

Can We Reclaim Time to Think?
Shambhala Sun September 2001
Margaret Wheatley

As a species, we humans possess some unique capacities. We can stand apart from what's going on, think about it, question it, imagine it being different. We are also curious. We want to know "why?" We figure out "how?" We think about what's past, we dream forward to the future. We create what we want rather than just accept what is. So far, we're the only species we know that does this.

As the world speeds up, we're forfeiting these wonderful human capacities. Do you have as much time to think as you did a year ago? When was the last time you spent time reflecting on something important to you? At work, do you have more or less time now to think about what you're doing? Are you encouraged to spend time thinking with colleagues and co-workers?

In this turbo speed culture, we've begun to equate productivity with speed. If it can be done faster, we assume it's more productive. A recent trend in some companies is to hold meetings standing up. These meetings (or perhaps they should be called "football huddles," are touted as more productive, but the only measure used is that they take less time. If people are kept standing, the meeting ends sooner. No one measures the productivity of these meetings by asking whether people have developed wiser solutions, better ideas, or more trusting relationships.

If we can pause for a moment and see what we are losing as we speed up, I can't imagine that we would continue with this bargain. We're giving up the very things that make us human. Our road to hell is being paved with hasty intentions. I hope we can notice what we're losing-in our day-to-day lives, in our community, in our world. I hope we'll be brave enough to slow things down.

But I don't believe anybody is going to give us time to think. We have to reclaim it for ourselves.

Thinking is the place where intelligent actions begin. We pause long enough to look more carefully at a situation, to see more of its character, to think about why it's happening, to notice how it's affecting us and others. Paulo Freire used critical thinking as a non-violent approach to revolutionary change. First in Brazil, and then in many poor communities around the world, he taught poor people how to think about their lives and the forces that were impoverishing them. Nobody believed that exhausted and struggling poor people could become intelligent thinkers. But it is easy for people to develop this capacity when they see how thinking can save their life and the lives of those they love.

Our lives are not as desperate as those poor, and we may not notice that we're losing the possibility of a fully human life. To see whether you're losing anything of value to yourself, here are some questions to ask yourself: Are my relationships with those I love improving or deteriorating? Is my curiosity about the world increasing or decreasing? What things anger me today as compared to a few years ago? Which of my behaviors do I value, which do I dislike? Generally, am I feeling more peaceful or more stressed? Am I becoming someone I admire?

If answering those questions helps you notice anything in your life that you'd like to change, you will need time to think about it. But don't expect anybody to give you this time. You will have to claim it for yourself.

No one will give it to you because thinking is always dangerous to the status quo. Those benefiting from the present system have no interest in your new ideas. In fact, your thinking is a threat to them. The moment you start thinking, you'll want to change something. You'll disturb the current situation. We can't expect those few who are well-served by the current reality to give us time to think. If we want anything to change, we are the ones who have to reclaim time to think.

In addition to claiming time to think, it's helpful to notice that in American culture, thinking is not highly prized. In our frenzy to make things happen, to take action, we've devalued thinking and often view it as an impediment to taking action. We talk about needing to get things done NOW; we've created a dualism between thinking and acting, between "being" and "doing." Personally, I find this dualism to be both dangerous and nonsensical.

There is no distance between thinking and acting when the ideas mean something to us. When we look thoughtfully at a situation and understand its destructive dynamics, we act to change it. Whenever we think and develop ideas that can change their lives, we act. We don't sit around figuring out the risks or waiting until someone else develops an implementation strategy. We just start doing. If an action doesn't work, we try something different. Governments and organizations struggle with implementation-inside any bureaucracy there's a huge gap between ideas and actions. But this is because we don't care about those ideas. We didn't invent them, we know they won't really change anything, and we won't take risks for something we don't believe in. But when it's our idea, a result of our thinking, and we see how it might truly benefit our lives, then we act immediately on any promising notion.

Taking time to think about those things that might truly change our lives always provides us with other gifts. Determination, energy, and courage appear spontaneously when we care deeply about something. We take risks that are unimaginable in any other context. Here's how Bernice Johnson Reagon, a gifted singer and song writer, describes her own and others fearless acts during the Civil Rights Movement. "Now I sit back and look at some of the things we did, and I say, 'What in the world came over us?' But death had nothing to do with what we were doing. If somebody shot us, we would be dead. And when people died, we cried and went to funerals. And we went and did the next thing the next day, because it was really beyond life and death. It was really like sometimes you know what you're supposed to be doing. And when you know what you're supposed to be doing, it's somebody else's job to kill you." (in *Lovingkindness*, Sharon Salzberg, p. 151)

Most of us don't have to risk life and death daily, but we may be dying a slow death. If we feel we're changing in ways we don't like, or seeing things in the world that make us feel sorrowful, then we need time to think about this. We need time to think about what we might do and where we might start to change things. We need time to develop clarity and courage. If we want our world to be different, our first act needs to be reclaiming time to think. Nothing will change for the better until we do that.

Bio

Margaret Wheatley writes, teaches, and speaks about radically new practices and ideas for organizing in chaotic times. She works to create organizations of all types where people are known as the blessing, not the problem. She is president of The Berkana Institute, a charitable global foundation serving life-affirming leaders around the world, and has been an organizational consultant for many years, as well as a professor of management in two graduate programs. Her latest book, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, (January 2002) proposes that real social change comes from the ageless process of people thinking together in conversation. Wheatley's work also appears in two award-winning books, *Leadership and the New Science* (1992, 1999) and *A Simpler Way* (with Myron Kellner-Rogers, 1996,) plus several videos and articles. She draws many of her ideas from new science and life's ability to organize in self-organizing, systemic, and cooperative modes. And, increasingly her models for new organizations are drawn from her understanding of many different cultures and spiritual traditions. Her articles and work can be accessed at www.margaretwheatley.com, or 801-377-2996 in Utah, USA.