

Margaret J. Wheatley, author of the book *Turning To One Another*, reminds us: "... in this turbulent time we crave connection; we long for peace; we want the means to walk through the chaos intact... We cannot find connection, community, and peace by withdrawing from others or going unconscious. The peace we seek is found in experiencing ourselves as part of something bigger and wiser than our little, crazed self. The community we belong to is all of life. The turbulence cannot be controlled, but when we stop struggling and accept it as part of life, it feels different."

This morning you will hear passages from her book *Perseverance*. You'll hear concepts, challenges, explanations, emotions, feelings, and beliefs. All of which have meaning for us as we contemplate Community.

When you hear her words, it may sound like she's talking to you as an individual. But she's talking to all of us, both individually and collectively. For it's the collective that is the village, it's the "us" that is the community. So listen to the following words with two ears. One ear attuned as an individual "you", the other should listen as the ear of the community.

### **Naming Myself**

We often choose a name that seems accurate for us, but that isn't big enough to contain our entire life. Often such names describe who or where we've been, but not where we're going. Names such as: "cancer survivor," "victim of war," "displaced person," "child of a dysfunctional family."

What is a name that calls you into your future life?

What is a name that can sustain you for the challenges you will inevitably face? A name that supports you to encounter life's difficulties, not as a victim, but as one who grows stronger and wiser?

What is a name that calls you to be fearless?"

The term "spiritual warrior" is one such name. This is not a traditional warrior, but one of a very different type. Spiritual warriors are "those who are brave." Most importantly, spiritual warriors never use aggression or violence to accomplish their work.

The skills that give them power are compassion and insight. It takes years of practice and discipline to cultivate these. And a strong commitment that these are the skills most needed.

Those who devote the time and exert the discipline to acquire these skills trust themselves to be of service to this troubled time.

## **Groundedness**

Do you know the ground you stand on? How well do you know its strengths, its pitfalls, the places that give you courage, the places where you get stuck? Do you know where to find your ground when things get bad? Do you pay it any attention when things are good?

Nobody gets through life ungrounded. But unless we know this and are conscious of the ground we stand on, we may be shocked to discover that what appeared as granite is, in fact, quicksand.

Ground has to be cultivated. We create ground by nurturing our convictions, by learning from our experience, by developing trust in ourselves and our world. These cultivation activities require hard work, as any farmer would happily warn us. We can't let our attention lapse, we can't just blindly push through our everyday lives and assume we're staying grounded. We're not...we have to take time to learn and reflect, stepping out of the fray to observe it periodically.

As much as we need to cultivate ground inside ourselves, we also need to be grounded in things beyond ourselves. This can be our faith, our love, our awareness. Whatever it is that calls us outside our narrow sense of self and invites us to participate in a world far more wondrous than any person can imagine.

Knowing our ground, and knowing it well, consciously attending to it and taking good care- this is the only way to withstand turbulence.

Even the most outrageous stream has a muddy bed that serves to keep it within bounds, enabling it to find its way to the sea.

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## **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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### **As It Is**

Sometimes the best thing to do is just leave things alone. To stop manipulating, interfering or pushing things along with your own worn-out energy. This is the first step-- withdrawing your energy from forcing or cajoling.

The next move is to change where you are, to stop looking at the situation from the outside and to step into it as much as you can. From inside, a whole different territory is revealed.

What do you notice when you stand inside the problem and take a look around? What information is available to you when you stop and listen to all the messages being offered? What happens as you stand there as open and curious as you can manage at this time, willing to not-know, even for a second?

Being in "not-knowing", open and aware, is how we discover right action--the appropriate means for what needs to happen. Right action usually doesn't match our plans, conceived as they were from outside. But now that we're inside the situation, curious and uncertain, we're able to notice what's here. We begin to see dynamics, people, patterns and information we can work with. We become realistic about what's available. Now we can focus on working with what's here, rather than what we thought we needed.

If we take this approach, in every situation, we discover that the resources we need are already here. We have more than enough to work with. It's our task to notice this abundance, and then figure out how to work with it appropriately. What's possible now, given all these new resources we've discovered?

The situation, no matter how difficult, doesn't need to be different. We just need to see it differently.

### **Opening**

Two opposing movements determine a great deal about our capacity- either we open or close, we withdraw or step forward, we turn toward or away, we look inward or outward.

It's very difficult to open and move beyond ourselves if the world is hostile and frightening. If we're being attacked, misrepresented or in danger, we instinctively seek to protect ourselves. Whatever armor we've developed quickly wraps around us. We may hide behind harsh words and gestures, we may disappear emotionally. Anything to defend ourselves.. In such moments, opening to the world feels dangerous and downright suicidal.

But armor can't protect us for long. The more we protect ourselves, the less capacity we have. We can hunker down and develop stronger defenses, consumed by fear and aggression, but after doing this for a period of time, there won't be much left of us. We will have cannibalized ourselves.

Opening to the world gives us strength, the will and capacity to persevere in hostile environments. But this doesn't mean that we open ourselves foolishly, standing there like a target, accepting whatever people throw at us. This has been aptly named "idiot compassion."

What we do open to is the information and messages we've shut out. We open to the people who still need us even as a few are attacking us. We open to what our work is now in the face of opposition. We open to the realization that this situation is workable. We realize that we have to open, no matter how fearful it may seem.

Fear always dissolves as we face it directly, We can be assured that things will be less fearful once we open. In the brighter light of undefendedness, we'll be able to see the way forward.

### **Fear**

Fear is just part of human life. It's so common that every great spiritual tradition includes the injunction: "Be not afraid."

If fear is this fundamental to being human, we can expect that we'll feel afraid at times, perhaps even frequently. Yet when fear appears, we don't have to worry that we've failed or take it as a sign that we're not as good as other people. In fact, we're just like other people. Fear is simple evidence that we're human.

What's important to decide is what we do with our fear. We can withdraw, flee, distract or numb ourselves. Or we can acknowledge that we're scared. And stay right here.

We can stay where we are and bravely investigate our fear. We can move toward it, curious about it. We can even interview it. What does it feel like? What color is it? Does it have a texture, size, personality?

What's important is to question the fear itself. We're not asking ourselves *why* we feel afraid, which is our usual inquiry. We just want to know more about this seemingly frightful creature that showed up in us.

Our investigation moves us closer and closer, and then the fear beings to change. Paradoxically, the more we engage directly with it, the less fearful it becomes.

It is our curiosity that transforms fear. Most often, it dissolves into energy that we can work with.

And all because we were willing to develop a relationship with what, at first, appeared so frightening.

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### **Blame**

When things go wrong, we're conditioned in Western culture to turn on each other. If we can just find someone to blame, or determine a simple explanation to our difficulty, we can move on.

If only life were that simple.

The world doesn't work this logically or straightforwardly. It's never just one person's fault, no matter how terrible or nasty they are.

The search for scapegoats is a huge detour from the work that has to be done, the problem that has to be solved. And it deprives us of the energy and relationships we need.

Seeking scapegoats or hastily assigning blame tears us apart. How can we trust one another if we think that someone's about to accuse us of something we didn't do?

Rather than hunt for a hapless victim, what if we all could admit that we're deeply troubled by what's happened, that we're all feeling distressed by this turn of events.

If we directly face the pain of what's here in our midst, we won't become blinded by blame. Past the pain is the possibility of clear-seeing, unclouded by despair or paranoia.

From here, we can see the way forward. Together.

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## **Failure**

Failure is unavoidable. There's no way to avoid times of crushing defeat, great loss, terrible regret. We might like to think that "failure is not an option," but it's guaranteed to appear and reappear throughout our lives. This is just how life works.

It helps to know this ahead of time. Or to learn it very quickly. What's essential is how we work with failure, what we do once its ugly face appears.

Some people feel that failure is a lesson sent by God to teach them what they need to learn. Others feel that failure is a punishment meted out to them by God or destiny. To some it's karma. Whatever your personal view, failure certainly is an opportunity to learn—not just about yourself, but about how the world works. Failure is filled with messages. How we interpret those messages is critical to what happens next.

When we fail, we have the opportunity to feel really bad about ourselves. Often, our own negativity is encouraged by others telling us how worthless we are, how everything that's gone wrong is our fault.

But we could learn more helpful and realistic things. We could learn that every failure results from a complexity of factors. It's never just one person's fault. We could learn about ourselves, what triggers us, which of our behaviors create problems, which seems helpful. We could learn about the dynamics and patterns present in the situation that had an impact on its negative outcome.

It takes a lot of contributions from many different sources to create failure. We're wasting the opportunity to learn and grow if we try to pin the blame on just one person or one reason.

## **Faith**

The journey of perseverance begins with fire, with passion for our cause, with hope to change things.

As the journey continues, passion dissolves into weariness. The obstacles are larger than we expected. The insanity is more than we can bear. But still we travel on, one foot in front of the other.

And then there comes a point when we realize that we will not see our work bear fruit before we die. And that's ok. We feel content that we have planted seeds for some future harvest. That we have met good people. That we have learned many things. That we have survived this far and lived to pass on the stories.

We're certainly not the first one to have our dreams pushed so far into the future that we won't live to see them. Consider Moses or Abraham or Martin Luther King. They each carried clear visions revealed to them by their God, but they also knew they would not live to see these promises fulfilled.

What led them forward was faith, not hope. Faith in the truth of their visions that came from a source beyond petty needs for satisfaction and accomplishment.

Perhaps holding true to the vision and not losing our way is enough for one lifetime.

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### **Patience**

Perseverance is a journey seemingly without end.

Yet it has a few destinations or rewards, one of which is patience.

It's not that we start out patient. We don't persevere because we are patient people.

We become patient because we have to. There is no choice—the work is endless.

Everyday we have to make a choice. Will we give up, or will we keep going?

When day after day we are willing to keep going we discover, quite to our amazement, that we have become patient.

And then we just continue on. Day after day.

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### **Joy**

People who experience true horror in their lives, or those who befriend them during war or natural disaster, frequently recount that joy was part of their experience. For those who haven't been in these situations, the ability to feel joy in the midst of tragedy seems unimaginable....

But joy is available in the worst, most dehumanizing situations. If we allow this fact, we can learn a great deal about our human spirits, about who we are.

Joy, like peace, resides only inside us. It is never manufactured by external circumstances....But discovering what lives deep inside us, as our natural condition, requires fearless curiosity.

If we look deep into ourselves, what do we think we'll find? Dark emotions, scary desires, endless negativity, unstoppable fear? Or do we expect we'll discover joy? To investigate our interior, we have to trust that we're more than a collection of very bad things. We have to have faith that, at our core, we're essentially fine, whole, healthy. And we have to believe this about everyone, not just ourselves.

The potential for joy is always present in us but, like everything in life, that potential only becomes evident in relationship. We can't analyze whether joy exists, or hope to discover it from a remote, isolated position. We have to be together. We have to be in service to one another to discover our essential goodness....

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### **Abandon Success**

Do not depend on the hope of results...

You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no results at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness the truth of the work itself...

Gradually yo struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people... in the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.

Thomas Meton  
Catholic monk, writer, activist

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These words help to guide us and inform us about life in community; life as an individual and life as a village, as a community. Sit with these thoughts. Sit with your feelings about these words.

May these words be of service to you and to our community. May these words be a blessing to us all.

Rev. Walter LeFlore