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Learning and Living in Times of Collapse: Interview with Margaret Wheatley

Aprender y vivir en tiempos de colapso: entrevista con Margaret Wheatley

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Let me start with the big question. Why educate? What should be the purpose or the purposes of education for the world that's coming?

I want to start with the biggest question you just posed, which is Why educate? And I want to start there because it's such a lens into how far we have gone in the wrong direction. We even have to think about whether there is a purpose for education, which I want to translate into: Is there a purpose for learning? In the life sciences, living and learning are synonyms. A living system is a constantly learning system.

So, when we talk about education, let's first define the context that we're in now. We start with the recognition that learning is always happening in our schools, but what are kids learning? And now with this intensively toxic and destructive social media environment for kids, what are they learning? We see the results of what they're learning, which is purely frightening in terms of mental health and well-being. But we are living in a culture that no longer understands that living and learning are synonyms. Just think about that for a moment. It's shocking. When I was speaking to many organizations, corporate groups, and professional associations, I would give a whole part of my presentation to the following question: How much learning is going on in your organization? And I would always preface that by saying "I feel ridiculous having to remind us that we need to learn." But that's where we are.

Where are we? We're frantic, fearful, primitive brain-based humans who are acting out of instinct rather than intelligence. So, the need for education is the need for learning. Learning is what will save some of us. We're not going to save many people on this planet, given the climate collapse and the violence, which is making many places on Earth increasingly uninhabitable. Right now, we are in a situation where most people are not acting in the richness and fullness of human beings, as human beings being fully human. These are times when human activity is driven mostly by our primitive brains with all this fear-based, threat-based behavior driven by the amygdala, always aggressive. How do we create circumstances and conditions for people to relax enough so that the richness of our human brains is available to us so that we experience what it means to be a human being, not a human animal?

This is true in schooling as well. How do we create the circumstances to engage and light up kids with their curiosity, with their sense of wonder, and with their innate desire to learn and grow? One of the things we've forgotten is what's innate in human beings when we're working with our full brain capacity, which then leads to mind capacity, which in turn leads to awareness and consciousness. For me, it is an absolute cause-and-effect chain. But how do we as adults remember that innate in all humans is generosity, creativity, and kindness? You don't get that when you're acting like a scared reptile!

In all of this, we first need to notice where we are. And we are in a culture that gives no recognition to our human spirits, our higher ways of being. And the only way we discover who we are, what we're capable of, and what's possible is by reintroducing learning. Learning and living are synonyms. And the meaning of life is to learn. To experience life as fully as possible, to just discover what life is all about.

In this scenario, what do you think should be the purpose of education?

To reawaken curiosity and wonder in children. But how do we do it, especially at this time when there is no future for them, when what they are feeling towards adults –if they are feeling anything toward

them— is pure anger: Why did you let this happen? Why did you rob us of our future? Why did you deceive us all these years and tell us life is always getting better? Now, this is Western Culture I'm speaking of. But it's also a global culture for kids because they're tuned in to the same movies, the same celebrity culture, etc. A Tibetan teacher shared with me what happened when the internet came to Bhutan, which was only recently. Bhutan is where you will find the most classical Tibetan Buddhist culture. And of course, they had their Minister of Happiness there. But things shifted when the internet came. Up until then, children knew the King of Bhutan and the Queen of Bhutan, they knew the teachers, the Buddhist teachers. And once the internet came, all they knew about was celebrities. And right there you see this powerful overwhelmingly destructive trend.

So, what do children need to learn? Let me switch that to how children need to become learners. My training in my master's degree was with the extraordinary educator, Neil Postman. That's where my mind opened and so much more became visible. He proposed that students should be apprentices and they should be with master learners. That would be the role of the teacher: a mastery over what it means to learn. But teaching has become simply the trade of being a teacher. I always hope that my grandchildren have one teacher who embodies imagination, curiosity, and a state of wonder. In our current school, these overwhelmed teachers are just collapsing under the weight of the whole system of education; systems that demand more compliance, more standardization, and more control of the students.

Any teacher who came into the profession, and I'm including myself in this as I started as a teacher, came in because we cared about kids. And many teachers still care about kids. But they're working within systems in which they cannot have the time or the resources to extend to children the amount of caring and attention they now need. The mental health crisis among children and teens is terrible and it's increasing at an exponential rate. Of course, these children have no sense of meaning, ground, or Spirituality. They live in this groundless, formless world. Most of them are immersed in social media. And when they tune in to what's happening on the

planet, they can see there's no future for them –economically, and professionally. Look at what's happened in China: 50% of graduates don't have jobs. They're told to just go get a factory job. And we still put people through educational institutions. Why? For what? So, colleges are a whole industry in collapse.

And then we have public schools in many countries where the teachers are just imprisoned by these regulations, standards, and overbearing bosses. So, the question for educators who still value learning is *Who do we choose to be?* How do we create the conditions for kids to be awakened to learning again and the excitement and flow of that? I don't know how we do that. I have a vague sense of islands of sanity, but I don't know. What's possible within the institution of schooling? I'd love your response.

In the spaces that I've been, learning from and engaging with what I've seen happening is students having an opportunity to explore the questions that matter to them. That's how it starts. So, the role of the teacher is to listen first before teaching, it's about getting to know their students, what their interests are, and what are they intrigued about, and use that as a starting point to explore together. Teachers become learners so does it that's a fundamental idea they engage in experiences that allow them to reconnect with their power to learn. In the tutorial networks movement in Mexico, for example, teachers offer the students a catalog of themes that they know very well. Not to deliver the content, but to share the experience of having gone through the path of learning, which places them in a better position to guide the student along their paths, so that they can reach their conclusions.

Yes! Exactly! I want to add to that from a different tradition, the Asian tradition where a spiritual teacher is someone who embodies and knows intimately from their own experience what they are teaching.

So; you're not just up there, simply talking about it. You have to be the embodiment of what you're teaching, so it's a very high standard. You know it when you're with them and the same is true with kids. They know when they're with a teacher who is excited about learning, right? And then, from your own direct experience as an adult, you can guide them to discover the things that excite them. So, I'm completely on board with what you've described.

I appreciated your depiction of the role of a teacher as an expert learner or as a master learner. Because if we want our children to reconnect with their power to learn, then the best thing we can do as adults is to model what that thing called learning looks like.

Yes! And just think for a moment, how satisfying that is! First of all, as the adult in the room, you are stimulated as you find meaning in your studies and learning. So, you're more alive and curious. And then you get the opportunity to awaken that in kids.

One of the concepts that we work with quite often when talking about educational change is the pedagogical core, which is the interaction be-tween a learner, an educator, and an object of knowledge. That's a unit where really powerful energy, humanizing energy resides. And in most schools, it remains untapped.

Absolutely. I would say it's more than untapped. It's forgotten. I don't know what your experience is, but for me, all of these changes start with only a few people. And then you pray to God that their colleagues see it, recognize it, and want it. But that's so dependent on people's personal lives right now, with so much stress and fear they're in. But, you know, we go for the few who are just there ready. To be invited into this.

That's right. The tutorial relationships practice is the result of the work of a very small team led by a beautiful educator called Gabriel Cámara, a very good friend of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, who worked with a group of young university students to try to figure out how to create the conditions for powerful learning in the most remote communities of the country. The pivotal moment for the group came when we realized that if we wanted learning communities happening in the most remote corners of the country, we needed to become a learning community ourselves. It was when this seminal experience of transformation at the level of the group happened at the core group that the movement of pedagogical renewal that I'm talking about just spread like wildfire.

And I don't want to pass over that lightly. That was essential. Yes. Oh, and I want to say one more thing. Being able to do this in

remote communities was an asset. Because you were free of these overbearing bureaucratic structures that are in the cities. I find this very encouraging because, at the same time, you can change how education is in rural communities. You also have the possibility of them becoming sustainable. That's when they really would be islands of sanity because they're not only educating their children, hopefully, they're holding on to them so that they don't migrate to cities (which is a big problem, right?), and you create a viable community that has its built-in sustainability.

Now, you have talked very extensively about collapse. Can you tell us a bit more about what you see as the nature of these times and why?

Well, there is a pattern to history. There are very detailed patterns of what happens with every complex civilization at the end of its life cycle. You know, we all have life cycles. Everything alive has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A birth, a growth, a flowering, a harvesting, a death. And we are under this increasingly bizarre belief that is deep in Western culture now that everything can get better and better because we're at the top of the heap. That we are at the top of the pyramid and our technology will save us, or our increased consciousness will turn things around. And here we are living on planet Earth with its own well-established, well-known laws and processes, and we have unleashed those with ignorance, deceit, and greed. The greatest threat to us now is climate change, Earth changes. We cannot stop what we set in motion. We ignore the laws, but Mother Nature knows her laws and it's telling us: "This is how I work." That's part of the collapse scenario. At the end of a civilization, and I'm not speaking only about this time but about a pattern of every civilization—Mayan, Aztec, Chinese, Egyptian, Roman, Assyrian, Abyssinian—, one of the things that happens is there's so much infighting that nobody notices the enemy at the gates. In the past, it could have been a marauding gang or invasions from another tribe or whatever. We've ignored climate, and we can't get it together, and now it's too late. But the other thing that happens is what people expect. People expect increasing material benefits, and everyone becomes materialistic, consumer-focused, narcissistic, and

focuses on entitlements rather than taking responsibility. This is the natural flow of any civilization. It starts with extreme commitment, people willing to self-sacrifice, to be martyrs, and willing to give your all because of your commitment to certain values and to your God, who's always a player: whatever your faith is you're doing it for a greater God or purpose. Then you see the civilization growing in capacity. It becomes materialistic. As part of these patterns of the development of any civilization you always have commerce and business. You have the Great Silk Road; you have great trade routes. We progress through these stages. Then every new generation demands more comforts, wants more, and gives less. The values that created coherence are gone. This is not just our time. I'm referring here to the work of historian Sir John Glubb who identified these 6 stages. In the last stage, people become focused on worshipping, not gods but celebrities and sports heroes. Sporting events become like warfare in many civilizations. People get distracted by entertainment. They worship actors and musicians. It's celebrity culture. They seek more and more distractions. There's more in-fighting. The elites take everything for themselves. There's more injustice, more poverty, and more ecological degradation because those in power couldn't care less. They don't give a damn about what's happening – a perfect description of our corporate oil companies right now.

This is the pattern. At one level, it's essential to know. It's also a relief, because then you realize, "Oh, it's not just us who screwed up". This is what happens. And then when you're clear about the pattern and the inability to stop it, it is then that you ask the question: Who do I choose to be? How can I serve this time? Not some fantasy time, not what I expected to be true.

And then I apply that question to children, who do pick up what's happening, or at least they pick up the level of fear and loss of a future and meaninglessness. I mean, is this all about being distracted and going to sporting events and focusing on your team, or how you look, or fashion, or likes and dislikes? They know that something's very wrong and I think it's the role of teachers, masters of learning, to connect with them at the deepest level to learn that it is still possible to live a meaningful life. And that a meaningful life is a life of being focused on how I can participate, belong, and serve.

Those go together. Then you have to feel a sense of belonging, of wanting to serve other people and get out of your self-drama.

I want to add a historical note, something I've just learned. It's pretty common now to want to develop a sense of wonder. We have that great gift of the Webb telescope which is just overwhelmingly incomprehensible, but at least we could look at those photos and just say, "Oh!" I do that periodically. I always do it with groups. Let's put things in perspective here, folks, we're not even a grain of sand in the cosmos, and yet we have consciousness, and we have a desire to learn and grow. So, let's use that. What I recently discovered that just intrigued me so much is that the arts flourish during the last stage of collapse. That's historically just true. When artists come forth, great spiritual teachings have much more popularity and are there to help people. That's a sign that we're in the last stage of collapse, not that we're in a new renaissance. Here's what I just learned from studying Islamic culture, and Arab culture in the Tenth, Eleventh, and Twelfth centuries. In the mid 1200s, in that whole century, Genghis Khan ravaged Asia. At that time, a book came out called *Wonders and Rarities*, which became a bestseller in the Thirteenth century. And while the author was doing this work, his town was attacked by Genghis Khan. 44,000 people were killed in his town. He was still writing and promoting a sense of wonder. So, I'm just fascinated by this and I think this is an avenue for kids and adults. The Webb telescope may be overwhelming, but we need a sense of wonder, and it seems the sense of wonder is easier to access when everything is going to hell. I'm fascinated by that thought.

Now, in times of collapse like these, it is also very easy to give up, fall into depression, suicidal attempts, or simply shut yourself up amid the chaos, the suffering, and the pain.

Right. I think that's a natural response, except –and again, this is historically true– there are always a few people who see what's happening, and the words of this same historian Sir John Glubb, raise the banner of duty and honor against the depravity and despair of their time. People who know that we must maintain community and be willing to self-sacrifice. But we're always a minority and we need to know about each other and prepare ourselves in many im-

portant ways so that we can continue to serve the masses who are dying, migrating, suffering terribly, or withdrawn into their little bubbles of distraction if they have that privilege.

I believe you're referring to the Warriors for the Human Spirit and their role in creating islands of sanity. Could you speak to those two ideas?

Having worked with leaders for 50-plus years, which is a shocking number to me also, I started seeing in about the year 2,000 how it was becoming increasingly difficult to be a good leader, even when you knew what to do and had a good track record of successes at empowerment and high engagement, having a vision, and values. I started seeing increasing levels of fear and distress. Droughts, hunger, migration, increased poverty, increased injustice, all of these things were making it difficult to be a good leader even when you knew how to be one. I also worked with an ancient Tibetan prophecy about this time, when the warriors from a very highly conscious kingdom called Shambala came back because we were at a time when great powers threatened one another with annihilation and life hung by the frailest of threads. I have been trained in that Shambala warrior tradition. I started to understand that this was my work because I had access to leaders. I had this very deep foundation of spiritual warriors whose only weapons are insight and compassion. These warriors in the prophecy made a lot of sense to me. As such warriors we are already inside the halls of power, so we aren't external protesters or invaders. We knew how these systems work, so we knew what was possible and what wasn't. It became increasingly clear to me that very little is possible. I've continued to confirm that when I just watch leaders above us clamp down in fear and demand more and more control over people. You see this everywhere. I also knew that these spiritual warriors, or peace warriors, needed training because we had to develop stable minds. We had to not get battered back and forth by these terrible events that are happening, which are increasing right now.

A stable mind is developed through meditation, as well as by reducing our reactivity being more aware of what triggers us, and working to let those triggers go. So being more open, and more perceptive is the route to being more compassionate and developing insights.

I've been doing this training now since 2015 with people all

over the world and of all ages, because I am increasingly interested in how we cultivate the skills it requires, like devotion or discipline. Being a warrior is a long-standing tradition in all cultures. Most use weapons of violence and aggression, but there is a tradition of peaceful warriorship, for example, in Carlos Castaneda's books on Don Juan, the Yaqui Indian Shaman and wise man in Northern Mexico. We're standing on the shoulders of the few people who always dedicate themselves to serving a time of increased suffering. There's no argument now that we're in a time of increased suffering. What is happening now is horrible, and it will continue.

So, I think we individually choose who we want to be. If I need to withdraw, if I need to just focus on my family, bless you for that. But I want to work with those who are saying, "Okay, I want to serve", I need to learn these basic ways of being that do not add to the aggression, that do not add to the fear, that do not add to the confusion. It's a path of real practice, and then we bring that practice to our work. We bring a stable presence. We bring our compassion and insight into whatever meeting we're in, whatever colleague we're in with, whatever family situation we're dealing with. It requires commitment and it also requires community. We have to be together in this. But we're always only a small band of devoted people. And there's a real practice path here, which I have defined in many ways.

I would like to come back to something you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation which was the idea that learning and living are the same thing. Can you elaborate on that, on that overarching idea and how it connects to education and its purpose?

Well, I want to change it from Can education become the vehicle to learning and living to Can educators become the vehicle. Because there's a huge difference between the institutions which cannot be changed at this point –let's just notice that people, we've tried and tried and tried! There's a good scientific explanation for this. These are systems that have emerged, and you don't change an emergent system. You can't work backward and change elements of it. But as educators, we can do what President Theodore Roosevelt

in the US said: do what you can, where you are, with what you have. This is my mantra. All the time. What is possible here, is because of what I have and who I'm with, and my whole desire to serve. Then you find lots of opportunities.

But to go back to living and learning. This takes us to what is the meaning of a human life. I don't know any other way to understand the truth that living is about learning. That's what life is for, to learn and to constantly grow. Let us all just reflect for a moment on when we feel most alive. When we are in a good relationship; when we're doing something meaningful; when we've just learned something that kind of blows our mind. Just put that together and you have a recipe for how to be with children: good relationships where they trust you and look up to you actually, and a sense of wonder and curiosity. Then when you learn something, what does that feel like? That's what life is for.

Beautiful. I just wonder if there's anything else that you would like to share.

Yes, there is actually. There's a sense of "do it now." We need to understand we have no more time to fool around with this or to doubt it. Just find your path of contribution. Choose who you want to be for this time and then get started and you'll find that this is very rewarding. It's very hard. And it's very meaningful. And it's joyful at times. So, no more time at all. The world is closing in on us now. So, if you choose to withdraw that's one choice. You can cocoon, you can ignore, you can deny, you can just get into self-protection. That's what the majority of people will do. I feel the utmost compassion for them. But that's not my choice.