



9-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Travis, M. P. (2002). Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future, by Margaret J. Wheatley. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 6 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0601082013>

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BOOK REVIEWS

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TURNING TO ONE ANOTHER: SIMPLE CONVERSATIONS TO RESTORE HOPE TO THE FUTURE

MARGARET J. WHEATLEY, BERRETT-KOEHLER, 2002.

Reviewed by Mary Peter Traviss, O.P.

When Margaret Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe* (1992) was first published, it was immediately embraced by the Catholic educational community. The Church's school administrators and teachers resonated with Wheatley's approach to democratic management, her emphasis on self-managed organizational teams, and her use of Ilya Prigogine's Chaos Theory with which many of us became familiar for the first time.

Her use of the constructs of equilibrium and disequilibrium from Piaget's notion of moral growth and development made sense to us. And her applications of Peter Senge's model of learning communities seemed to be a natural continuation of our own attempts in the latter quarter of the 20th century, specifically after the publication of *To Teach As Jesus Did* (1972), to form our schools into loving, learning communities. A gradual move away from top-down administration to schools as democratically operated "family affairs" seemed an obvious next step, even a return to a previous and familiar practice when the Sisters thought of the school as "our school." Everyone participated in the achievement of goals. We instinctively knew that it was relationships that most contributed to successful organizations; and here was this brilliant professor, acclaimed speaker, and best-selling author, Margaret Wheatley, to confirm it for us.

Now Wheatley has written a new book, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, which will also find a particularly receptive audience among Catholic school personnel. What she proposes in this book is a natural evolution of what must become the focus of the Catholic schools for the new millennium: teaching others, especially children, how to establish relationships; how to nurture them, stay in them, develop strategies that will strengthen them, and use them to change the world.

This remarkable 145-page book is divided into three parts. The first part

is introductory and contains a section on “How to Use This Book.” The second part contains drawings, poems, stories, quotations, and things to think about. It is intended to slow us down and get us in the mood for conversation and reflection. The third part lists 10 conversation starters, questions to pose to others, and short meditations and poems to use in conversation. Two of my favorites are “What do I believe about others?” and “Am I willing to reclaim time to think?” It is a book in which we could write other questions that come to mind and things we want to say when engaged in conversation.

History is filled with examples of leaders who had simple conversations with others, who shared powerful ideas that their listeners passed on to others through loving conversation. Other listeners added their own modifications, and through a new lens created wholly different ideas to be added to and improved upon, gaining power as they became new solutions for new problems. It might seem like a very simple idea—turning to one another and replying on the combined wisdom of a community—but it has always been that the simple ways are the best ways. We have complicated our lives to such an extent that they are often so tangled and overlaid that it is almost impossible to follow the original intention and purpose of a journey. Complicated and entangled practices may appear sophisticated and intelligent, but the truth is that solutions require simplification.

Wheatley adapts her leadership model to conversation in this book, and she claims that “If we can sit together and talk about what is important to us, we begin to come alive. We share what others see and feel” (p. 3). We must practice, she insists, the spirituality of listening. And she declares that “We can change the world if we start listening to one another” (p. 3).

We in the Catholic school community are almost certain to employ the model to ask “What kind of schools do we wish to create?” “What do we want from our schools?” “What kind of education does the Catholic school wish to offer its students for the future?” “What kind of person should our schools produce?” and Wheatley’s question, “What do you wish were different?” (p. 3).

This book’s message is deceptively simple. However, it is enormously powerful and cries out for implementation. If the Catholic schools could produce graduates who habitually turn to members of the community in times of trouble to discuss ways to find resolution to their problems, they would be teaching the interdependence of all peoples, one of the most important Christian social principles. And if the schools would also teach listening skills in a consistent sequential manner so that people would not only listen with their heads but also with their hearts to what others say about major issues in the world, we could indeed change the world through being connected to one another. I believe that is what Jesus Christ is inspiring us to do through our schools in the 21st century.

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