

Perseverance

MARGARET J. WHEATLEY

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An Excerpt From

Perseverance

by Margaret J. Wheatley
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From the Elders of the Hopi Nation

ORAIBI, ARIZONA JUNE 8, 2000

TO MY FELLOW SWIMMERS:

Here is a river flowing now very fast.
It is so great and swift that there are those
who will be afraid, who will try
to hold on to the shore.

They are being torn apart and
will suffer greatly.

Know that the river has its destination.
The elders say we must let go of the shore.
Push off into the middle of the river,
and keep our heads above water.

And I say see who is there with you
and celebrate.

At this time in history,
we are to take nothing personally,
least of all ourselves,
for the moment we do,
our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over.
Gather yourselves.
Banish the word struggle from your attitude
and vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done
in a sacred manner and in celebration.
For we are the ones we have been waiting for.

Questions and Answers

How is it that some people devote their lives to a cause, to a person, to a place?

And how is it that even in the midst of failures, betrayals, reversals, they can still remain focused and dedicated to their cause?

What enables a person to stay, to not be dissuaded, to not lose focus? How do people not become overwhelmed, or succumb to exhaustion and despair?

How do such people sustain themselves over long periods of time? How do they preserve their health and well-being?

How do they preserve their faith?

I want to be one who perseveres, so these are real questions for me.

I have been out in the world with these questions for many years now and met many people who have persevered through circumstances I hope never to encounter. I am grateful for all that I have learned from them—they answered many of my questions.

Of course there are many answers available. Here are just a few I discovered and found to be relevant in my own experience.

May the questions stay alive in your heart, and may these few answers serve you well so that you too may be one who perseveres.



Reg Wheatley

It is not necessary to hope in order to undertake,
nor to succeed in order to persevere.

Charles the Bold
Duke of Burgundy

Perseverance

The word “perseverance” in Latin means, “one who sees through to the end,” “one who doesn’t yield.” In English, it describes how we maintain our activity in spite of difficulties. Tenacity, steadfastness, persistence, doggedness—these are all common synonyms.

In Chinese, the character for perseverance is often the same as the one used for patience.

Human experience is the story of perseverance. Throughout space and time, humans have always persevered. We wouldn’t be here without them.

Think of all the people you know—family, friends, strangers—who have just kept going, who didn’t yield, who were tenacious, steadfast, patient.

How would you describe them? What were some of their traits? Their capacities? What was it like to be around them, to listen to their stories?

At the end of their lives, how were they?

Angry? Contented? Cynical? Peaceful?

What do their lives offer you as lessons on how to persevere?

What do we all need to learn from them now?





A Knife

Here is the Chinese character for perseverance.
It is a knife poised over a heart.

Written in the ancient "seal style"





PART ONE


Here Is a River

TO MY FELLOW SWIMMERS:

Here is a river flowing now very fast.
It is so great and swift that there are those
who will be afraid, who will try
to hold on to the shore.
They are being torn apart and
will suffer greatly.

I'm making my shoulders strong
for the young to stand upon,
stepping lightly on the backs of those
who hold me up.
It's a chain of life unending,
ever new and ever bending,
grateful is the heart for the chance to be alive.

Susan Osborn
Singer/songwriter



We've Been Here Before

We have never been here before in terms of the global nature of our predicament. For the first time in human history (at least that we know of), we have endangered our home planet. And for the first time, we know what's happening to just about all 7 billion of us humans, the challenges and terrors we endure and the occasional, reaffirming triumphs. Never before have humans been so aware of one another's struggles, pain and perseverance. Never before have we known so many of the consequences of what we do—our thoughtless, violent, heroic and loving actions.

Yet we *have* been here before. In our long, mysterious history, humans have had to struggle with enormous upheavals, dislocations, famines and fears. We've had to counteract aggression, protect our loved ones and face the end of life as we've known it. Over and over again.

The scale is different now, but the human experience is the same. And so are our human spirits, capable of generosity or abuse, creativity or destruction, survival or extinction. As we face the challenges and struggles of this time, it might help to recall the centuries of solid shoulders we stand on.

And if you reflect on your own life experience, what else have you endured? You're still here—how did you stay here?

How have you come through rough times before?

What from your own personal history gives you now the capacity to get through this time?



What Time Is It?

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,
we had everything before us, we had nothing before us,
we were all going direct to Heaven,
we were all going direct the other way.

In short, the period was so far like the present period,
that some of its noisiest authorities insisted
on its being received, for good or for evil,
in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Charles Dickens
A Tale of Two Cities, 1859

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes

Writer



It's Our Turn

Throughout human existence, there have always been people willing to step forward to struggle valiantly in the hope that they might reverse the downward course of events. Some succeeded, some did not. As we face our own time, it's good to remember that we're only the most recent humans who have struggled to change things.

Getting engaged in changing things is quite straightforward. If we have an idea, or want to resolve an injustice, or stop a tragedy, we step forward to serve. Instead of being overwhelmed and withdrawing, we act.

No grand actions are required; we just need to begin speaking up about what we care about. We don't need to spend a lot of time planning or getting senior leaders involved; we don't have to wait for official support. We just need to get started—for whatever issue or person we care about.

When we fail, which of course we often will, we don't have to feel discouraged. Instead, we can look into our mistakes and failures for the valuable learnings they contain. And we can be open to opportunities and help that present themselves, even when they're different from what we thought we needed. We can follow the energy of "Yes!" rather than accepting defeat or getting stuck in a plan.

This is how the world always changes. Everyday people not waiting for someone else to fix things or come to their rescue, but simply stepping forward, working together, figuring out how to make things better.

Now it's our turn.



The future is no more uncertain than the present.

Walt Whitman

Poet

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of several overlapping, wavy, horizontal bands in shades of light blue and grey, creating a sense of movement and depth.

Dwelling in Uncertainty

Some people despair about the darkening direction of the world today. Others are excited by the possibilities for creativity and new ways of living they see emerging out of the darkness.

Rather than thinking one perspective is preferable to the other, let's notice that both are somewhat dangerous. Either position, optimism or pessimism, keeps us from fully engaging with the complexity of this time. If we see only troubles, or only opportunities, in both cases we are blinded by our need for certainty, our need to know what's going on, to figure things out so we can be useful.

Certainty is a very effective way of defending ourselves from the irresolvable nature of life. If we're certain, we don't have to immerse ourselves in the strange puzzling paradoxes that always characterize a time of upheaval:

- the potential for new beginnings born from
the loss of treasured pasts,
- the grief of dreams dying with the
exhilaration of what now might be,
- the impotence and rage of failed ideals and
the power of new aspirations,
- the horrors inflicted on so many innocents that
call us to greater compassion.

The challenge is to refuse to categorize ourselves. We don't have to take sides or define ourselves as either optimists or pessimists. Much better to dwell in uncertainty, hold the paradoxes, live in the complexities and contradictions without needing them to resolve.

This is what uncertainty feels like and it's a very healthy place to dwell.

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