

Executive Book Summary

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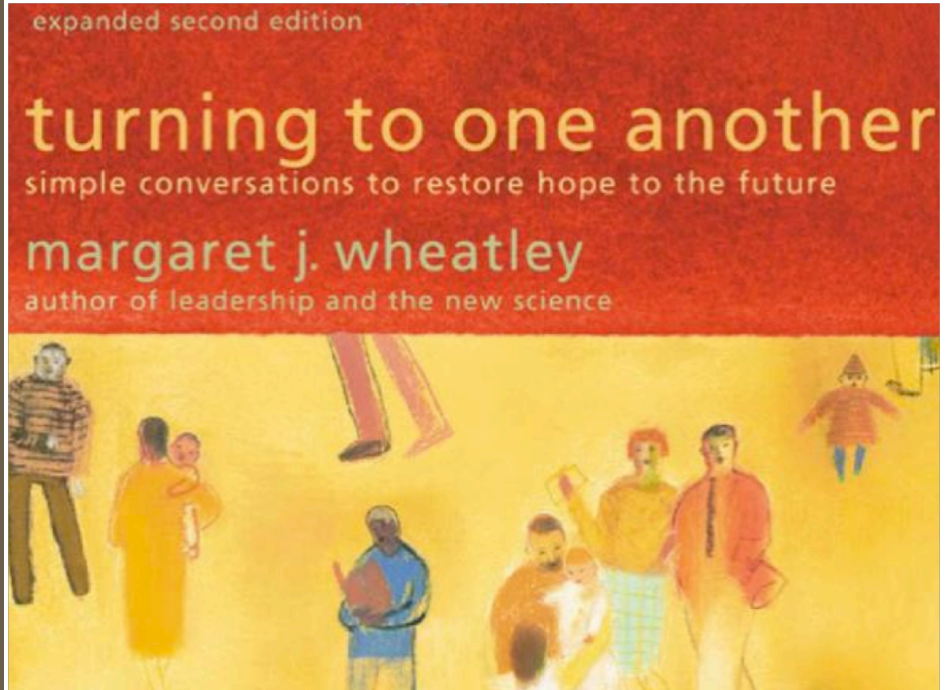
Margaret J.
Wheatley's

Foundations of
Conversation

Reflections

Starting
Conversations

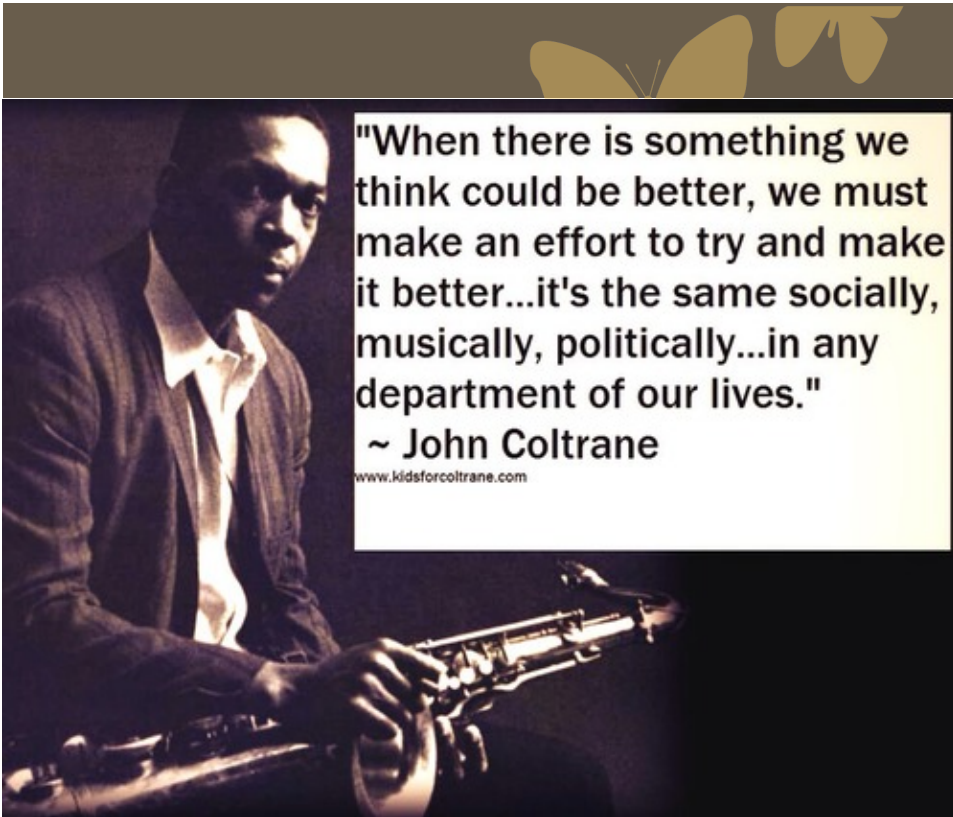
"I believe we can
change the world if
we start listening to
each other again"
(p. 4)



Turning to One Another:
Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future

At the risk of sounding overly simplistic, this book is about the power of conversation in the struggle to become fully human. Wheatley proposed that simple conversations are humanity's natural form of collaborative thought. By gathering to listen and speak of our experience we initiate a creative process that has potential to spark positive change locally and globally. Wheatley referenced the often-heard introduction to stories of positive change: "some friends and I started talking..." (p. 26). Positive change can be realized when we engage in honest conversation where we speak and listen without being inhibited by our fears.

This description leans heavily toward the abstract and evokes ideals of community, honesty, and courage. It would be easy to dismiss as unrealistic and impractical, but this book is written to be used. Wheatley has provided a resource that is equally inspirational, challenging, and applicable, first personally, then socially. Wheatley presented the relationship between conversation and humanization in a narrative structure that invites personal reflection, interaction with the text, and immediate action.



"When there is something we think could be better, we must make an effort to try and make it better...it's the same socially, musically, politically...in any department of our lives."

~ John Coltrane

www.kidsforcoltrane.com

In times that seem to be increasingly complex, where injustice and suffering continue to plague communities, and no one has enough time or resources we rely on the potential of conversations among friends to spark a revolution.

Foundations: The Complexity of Simple Conversation

Like any good conversation this book is non-linear. It consists of several threads that weave throughout a series of essays and poems. A linear summary of *Turning to One Another* risks losing the message communicated through the form of the book and the process of its reading.

The Threads

- We look out to see an increasingly confusing and chaotic world in which we struggle to find connections. Feeling isolated and helpless, we disengage and find distractions.
- Nothing exists in isolation; everything is relational. Cooperation, not competition is the natural order.
- Building relationships through conversation restores hope and always precedes positive change. "We are wiser together" (p.32).
- Honest conversation requires a belief in human equality and an investment of time and curiosity.
- Act now! Begin conversations with people who share your interests. Be patient and build momentum.



Andy Everson
http://www.idlenomore.ca/andy_everson

“When we humans don’t talk to one another, we stop acting intelligently. We give up the capacity to think about what’s going on. We don’t act to change anything. We become passive and allow others to tell us what to do. We forfeit our freedom. We become objects, not people. When we don’t talk to each other, we give up our humanity” (p.30).

“There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.” (p.26)

“Simple processes” (p.24)

The simplicity of conversation as a solution to major problems is one of its key strengths. Conversations entered into by community members with a common interest allow for the detangling of complex issues. Conversation as a process, if done openly, honestly, and in good faith, is not a technique to be mastered by experts who must then be called upon for help and only add complexity; rather, it is often a path toward common sense.

Think of a time when you have bypassed complex organizational processes and, instead, solved a problem locally by speaking with the people immediately affected.

What happens to relationships when conversation is replaced by techniques like negotiation or arbitration?

“The Courage of Conversation” (p.28)

There are many reasons why people avoid conversation. Sometimes we are afraid that others won’t welcome our perspective. Perhaps we are used to organizations that don’t invite the open sharing of ideas, or do, but then dissect and eventually reject any ideas not shared by those in power. Wheatley contended that these experiences are not conversation.

People want to connect in conversation, and are able to overcome their fears when driven by a deeply rooted passion. From an evolutionary perspective, conversation is a key human adaptation. It is our natural mode of social thinking.

Key behaviors and attitudes in “the practice of conversation”

“We acknowledge one another as equals”

“We try to stay curious about each other”

“We slow down so we have time to think and reflect”

“We remember that conversation is the natural way humans think together”

“We expect it to be messy at times”

Applying these behaviors and attitudes will create fertile conditions for growth producing conversation. Setting aside our prejudices and assumption, believing that everyone has something to teach us, reprioritizing our time, listening without think of our next response, trusting our instincts, and accepting struggle, confusion, and ambiguity will allow for conversations that can result in significant positive change.

The Influence of Paulo Freire

Through her essays, Wheatley referred to the ideas and words of Paulo Freire, an educator who used education as means of liberation. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a critical theorist lens through which to view the power relations within systems of oppression, specifically colonial societies. Freire argued that the struggle for humanization may only originate among the oppressed, that they must become aware of the mechanisms and ideologies responsible for their oppression, reject the image of the oppressor instilled within them, and stand in opposition. For the impoverished of Brazil, part of this struggle required literacy and an education in critical theory. For the readers of *Turning to One Another* the struggle for humanization, for human agency and subjectivity, begins with conversations. Rather than waiting for a solution from outside, individuals claim their agency by coming together to speak and listen.

We “cannot be truly human apart from communication...to impede communication is to reduce people to the status of things”
(Freire as cited in Wheatley, year, p.30)



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Willing to be Disturbed

“We weren’t trained to admit we don’t know. Most of us were taught to sound certain and confident, to state our opinion as if it were true. We haven’t been rewarded for being confused. Or for asking more questions rather than giving quick answers. We’ve also spent many years listening to others mainly to determine whether we agree with them or not. We don’t have time or interest to sit and listen to those who think differently than we do.” (p.38)

Disturbing Challenges

- 1 Begin a conversation with someone with whom you share an interest, but likely disagree. Learn something from them.
- 2 Admit that you can’t figure something out on your own. Invite help, knowing that we are wiser together.
- 3 Allow yourself to be confused and notice what creativity is sparked by this confusion.
- 4 Think of some aspect of your life. What surprises you? What disturbs you? The answers to these questions may reveal your functioning values, beliefs, and assumptions

ed.
Are we socially promoting the
more less creative
positions that demand creativity
because we are seduced by
confidence and certainty?
Does this have sexist roots? Alpha male
is not willing to be disturbed, surprised
or confused.

“The nature of today’s literacy practices is reflected in a concept of **living texts** which refers to experienced events and encounters that offer meaning-making that is fluid, interactive and changing” (Phillips & Willis, 2014, p.1).

Section two of *Turning to One Another* consists of key quotations, one per two-page spread. Wheatley included this section to encourage readers to slow down and take time to reflect. The physical space devoted to these ideas allows time to pause and think, or write in the empty space. In this way, readers are able to interact with a living text where the reflections, conversations, and actions of the reader elevate the text from a tool of transmission to a mode of transaction.

a place to pause and reflect

↳ Not used to this as part of a reading process. It's a more active and challenging approach to written text.
"Living text"?
Unknown, what will I do make say think?

community discovering what it cares about

disrupted by consumer
glitter + garbage of
western

“We can’t be creative if we refuse to be confused” (p. 48)

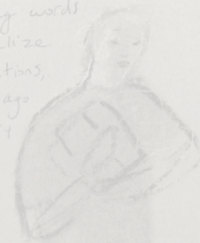
Dangerous assumption that we don't have agency or can't create change.

- distraction (glitter)
- trust the experts
- objectification
- internalizing the oppressor.



Am I becoming someone I respect?

I often hear myself saying words that I am using to realize aren't mine they are reactions, programmed in me years ago that surface when I try to control others.





Conversation Starters

Turning to One Another is meant to be used. Part three contains a series of essays written as conversation starters. The reader is encouraged to bring the questions and ideas in this section to the people in their community. Wheatley reminded us of the importance of starting small and thinking big: hope, along with momentum will build through conversation.

“Who else should be here?” (p. 59) is a question Wheatley cautioned us to be mindful of throughout the conversation. Seek out and invite stakeholders. A variety of voices adds richness to the conversation and is often the key to cracking a tough problem. It is especially important to invite stakeholders who offer contrasting perspectives; Wheatley reminded us “there is no need for us to be joined at the head. We are joined by our human hearts” (p.41).

“Do I feel a vocation to be fully human?”
This question calls us to examine our purpose in life and articulate how our daily actions relate to our sense of purpose.

“What is my faith in the future?”
Faith in the future hinges on the willingness of communities to change their ways of perceiving and being in the world. Wheatley used the example of hunger: the problem isn't production of food, but the mechanisms of distribution. People could be fed if the distribution of food did not privilege wealth.

“What do I believe about others?”
This question asks us to reflect on our assumptions of the natural motivators of human beings, and on the potential of humans to do good. In the political world of educational administration and governance, camps are often formed. When this happens, it is crucial that both sides suspend their assumptions of what is motivating the other side and engage in honest conversation.

“What am I willing to notice in my world?” & “When have I experienced good listening?”

The importance of “bearing witness” to the struggles of others is emphasized in these sections. Simply being heard can be healing. Specifically, teachers do not have to “fix” their students lives, often the act of listening and sitting along side can be healing.

“Am I willing to reclaim time to think?”

The pace of modern life leaves little time for reflection and curiosity. Consequently, “we accept what is” (p.100). Human creativity relies on time to think, to question, and to imagine. Wheatley offered the following test to determine the impact a lack of time may have on one's life, ask yourself:

- “are my relationships with those I love improving or deteriorating?”
- “Is my curiosity about the world increasing or decreasing?”
- Do I feel more or less energy for my work than a few years ago?”
- “Which of my behaviors do I value, which do I dislike?” (p.101)

“What is the relationship I want with the Earth?”

Cooperation, not competition is the ecological norm. Individuals within systems are interdependent. This is true for ecosystems, organizations, and families. For more information on how to live within cooperative networks consult a riverbank, field, lake, or forest.

“What is my unique contribution to the whole?” (p.116)

“When have I experienced working for the common good?” (p.126)

“When do I experience the sacred?” (p.134)

For Wheatley, the answers to these three questions reinforce the importance of cooperation within communities rich with diversity. Using differences to isolate and segregate has been proven catastrophic. The assumption of overt dominance of one group over another has been proven catastrophic. The abdication of meaning, of what is sacred, to some source independent of ourselves and those we love living on the land we love has proven catastrophic. Our most useful contributions stem from our differences. Serving the needs of others serves our own needs. Engaging in the dynamic mess of daily life is an interaction with the sacred.

Indra's Net

From the Rig Veda
as described by Deepak Chopra

There is an endless net of threads throughout the universe...
At every crossing of the threads there is an individual.
And every individual is a crystal bead.
And every crystal bead reflects
not only the light from every
other crystal in the net
but also every other reflection
throughout the entire universe.

(p.124,125)

“What is our role in creating change?”

Wheatley defined a leader as, “*anyone willing to help, anyone who sees something that needs to change and takes the first steps to influence that situation*” (p.144). This definition distributes responsibility among everyone in a community or organization, not simply those with formal appointments. Wheatley also described a change process that begins with the identification of a problem, proceeds through attempts to understand and influence change, and enviable failures and revisions, but also the nourishment of hope through small victories that eventually gain momentum and have the potential to evolve into cultural movements.

Initiating or participating in a change process will likely cause one to ask **“Can I be fearless”** (p.152). Wheatley described fearlessness as the ability to acknowledge fear, but to speak or act anyway. This contrasts with the ignorance of danger through “false bravado” (p.152). A similar question would be “what might I need to walk out of?” Walking out of unhealthy relationships, social situations, or attitudes requires fearlessness as well. Wheatley cites the example of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004, where protestors took to the streets to fight the results of a fraudulent election.

Gestures of Love

Essentially, the vision of leadership and community development described in *Turning to One Another* can be summarized by *love*. Wheatley argued that any act which supports the vocation of humanity (Freire as cited in Wheatley, year, p.) is an act of love. For an educational leader this can take many forms. Often, simply listening to others share their stories is enough to create positive change. Individuals exercise agency and may initiate or sustain a process of positive change when they articulate their experience, or share descriptions of what has surprised them, and what has disturbed them. Initiating these conversations draws on our curiosity in the lives of others, suspends our assumptions, and exercises our ability to patiently persevere in the messy work of humanization.

“I think a gesture of love is anything we do that helps others discover their humanity. Any act where we turn to one another. Open our hearts. Extend ourselves. Listen. Any time we’re patient. Curious. Quiet. Engaged.”



This book supported me as I engaged my colleagues in conversations addressing the professional development culture of our school. I found support through Wheatley’s emphasis on the normality of mess and confusion in processes of change. Like most of us, I have been taught to think that confidence and certainty are the ideal attitudes for an educator. If this remains true, than educators forfeit a key aspect of their humanity every time the school bell brings the kids in from recess.

References

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“To all of us, may we not be separated” (Wheatley, 2009, inscription)