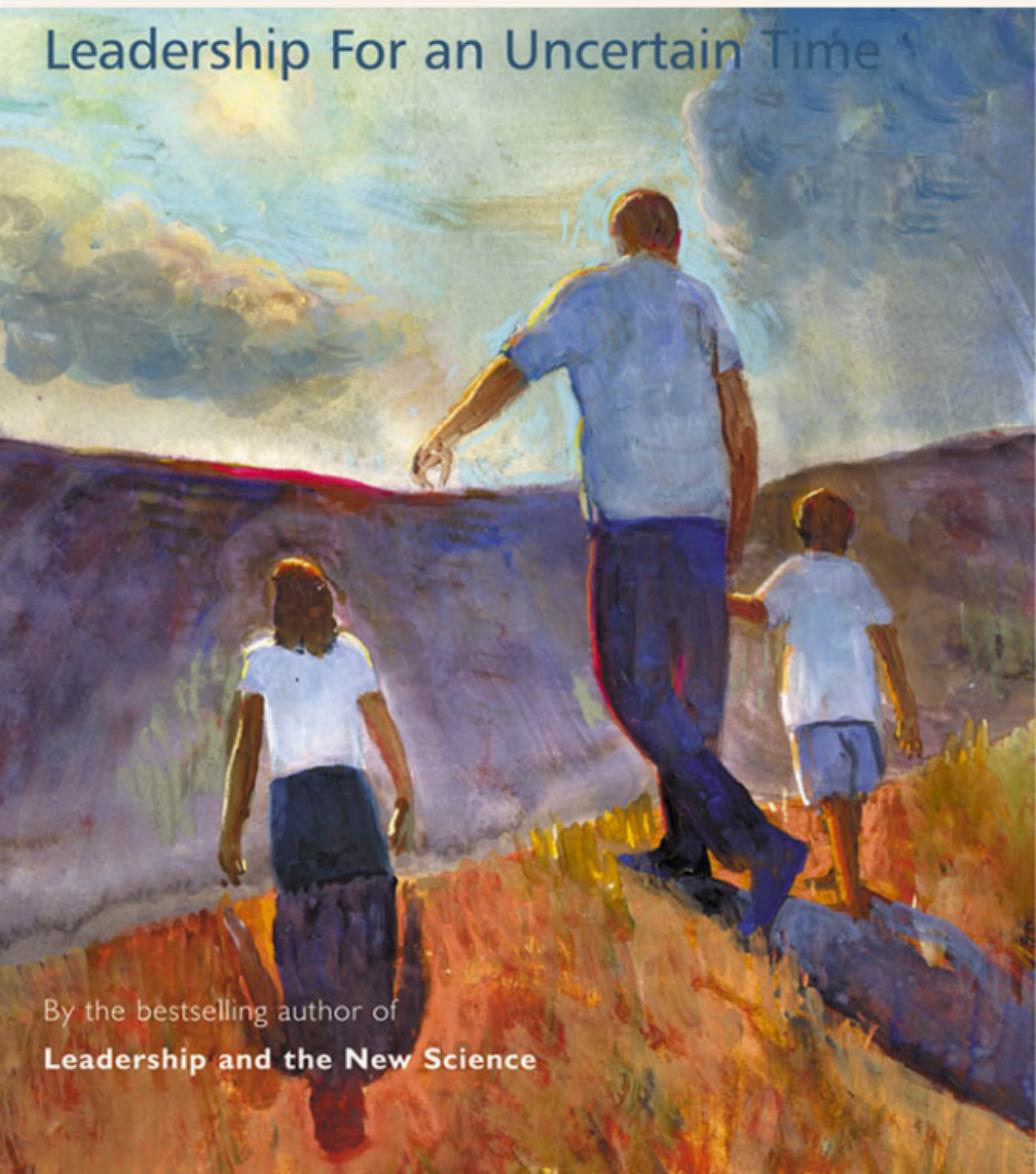


Margaret J. Wheatley

# Finding Our Way

Leadership For an Uncertain Time



By the bestselling author of  
**Leadership and the New Science**

An Excerpt From

***Finding Our Way:  
Leadership For an Uncertain Time***

by Margaret J. Wheatley  
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# Contents

## **Opening**

Ancient Thera, Modern Teacher 1

## **Organizing: There is a Simpler Way**

The New Story is Ours to Tell 16  
The Irresistible Future of Organizing 32  
The Promise and Paradox of Community 45  
Relying on Human Goodness 55  
The Best in Art and Life 58

## **Leadership: We Make the Road by Walking**

Goodbye, Command and Control 64  
Relying on Everyone's Creativity 75  
Bringing Life to Organizational Change 83  
Working with Life's Dynamics in School Systems 100  
When Change is Out of Our Control 114  
Leadership in Turbulent Times Is Spiritual 125  
The True Professional 134

## **Obstacles: Where the Road Gets Hard**

The Real Work of Knowledge Management 144  
The Uses and Abuses of Measurement 156  
Name, Connect, Nourish, Illuminate 163  
Transforming Aggression into Creativity 180  
Seven Hundred Years to Go 198

## **Personal: Attending to Our Footsteps**

Living Our Interconnectedness	204
Willing to be Disturbed	210
Reclaiming Time to Think	214
Listening	218
Raising Our Children	222
Ending Our Silence	226
Everything Has a Deep Dream	230

## **My Own Footsteps**

Consumed by Either Fire or Fire	236
Maybe You Will Be the Ones	245
America's Dark Night	257
Beyond Hope or Fear	261
Dreaming World	265
A Parting Blessing	270

Notes	272
Where These Essays Were First Published	274
Bibliography	276
Permissions and Photo Credits	279
Index	280
About the Author	295

# Opening

There is a simpler way to organize human endeavor. I have declared this for many years and seen it to be true in many places. This simpler way feels new, yet it is the most ancient story there is. It is the ancient story demonstrated to us daily by life, not the life we see on the news with its unending stories of human grief and horror, but what we feel when we're in nature, when we experience a sense of life's deep harmony, beauty, and power. It is the story of how we feel when we see people helping each other, when we feel creative, when we know we're making a difference, when life feels purposeful.

For many years, I've written and spoken about this ancient new story, and how we might apply it in organizations and communities around the world. I've learned that as we understand how living systems operate, we develop the skills we need: we become resilient, adaptive, aware, and creative. We enjoy working together. And life's processes work everywhere, no matter the culture, group, or person, because these are basic dynamics shared by all living beings.

As we work with life, we also rediscover another gift, the great potential of the human spirit. I've worked in many places in the world of extreme material poverty. But that challenge fades in comparison to those of us who have forgotten how resilient and vast the human spirit is. Mother Teresa once said that the greatest poverty she saw was in the West because we suffer from spiritual poverty.

Western cultural views of how best to organize and lead (the majority paradigm in use in the world) are contrary to what life teaches. Western practices attempt to dominate life; we want life to comply with human needs rather than working as partners. This disregard for life's dynamics is alarmingly evident

in today's organizations. Leaders use control and imposition rather than self-organizing processes. They react to uncertainty and chaos by tightening already feeble controls, rather than engaging our best capacities in the dance. Leaders use primitive emotions of fear, scarcity, and self-interest to get people to do their work, rather than the more noble human traits of cooperation, caring, and generosity. This has led us to this difficult time, when nothing seems to work as we want it to, when too many of us feel frustrated, disengaged, and anxious.

### ***The Era of Many Messes***

I find it important, periodically, to ask people to step back and try to see the big picture. This is difficult to do when we're stressed by so many pressures at work and at home. But when we shift to fifty thousand feet, it's easier to see that our impotence is not a result of personal failings. Instead, failing to achieve good results is a consequence of living in this time when we've reached the end of a paradigm. Many of our fundamental beliefs and practices no longer serve us or the greater world. Worse than that, too many are causing harm and distancing us from the very skills, knowledge, and wisdom that would help.

This is the era of many messes. Some of these we've created (although not intentionally,) because we act on assumptions that can never engender healthy, sustainable societies and organizations. *We act as if* humans are motivated by selfishness, greed, and fear. That we exist as individuals, free of the obligation of interdependence. That hierarchy and bureaucracy are the best forms of organizing. That efficiency is the premier measure of value. That people work best under controls and regulations. That diversity is a problem. That unrestrained growth is good. That a healthy economy leads naturally to a healthy society.

That poor people have different motivations than other people. That only a few people are creative. That only a few people care about their freedom.

These beliefs are false. They've created the intractable problems that we now encounter everywhere. If you look globally, it's hard to find examples in any country or any major sector—health, education, religion, governance, development—of successfully solving dilemmas. Attempts to resolve them lead only to more problems, unintended consequences, and angry constituents. While millions of people work earnestly to find solutions, and billions of dollars are poured into these efforts, we can't expect success as long as we stay wedded to our old approaches.

We live in a time that proves Einstein right: “No problem can be solved from the same level of thinking that created it.”

### ***A Tale of Two Stories***

This book contains many different essays, each of which was first published in a journal, magazine, or book. They represent ten years of work, of how I took the ideas in my books and applied them in practice in many different situations. However, this is not a collection of articles. I updated, revised, or substantially added to the original content of each one. In this way, everything written here represents my current views on the subjects I write about.

This book tells two stories, each meant to serve as a guide for finding our way to a more hopeful future. The first story describes and applies the new paradigm of living systems. It tells how all living systems—which includes people—self-organize, change, create, learn, and adapt. I tell this story in great detail and offer many different applications.

I hope these essays provide answers to many of the fundamental questions of leadership: How do leaders shift from control to order? What motivates people? How does change happen? How do we evoke people's innate creativity? What are useful measurement systems? How do we solve complex problems? How do we create healthy communities? How do we lead when change is out of our control? How do we maintain our integrity and peace as leaders?

Leaders and people have struggled with these questions for many years. In my experience, when we shift the paradigm, we find answers, real answers.

The second story is of a different kind. In each section, the essays appear in chronological order. I did this so you would notice the evolution of these ideas—how my topics have shifted, my emphasis has changed, and my writing has taken on a different voice. These changes illustrate how the first story fared and evolved as I took these ideas out into a world that was changing rapidly, but not in the right direction. I'm sad to report that in the past few years, ever since uncertainty became our insistent twenty-first-century companion, leadership strategies have taken *a great leap backward* to the familiar territory of command and control. Some of this was to be expected, because humans usually default to the known when confronted with the unknown. Some of it surprised me, because I thought we knew better. I thought we had learned something from all the experiments about innovation, quality, learning organizations, and human motivation. How is it that we failed to learn that whenever we try to impose control on people and situations, we only serve to make them more uncontrollable?

Whatever might explain this desperate retrenchment, for me it has made telling the new story even more important. Today, we need many more of us

storytellers. The need is urgent, because people are forgetting there is any alternative to the deadening leadership that daily increases in vehemence. It's truly a dark time because people are losing faith in themselves and each other and forgetting how wonderful humans can be, how much hope we feel when we work well together on things we care about.

Because more storytellers are needed, there are essays in this book that speak to you directly. I ask you to look at how these times are affecting you personally. Do you work in ways that support interconnectedness rather than separateness? Are you taking time to think? How well do you listen to those you disagree with? What's happening with your children? Do you speak up for what you believe in?

The last part of this book is very personal. I've shared the perspectives and feelings that have arisen in me as I've been out in this troubled world. I write about my children, my country, and how I no longer seek hope, only right action. I also describe the experience of living and working in the endless spiral of paradox, especially the paradox of feeling so blessed in the peace and abundance of my life, while more and more people on this beautiful planet must confront life's horrors.

My hope is that you will feel strengthened from reading this book. I hope that your clarity grows bright and undeniable, that you have greater confidence to tell the story that is true in your experience, that you act with courage, and that you know you are in company with millions of people around the world working to bring to life this ancient new story.

### ***The New Story in an Ancient Culture***

This book came into form in a place that illuminates what it feels like to live in harmony with life and with each other, Thera Island in the Greek Aegean, near Crete. I didn't go to Thera (also named Santorini) to learn this—I innocently arrived on the island and was surprised to discover it. All I knew beforehand was that the island had been destroyed by a violent volcanic eruption around 1500 B.C.E. That eruption may have begun the end of Minoan civilization on nearby Crete, and might have destroyed Atlantis, according to the accounts of Plato.

But I was not prepared for the intense and joyful encounter I had with Thera culture when I walked into a museum shop that displayed the vivid wall murals that had adorned their buildings' interiors. I was surrounded by imagery that reflected deep harmony with life. Dolphins danced with ships, birds filled the air, and every scene was filled with flowers and animals. It felt as if I was looking at the Peaceable Kingdom where all creatures shared easily in life's pleasures. I recalled that Minoan culture was deeply feminine, led by women priests. I picked up a replica of their pottery and loved the round feminine shape of a jug where swallows flew in graceful arcs across the surface.

I felt such deep kinship with these artists and their joyous images that I needed to learn more. Who were these people who could stir my tired soul and awaken such keen curiosity to know more about their life? Here's what I learned.

Thera culture was its own unique expression of Minoan culture, a world that never fragmented nature from humans from art. Humans were not separate from the natural order. They didn't attempt to manipulate it or to observe it from a distance. I found this difficult to comprehend, coming from a culture so

fixated on separation and control, where art is something different than life, where humans stand outside life and seek to control it.

Minoans expected order to triumph over chaos because they lived close to life and knew life's cyclical nature. Cycles kept them from focusing on isolated events or from thinking that life was always progressing. (These beliefs still can be found today in indigenous cultures or their traditions.) In the eternal, recurring cycles of life, incidents and dramas were of no consequence. Humans participated in a grand circular flow of life. People lived these cycles not as humans making history, but as humans living life. Nothing happened outside or independent of the living world. People didn't visit "nature" as we do now. It was all one life.

Minoans knew life to be abundant. Their paintings express joyful awareness that the earth gives great gifts of fertility and blesses us with its beautiful diversity of animals, flowers, and plants. Every painting celebrates this rich, gorgeous bounty.

All of this ended with the volcanic eruption. An ironic end to a culture that loved life, but also a firm teacher to those of us who hope to cling to what we have. Nearly a thousand years later, Greek civilization reached its zenith in Athens and set the course of Western mind that we're still dealing with today. The Greeks fell in love with themselves, with the human form, with history, with heroes. In their love of human potential, they set us on a path where we forgot that humans exist within a greater cosmos. And today, it's hard to remember what it feels like to be a beloved partner with life.

As I sat on the rim of the caldera that ended Thera life, living the good tourist life, I discovered a civilization that embodied what I know. What the Theras

knew, I know, that it is possible to live and work together in ways that bring out our creativity, that inspire us to do good work, that bring more harmony and pleasure to our relationships. And I know that we get into desperate trouble, as the Greek experience teaches, when we make ourselves the only focus, when we revere heroic leaders, when we treat life as something distant from us that we ignore and occasionally visit.

The certainty of cycles, the triumph of order over chaos, the diversity born from life's creativity, the innate artistry of each of us, the enduring beauty of the human spirit—these are what I write about. From Minoan times till now, the story hasn't changed. But it is important that we reclaim it and retell it before we are swept away by eruptions of our own making.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Marg Wheatley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and larger than the others.

Margaret J. Wheatley

*October, 2004*

The New Story Is Ours to Tell  
The Irresistible Future of Organizing  
The Promise and Paradox of Community  
Relying on Human Goodness  
The Best in Art and Life

Each of these essays describes the new story, describing different capabilities and dynamics of all living systems, including people. This is the foundation, the theory base, for all that follows in later essays when I apply these dynamics to leadership and organizational practices.

# The New Story Is Ours to Tell

*Willis Harman, an invaluable mentor to me and many people, changed my work with a letter he wrote me in 1994. Willis urged me to continue speaking my message but warned me not to derive it solely from science. As he did with so many, he wanted me to understand the deeper premises of modern science, which, for all the “new science” hoopla, were anything but new. He encouraged me to explore the deeper values and premises of my work that were far more important than any science.*

I contemplated his letter for months. I realized that I was using the science to get the attention of those who could hear this message in no other form. (When I told Willis this, he laughed and applauded my clarity. If you're being Machiavellian, it's good to realize it.) What was “my message” from the new sciences has grown in depth and strength into a “new story.” It is sourced from many traditions, not just Western science, and I offer it to any individual or group that is willing to listen. I am less focused on persuasion and more engaged in the telling of a story that gives hope and possibility to us all.

Many people hold this new story. Traditional cultures have held it for centuries, even as they've been told their ways are primitive or backward. But for us growing up in the West, many of us falter in expressing this voice because we've been told that these ideas which we feel intuitively—about leaders, organizations, and people—are crazy. It is time to change this definition of craziness. We, in fact, represent *the new sanity*—the ideas and values and practices that can create a future worth wanting.

Those who carry a new story and who risk speaking it abroad have played a crucial role in times of historic shift. Before a new era can come into form, there must be a new story. The playwright Arthur Miller noted that we know an era has ended when its basic illusions have been exhausted. I would add that these basic illusions not only are exhausted but also have become exhausting.

As they fail to produce the results we want, we just repeat them with greater desperation, plummeting ourselves into cynicism and despair as we lock into these cycles of failure.

I was introduced to the critical nature of the teller-of-new-stories role in reading the work of physicist Brian Swimme and theologian Thomas Berry. They wrote a new story of the universe, based on their belief that creating a new cosmic story is the most important work of our times. It is the new stories that will usher in a new era of human and planetary health.

Lest you believe that cosmic stories can only be told by physicists or theologians, their idea of a cosmic story is one that answers such questions as, What's going on? Where did everything come from? Why are you doing what you do?

I believe that you and I have important themes to contribute to this new cosmic story. I would like to contrast in some detail the new and the old stories. My hope is that in seeing the great polarities between these two, you will feel more strongly called to give voice to the new.

For more than three hundred years, Western culture has been developing the old story. I would characterize it as a story of dominion and control, and all-encompassing materialism. This story began with a dream that it was within humankind's province to understand the workings of the universe, and to gain complete mastery over physical matter. This dream embraced the image of the universe as a grand, clockwork machine. As with any machine, we would understand it by minute dissection, we would engineer it to do what we saw fit, and we would fix it through our engineering brilliance. This hypnotic image of powers beyond previous human imagination gradually was applied to everything we looked at: our bodies were seen as the ultimate machines; our organizations had all the parts and specifications to assure well-oiled

performance; and in science, where it all began, many scientists confused metaphor with reality and believed life *was* a machine.

This dream still has immense hypnotic power over us. For every problem, we quickly leap to technical solutions, even if technology is the cause of the initial problem. Science will still save us, no matter the earthly mess we've created. In our bodies, we long to believe the promises of genetic engineering. Our greatest ills, perhaps even death, will vanish once we identify the troubling gene. We need only invest more in technology to yield unsurpassed benefits in health and longevity, and all because we are such smart engineers of the human body.

In most of our endeavors—in science, health, management, self-help—the focus is on creating better-functioning machines. We replace the faulty part, reengineer the organization, install a new behavior or attitude, create a better fit, recharge our batteries. The language and thinking is mechanistic. And we give this image such hegemony over our lives because it seems our only hope for combating life's cyclical nature, our one hope of escape from life's incessant demands for creation and destruction.

When we created this story of complete dominion over matter, we also brought in control's unwelcome partner, fear. Once we are intent on controlling something, we feel afraid when we meet with resistance. Since nothing is as controllable as we hope, we soon become entangled in a cycle of exerting control, failing to control, exerting harsher control, failing again, panicking. The fear that arises from this cycle is notable in many of us. It's especially notable in our leaders. Things aren't working as they had hoped, but none of us knows any other way to proceed. The world becomes scarier as we see daily the results of our ignorance and confront our true powerlessness. It is from this place, from an acknowledgment of our ignorance and lack of power, that the call goes out for a new story.

But the old story has some further dimensions worth noticing. This story has had a particularly pernicious effect on how we think about one another, and how we approach the task of organizing any human endeavor. When we conceived of ourselves as machines, we gave up most of what is essential to being human. We created ourselves devoid of spirit, will, passion, compassion, emotions, even intelligence. Machines have none of these characteristics innately, and none of them can be built into its specifications. The imagery is so foreign to what we know and feel to be true about ourselves that it seems strange that we ever adopted this as an accurate description of being human. But we did, and we do. A colleague of mine, as he was about to work with a group of oil company engineers, was warned that they had “heads of cement.” He cheerfully remarked that it didn’t matter, because they all had hearts, didn’t they? “Well,” they replied, “we call it a pump.”

The engineering image we carry of ourselves has led to organizational lives where we believe we can ignore the deep realities of human existence. We can ignore that people carry spiritual questions and quests into their work; we can ignore that people need love and acknowledgment; we can pretend that emotions are not part of our work lives; we can pretend we don’t have families, or health crises, or deep worries. In essence, we take the complexity of human life and organize it away. It is not part of the story we want to believe. We want a story of simple dimensions: People can be viewed as machines and controlled to perform with the same efficiency and predictability.

It is important to recognize that people *never* behave like machines. When given directions, we insist on putting our unique spin on them. When told to follow orders, we resist in obvious or subtle ways. When told to accept someone else’s solution or to institute a program created elsewhere, we deny that it has sufficient value.

As leaders, when we meet with such nonmechanical responses, we've had two options. We could criticize our own leadership skills, or we could blame our followers. If we the leader was the problem, perhaps it was due to poor communication skills; perhaps we weren't visionary enough; maybe we'd chosen the wrong sales technique. If "our people" were the problem, it was because they lacked motivation or a clear sense of responsibility, or it could be that this time we'd just been cursed with an obstinate and rebellious group. With so much blame looking for targets, we haven't taken time to stop and question our basic beliefs about each other. Are expectations of machinelike obedience and regularity even appropriate when working together?

Trying to be an effective leader in this machine story is especially exhausting. He or she is leading a group of lifeless, empty automatons who are just waiting to be filled with vision and direction and intelligence. The leader is responsible for providing everything: the organizational mission and values, the organizational structure, the plans, the supervision. The leader must also figure out, through clever use of incentives or coercives, how to pump energy into this lifeless mass. Once the pump is primed, he must then rush hither and yon to make sure that everyone is clanking along in the same direction, at the established speed, with no diversions. It is the role of the leader to provide the organizing energy for a system that is believed to have no internal capacities for self-creation, self-organization, or self-correction.

As I reflect on the awful demands placed on leaders by the old story, I wonder how anyone could survive in that job. Yet the mechanistic story has created roles for all of us that are equally deadly. It has led us to believe that we, with our unpredictable behaviors, our passions, our independence, our creativity, our consciousness—that we are the problem rather than the blessing. While the rest of nature follows obediently in the great mechanistic parade of progress, we humans show up as rebellious and untrustworthy. Our problematic natures

are the very reason we need to create organizations as we do. How else could we structure such recalcitrance into vehicles of efficient production?

In this story, such key human traits as uniqueness, free will, and creativity pose enormous problems. Machines are built to do repetitive functions that require no thought and minimal adjustment. Conformity and compliance are part of the expectations of this story. Creativity is unwanted, because it is always surprising and therefore uncontrollable. If we tolerate creative expressions, we find ourselves with unmanageable levels of diversity. A machine world is willing to sacrifice exploration for prediction. Guaranteed levels of performance are preferable to surprising breakthroughs. In our machine-organizations, we try to extinguish individuality in order to reach our goal of compliance. We trade uniqueness for control, and barter our humanness for petty performance measures.

It is one of the great ironies of our age that we created organizations to constrain our problematic human natures, and now the only thing that can save these organizations is a full appreciation of the expansive capacities of us humans.

So it is time for the new story. Our old one, with its alienating myths, is eating away at us from the inside, rotting from its core. Fewer of us tell it with conviction. Many more of us are beginning to understand that our experience and our beliefs tell a story that celebrates life rather than denying it. We can see these in the pronounced increase in conversations and writings about destiny, purpose, soul, spirit, love, legacy, courage, integrity, meaning. The new story is being born in these conversations. We are learning to give voice to a different and fuller sense of who we really are.

I would like to characterize the new story as a tale of life. Setting aside our machine glasses, we can observe a world that exhibits life's ebullient creativity and life's great need for other life. We observe a world where creative self-

expression and embracing systems of relationships are the organizing energies, where there is no such thing as an independent individual, and no need for a leader to take on as much responsibility for us as we've demanded in the past.

As I develop some of the major themes of this new story of life, I will be drawing first on the work of modern science. However, science is only the most recent contributor to a story that is very ancient. We find this story in primal wisdom traditions, in indigenous tribes, in most spiritual thought, and in poets old and new. It is a story that has never been forgotten by any of us, and that has been held for us continually by many peoples and cultures. Yet for those of us emerging from our exhaustion with the old mechanistic tale, it feels new. And it certainly opens us to new discoveries about who we are as people, as organizations, and as leaders.

For me, one of the most wonderful contrasts of the old and new stories is described in a passage in Kevin Kelly's book *Out of Control*. As he reached for language to describe life, he moved into sheer exuberance. (I always pay attention when a scientist uses poetic language—I know that something has touched him or her at a level of awareness that I don't want to ignore.) Kelly was trying to describe the ceaseless creativity that characterizes life. He said that life gives to itself this great freedom, the freedom to become. Then he asked, "Becoming what?" and went on to answer:

Becoming becoming. Life is on its way to further complications, further deepness and mystery, further processes of becoming and change. Life is circles of becoming, an autocatalytic set, inflaming itself with its own sparks, breeding upon itself more life and more wildness and more "becomingness." Life has no conditions, no moments that are not instantly becoming something more than life itself. (Kelly, 110)

Kelly's passionate descriptions of processes that inflame, breed more life and wildness, create more deepness and mystery, stand in stark contrast to the

expectations we have held for one another. I like to contemplate Kelly's description of life with the lives we describe when we design an organizational chart. The contrast between the two is both funny and sobering. Could we even begin to tolerate such levels of passion and creativity in our organizations? But can we survive without them?

In the 1960s, the great American poet A. R. Ammons told the same story in different and precise language:

Don't establish the  
boundaries  
first  
the squares, triangles,  
boxes  
of preconceived  
possibility,  
and then  
pour  
life into them, trimming  
off left-over edges,  
ending potential:  
let centers  
proliferate  
from  
    self-justifying motions!

In both science and poetry, we are remembering a story about life that has creativity and connectedness as its essential themes. As we use this new story to look into our organizational lives, it offers us images of organizations and leaders

that are both startling and enticing. It offers us ways of being together where our diversity—our uniqueness—is essential and important. It offers us an arena big enough to embrace the full expression of our infinitely creative human natures.

And for the first time in a long time, it offers us the recognition that we humans are, in the words of physicist Ilya Prigogine, “the most striking realization of the laws of nature.” We can use ourselves and what we know about ourselves to understand the universe. By observing with new eyes the processes of creation in us, we can understand the forces that create galaxies, move continents, and give birth to stars. No longer intent on describing ourselves as the machines we thought the universe to be, we are encouraged now to describe the universe through the life we know we are.

As we look at life through the lens of human nature and human desire, we are presented with some wonderful realizations. Our own desire for autonomy and creativity is reflected in all life. Life appears as boundlessly creative, searching for new possibilities and new capacities wherever it can. Observing the diversity of life forms has become a humbling experience for many biologists. At this point, no one knows how many different species there are or where the next forms of life will appear, except that now we even expect them to appear elsewhere in our solar system.

Life is born from this unquenchable need to be. One of the most interesting definitions of life in modern biology is that something is considered alive if it has the capacity to create itself. The term for this is *autopoiesis*—self-creation. Life begins from the desire to create something original, to bring a new being into form.

The incredible diversity of life bears witness to a level of creativity that has little to do with the survival struggles that have been used to explain everything.

Newness appears not for simple utilitarian purposes, but just because it is possible to be inventive. Life gives to itself the freedom to become, as Kevin Kelly notes, because life is about discovering new possibilities, new forms of expression. Two biologists, Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, observe that life responds not to “survival of the fittest” but to the greater space of experimentation of “survival of the fit.” Many designs, many adaptations are possible, and organisms enjoy far more freedom to experiment than we humans, with our insane demand to “Get it right the first time.”

The freedom to experiment, to tinker oneself into a form of being that can live and reproduce, leads to diversity that has no bounds. In my own telling of a new cosmic story, I would sing that newness is a primary value embraced by all life, one that encourages life to new discoveries. The need and ability to create one’s self is a force we see quite clearly in human experience but that we have greatly misunderstood in our organizations.

The second great force I would add to this new story is that life needs to link with other life, to form systems of relationships where all individuals are better supported by the system they have created. It is impossible to look into the natural world and find a separated individual. As an African proverb states: “Alone, I have seen many marvelous things, none of which were true.” Biologist Lynn Margulis expresses a similar realization when she comments that independence is a political concept, not a biological concept. Everywhere life displays itself as complex, tangled, messy webs of relationships. From these relationships, life creates systems that offer greater stability and support than life lived alone. Organisms shape themselves in response to their neighbors and their environments. All respond to one another, coevolving and cocreating the complex systems of organization that we see in nature. Life is systems seeking. It seeks organization. Organization is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Self-organization is a powerful force that creates the systems we observe and testifies to a world that knows how to organize from the inside out.

Self-organizing systems have the capacity to create for themselves the aspects of organization that we thought leaders had to provide. Self-organizing systems create structures and pathways, networks of communication, values and meaning, behaviors and norms. In essence, they do for themselves most of what we believed we had to do for them. Rather than thinking of organization as an imposed structure, plan, design, or role, it is clear that in life, organization arises from the interactions and needs of individuals who have decided to come together.

The clash of the old and new stories can be seen everywhere. It is painfully visible in organizations that were created to birth the new story, including many nonprofits, churches, and public benefit organizations. People form these organizations in response to the call of the new story; they join together because they know that they can't birth this dream alone. An organization is required in order to move it forward. The human desires that lead them to organize—to find more meaning in life, to bring more good into the world, to serve others—come from the new story.

Yet as soon as they embark on the task of creating an organization, old ideas and habits arise. These organizations impose structures and roles, develop elaborate plans, use command and control leadership. Over time, the organization that was created in response to the new story becomes a rigid structure exemplifying, yet again, the old story. People come to resent the organization they created, because now it is a major impediment to their creativity, to their hope, to their dreams.

The new story holds out different images of organization—it teaches us that humans, when joined together, are capable of giving birth to the form of the organization, to the plans, to the values, to the vision. All of life is self-organizing, and so are we. But the new story also details a process for organizing

that stands in shocking contrast to the images of well-planned, well-orchestrated, well-supervised organizing. I can summarize the organizing processes of life quite simply: Life seeks organization, but it uses messes to get there. Organization is a process, not a structure.

Simultaneously, the process of organizing involves developing relationships from a shared sense of purpose, exchanging and creating information, learning constantly, paying attention to the results of our efforts, coadapting, coevolving, developing wisdom as we learn, staying clear about our purpose, being alert to changes from all directions. Living systems give form to their organization and evolve those forms into new ones, because of exquisite capacities to create meaning together, to communicate, and to notice what's going on in the moment. These are the capacities that give any organization its true aliveness, that support self-organization.

In the new story, we discover a world where life gives birth to itself using two powerful forces: the need to be free to create one's self and the need to reach out for relationships with others. These forces never disappear from life. Even if we deny them, we can't ever extinguish them. They are always active, even in the most repressive human organizations. Life can never stop asserting its need to create itself, and life never stops searching for connections.

We fail to acknowledge these unstoppable forces of life whenever we, as leaders, try to direct and control those in our organization. Life always pushes back against our demands. But instead of learning about life, we tend to see their "difficult" behaviors as justification for a more controlling style of leadership. Many of the failures and discontents in today's organizations can be understood as the result of this denial of life's forces and how life pushes back against a story that excludes it.

To see these competing forces, think about how many times you have engaged in conversations about “resistance to change.” I have participated in far too many of these, and in the old days, when I still thought that it was me who was “managing” change, my colleagues and I always were thoughtful enough to plan a campaign to overcome this resistance. Contrast this view of human resistance to change with Kelly’s images of life as “further processes of becoming and change . . . circles of becoming, inflaming itself with its own sparks, breeding upon itself more life and more wildness.” Who’s telling the right story? Do we, as a species, dig in our heels while the rest of life is engaged in this awesome dance of creation? Are we the only problem, whereas the rest of life participates in something wild and wonderful?

The old story asserts that resistance to change is a fact of life. Bound by a world view that seeks stability and control, change is always undesirable. But the new story explains resistance not as a fact of life, but as evidence of an act *against* life. Life is in motion, constantly creating, exploring, discovering. Nothing alive, including us, resists these great creative motions. But all of life resists control. All of life reacts to any process that inhibits its freedom to create itself.

In organizations of the old story, plans and designs are constantly being imposed. People are told what to do all the time. As a final insult, leaders go outside the organization to look for answers, returning with programs and methods invented elsewhere. Those in the organization only see these prepackaged solutions as insults. Their creativity has been dismissed, their opportunity to invent something new for the organization has been denied. When we deny life’s need to create, life pushes back. We label it resistance and invent strategies to overcome it. But we would do far better if we changed the story and learned how to invoke the resident creativity of those in our organization. We need to work with these insistent creative forces or they will be provoked to work against us.

And most organizations deny the systems-seeking, self-organizing forces that are always present, the forces that, in fact, are responsible for uncharted levels of contribution and innovation. These fail to get reported because they occur outside “the boxes of preconceived possibility.” There is no better indicator of the daily but unrecognized contributions made by people than when a municipal union, prohibited from going on strike, decides to “work to rule.” They work *only* according to the rule book. They *only* follow policies and job descriptions. The great irony is that even though rules and policies are designed to create productive work, as soon as they are the only instructions, cities cease running, effective civil functioning stops. What work-to-rule demonstrates is that no organization functions on the *planned* contributions of its members. Every organization relies on its employees going beyond the rules and roles, figuring out what needs to be done, solving unexpected problems as they appear.

We also deny these system-seeking forces when we narrow people to self-serving work, when we pit colleagues against one another to improve performance, when we believe people are most strongly motivated by promises of personal gain. If we deny people’s great need for relationships, for systems of support, for work that connects to a larger purpose, they push back. They may respond first by embracing competition but then lose interest in the incentives. Performance falls back to precontest levels. In organizations driven by greed, people push back by distrusting and despising their leaders. In organizations that try to substitute monetary rewards for a true purpose, people respond with apathy and disaffection.

It is possible to look at the negative and troubling behaviors in organizations today as the clash between the forces of life and the forces of domination, between the new story and the old. Once we realize that we cannot ever extinguish these creative forces, that it is impossible to deny the life that lives in our organizations, we can begin to search for new ways of being together.

In many different places, the new story is emerging. It is, in its essence, a story about the human spirit. This realization is surfacing in many different disciplines and people. For those who have focused on organizations, I find it delightful to note that two great management thinkers, Edward Deming, the great voice for quality in organizations, and Robert Greenleaf, the prophet of servant leadership, both focused on the human spirit in their final writings. Deming concluded his long years of work by stating simply that quality was about the human spirit. As we grew to understand that spirit, we would create organizations of quality. Greenleaf understood that we stood as servants to the human spirit, that it was our responsibility to nurture that spirit. Following different paths, they arrived at the same centering place. We can create the lives and organizations we desire only by understanding the enlivening spirit in us that always is seeking to express itself.

Leaders who live in the new story help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness; they welcome the surprises we bring to them; they are curious about our differences; they delight in our inventiveness; they nurture us; they connect us. They trust that we can create wisely and well, that we seek the best interests of our organization and our community, that we want to bring more good into the world.

We who hold this story feel both its beauty and its promise. What might we create if we lived our lives closer to the human spirit? What might our organizations accomplish if they trusted and called on that spirit? I want us to be telling this story in health care organizations, on campuses, in schools, in governments, in religious denominations, in corporations. I want traditional business/economic logic to stop being the only story; I want business/economic imperatives to stop moving us away from the deeper realities we know. Even in the for-profit sector where it still dominates, the old story has not created organizations that are sustainable over time or welcoming of the human spirit.

Why would we let such thinking move unchallenged into other types of organizations or other cultures?

When it is time for a new story to emerge, holding onto the past only intensifies our dilemma. We experience our ineffectiveness daily, and we descend into a profound sense of lost. What we ask of the tellers of the new story is their voice and their courage. We do not need them to create a massive training program, a global approach, a dramatic style. We only need them to speak to us when we are with them. We need them to break their silence and share their ideas of the world as they have come to know it.

If you carry this story within you, it is time to tell it, wherever you are, to whomever you meet. Brian Swimme compares our role to that of the early Christians. They had nothing but “a profound revelatory experience. They did nothing—nothing but wander about telling a new story.” As with these early believers, Brian encourages us to become wanderers, telling our new story. Through our simple wanderings, we will “ignite the transformation of humanity.” And he leaves us with a promise:

What will happen when the storytellers emerge? What will happen when “the primal mind” sings of our common origin, our stupendous journey, our immense good fortune? We will become Earthlings. We will have evoked out of the depths of the human psyche those qualities enabling our transformation from disease to health. They will sing our epic of being, and stirring up from our roots will be a vast awe, an enduring gratitude, the astonishment of communion experiences, and the realization of cosmic adventure.

What a wonderful promise. I invite you into the telling.

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