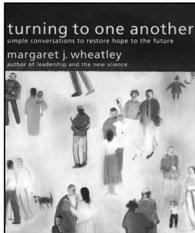




## BIRTHING THE FUTURE TOGETHER THROUGH CONVERSATION

BY KAREN SPEER STRA



**Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future**  
by Margaret J. Wheatley

**W**ritten in short essay form, Margaret Wheatley's latest book, *Turning to One Another* (Berrett-Koehler, 2002), invites us to talk about what we truly care about and to listen to others with our hearts and our minds. Perhaps more important now than ever before, this book encourages us to spend some time thinking about what we hope for the future. Helping us with this important task, Wheatley deftly uses her usual warm, autobiographical approach to show us what she believes and how she herself wants to be held accountable for those beliefs and make them visible in her actions. Because of her prompting, I found myself asking, "What is *my* faith in the future? How willing am *I* to have my beliefs and ideas challenged. How willing am *I* to be disturbed?"

In her earlier writings, Wheatley deepened her readers' understanding of how systems behave. The world is inherently orderly, she has said, as she invited us to live simply as partners within its playful dance. In this book, she goes a step further—she exhorts us to collectively birth the future.

### Conversational Practices

The book is organized in three parts. The first part sets out the power, the courage, and the practices of conversation. Wheatley has been hosting dialogues of various kinds for a decade. But her appreciation of the potential of conversation has been deepened by

two approaches that generate deep insights, a strong sense of community, and innovative possibilities for action. From Christina Baldwin, Wheatley gained a deeper understanding of circle and council practices for evoking compassionate listening and authentic conversation. From Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, she has incorporated the World Café, an exciting way to focus on "conversations that matter and questions that travel well." This approach links small-group conversations in a way that causes knowledge to grow and the collective wisdom of the group to become visible to participants. Based on learnings from these and other sources, Wheatley founded The Four Directions, a global initiative that links local circles of leaders in a worldwide network on behalf of life-affirming futures.

The brief second portion of the book is devoted to simple yet captivating sketches by Vivienne Flesher, coupled with pithy hand-scripted statements such as "It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do." These statements or questions, often accompanied by a thought-provoking quotation, lend an "open-journal" feel to the book. Some readers may be prompted to add their own thoughts to these pages, making it an even more personal document.

### Profound Challenges

It is the third part of the book that most people will find particularly useful. The author calls this last and longest section "Conversation Starters." Each of the 10 "chapters" provides the framework for a conversation that readers themselves might host. With stories, quotations, and poetry interspersed throughout, Wheatley has lovingly compiled a set of resources that compel

readers to thoughtful action on profound challenges.

For instance, she asks, "When have I experienced working for the common good?" and prompts conversation groups to dig deep inside to answer such questions as "How many times were you surprised by someone's ingenuity, or your own?" She concludes this topic by reminding us that "if we raised our expectations, then it wouldn't take a crisis for us to experience the satisfaction of working together, the joy of doing work that serves other human beings. And then we would discover, as the Chinese author of the Tao te Ching wrote 2,500 years ago, that 'the good becomes common as grass.'"

This is an inspirational book at its core. It frees us to be our better selves. It's all about service and community, and caring and unselfish behaviors. Because of its early 2002 publishing date, Wheatley must have written much of the material prior to the September 11 attacks, yet each page pulses with thoughts readers will find even more provocative since that dreadful day. One page features a World Trade Center survivor's words: "We didn't save ourselves. We tried to save each other." Life is, indeed, too short to be selfish.

Wheatley also shares with us her experiences of the sacred, which is nothing special, she says—just all of life. She ends with an Aztec story about a forest fire, an owl, and a small Quetzal bird who attempts to put out the fire with tiny droplets from its beak. The owl questions this behavior, pointing out the futility of it all, but the tiny bird says, "I'm doing the best I can with what I have."

That is, after all, the best any of us might do. Conversation, Wheatley says, requires that we extend ourselves to

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others, curious about what their stories might hold. For in the telling, the teller and the listener each becomes more fully human. And finally, she exhorts us, to trust that meaningful conversations *can* change our world. ■

**Karen Speerstra** (kspeerstra@aol.com) is a coach, writer, and editor based in central Vermont. During her 20-year career in professional and college text publishing, she was publishing director at Butterworth-Heinemann and founded a line of business books focusing on knowledge management, visionary leadership, change management, HR, and organizational development.