

expanded second edition

turning to one another

simple conversations to restore hope to the future

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An Excerpt From

***Turning to One Another:
Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future,
Expanded Second Edition***

by Margaret J. Wheatley
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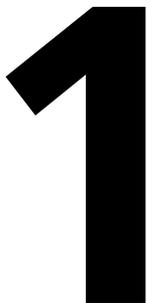
For all of us
May we not be separated

contents

Part One: Turning to One Another	1
Now is the time	2
Welcome	6
Why I wrote this book	10
How to use this book	14
Can we restore hope to the future?	18
What I believe at this time	22
Simple processes	24
The courage of conversation	28
The practice of conversation	32
Willing to be disturbed	38
Part Two: A Place to Pause and Reflect	44

Part Three: Conversation Starters	56
Now it's your turn	58
1. Do I feel a vocation to be fully human?	60
2. What is my faith in the future?	66
3. What do I believe about others?	74
4. What am I willing to notice in my world?	82
5. When have I experienced good listening?	90
6. Am I willing to reclaim time to think?	98
7. What is the relationship I want with the earth?	106
8. What is my unique contribution to the whole?	116
9. When have I experienced working for the common good?	126
10. When do I experience sacred?	134
11. What is our role in creating change?	142
12. Can I be fearless?	150
Gestures of love	160
Turning to one another	166
Referenced quotes	167
About the author	174
A story from the Aztec people	182

turning to one another



When this book was first published in 2002, I made a rash statement: “I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again.” I still believe this. I still believe that if we turn to one another, if we begin talking with each other—especially with those we call stranger or enemy—then this world can reverse its darkening direction and change for the good. And I know with all my heart that the only way the world will change is if many more of us step forward, let go of our judgments, become curious about each other, and take the risk to begin a conversation.

Our twenty-first-century world is descending into aggression, fear, and separation. War, genocide, violence, slavery, pandemics, poverty, natural disasters—all these are commonplace in this new century, despite most people’s deep longing to live together in peace.

What are we going to do about this? What role do we choose to play? Do we withdraw and hope at least to live a satisfying private life? Or do we turn to one another and do what we can to birth a healthy future? If you’ve read this far, I’m hoping you’ve already chosen to be engaged, that you’re someone who’s ready to work with others to restore hope to the future. There are millions of us out there in the world, and we truly welcome you joining us.

To support you who aspire to restore hope to the future, this book includes two new conversations. “What is my role in creating change?” describes how the world always *only* changes when a few individuals step forward. It doesn’t change from leaders or top-level programs or big ambitious plans. It changes when we, everyday people gathering in small groups, notice what we care about and take those first steps to change the situation.

The second new conversation is “Can I be fearless?” Fear is everywhere these days, and it’s only increasing. Fear destroys human capacity; therefore, we are called to be fearless. Fearless doesn’t mean that we are free of fear. It means we learn how to face our fear so that it stops controlling us. This conversation is the last in the book, but it might also be the first. If we don’t learn how to move past our fears, we will not be able to host conversations or become active on behalf of this troubled, still beautiful world.

Singer Harry Belafonte said, “The last source of truth and hope is the people themselves.” Do you know this to be true? If not, I encourage you to begin one of these conversations. In conversation, you’ll discover that other people are just as concerned, caring, and eager for change as are you.

We can change the world if we just start listening to one another again.

I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate, or public meetings. Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well.

What would it feel like to be listening to each other again about what disturbs and troubles us? About what gives us energy and hope? About our yearnings, our fears, our prayers, our children?

I wonder if you believe, as I do, that this world needs changing. This book is an invitation to notice what's going on, to clarify your thoughts and experience, and to begin speaking with those around you. What do you see? What are you experiencing in your life and the lives of those you care about? What do you wish were different?

Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change—personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what's important to us, we begin to come alive. We share what we see, what we feel, and we listen to what others see and feel.

For as long as we've been around as humans, as wandering bands of nomads or cave dwellers, we have sat together and shared experiences. We've painted images on rock walls, recounted dreams and visions, told stories of the day, and generally felt comforted to be in the world together. When the world became fearsome, we came together. When the world called us to explore its edges, we journeyed together. Whatever we did, we did it together.

We have never wanted to be alone. But today, we are alone. We are more fragmented and isolated from one another than ever before. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it as "a radical brokenness in all of existence." We move at frantic speed, spinning out into greater isolation. We seek consolation in everything except each other. The entire world seems hypnotized in the wrong direction—encouraging us to love things rather than people, to embrace everything new without noticing what's lost or wrong, to choose fear instead of peace. We promise ourselves everything except each other. We've forgotten the source of true contentment and well-being.

But we haven't really forgotten. As the world becomes more complex and fearful, we know we need each other to find our way through the darkness. The yearning for community is worldwide. What can we do to turn to one another?

The simplest way to begin finding each other again is to start talking about what we care about. If we could stop ignoring each other, stop engaging in fear-filled gossip, what might we discover?

Conversation, however, takes time. We need time to sit together, to listen, to worry and dream together. As this age of turmoil tears us apart, we need to reclaim time to be together. Otherwise, we cannot stop the fragmentation.

And we need to be able to talk with those we have named “enemy.” Fear of each other also keeps us apart. Most of us have lists of people we fear. We can’t imagine talking with them, and if we did, we know it would only create more anger. We can’t imagine what we would learn from them, or what might become possible if we spoke to those we most fear.

I hope we can reclaim conversation as our route back to each other, and as the path forward to a hopeful future. It only requires imagination and courage and faith. These are qualities possessed by everyone. Now is the time to exercise them to their fullest.

Reg Wheatley

why I wrote this book

I write a great deal. But this book is very different from anything I've written in the past several years. I'd like to tell a few aspects of my own story to explain why I felt compelled to write this particular book at this time.

For many years, I've been privileged to meet and work with people in many different communities, organizations, and nations. I have been invited into these different places because of my work on leadership and life in organizations. I've been trying to understand how life organizes, and to apply those learnings to how we structure and design human organizations. Nature organizes much more effectively than we humans do, and quite differently. For example, life works cooperatively, not competitively, in networks of relationships where each depends on the other. (Please see my other books for more details.)

I have found life to be the best teacher for the dilemmas of these times. How do we live and work in a world that is increasingly chaotic? How do we live and work as an interdependent community and planet? How do we evoke people's innate creativity and caring? What are the values we must preserve as everything changes around us? How can we be together in ways that affirm rather than destroy life?

Most of the people I meet are caring, intelligent, and well-intentioned. They hope that their work will be of benefit to others, that it makes a small difference. I have sat and thought about life-affirming leadership with eleven-year-old Girl Scouts, and with the head of the United States Army, with tribal peoples and with corporate peoples, with religious ministers and with government ministers.

Working in the world, I've grown increasingly distressed. Especially in the last few years, things clearly are not going right. Good people are finding it increasingly difficult to do what they know is best. Whether we're in a small village or a major global corporation, in any country and in any type of work, we are being asked to work faster, more competitively, more selfishly—and to focus only on the short-term. These values cannot lead to anything healthy and sustainable, and they are alarmingly destructive. Even though life is our best teacher, we're not learning her lessons. I believe we must learn quickly now how to work and live together in ways that bring us back to life.

I've explored this distress with tens of thousands of people, and have discovered something obvious and extremely hopeful. We are all human. The unique expressions of culture and tradition that give us such interestingly different appearances are based on the same human desires for learning, freedom, meaning, and love. You and I are yearning for the same things—wherever we are, using whatever means we have available.

It is an increasingly dark time. It is difficult to do good and lasting work. It is seemingly impossible to create healthy change. But people still are basically good and caring. We may feel distressed, overwhelmed, numbed, and afraid. But beneath these feelings, we still desire learning, freedom, meaning, and love.

Because this is a time when we are bombarded with images of human badness, I have been intentionally exploring human goodness. I have learned a great deal from Paulo Freire's work with the very poor of Brazil, and you will read some of those learnings in these pages. The stories and work of others who have taught me are here also—poets, spiritual teachers, everyday people living lives quite different from mine. From them I've learned that no matter how beaten down we are—by poverty, by oppressive leadership, by tragedy—the human spirit is nearly impossible to destroy. We humans keep wanting to learn, to improve things, and to care about each other.

What's truly hopeful is that we already have the means to evoke more goodness from one another. I have witnessed the astonishing power of good listening and the healing available when someone gives voice to their experience. I saw this first in South Africa after apartheid ended. A few of those stories are in these pages. And other stories from those living in very difficult conditions. We may have forgotten how to listen, or how to tell our own story, but these are the skills that will help us now.

I also have learned that when we begin listening to each other, and when we talk about things that matter to us, the world begins to change. A close friend and colleague of many years, Juanita Brown, has shared her experiences in community organizing and corporate strategy, and her belief in everyone's capacity to figure out how to make a difference. Juanita taught me that all change, even very large and powerful change, begins when a few people start talking with one another about something they care about. Simple conversations held at kitchen tables, or seated on the ground, or leaning against doorways are powerful means to start influencing and changing our world.

Beginning in 1998, another friend and colleague, Christina Baldwin, taught me that human beings have always sat in circles and councils to do their best thinking, and to develop strong and trusting relationships. I have now experienced many circles, in many different settings. Whether I'm with a group of friends or strangers, seated in a windowless corporate room or on logs in the African bush, I have learned that the very simple process of council takes us to a place of deep connection with each other. And, as we slow down the conversation to a pace that encourages thinking, we become wise and courageous actors in our world.

Each of these learnings and observations has led to this book. My feelings for this book are best described in Paulo Freire's voice, in words he used in his first book:

From these pages, I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and women, and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love.

how to use this book

The intent of this book is to encourage and support you in beginning conversations about things that are important to you and those near you. It has no other purpose. The book has three sections. Part One contains short essays about things relevant to conversation. I describe the power of conversation to bring us together, how it revives our hope and commitment to work for the changes we want to see in our world. I also describe several conditions that help with good conversation, including simplicity, courage, listening, and diversity. This entire section is meant to encourage you to be the convener and host of conversations. I hope you feel supported to step forward into action, to call together a few friends and colleagues, and start talking about what you most care about.

Part Two contains a few pages of quotes and images. This is the place for you to pause and reflect on what you've read. And to prepare for the work ahead, which is starting conversations. I hope this section inspires you and gives you energy, because the work is now yours to do.

Part Three has twelve short "Conversation Starters." These brief essays provide content for your conversations. (You can, of course, just begin your conversations with the issues and dreams that concern you most.) Each of these conversation starters begins with a question. Each contains a story or two, some facts and quotes, and my own comments and interpretations about the topic. I've included some poems as well.

You'll have to be the judge as to which, if any of these materials, are useful to you to start a conversation. You might want to just use the question, or one quote. I tried to keep the essays short so that they could be read aloud in a group, if that seems useful. My greatest hope is that you, as conversation host, will be provoked by these conversation starters, and then decide what works best for you and your colleagues.

Why did I choose these particular twelve questions or topics? These are not the only things we need to be talking about. I know there are other issues more relevant to your community or organization. I chose these twelve because, in my experience, they lead people into conversations about their deepest beliefs, fears, and hopes. They also help us understand our experience more fully. Because the questions draw out our individual experience and insight, they also reveal our fundamental human goodness. As we speak to each other from this place, we move closer and develop strong relationships. I hope you will try out these questions and see if they work in this way for you, your friends, and your associates.

I do know that even one of these conversation starters can easily lead you into dozens of other meaningful and important topics. Wherever conversation leads you, I trust you will experience how listening and talking to one another heals our divisions and makes us brave again. We rediscover one another and our great human capacities. Together, we become capable of creating a future where all people can experience the blessing of a well-lived human life.

We can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Please join in.

can we restore hope to the future?

I don't meet many people who are optimistic anymore. It doesn't matter where I am, in what country or organization, or with whom I'm speaking. Almost everyone is experiencing life as more stressful, more disconnected, and less meaningful than just a few years ago. It's not only that there's more change, or that change is now continuous. It's the nature of the change that is upsetting. For example:

A small political incident sets off violence that doesn't end.

A small computer malfunction disrupts lives for days or weeks.

Economic problems in one country cause hardship in many countries.

The undetected rage of a person or group suddenly threatens us or someone we love.

A disease in one location spreads like wildfire into global contagion.

The plagues we hoped to end—poverty, hunger, illiteracy, violence, disease—are growing worse.

These crises appear suddenly in a life or community. They always feel surprising, out of control, and irrational. The world doesn't make sense anymore, and there are no safe places. As sociologist John Berger describes it:

There is no continuity between actions, there are no pauses, no paths, no pattern, no past and no future. There is only the clamor of the... fragmentary present. Everywhere there are surprises and sensations, yet nowhere is there any outcome. Nothing flows through; everything interrupts.

As I listen to many people, in many countries, I'm convinced we are disturbed by similar things. I've listened carefully to many comments, and included some of them here. Taken as a whole, they paint a picture of people everywhere troubled by these times, questioning what the future holds. Here are some of the comments and feelings I've heard expressed:

Problems keep getting bigger; they're never solved. We solve one, and it only creates more.

I never learn why something happened. Maybe nobody knows; maybe it's a conspiracy to keep us from knowing.

There's more violence now, and it's affecting people I love.

Who can I believe? Who will tell me what's really going on?

Things are out of control and only getting worse.

I have no time for my family anymore. I'm living a life I don't like.

I worry about my children. What will the world be like for them?

Confronted with so much uncertainty and irrationality, how can we feel hopeful about the future? And this degree of uncertainty is affecting us personally. It's changing how we act and feel. I notice this in myself and others. We're more cynical, impatient, fearful, angry, defensive, anxious, more likely to hurt those we love.

Certainly, this is not what any of us wants. How can we become people we respect, people who are generous, loving, curious, open, energetic? How can we ensure that at the end of our lives, we'll feel that we have done meaningful work, created something that endured, helped other people, raised healthy children?

What can we do now to restore hope to the future?

what I believe at this time

I've found that I can only change how I act if I stay aware of my beliefs and assumptions. Thoughts always reveal themselves in behavior. As humans, we often contradict ourselves—we say one thing and do another. We state who we are, but then act contrary to that. We say we're open-minded, but then judge someone for their appearance. We say we're a team, but then gossip about a colleague. If we want to change our behavior, we need to notice our actions, and see if we can uncover the belief that led to that response. What caused me to behave that way and not some other way?

Over the years, I've noticed that many of us harbor negative beliefs about each other. Or we believe that there's nothing we can do to make a difference. Or that things are so crazy that we have to look out only for ourselves. With these beliefs, we cannot turn to one another. We won't engage together for the work that needs to be done.

I've been trying to stay aware of my own beliefs for many years. I'm describing some of them here for a few reasons. First, I want to be held accountable for these. I want my beliefs to be visible in my actions. Second, in stating them, you can learn a bit more about me. These are mine—I expect yours may be quite different. And finally, I hope that in expressing mine, you'll be interested in noticing and stating your own.

Here are some of my beliefs that motivate my actions these days.

People are the solution to the problems that confront us. Technology is not the solution, although it can help. We are the solution—we as generous, open-hearted people who want to use our creativity and caring on behalf of other human beings and all life.

Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone.

We humans want to be together. We only isolate ourselves when we're hurt by others, but alone is not our natural state. Today, we live in an unnatural state—separating ourselves rather than being together.

We become hopeful when somebody tells the truth. I don't know why this is, but I experience it often.

Truly connecting with another human being gives us joy. The circumstances that create this connection don't matter. Even those who work side by side in the worst natural disaster or crisis recall that experience as memorable. They are surprised to feel joy in the midst of tragedy, but they always do.

We have to slow down. Nothing will change for the better until we do. We need time to think, to learn, to get to know each other. We are losing these great human capacities in the speed-up of modern life, and it is killing us.

The cure for despair is not hope. It's discovering what we want to do about something we care about.

simple processes

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity,
but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Many of us would like to simplify our lives, and life in general. Yet I notice how difficult it is to accept and believe in simple solutions and processes. Everything has become quite complicated. Things that were simple, like neighborly conversation, have become a technique, like intergenerational, cross-cultural dialogue.

Once a simple process becomes a technique, it can only grow more complex and difficult. It never becomes simpler. It becomes the specialized knowledge of a few experts, and everyone else becomes dependent on them. We forget that we ever knew how to do things like conversation, planning, or thinking. Instead, we become meek students of difficult methods.

In the presence of so many specialized techniques for doing simple things, we've become suspicious of anything that looks easy. And those of us who have technical expertise are especially suspicious. I've seen myself pull back from simple more than once because I realized I wouldn't be needed any longer. Those are useful moments that force me to clarify what's more important—my expert status or making sure the work gets done well. (I haven't always chosen the nobler path.)

There may be another reason why people in general hesitate to believe in simple solutions. If it's so simple, why haven't we thought of it earlier? Why have we invested so much time and money in learning a complicated method? Was all that learning and struggle a waste of time? It's always hard to acknowledge that we've wasted our time. We stay invested in what's complicated just because it took so much time to learn it.

But simplicity has a powerful ally—common sense. If we reflect on our experience, we notice that good solutions are always simple. Much simpler than we thought they'd be. Everyone has this experience, many times over.

Scientists are taught to seek the simpler solution. If there's a choice between two possibilities, they choose the simpler one. Simple solutions are called "elegant" in science. The beauty of the universe expresses itself in simplicity.

This being true, people often laugh when they finally realize there's a simple, commonsense solution. I think it's a laugh of relief, and of recognition—we remember all those other times we were surprised by simple. But I also think we need to give ourselves credit for our struggles with complexity. We can laugh at our realization only because we're on the other side of complexity.

The simplicity of human conversation

To advocate human conversation as the means to restore hope to the future is as simple as I can get. But I've seen that there is no more powerful way to initiate significant change than to convene a conversation. When a community of people discovers that they share a concern, change begins. There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.

It's easy to observe this in our own lives, and also in recent history. Solidarity in Poland began with conversation—less than a dozen workers in a Gdansk shipyard speaking to each other about their despair, their need for change, their need for freedom. In less than a month, Solidarity grew to 9.5 million workers. There was no e-mail then, just people talking to each other about their own needs, and finding their needs shared by millions of fellow citizens. At the end of that month, all 9.5 million of them acted as one voice for change. They shut down the country.

Whenever I read about a new humanitarian relief effort—some of which have earned the Nobel Peace Prize—it is always a story of the power of conversation. Somewhere in the description of how it all began is the phrase: "Some friends and I started talking..."

It is always like this. Real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about. Did they notice a dangerous street crossing near their child's school? Cancer increasing in a neighborhood? Landmines maiming their children? Deaths caused by drunk drivers? It only takes two or three friends to notice that they're concerned about the same thing—and then the world begins to change. Their first conversation spreads. Friends talk to friends. Because friends care about each other, they pay attention to what is being said. Then they talk to others, and it grows and grows.

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