

An Excerpt From

***So Far From Home:  
Lost and Found in Our Brave New World***

by Margaret J. Wheatley  
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers



# SO FAR FROM HOME

lost and found in our  
brave new world

**MARGARET J. WHEATLEY**

Bestselling author of *Leadership and the New Science*

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**BK**

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*a BK Life book*

## So Far from Home

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## **DEDICATION**

For all of us who aspire to be warriors for the human spirit, and for those whose needs and suffering summon us to be brave.

For Yava Rukshi, whose protective and challenging presence and beautiful home provided the container for this book to take form.

For my teachers who proclaim the teachings, radiate confidence, and illuminate the way of discipline. I do not have words to express my gratitude and devotion: The Vidyadhara Chögyam Trungpa and Pema Chödrön.

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# HOME IS

The source of vivid memories for a place we've never been  
the yearning for return to a place we've yet to find  
the sense of true belonging  
when we know that we've been found  
the confidence to journey through this life.

—Margaret J. Wheatley



## AN INVITATION TO YOU AS READER

*I wrote this book for you* if you offer your work as a contribution to others, wherever and whatever that work might be. And if you now find yourself feeling more exhausted, frustrated, overwhelmed, and sad while also experiencing moments of joy, belonging, and increased resolve to continue your work.

*This book can restore* your clarity, energy, and enthusiasm for your work if you take time with it and read it slowly.

*This book cannot serve you* if you skim, scan, scroll, or flip through its pages hunting for a few good ideas.

*This book intends* to provoke and disturb, to console and affirm you. These strong responses require time and reflection.

*This book explores* how this brave new world—so difficult and destructive of our good work—emerged from complex causes and conditions. Complexity takes time to understand.

*This book invites you* to choose a new role for yourself so that you might better serve the people, causes, and places important to you. Conscious choices take time to discern.

*This book calls upon skills* not common these days, such as thinking, sense making, pattern recognition, reflection. These skills return when we free our minds of distraction and enter the quiet space of contemplation.

*I invite you to explore* this book slowly so that it might illuminate and clarify your path going forward.

May this book benefit you so that you might benefit many others.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Greg Wheatley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent "G" and "W".

## AN INVITATION TO WARRIORSHIP

Most cultures identify this as a dark time, an age of destruction, the end of a cycle or the end of times. And most cultures have the tradition of warriors, an elite class entrusted with defending the faith, the culture, or the kingdom. Warriors undergo rigorous training and display great courage; their valiant acts live on in stories that inspire people to maintain the faith and strive to be courageous.

For many years now, I have been inspired, motivated, and comforted by a prophecy that comes from Tibetan Buddhism of impending darkness and the summoning of the warriors. Although this word *warrior* has heavy connotations of force and aggression, it means something very different in Tibetan culture. The Tibetan word for warrior, *pawo*, means one who is brave, one who vows never to use aggression. I practice for this kind of warriors in a lineage based on the prophecy of the Shambhala warriors. My personal vow is to refrain, as best I can, from adding to the aggression and fear of this time. Shambhala was an ancient kingdom of wise and conscious people, ruled by enlightened kings. (My Tibetan teacher places it in current-day Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Others believe it is not a physical place but a description of our awakened minds.) The people of Shambhala were unusual in that they had no anxiety. Free from fear, they were able to create an enlightened society.

The prophecy of the Shambhala warriors comes from an ancient time, speaking across a vast distance to our present one: "There comes a time when all life on Earth is in danger. Great barbarian

powers have arisen. Although these powers spend their wealth in preparations to annihilate one another, they have much in common: weapons of unfathomable destructive power, and technologies that lay waste our world. In this era, when the future of sentient life hangs by the frailest of threads, the kingdom of Shambhala emerges.”<sup>2</sup>

You cannot tell who these warriors are by their appearance; they look like normal people doing regular jobs. They are, however, extremely well armed. Their “weapons” are powerful: compassion and insight. Well trained in their use, they go into the corridors of power to dismantle the beliefs and behaviors that are destroying life.

When I first heard this prophecy, I was very moved by the description of the warriors—already inside the halls of power, knowledgeable about the inner workings of these systems, perfectly positioned to discern the causes and conditions that had led to the descent into darkness. These warriors would not succumb to aggression or be paralyzed by fear. They would know where best to use their skillful means of compassion and insight.

Perhaps you see yourself in this description or are curious to investigate what it might mean. This is my invitation to you, to all of us who are in these systems of power, who know their inner workings, who know they cannot be rescued or reversed. We are free to choose a new role for ourselves, to transform our grief, outrage, frustration, and exhaustion into the skills of insight and compassion, to serve this dark time as warriors for the human spirit.



PART I

# NEW WORLD

Oh brave new world!  
That has such people in it!

SHAKESPEARE, *THE TEMPEST*



## SEEING WHAT IS

*I'm sitting on the banks of the Virgin River in Zion National Park, my favorite place on the planet. The river is confidently, casually flowing through this magnificent canyon that it has been carving out for about two million years.*

The canyon has created one of Earth's most sacred places. It has been a dry winter, so the river is low, ambling peacefully along. I've been here at other times when it's fierce, flooding, destructive. Next time I'm back it will be different again.

I've learned a lot from rivers, starting with the teacher stream I wrote about in *Leadership and the New Science*. That lovely mountain stream taught me about process structures, things that have clear identity and intention yet constantly adapt to circumstances and conditions, changing their form as needed. Streams take many forms yet never lose their way, which is unerringly to the ocean. Along the way, they create magnificent canyons, wreak terrible destruction, provide sustenance to farms and communities, provide pleasure and pain to those who live along their banks. This is the pattern of life—changing, adapting, creating and destroying.

The Hopi Native American elders describe this time—our time—as a river flowing now very fast, great, and swift. They

warn us not to hold on to the shore, the place of security and old ways, because those who do “will be torn apart and suffer greatly.” They encourage us to push off into the middle of the river and to keep our heads above water.<sup>3</sup>

These river images, even the most turbulent ones, no longer describe this time for me. I need a more violent image of disruption and dread to describe what I’m seeing and how I’m feeling. It is Yeats’ dark vision that speaks to me, written in 1919 in the troubled years after the First World War:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

### **A Confession of Innocence**

Many of us—certainly I’d describe myself in these terms—were anxiously engaged in “the ceremony of innocence.” We didn’t think we were innocents, but we were. We thought we could change the world. We even believed that, with sufficient will and passion, we could “create a world,” one that embodied our aspirations for justice, equality, opportunity, peace, a world where, in Paulo Freire’s terms, “it would be easier to love.” (The gifted publisher of this and all my books, Berrett-Koehler, aspires “To create a world that works for all.”) This vision, this hope, this possibility motivated me for most of my life. It still occasionally seduces me into contemplating what might be the next project, the next collaboration, the next big idea that could turn this world around. But I’m learning to resist the temptation.



This is not a book that contemplates what we might do next, what we've learned from all our efforts, where we might put our energy and experience in order to create positive change. I no longer believe that we can save the world. Powerful, life-destroying dynamics have been set in motion that cannot be stopped. We're on a disastrous course with each other and with the planet. We've lost track of our best human qualities and forgotten the real sources of satisfaction, meaning and joy.

This book was born from my clarity that greed, self-interest and coercive power are destroying the very life force of this planet. I don't know whether such destruction is intentional or not, but I observe it happening everywhere. I was hit in the face with this while in South Africa in November 2011. South Africa is the country of my heart, always teaching me about the depths of human experience. I've been working there since 1995 and this was my fourteenth visit. In the years of Nelson Mandela, hope was palpable. Everyone seemed to be starting projects to tackle huge social problems, eager to work with others to create the New South Africa. They understood the complexity of all the issues, they knew it was "a long walk to freedom,"<sup>4</sup> and they had great faith in their future.

But now, for many reasons, hope is hard to find and the good people who have created successful projects and built effective non-government organizations (NGOs) are exhausted and demoralized. They keep doing their work, but it's now a constant struggle. They struggle for funds, they struggle with inept, corrupt bureaucracy, they struggle with the loss of community and the rise of self-interest, they struggle with the indifference of the newly affluent. The dream of a new nation of possibility, equality,

and justice has fallen victim to the self-serving behaviors of those with power.

Please do not think this is only true in South Africa. It's happening everywhere, as you may have noticed.

### **Indestructible Motivation**

Yet I have not set out to write a book that increases our despair. Quite the contrary. My intention is that we do our work with greater resolve and energy, with more delight and confidence, even as we understand that it won't turn this world around. Our work is essential; we just have to hold it differently. This was beautifully described by Václav Havel, leader of the Velvet Revolution, the poet-playwright who then became president of the new Czech Republic: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."<sup>5</sup>

How do we find this deep confidence that, independent of results, our work is the right work for us to be doing? How do we give up needing hope to be our primary motivator? How do we replace hope of creating change with confidence that we're doing the right work?

Hope is such a dangerous source of motivation. It's an ambush, because what lies in wait is hope's ever-present companion, fear: the fear of failing, the despair of disappointment, the bitterness and exhaustion that can overtake us when our best, most promising efforts are rebuked, undone, ignored, destroyed. As someone commented, "Expectation is premeditated disappointment."

My great teachers these days are people who no longer need hope in order to do their work, even though their

projects and organizations began with bright, hope-filled dreams. As “the blood-dimmed tide” of greed, fear, and oppression drowns out their voices and washes away their good work, they become more committed to their work, not because it will succeed, but just because it is right for them to be doing it. I watch their inner struggles and bouts with despair, but mostly what I notice is their perseverance and confidence. They see how bad it is, they know it is getting worse, they realize their work won’t create the changes they have worked hard for all these years. Yet they continue to do their work because they know it is theirs to do. Sometimes they say, “I can’t not do this.” Other times they ask, “What else would I be doing if not this?”

These brave people are true warriors. Seeing as clearly as they can, hearts as open as they can bear, they keep doing their work. They know how systems of power work and they try to discern wise actions. Though in frequent battles with politicians, leaders and bureaucrats, they strive to keep their hearts open and not to succumb to anger and aggression. Work is filled with constant challenges, and they know there will be many more.

Perhaps you see yourself in this description. Or perhaps you still rely on the hope that it’s possible to save the world.



## DO YOU WANT TO SAVE THE WORLD?

*I use this rather dramatic phrase of “saving the world” to get your attention and also to make a point.*

You may not hold your work in such grandiose terms; you may be working hard to create change within one community, one organization, or for one cause. You haven't been contemplating how to change the whole world, just working on the small piece in front of you. But many of us harbor the hope that if we do a good job and have evidence of our results, our work will spread and create change beyond our initial project or place. For me, such hope places you in the category of saving the world.

A few questions to see whether you fit in this category:

- When you've discovered a process or project that works well, do you assume that others will be interested in how you achieved your success?
- Do you present your good results, with supporting evidence, and assume that this will convince others to adopt your model?
- Do you sometimes imagine how your good work could be taken up by enough other people that it goes to scale, creating change far beyond your own sphere of influence?

- Have you presented your work at conferences or meetings hoping to have this kind of impact?

These hopes and dreams are quite normal in my experience, and it's hard to let them go. But they're based on an assumption of rational human behavior—that leaders are interested in what works—that has not proven true. Time and again, innovators and their highly successful projects are ignored, denied or pushed aside, even in the best of times. In this dark era, this is even more true.

If we choose to stay in our work and claim the role of warrior, our aspiration changes in a dramatic way—we give up needing anyone else to adopt our good work. We focus on where we are, who we're with, what we're doing within our specific sphere of influence. We do our work with even greater focus and determination: and we abandon dreams of influencing anybody else. This is what I mean by giving up saving the world.

But we do not give up our work. We act with greater clarity and courage once freed from oppressive ambition. And we cheerfully choose a new role, transforming from savior to warrior.

### **Warriors for the Human Spirit**

The subject of this book is warriorship. I want to encourage us to claim this role for ourselves, to be warriors for the human spirit, people brave enough to refrain from adding to the fear and aggression of this time. This is no easy task, not to meet aggression with aggression, to consciously choose to stay out of fear and support others to do the same, to quell the anxiety and anger that erupts so reflexively and choose for peace. Of course it's hard—what isn't these days? I just want to be struggling for the right things.

As I've claimed this role for myself, I'm learning that the capacities and skills we most need—patience, compassion, discernment, effectiveness, courage—are available to us if we can see the world honestly and not flee from its harshness. This is ancient wisdom, expressed clearly by the Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa:

We cannot change the world as it is,  
but by opening ourselves to the world as it is,  
we may find that gentleness, decency and bravery are available—  
not only to us but to all human beings.<sup>6</sup>

I've been contemplating this teaching for a few years, enticed by its description of a path that is both paradoxical and straightforward. If we fully accept the world as it is—in all its harsh realities—then we can develop the very qualities we need to be in that world and not succumb to that harshness. We find our courage, morality, and gentle, non-aggressive actions by clear seeing and acceptance. As we accept what is, we become people who stand in contrast to what is, freed from the aggression, grasping and confusion of this time. With that clarity, we can contribute things of eternal importance no matter what's going on around us—how to live exercising our best human qualities, and how to support others to discover these qualities in themselves.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose work and faith led him to confront and transcend the most dehumanizing violence and degradation of the human spirit, proclaims that this is a moral universe. Martin Luther King, Jr. noted, “The arc of the universe is long but it tends towards justice.”<sup>7</sup> I honor the valiant warriorship of these two great men and hold their lives with reverence. Yet I don't need their statements

to be true in order to claim my own warriorship. Perhaps the world progresses slowly but inexorably toward justice and morality. But the evidence is certainly mixed.

I personally aspire to be so free of hope and fear that I don't need some future far-off progress to commit to my work right now. It doesn't matter which way history moves. What matters is now: how we live, work and create together in this very moment, relying on and cultivating our best human qualities, creating meaning by how we are together in the present moment. Perhaps this contributes to the arc of history that Dr. King describes, but who knows? I've let go of my need to influence the course of history. I've chosen between two paths: one path is offering me meaning, strength, and contentment; one path lures me into further exhaustion and despair. At least that's been my experience. I invite you to explore this for yourself in the coming pages.



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## NEW MAPS FOR LOST PEOPLE

*For many years I've thought of myself as a kind of cartographer. This was the primary image in Leadership and the New Science, where I described the discoveries of new science as lands rich in possibility, dimly seen, awaiting our voyages of discovery.*

I thought of us as brave explorers, eager to learn more about the world described by new science—a world of unending relationships, infinite creativity, and order for free.

When I drew those first maps in 1992, I assumed my job was quite straightforward. My task was to provide just enough detail of these lands of bright vision and possibility so that people would begin their own explorations. And a good number of people did; their explorations and experiments manifested in many forms, from new approaches to leadership, to healthy communities, to organization-wide transformations. And today, as the world becomes ever more chaotic, more people are becoming interested, if not desperate, to find ways to lead in this turbulence. But in spite of our courage, dedication, and very hard work, we're now lost in a world where we don't want to be. What happened to that bright new world that seemed so close at hand only a few years ago?

When hikers are lost in the wilderness, as you'll read in Chapter 8, "Are We Lost?" they cling to their old maps far too long, driving themselves to exhaustion and despair, threatening their very survival. Unable to acknowledge that they don't know where they are, they grasp wildly at any scrap of information that would confirm their old maps. But they *are* lost. And they need new maps.

We, too, are lost in the wilderness of a brave new world, a global culture whose values and practices are completely opposite to what we set out to create. We didn't intend to be here—we were working for a very different destination. But here we are and, like all lost people, we need first to acknowledge that we are truly lost, so that we stop relying on outdated maps. If we can stop our frantic activity and see this new world clearly, we will be able to create new maps to make our way forward.

### **A Book of New Maps**

This book offers a set of new maps. They are not the only ones that could be drawn, but they are the ones I felt compelled to lay out, based on my training as a systems thinker and my observations from being out in the world with people these many years. Here you will find maps of three different kinds. The first are topographical, in that they describe the characteristics and features, the terrain of this brave new world. These maps are in Part II: "Home: We Cannot Change the Way the World Is."

The second are quite different. They are systems maps, describing the interplay of life's dynamics with human values and behavior, complex interactions that gave rise to what has emerged. I think of these systems maps as charts of the prevailing currents that carried us here against our will. They are in Part III: "Lost: Opening to the World as It Is."

The last maps are personal, describing what is required to do our work once we commit to walking the warrior's path. These are in Part IV: "Found: Discovering Gentleness, Decency, and Bravery."

To entice you to begin your exploration, here is a bit more detail of the maps you'll find in each part.

### **Home: We Cannot Change the Way the World Is**

I begin by exploring the capacities of life that have created our wondrous home planet. I describe how three of life's most powerful dynamics are revealing themselves at present, both in the new sciences and in the current global culture.

Chapter 4 "Everything Comes from Somewhere"

Chapter 5 "Emergence: Surprised by Newness"

Chapter 6 "Identity: The Logic of Change"

Chapter 7 "Relationships: Endlessly Entangled"

### **Lost: Opening to the World as It Is**

My intent is for us to see as clearly as possible what's going on in our world in all its harsh details so that we can recognize how lost we truly are. Only if we acknowledge that we are lost can we begin to become unlost. These systems maps describe the complexity of factors and their interactions that have led us to where we are today.

Chapter 8 "Are We Lost?"

Chapter 9 "All-Consuming Selves"

Chapter 10 "Distracted Beyond Recall"

Chapter 11 "Controlling Complexity"

### **Found: Discovering Gentleness, Decency, and Bravery**

Here I describe the essentials of warriorship, beginning with our unassailable faith in people. I offer several different reflections and practices for how we can practice our new role as warriors: how we develop our two “weapons” of compassion and insight; how we stay together on the path without a goal; and how we discover the place of right work, free from hope and fear.

Chapter 12 “A Prophecy of Warriors”

Chapter 13 “Choosing for the Human Spirit”

Chapter 14 “Warriors at Work”

Chapter 15 “No Hope No Fear”

The book concludes with a guide for warriors and a parable:

“A Path for Warriors”

“A Dream of Warriors”

### **Wanted: Fearless Readers**

I feel it necessary to both warn and encourage you as you begin to read this book. Seeing what is, in all its harshness, is not a pleasant experience. Every time I reread my own writing, I can easily move into despair and overwhelm. So I’m very sensitive to what I’m inviting you into and the emotions you may encounter as you read Part II, “Home,” and Part III, “Lost.”

*But I don’t end our journey there.* I’m asking you to walk through the darkness of this time so that together we can discover the light of clarity and energy for the work we choose to do. The journey of this book ends with Part IV,

“Found,” where I describe practices for us warriors that can inspire, sustain, and enliven us for the journey ahead. So if you feel your steps faltering as you encounter how dark it really is, please keep going until you reach Part IV and discover the light that beckons us on.





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