



THE ART OF CONVENING™

Authentic Engagement in Meetings, Gatherings, and Conversations

"Good conversation is very different from those bad meetings. It is a much older and more reliable way for humans to think together. Before there were meetings, planning processes, or any other techniques, there was conversation—people sitting around interested in each other, talking together. When we think about beginning a conversation, we can take courage from the fact that this is a process we all know how to do. We are reawakening an ancient practice, a way of being together that all humans remember. A colleague in Denmark stated it perfectly: "It remembers me what it is to be human." from "Turning to One Another"

"We are the Pioneers"

excerpted from a talk given by Margaret Wheatley
at the May 10, 2002 Thought Leader Gathering, San Francisco, CA

Just to have time to think together – as colleagues, as people who are struggling to do their best in the world. This kind of spaciousness is very rare and is worth celebrating. That you got here in spite of all the things telling you, you couldn't make it.

I need to warn you that I'm not cheerful anymore. I have no interest in being optimistic; I just want us to be together and explore what this time together might be. It's like we're on the Titanic. I feel that my own function in this situation is (for I don't believe that our civilization is strong enough to see us through this time and that this is a time of dissolution and un-raveling) to see if we can get more people on the lifeboats. For all of you who are trying to create the new--develop with your expertise and heart- -new forms, of banking, music, and commerce. It's really important that we notice that we ARE the pioneers, in the midst of a period in which we will not receive approval, support or blessings from the dominant culture. So I actually believe we each need to think through how willing we are to be pioneers. We could also be called radicals – which means getting back to the roots of things.

It doesn't matter where we start; it's just that we begin to think critically. It has been said, "We all have the vocation to be truly human, to be loving beings." But what if our current way of life is irreconcilable with our vocations? What if it doesn't allow us to express our most loving compassionate selves? This doesn't mean we all become ministers or monks, or withdraw from the world. But what it does ask is that we all struggle with how we can take where we are and become more ourselves. What can we do INSIDE the major institutions, or classrooms, or consultant rooms, where we are, to make sure that our work becomes reconcilable with our vocation of human beings? That is the work of the moment.

Our institutions engage us in ways that are inherently destructive to what it means to be a human being, but they are still the places where we congregate, so I'm all for holding ourselves to Prigogine's question (above). As long as we approach our work, whatever it is, with a greater consciousness of what it is to be of service, to be fully human, with each other, We are the pioneers of the new, not the holders of the old.

I moved from Yonkers to Utah and was asked if I was in the witness protection program. One of the things I've really learned to value in this move is pioneer energy, because pioneers settled Utah. What happened with so many of the pioneers is when they set out from their old home they had an aspiration for a better life--to be more fully human, whether that meant religious freedom, economic stability—but they set out with no idea of the sacrifices that would be required of them. So they set out with their precious china, their art, their pianos... they put their old life into these wagons and set out for a better life. What they met was tragedy and hardship. They buried their children on the trail, they became ill, but they still carried on. Then they hit the Rockies. At that point, the piano went overboard, they had to literally jettison their old way of life as they approached the mountain.

For us, as pioneers, we need to realize we have just hit the Rocky Mountains. Whatever hopes we may have, we didn't know we'd have to sacrifice SO MUCH to get to the promised land. We have to realize that whole new levels of maintaining this vision are what is required. We will not get over those mountains by holding on to the past. I have no idea what this means for you, what you have to give up. But I want to be in this conversation together. As we see more and more of the institutions falling down around our ears, I want to be in the conversation with you about what we have to do now. When our bosses rebuff us, can we give up our desire for promotion, and make courageous stands at opportunities we would have let go by in the past. And when we do, what will our voices say?

We must notice the great silences that lie between us. What are the issues we are afraid to talk about? What are we still willing to be silent about, and how can we gather our colleagues around us so that we can speak. There is no way that we can become courageous alone. I know this. It's like suicide to do it alone. But maybe we can do it together. So we need more time, even though we're busier, for this kind of activity. So we can help each other know which of the things of the past we can now let go of, which things we are now willing to give voice to. I know one thing only about the future. If we stay silent, we are all going down. The trajectory we're on now can only be shifted by millions of us stepping forward.

It is hard to speak now when we are all so busy. I'd ask you to notice if you are withdrawing or extending yourself as the world becomes more horrendous. The stark contrast of our lives: the news spans what's going on in the Middle East, to the Rolling Stones concert tour, and a fashion tip. From looking great to what's happening with aids in Africa. This contrast is wearying and tears at us. If we don't notice our own response to these times, and continue to withdraw and not talk about what is import, the world is going down in this suicide spiral. The only way to shift is that enough people give voice to the world that we want. Turning to one another is the essential gesture of our times. This is where we will find not only comfort and consolation, but also the courage to speak.

Every time your heart leaps out and you want to serve better, that's the future, speaking through you.

It would be a great tragedy to deny our images, our vision, or lose their clarity. The only way I know to stay accountable is in relationship to other people who help me stay accountable. Whatever is in front of us, it is not going to change without a whole new way of being together.

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