

## Warriors Wanted: Why One Woman is Training People to Defend the Human Spirit by CBC Radio

Seventy-five year old writer, consultant and activist Margaret Wheatley has studied the cyclical nature of civilizations throughout history and she is quite confident that the end of our civilization is closer than we might like to think. And she is doing something about it... something radical.

Wheatley is building an army of 'warriors for the human spirit' with people who want to lessen the suffering in the world - whether it be from natural disasters, political strife, war, famine, or from the tyranny of daily injustices in modern life.

Her warriors are trained as leaders with compassion, kindness, servitude and generosity as prime requirements. Wheatley has amassed a library of resources - articles, podcasts, videos, and even poems - to help inspire your inner warrior.

Since 1966, Margaret Wheatley has worked globally as a speaker, teacher, community worker, consultant, advisor, and formal leader. She is the co-founder and president of the Berkana Institute that supports emerging leaders. She holds a PhD from Harvard and is the bestselling author of nine books, including *Who Do We Choose to Be?: Facing Reality*, *Claiming Leadership*, *Restoring Sanity*.

She spoke to Tapestry host Mary Hynes about this ambitious project.

Training warriors for the human spirit

MH: I'm interested in the word 'warrior'. I'm intrigued by your choice. I'm picturing armour and weapons and something ferocious. What does the word warrior mean to you?

MW: Warriors exist through every culture. The deeper tradition of warriors which you can find in other cultures is that the warriors arise when something needs protection. And in this time, for me, it is human beings - people - who need protection. We need protection because we do have these great human capacities that I could define as our 'human spirits': our generosity, our creativity, our kindness.

There is a tradition of spiritual warriors or peaceful warriors that occurs over and over again in history. So we are standing on the shoulders of millions and millions of other people who have trained as warriors. And that's also important because there's no such thing as a casual warrior. You have to train. You have to sacrifice. You have to have a level of dedication that is really unusual these days.

The commitment is to service. Warriors for the human spirit are committed to serving people but the quality of our service is that we vow not to add to aggression and not to add to fear. We want to be the embodiment really of the best qualities of human beings. And those are qualities of presence, good listening, confidence that isn't based on arrogance just on self-knowledge. And we want to be there for others not for our own glory.

MH: Tell me a little bit about some of your warriors, because I gather this training and this work is taking place in various parts of the world.

MW: We've done it in the U.S. drawing on people from Australia, Canada, South America and some from Europe. And then we've offered it in Europe in different locations drawing on people from Africa and Asia and Europe. We're up to about 30 countries. And the warriors range in age from late 20s to our oldest warrior who, when she was in training, was 84 years old. She was a nun who had been living a consecrated life, a vowed life, for over 60 years.

It's such a delightful range of professions. We have people who are artists and performers. We have people who are former ambassadors. We have teachers, educators at all levels, and they really relate to warrior training because being a teacher these days is very, very difficult work.

They have to write a description of what is a warrior for the human spirit. Those are the best things I could possibly read. One woman, she's a minister, she said a warrior for the human spirit is someone who makes a commitment to stay. Who practices compassion and insight wherever they are. Who knows they can't do anything without community.

How to deal with despair

MH: I'm intrigued by this notion [that] you commit to stay. Is the opposite of someone who commits to stay, someone who just sort of checks out or is so consumed by despair that they hide under the covers?

MW: One is just like, this isn't what I signed up for [so] I'm just going to go lead a good life. I'm in denial and everything is going to get better, or I can't bear it so I'll just hide behind a screen somewhere and entertain myself to death. I mean we see that in the bulk of the population.

But we feel more acutely the despair than others. The sadness is overwhelming for us because we're staying in the world and we're trying to be there, open to what's happening to people's suffering, the egregious abuses of power going on now. That openness brings our recognition of how much suffering is going on. And so we talk a lot about how do we maintain a sense of humour, as part of our actual skill set, to deal with the despair and the sadness. And that's a good thing about a sense of humour, not cynicism or sarcasm, but a good sense of humour.

MH: What else is in your toolkit when it comes to countering despair?

MW: I realize I am never going to be free of despair because this is a despairing time. This is a time worthy of despair. But the difference is I'm not afraid of my despair. I recognize it's part of the price I pay for being awake and therefore I also know I have other alternatives to act. Those alternatives are: if I'm witnessing all of this

despair, how can I serve? How can I get out of myself and the self-protection and just find ways to be of service? With warriors-in-training, it's what can I do right here, right now? What can I offer? And what we're really offering is the reminder of what it means to be a good human being. It's getting that simple for me.

MH: I'm so struck by this phrase of yours: "this is a time worthy of despair." Because there is quite a strong narrative that says despair is the enemy: "Whatever you do, you mustn't give in to despair." And you're suggesting that maybe that is not the most helpful approach?

MW: I think it's a mirage, I think it's an illusion, having to avoid something that is so real and present in our emotional bodies. How could you not feel sad? How could you not feel grief? And therefore how could you not feel despair when you're really taking in what's happening now? The work of the warrior is to really, fully take in what's going on because when we do, that's when we discover the very qualities we need. Compassion, gentleness, non-aggression, clear-seeing. You fully witness what's going on and in that witnessing your heart opens and you feel more compassion for others.

And then if you get to work serving others, you'll actually end up with a very satisfying life.

The end of the world as we know it

MH: So much of this is hopeful and inspiring. And at the same time you have given a lot of thought to the cyclical nature of civilizations and you have suggested that ours could very well be on the verge of total collapse. What signs do you see?

MW: I think the events of the past few months have convinced many more people that we are already losing the systems and losing the planet. So to talk about us being in the last stage of a civilization is no longer a foreign notion that people argue against.

The real question now is: as things get worse and worse, what is right action? What do we do? Then the question is: who do I choose to be? Where can I still give service? Where can I live a meaningful life?

This is a cycle. It's six different ages. The First Age is the age of pioneers when everyone is transformed by the ideal and the idea of service and gives up everything, gives up material comfort and migrates. Most nation states began with high ideals and then gradually as they get settled down and life gets more comfortable, it moves into an age of affluence and age of commerce and life gets better and better. And as life gets better and better, we of course become more materialistic, more selfish, more demanding, and so by the sixth stage we are into this age of degradation and self self focus. It's a cycle.

MH: Do you see us being in the sixth stage of the sixth stages?

MW: Oh for sure. I'm counting down the clock. Absolutely. There's no denying that we're in this age of entitlements, demands, narcissism and an inability to see beyond our own increasing neediness and our own fear-based neediness. Yeah, there's no question about that.

MH: So when you say you're counting down the clock What are you bracing for?

MW: I believe I will live long enough to be of service as suffering increases exponentially.

Don't let your children be superheroes

MH: You used the word 'valiant.' It's been a very long time since I heard that word. Have some of these values just completely fallen off the edge of the world?

MW: Well yes, haven't they. I mean where they appear now is in all the children's movies about heroes. And I want to restore them to the human level - especially with children. I have a lot of grandchildren. I've watched a lot of these superhero movies and I think it's a deception that we're visiting upon our children and our grandchildren to say 'everyone's a superhero! You have superpowers.'

Let's develop them as strong value-based individuals, as people who are going to be needed in the times ahead. We need to be working with our children and our grandchildren now for them to know what it means to be a fully alive human not a superhero. We need people being people.

We need people recognizing what our greatest human capacities are - our consciousness and awareness, our ability to love, our ability to work together in harmonious ways and our ability to care about one another rather than just the self. This is what's been eradicated in global culture, consumer culture, political culture. So I want us all to really focus on enlivening those qualities in ourselves and making sure now that we're bringing them to our children and grandchildren as well.

How you can become a warrior for the human spirit

MW: The first way to start is through finding a few others who feel similarly. Sometimes that's best done through starting a book club or circulating article. My website is a library of resources and it's all for free. There are podcasts where I really lay this out. You could start with that, but the first work is to start a conversation among like minded others. Then you get into the possibility [of] what could we create here in our community? I use Theodore Roosevelt's statement 'Do what you can, where you are with what you have.'

\*\*\*

For more inspiration, join this Wednesday's webinar with Meg Wheatley and John Powell on "Finding Ground in a Groundless Time". More details and RSVP info here.