

8 Fearless Questions by Margaret Wheatley

Excerpt from "A Call to Fearlessness for Gentle Leaders" address at the Shambhala Institute Core Program, Halifax, June 2006

I think these questions are worth holding for a while.

How do you call yourself? How do you identify yourself? And have you chosen a name for yourself that is big enough to hold your life's work?

I have a colleague who first suggested this to me. And he said, "So many of us choose names that are too small for a whole life." So, we call ourselves, 'cancer survivors'; that seems to be a very bold name, but is it big enough to hold a life? Or, 'children of abuse.' Or, we call ourselves 'orphans,' or 'widows,' or 'martyrs'.... are these names big enough to hold your life?

And the second question that just occurred to me as I was doing this is, Are we choosing names that demand fearlessness? You're a coach. You're an executive. You're a consultant. You're a teacher. You're a minister. You're a hospital administrator. You're a civil servant. Are those names demanding fearlessness of us? I don't know what the names are that would create fearlessness, but I think this is a very important question.

What's so bad about fear?

Fear has a lot of positive attributes when you think about it. First of all, it gives us adrenaline. So it gives us the energy we need, the surging we need, to really do things that, then, look courageous. So, fear could be a good thing.

The second thing about fear is that it's instantly available. You don't have to do any work here; you just have a thought and suddenly you're afraid.

And the other good thing about fear is that it's a constant companion. Day and night. Waking and dreaming. It's always there.

So, what is there to fear about fear? I don't know the answer to that question yet. So, I just ask you to consider it. But, it seems to me that a lot of our fear is based on wanting to protect and defend ourselves. And a lot of fear arises when we're so focused on ourselves that we lose our engagement with the world. If the way out of fearfulness is to stop identifying so terribly with ourselves and with the self that we're trying to protect and defend and nourish, then this leads us into the possibility

that the way out of fearfulness is to connect with the greater world.

Does the world need us to be fearless?

What's going on in the world, and does it require a different response from us? Does the world need us to be fearless? Here's a poem that I wrote a while ago, that also expressed my views on this:

The flags are flying at half-mast. Again.
This one drapes across the highway as I drive toward it.
It's over-sized, the type of flag that became popular when patriotism
needed to be more visible.
It suffocates the road, limp, lifeless.
Wind attempts to lift its spirit but
the flag refuses so
laden with sorrow.

This flag is for Katrina.
I remember another massive flag that
flared-out defiantly in the fierce wind after 9-11.

The world I see will soon be lost in lifeless flags.
We are only at the beginning.

Last night, I threw out a salt container that still had some salt in it.
I wanted to clear out space in my crowded cabinet.
As I tossed it in the garbage, it came to me. There will
come such scarcity that even those few grains will be treasure.
I still threw it out, but I vowed to remember this night.

Now, how do I live whole-heartedly?

Every time a flag gets lowered, I tell myself:
This is what it feels like as a culture dies.
This is what it feels like in the age of destruction.
This is what groundless feels like.
Don't grasp for ground.
Don't grasp.

Groundlessness has to be learned.
I am teaching myself with these terrifying mantras.

What if we can't save the world?

What if our efforts come to nothing? What if, at the end of our lives, we die having
watched destruction and not been able to create any good effect?

What, really, is available to us if we can't save the world? What do we fund our work
for? Where do we gain energy if we don't believe that we're going to be
successful? How can we do our work without hope that we will succeed?

There's something very interesting to understand about hope. That is, that hope and fear are one. Any time we're hopeful, we don't know it necessarily, but we're bringing in fear. Because fear is the constant, unavoidable companion of hope. What this simply means is that I hope for a certain outcome and I'm afraid I won't get it. I hope for a certain result and I'm fearful it won't happen. This is the way that hope and fear are wedded together. There is a place called, "beyond hope and fear." It is to be free from hope, so that we are free from fear.

So, it might be that the road to fearlessness is only found by giving up hope. By giving up outcomes, by giving up goals.

I find this to be an intolerable posture, by the way. If we don't have hope, where will we find our motivation? If we don't have hope, who will save the world? If we go down in despair - which seems to be the alternative to hope in many peoples' imaginations, who will save the world?

What if your work achieves nothing? Thomas Merton, a great writer and contemplative in the Catholic tradition, said, "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not, perhaps, results opposite to what you expect.

"As you get used to this idea of your work achieving nothing, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there, too, a great deal has to be gone through, as, gradually, you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything."

What would it feel like to find our fearlessness with each other? For those relationships to be enough? For us to feel we would have made a significant contribution, and led a good life, just because we cared for, loved, consoled a few people? This is quite a frightening thought; to shift from saving the world to loving a few people? Doesn't seem like that will do it, does it?

What is it like to live in the future now?

I was given a passage by the Brazilian theologian, Ruben Alvez, who described hope in this way:

"What is hope? It is the presentiment that imagination is more real and reality less real than it looks. It is the suspicion that the overwhelming brutality of fact that oppresses us and represses us is not the last word. It is the hunch that reality is more complex than the realists want us to believe, that the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual, and that, in a miraculous and unexpected way, life is preparing the creative events which will open the way to freedom and to resurrection.

"But, hope must live with suffering. Suffering, without hope, produces resentment and despair. And hope, without suffering, creates illusions, naiveté, and drunkenness. So, let us plant dates, even though we who plant them will never eat them. We must live by the love of what we will never see.

"This is the secret of discipline. Such disciplined love is what has given saints,

revolutionaries, and martyrs the courage to die for the future they envision; they make their own bodies the seed of their highest hope."

I'm finding this to be a very provocative exploration of hope, not comfortable at all. I don't actually want to make my body the seed of the future I hope for, or the seed of my own highest hope. I don't really want to have to sacrifice that much. I don't think I really know what "disciplined love" is. I don't understand that.

Why do we imprison ourselves? Why are we so afraid?

The American poet, Robert Bly, wrote:

"If we don't lift our voices, we allow others (who are ourselves) to rob the house. Every day we steal from ourselves knowledge gained over a thousand years."

Why do we imprison ourselves? And what's the nature of the bars? What's the nature of the prison?

I think some of the prison bars that we have constructed for ourselves are our fear of losing our jobs. Our fear of not being liked. Our need for approval. Our desire to make important changes but not have to risk anything at all. So, we still want the comfort of this life and it feels like a bigger risk to step out and say, "No," or to say, "You can't do that to me." It feels like a larger risk, because I think the real prison we're in is our affluence, and our focus on our affluence or our hypnosis around material goods. I offer you this to think about: what is it that keeps you from acting fearlessly?

I'm quite perplexed by how fearful we are as cultures now in North America, and in Europe: we're so damned fearful of losing what we have, we're not noticing that we're losing what we have through our silence.

Why do we put up these bars that keep us back from doing what we know needs to be done? What impedes us from standing forward for those things that nurture us, our hearts, and our spirits? Bernice Johnson Reagon, who was very active in the civil rights movements and also a wonderful singer, co-founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock, tells the story of looking back at those days of the civil rights movement, now from the safety and comfort of a successful life and career. She said, "In those days, we used to go out onto the streets, we used to protest. They would shoot at us, and someone would get killed. And then we'd go to their funeral and then we'd mourn and we'd grieve. And then the next day, we'd go back on the streets and protest some more." And she said, "When I look back, now, I think we were crazy to do that." But, then she said this. "But, when you're doing what you're supposed to do be doing, it's somebody else's job to kill you."

Can we work beyond hope and fear?

Can we find a way to be motivated, to be energetic, to be happy; to take delight in the work that we're doing that isn't based on outcomes, that isn't based on needing to see a particular result? Is that even available?

What if we could offer our work as a gift so lightly, and with so much love,

that that's really the source of fearlessness? We don't need it to be accepted in any one way. We don't need it to create any certain outcome. We don't need it to be any one thing. It is in the way we offer it, that the work transforms us. It is in the way we offer our work as a gift to those we love, to those we care about, to the issues we care about. It is in the way we offer the work that we find fearlessness. Beyond hope and fear, I think, is the possibility of love.

What would it take for us to just deal with what is? To not need to be always engaged in changing the world?

Yitzhak Perlman, the great violinist, was playing in New York. Yitzhak Perlman was crippled by polio as a young child, so the bottom part of his body doesn't work well and he wears these very prominent leg braces and comes on in crutches, in a very painful, slow way, hauling himself across the stage. Then he sits down and, very carefully, unbuckles the leg braces and lays them down, puts down his crutches, and then picks up his violin. So, this night the audience had watched him slowly, painfully, walk across the stage; and he began to play. And, suddenly, there was a loud noise in the hall that signaled that one of his four strings on his violin had just snapped.

Everyone expected that they would be watching Yitzhak Perlman put back the leg braces, walk slowly across the stage, and find a new violin. But this is what happened. Yitzhak Perlman closed his eyes for a moment. Yitzhak Perlman paused. And then he signaled for the conductor to begin again. And he began from where they had left off. And here's the description of his playing, from Jack Riemer in the Houston Chronicle:

"He played with such passion, and such power, and such purity, as people had never heard before. Of course, everyone knew that it was impossible to play this symphonic work with three strings. I know that. You know that. But that night, Yitzhak Perlman did not know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before. When he finished, there was an awe-filled silence in the room. And then people rose and cheered. Everyone was screaming and cheering and doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had just done. He smiled. He wiped the sweat from his brow. He raised his bow to us. And then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet and pensive and reverent tone,

"You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

Sometimes, it is our task to find out how much music we can make with what we have left. What is the name that is big enough to hold your fearlessness, that is big enough to call you into fearlessness? That is big enough to break your heart? To allow you to open to the suffering that is this world right now and to not become immobilized by fear and to not become immobilized by comfort? What is the way in which you can hold your work so that you do feel free from hope.... and therefore free from fear?