be there to support people no matter what is going on. My work as a leader, my work as an activist, my work as a mother, a community member is to create the conditions so that people remember what it's like to be a good team member. Remember what it is like to work in community. And for me, the most important obligation of those who take on this beautiful title of Warrior for the Human Spirit is that we have to be the ones, through our own practice and training, who actually embody the best of human qualities: generosity, kindness, intelligence, sanity, and that we have to be a clear and present embodiment of the best of human nature.

TS: Now you mentioned, Meg, that you've studied this pattern of complex civilizations and you've read quite a bit of the literature. You talk about this in your new book, *Who Do We Choose To Be?*—about the collapse of civilizations. And I'd love for you to talk more to our audience about this time that we're in and how you came to this conclusion, which I think is—for many people, for me—startling. That it's a time to give up on big—if I understand you correctly—global solutions to our problems, and instead work more as a Warrior for the Human Spirit in our own spheres of influence. How did you come to that conclusion?

MW: There are several elements here that are important. The first one is that life is cyclical. We know this, but we don't apply it. Everything has a life stage. We're the only civilization—Western civilization—that got hooked on a very false premise, which is progress. So, we can stand outside living and dying, being young and then going through the seasons and getting old. We can forego all that because of our technological skills. We can always make things better. That was a very deceiving and ahistorical myth that is still in the hearts and minds of many, many activists.

But when you then apply the cyclical concept to understanding life, it's easy to understand it in our bodies, in the seasons. And it's even, I think—maybe it's not easy but it seems—clear that organizations go through lifecycles. They bloom, they're young, they're vibrant, they're innovative and then gradually they ossify into these not-working bureaucracies. Well civilizations, societies, families have the same cycle. We are blinded to that because of our belief in the myth of progress, to start; and then we're blinded to seeing clearly what is. That's why I love our vow that, "I open to the world as it is." We're blinded by this belief in progress, so we don't see ... We do see, we experience the signs of decay, impotence, large systems not working, spinning out of cause and effect when it comes to climate change. We see these things but we still don't believe. And I understand the pain of this because I spent years delving into this and coming to accept it. But we don't fully

see that, oh, we're at the end of this cycle spoken about in all great traditions and cultures and spiritual traditions. But we have all the hallmarks of a very well-designed pattern. I'll speak about the pattern in a moment with a few little illuminating parts of it. But people will say, "Well, I just don't agree with you." Well, this is where we're all caught facing the fact that we've stopped thinking. We've stopped looking at history. We've stopped being thoughtful and sane in how we understand things.

So we're all, at this point, massively reactive. What I have found, because I work in the field with activists, what I have found is that [in] our desire to make things better and improve things beautifully—[with] compassionate and passionate motivations—that we're just pushing against, basically, a force of history, a stage of life. And that's what is so troubling to me, is that we're exhausting ourselves and we're going to go down in despair here. Many people already have. I just wanted to find ... I wanted to fully recognize, using history and present day awareness, what is going on here and what is right work? What is a place where I can still make a difference? Where I can still feel a sense of deep commitment and experience moments of joy in the work? And that's been my quest and it's the basis now of really facing reality to find work that is meaningful.

TS: Now I want to ask you a question about this myth of progress. What would you say to someone who says, "It looks to me like we are making progress." At least in certain areas when it comes to human rights or women's rights, there are leaps forward being made. Yes?

MW: I don't see those leaps forward at all now. If you look globally, which I do, but even if you look at United States right now, we are not seeing the continuation of something that was very good and positive at the beginning. We're not seeing the continuation of civil rights, of women's rights. We're not seeing the continuation of even voting rights in this country. And then you look at the circumstances of women and girls around the world, and it's dreadful. Women and children are weapons of war. Rape is a weapon of war now. And those are not signs of progress. Now, I thought you were going to talk about technology, which many people think about.

TS: Yes, I was going to get there so let's go right there, yes.

MW: Again, I'm not I'm not speaking for myself, I'm quoting other authors here, and historians. There's something known as the progress trap—this was named by Ronald Wright, who is a brilliant Canadian writer and historian. Progress trap is: what always helps take down a civilization is that the original technology that gave it its advantage, that gave it its power to move ahead, becomes the very technology that then causes its demise. So you can go back in time to hunters, gatherers running 100,000 horses off a cliff for meat, or bison. It felt really good for a while, and then there were no more horses and no more bison. If you look at our technology, especially I think this is paramount in our faces right now, the consequences of the internet and social media are devastating to the development of young people, are devastating to political elections.

We're living in the age where the technology that was first used to connect us to one another—and the remarks by Zuckerberg of Facebook a few weeks ago before Congress had a certain poignancy to them because, as he said, we were building a technology to connect people. But increasingly now, week by week, we get reports of what is happening to young people who have only grown up with smartphones. They have no sense of self, they have much higher—increasing—rates of suicide, anxiety, despair

because they have no ground. If you live in virtual space, you don't have a being. You don't have a way of connecting. And so we're seeing this in really terrible increases in suicide and anxiety among young people.

So that's the technology that seemed to give us a great capacity. We're going to act as one human family. What has it done? It's also been used as a primary organizing tool—social media videos posted on YouTube—for organizing individual terrorism acts. So what's missing, from our perspective, is the sense of time in history. And I'm getting clearer and clearer on this personally. We didn't just happen. These things don't look good if you look at them over time. You could look at the Arab Spring, which seemed to be a wonderful mobilization of youth using technology, social media. And now where is Egypt? It's back to dictatorship.

So, we're a very present moment in a negative way—such a powerful term but I'm using it in a negative sense. We look at something and go, "Oh, that's great. Oh, that's a sign of progress." You have to look at the aftereffects of it. You have to look at where that went as it worked its way through society. So we've become very shallow thinkers, and this is where I really do think our optimism is just a set of blinders that actually keeps us from contributing. I want to keep going back that my work is about, "Where can I make the most meaningful contribution for this time?" And so context is important in that statement. My definition of what is "meaningful contribution" has to be examined and thought about. And then I get really clear ... I'm answering the question of my book title, Who Do We Choose to Be?

TS:So if I understand you correctly, in facing reality—which is part of the subtitle of your book, Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity—in facing reality, there's a time that we're in now where we can't look to make these big wholesale global changes but we can, you quote Theodore Roosevelt, "Do what you can with what you have, where you are." So I get that. I think the question that comes up for me is, is there a feeling of like, "Wow, I'm just putting a drop in a bucket. I can do what I can with what I have, where I am, my organization, the people I'm with, but I'm on a sinking ship. This is not really helping."

MW:Well, it depends if you define your role in life as keeping a ship afloat or doing meaningful, humane acts of service. And it really does come back down to that. And as I said, these are not easy-to-absorb recalibrations. I know this. I mean, I've gone through this for five or six years. But it's important, if we're really looking for a life of contribution—and by the way, we really are all very small drops in the great ocean of anything; so we're talking about humility here, perhaps, which is a long-lost sensibility—but I want to just keep us focused on the question of recognizing the ship is sinking.

What is meaningful work in that moment? What is meaningful work? And yes, we may be creating a better future, because once this cycle ends, then a new cycle begins. But my own ... because I hear this from a lot of my colleagues, we're kind of excited that things are collapsing because they're failing, they're horrible, they're abusive, they're destructive of the human spirit and the planet. So let's get rid of them all. But what's that going to feel like? What's that experience of getting from here—which is purely destructive, even with the new innovations. I wrote a book about communities daring to live the future now, Walk Out Walk On, in which we were highlighting all the positive ways that people are recreating community and taking it on for themselves, in the midst of breakdown. So that still has to happen, but my particular focus is, let's create these alternatives in our local communities, because

that's what gives us a satisfying life. How it contributes to building a brighter future, a future that's based on more humane values—that will happen. But the timeline is probably a lot longer than we want it to be. I mean, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was speaking to some friends of mine years ago, who were despairing of the work, that their work would have any influence, and he just said, "Oh, don't worry about that. Your work will bear influence in about 700 years." That gave us a different time cycle here.

I am concerned—I don't know when the rosy future will appear—but I am very concerned about talented, caring, compassionate people being of service as the times get tougher and rougher for more and more people. And it's happening now on a daily basis. So we need to be the ones who train to develop our compassion and insight—now I'm giving you the warrior training. We need to be the ones who prepare ourselves, so when more and more people are suffering, more and more people are angry, when the systems continue to fail, that we can be there to support people. So I'm very focused on, you know, the next several years.

TS: Now, Meg, when you say we're not just in a time of chaos, we're in a time of destruction; and that you and your colleagues, or at least some of your colleagues, are actually like, "Thank God, it's all going to fall apart;" and we need that to happen for some new time of resurrection (my language) to occur—what do you actually see happening over the next period of time? Where do you place us right now and how do you see it without any rosy optimism—which clearly is not having anything to bear with this conversation?

MW: Well, in [The Collapse of Complex Societies]—I cite two authors in particular in the book—Joseph Tainter, who is the seminal thinker about what happens with complex civilizations, and he has a primarily economic view, but he's looked at all civilizations throughout time, no matter where the place is. And one of the characteristics is the systems become so overbearing and bureaucratic—it doesn't matter where we are—become rigid, become held by the elites who no longer care at all about what's happening to anybody else in their society. The elites always take power, they use up everything for themselves, and the society ... These systems become too expensive to maintain. There's no money for them, so they go into—we just have to think about the recent news about the tax plan—taking money from the poor, using up the basic capital of the society. So we're there now.

And then I overlay that with Sir John Glubb's description of cycles that a society goes through, starting with high ambition, high ideals, all about service, and then gradually through six stages, ending up in the age of degradation, just prior to collapse. That is characterized—this is where it gets very telling—by its celebrity culture, where celebrities are worshiped. And the celebrities—again, this goes back through time in other civilizations—the celebrities who are worshiped are actors, musicians and sports heroes. And sports become a major, major focus for the common people. And he [tells us]—because it is generational: each generation wants more, offers less, becomes more narcissistic—that this is a 250 year cycle. And the United States was founded in 1775, so that gives us ... we're coming up very close to his time period.

The time period is not random; it's a generational time series. So there are 10 generations of 25 years each. So there are other people who are speaking about what's going to happen in the 2020s, and it's scary as hell. It's the collapse of systems, more infighting, struggling to make things work, and I think we see that now, we're just not living yet with the consequences of what's happening in Congress and the removal of safety nets, the removal of any concern for the poor. And

tremendous infighting is one of the characteristics also. Civil wars develop in every civilization and they don't even notice who the real enemy is, which in this case would be those who threaten us from the outside.

TS: Now Meg, can you help me understand this point you made about the age of celebrities and athletes, and why that would be a sign—logically—why that would be a sign of a time of collapse?

MW: Well, it's not the logic, it's what is. In the final stage where everything is degraded—everything is self-serving, superficial, and while the elites are just taking everything for themselves—what you always see is that people turn to worship celebrities in those three categories. So there's not a logic there, there's just an "is-ness" to it all. And it's part of shifting to personal cocooning, personal seeking entertainment, seeking satisfaction while—you know, this is "bread and circuses" in the Roman Empire, where you just give people a lot of displays—while you're taxing them to death and Barbarians are at the gate.

So it does make sense, because throughout a whole civilization's development, there is increasing wellbeing, there's increasing attention to justice, to hospitals, to education—all of that seems to be building a robust society. But the underbelly of it is increasing expectations for superficial entertainment and an increasing focus on self-satisfaction rather than community values or community service. It makes so much sense, psychologically.

TS: So your sense is that the 2020s for humanity will be very, very difficult and challenging and your—

MW: For America.

TS: For America, and not worldwide?

MW: Well, it will be worldwide because of the nature of our interconnectedness, but this is happening in the States right now.

TS: OK, and that you're training interested people in becoming Warriors for the Human Spirit, so that they can be resources and lights (in my own language) during that time—

MW: That's right.

TS: So help me understand how, if somebody wants to be a resource for others during this difficult time, what you feel are the essential training ingredients.

MW: Yes, well of course this is near and dear to my heart since I'm running these training programs. First of all this requires ... This is also a historical role. There are always a few people who refuse to go along with the current degradation of lack of morals, lack of ethics, narcissism that's growing. That's true in all times, so it's certainly true now. But we know the stories from World War II or any great conflict where there are always a few people who refuse and stand up and take a stand, and also shelter others. So you can think of any World War II hero in that regard, or modern day people as well. So there's always a group of people who refuse to go along, and take a stand. So that's the first commitment, am I one of those? And that's why the book title is the question, Who Do You Choose To Be?

And this is a conscious choice. And once you make that choice, then you have to really develop.

My feeling is, we're not going to change the world, but we could certainly change ourselves. We can certainly work on ourselves. So developing a stable mind is one of those capacities—through meditation, through developing greater awareness—so that we don't get thrown off balance, we don't get hooked by our reactivity, we understand our own filters. And we know to train so that we can stay in the places that most trigger us and not be a reactive mess, but actually be a better, clearer presence. Part of the skill is developing direct perception, being able to see more, to take in more. Again, this is working with the mind to notice our biases and our filters, and then develop past those, open our minds to much more information.

A critical part of this also is knowing what works, because we have clearly seen the situation we're in and we can make a truly good discernment about what might work in this situation. So because I am working with leaders, it's where you apply the skills you've already developed, but with a much greater sense of clarity. And then the fourth component is having one another, having community who share the same view, who have a real sense of what's going on in the world and are just there to support each of us. This is very lonely work. It's predicted to be lonely and it is and that's OK. We're beyond the outsiders here. We're looking in at what's going on, but there's a sense of this as ... we're talking about spiritual worship in many traditions. We're there to protect the people and we're there to defend. And to do that well, we have to be fully dedicated and trained. We train our minds, we offer ourselves in community and support to one another, and we really work to develop a level of clear seeing.

I equate this to the same sort of training that warriors anywhere would have developed. That was part of their training. It's not casual, it's not like you say, "OK, I want to be there for people," and then you walk into the next meeting and some jerk says something and you're just livid, you're just aggressive. I mean our basic premise, our basic commitment is we will not add to fear and aggression by whatever tactics we use. I'm also speaking of the tradition of the Shambhala warriors that Joanna Macy has made so clear, and my own teacher Chögyam Trungpa has made so clear. We only have two skills, two weapons—as Joanna Macy, a teacher, often described it—the weapons of compassion and insight. And those take training to develop, but it's very rewarding work, I must say.

TS: OK, there's a lot here Meg, so I want to unpack some of it. The Warrior for the Human Spirit refrains from fear and aggression. OK, what happens when someone does feel aggressive? Maybe it's about something that's happening in the world, something that makes them feel angry or afraid. Maybe there's a fear of nuclear war disaster of some kind. How does a Warrior for the Human Spirit work with fear and aggression when they do arise?

MW: Well, I can speak personally because they arise every single day. I have new levels of rage about the destruction that's going on for the people and places and causes I care about in this country. And it's to recognize that I do not choose to stay or act—react—from those feelings. So when I go into fear, I understand that I am really making a choice to be afraid. I would rather just see the situation clearly so I would know what would be right action at this moment. And then I've developed, from working with my mind for many years—it's part of the training but we don't ...



There's a great statement that if you don't know fear, you can't be fearless. So we're not talking about accepting everything or just sitting there with a beneficent smile on our face at what's going on. It's actually working, expecting these deep dark emotions including grief, and the sense that despair for all that's being lost, and fear, outright fear.

It's being able to work with them, and not from a purely reactive basis. Much more becomes possible when we are afraid, if we can actually honor that emotion—"I am scared shitless at this moment."—and just sit with it for a moment. Then from a calmer, more centered place really decide, "So what would be right action here?" And that's when it becomes fearless, because you've gone through the fear. You never deny these things. And I have to say, I'm just watching in my own life how intense my feelings of anger are daily. And it's not always satisfying to not react, and sometimes I do in terms of cursing, just blowing off, doing a rant. I think the core—I'm glad you brought this up Tami—because the core of how we train, how any of us need to train, is we need to honor and acknowledge these very strong emotions we're now in on a daily basis, which I would say is anger that becomes rage, grief that becomes an overwhelming sense of loss, powerlessness.

And for people who have been active in the world and been influential in the world, what do we do with those feelings? And I think that's the major question for your listeners that you actually started this with. We're now encountering such strong emotions that are justified. In fact, it would be a real shame if we didn't notice that we're in these very strong, dark emotions frequently. But then the real need is, what do I do with them? What do I do with them? That's why so many people are getting ill, they don't know what to do with their grief or anger. So finding right work from that is essential. Because otherwise we're just eaten alive by these very strong emotions.

TS: You're saying finding "right work," meaning not coming from a reactive place, but choosing to then respond with some meaningful contribution of some kind.

MW: That's correct.

TS: OK. I wanted to also talk to you about this idea of seeing things as they are. I use the phrase, "direct perception." And I notice, even as you're talking and I am feeling challenged to see the state of the world as it really is, I feel like I don't know where to get the right information to even come to the right assessments and conclusions. What news do I trust? I mean, how do I actually engage in clear perception about the world's situation?

MW: Yes, this is a double-edged sword, because the more you tune to what's going on in the world, the more it's devastating. Many of my friends, and myself, we talk about how we give ourselves rest weeks, where we just don't watch any news or don't read any news even, just to sort of come back to some form of feeling grounded again. But just two days ago I picked up a quote from one of my great mentors as a young woman, Hannah Arendt, who said that when everything is lies, it's not that people believe the lie, they start to not believe anything at all. And I think that is the danger of this time, when we throw up our hands and say, "I can't believe anything."

I don't think that's true. I think it requires a commitment to seek out good reporting—there's a lot of good reporting going on right now—and to be disciplined about reading about things in detail. It's interesting because we're all, even

the press now just bullet points the key points in an article. Every week The Guardian from the UK, puts out something they call the "Long Read." I would call that old fashioned journalism, but it's where you have to sit and read several pages that gives you a full picture, a complex picture, of what's going on. So I think this is ... and I'm getting clearer about this. I've just been out in the world all fall, meeting a lot of people in Australia and Europe, where I've been a lot in my life. But I think so many people are just saying, "Well, I can't trust anything." I think that's irresponsible because we are thoughtful, caring people, so we need to find the sources of information that are reliable. And then you can counter poise them, one against the other.

It takes responsibility. It takes a commitment. "I'm going to seek out information about this." But there's good reporting going on. I think we're being brainwashed to say, "Well, you can't trust the media," as one big whitewash. There's a lot of good reporting going on, but it's a commitment to not be overwhelmed, and then to notice that even when I take an accurate full picture of something, I will be overwhelmed and therefore I need to maybe give myself a few days off or just go away and do something else to relax the mind. Because it is quite overwhelming, what's going on. But to withdraw on that basis, I think, is completely irresponsible.

TS: Makes sense to me. OK, now the third point you made: knowing what works and using our talents. And this is a quote that I pulled from your book, *Who Do We Choose To Be?* It's a question that you ask leaders, "Are you willing to use whatever power and influence you have to create islands of sanity, that evoke and rely on your best human qualities to create, relate and persevere?" And I love this idea of creating in our own lives "islands of sanity" and I wonder if you can talk more about that, what you mean by that?

MW: Yes, I did not mean it as personal. I meant it as organizational or community-based, that we use our own leadership or our own commitment to a cause or an issue to gather people together and then to intentionally— I'm not talking about these as places of transformation, I'm talking about them as places of transcendence—where we're willing to transcend the current dynamics that are so prevalent in organizations and policy making, of greed, self-interest, just making a decision to make a decision. And we create places where the human spirit can flourish, where people can remember the great pleasure of working well together, taking time to think. I mean these are revolutionary changes now that I always feel somewhat foolish having to name. That creating a place, a workplace or a community effort where people are thinking together is a revolutionary act these days, rather than just reacting, rather than just doing an immediate action.

So an island of sanity ... I define sane leadership as a leader's unshakable faith that people can be creative, generous and kind. And the operative phrase there is "can be," because we can also be self-interested, narcissistic, brutal, even savage with one another. So this takes work, and it's a great, courageous act on the part of leaders to say, "I'm not going to go along with the general mainstream. I am going to create this as an island. I'm going to create a sense of specialness, a sense of, "I know what we're doing and we're going to keep out the negative pressures"—some of which are bureaucratic, some of which are more personal attacks—but we're going to create a boundary, not to keep ourselves protected, but to keep ourselves so we can do good work.

And I'm getting a lot of positive response from that. And it is my take on the quote

from Teddy Roosevelt, "Do what you can with what you have, where you are." Let's just, whatever your sphere of influence, let's think of that as a sanctuary, as an island of sanity where we're going to work well together. And it is an act of transcendence these days. I'm quite sure of that.

TS: Can you help me understand your use of the word "transcendence"? That you said it's transcendence, not transformation. I didn't understand that.

MW: Transformation ... Yes, it's meaningful to me in that when you transcend something you rise above it. Whereas transformation, which was the core of so many of us in our change work, is we were going to change the system and we were going to not only personally transform but we were going to transform the workplace, or how we were together in community. So that was taking the present shape and form of things—the system—and working to change it. And when I talk about the island mentality, it's really about, "That is what it is. We're not going to change it. We will rise above it and create something new that's based on different values and different practices."

TS: OK, there's another quote from, Who Do We Choose To Be? "You can identify Warriors for the Human Spirit by their compassionate presence and by their cheerfulness." And I noticed I was with you when you said, "By their compassionate presence," I thought, well that's intuitively obvious, but "by their cheerfulness"? I thought, "Huh, really?" Help me understand that.

MW: That's one of those ... I love finding words that stop us—"What do you mean?" Well, we're not Little Miss Sunshine figures of optimism and positivity, the cheerfulness another way of thinking about it, is confidence, uprightness. But I do experience it as cheerfulness in sort of the older sense of the word. When I'm with a group of people and we're really working together, I feel cheerful. And I make note of it to people like, "Isn't it good that we're together?" This is the joy of being together in work, no matter how hard the work is. It's cause for really feeling grateful and cheerful. We're not cheerful about outcomes, expectations. It's just the joy of being in work together where we're not at each other, where we're really in a deeper sense of connectedness. That's what cheerfulness means.

TS: And there's another quote from this same section that I thought was curious. It's a chapter you call "The Joy of Interbeing." You write, "The experience of joy often feels the same as sadness." And I think that's very interesting, especially in the light of this conversation we're having, where I notice I feel a certain heaviness in my heart having this conversation with you, but I also feel a joy of getting to connect with you. I don't know if I would say they feel the same, I kind of feel both of them so—

MW: Heaviness is not the same, is not what I'm describing as sadness. For me joy and sadness are one, in that they're full-body experiences, when you're really in a period where your whole being just seems engaged with this feeling. I find it, and others describe it the same way, it's difficult to put a name to it. So we have to get beyond "what is sadness," but that's different than heaviness. But whatever joy you may be feeling right now is the kind of joy that is usually experienced when people have gone through ... it could be natural disaster recovery efforts, where they're saving people and animals and delivering medical supplies and people are dying around them. But they always recount those experiences as joyful. I've worked in that area for many years and I've finally understood, "Oh, you're speaking about an experience of human communion of really transcending the self, of just being there for

each other." And that is a joyful experience.

It also has this quality of sadness because the experience that we were in had great grief and loss in it. And I think all of these are ... We have these names—joy and sadness or happiness or many different descriptors—they're all too limiting. And so when I say "joy and sadness are one," which is a scriptural quote, it's really about feeling throughout your being-ness, that this is just right, this is a big yes, this experience. And I can feel that when I'm in places of deep grief. I can feel it because I'm together with other people. It's a completely non-Western focused, non-material basis of just what's available when ... I quote the Bible all the time, "Whenever two or more are gathered there will I be also." So it's truly an experience of the sacred, and I don't know how to describe that even with the words joy or sadness, but it's the deepest, profound sensation.

TS: Now Meg, I'm imagining people listening who are feeling resonant with this idea of being a Warrior for the Human Spirit, but they may not identify necessarily in their life as being a leader. I know you've done a lot of work with leadership. Do you think if someone's a Warrior for the Human Spirit by necessity, they're a leader?

MW: They are. I used a definition of a leader as anyone willing to help. I used that for many years. So it's still a woman who goes to bat for her child in the school system. It's the person who sees something going on in the community and just won't let it pass by. It's someone whose heart opens to a cause just by looking at a photo in a newspaper. So if a leader is anyone willing to help, we need to pay attention to what are the causes or situations that call us forward, that call us to want to help and to serve. And the world is filled with leaders, because there are so many people with their hearts open who really desire to make a difference. And what I'm doing in my own work right now is relying on that same dynamic of being called to serve, and then giving it a name: Warrior for the Human Spirit.

TS: Now finally, Meg, I read in the news section on your website that in January you will be going on a 60-day silent solo retreat. And I thought that was so interesting that you are willing and that you see it as part of your work to take time like this, to go on a two month retreat and be "out of the action" in a certain sense, the action of the world, the outer world, for that period of time. And I wonder if you can just talk about that decision at this point in your life to spend that much time in retreat?

MW: Well, this is my eighth year of doing, minimally, 60 days of retreat and it is of such benefit to me that I couldn't not do it at this point. It allows me the ability to just watch my mind come back alive—no distractions, nothing to do except to be with my mind, whether in meditation or in study, or just be on my own, so that I really see more clearly and I really develop a sense of that equanimity that lasts until about November. And then I realize I'm getting much more reactive again. This has been part of my practice. As I said, this is the eighth long retreat I'm doing. I've had incredible guidance from my teacher, Pema Chödrön. It's just, for me, it gives me the basis to do my work, to take in the suffering of the world, and to not be undone by my own very strong reactions and dark emotion. So, it's my way of truly nourishing and re-centering and preparing and tuning in to what's next.

TS: Meg Wheatley, I want to thank you so much for this conversation. You really inspire me. Thank you so much.

MW: Well I would just say that for you and all the listeners, the conflicting emotions, the

feelings of "I'm not going to let things in because it's too despairing"—it's all part of the process. And really, the gift of coming to terms with facing "what is," is the gift of finding one's right work, and therefore that's an unshakable motivation for going forward.

TS: I've been speaking with Margaret Wheatley. She's the bestselling author of Leadership and the New Science and a new book, Who Do We Choose to Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity. Meg, thank you so much for being on Insights at the Edge. Thank you.

MW: I'm very grateful for this time Tami, thank you.

TS: SoundsTrue.com: many voices, one journey.