

LOST AND FOUND IN A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Margaret (Meg) Wheatley, Ed.D.

I describe this time as a brave new world, a world that satisfies virtually nobody, moving in a direction not of our choosing and counter to what we were working to create. Our present global culture, with its emphasis on greed, self-interest, consumerism, and coercive power, is leading us deeper into the wilderness, farther from the values, objectives, and ideals many of us have worked valiantly to create. Frequently now, people report feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, frustrated, and occasionally despairing. Where are we headed? How did we get here? How do we find a sane way forward?

I've found it helpful to seek answers to these questions by accepting the fact that we are *lost*—as a global culture, as organizations, and perhaps as individual leaders. We are in new territory, this brave new world that operates at hyper speed, hyper stress, and hyper irrationality. Our old maps for creating capacity no longer apply; in fact they only get us more lost. So I've been focused on how we get “unlost,” how we open to the information that will tell us where we really are, the

very information we need to create new maps that offer us a way forward.

I'm curious whether “lost” feels to you like an accurate descriptor of our culture and/or your organization. Before you respond, read about the behaviors of people who are lost in life-threatening circumstances in the wilderness.

Predictable Behaviors of Lost People

1. People who are lost at first deny they're lost. They're confident that they *do* know where they are, they just can't find any familiar signs. Everything's okay, they still know where they're going, the maps are still correct. But gradually, confronted with strange and unfamiliar sights, anxiety seeps in. They speed up their activities, urgently wanting to verify that they're not lost. Those lost on a mountain walk faster or go in circles; those lost in a failing project work faster, longer, harder, and go in circles.

This article is adapted from Wheatley's new book, *So Far from Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World*. Berrett-Koehler, October 2012.

2. At this point, doubt and uncertainty creep in. People become angry and impatient, pushing aside any information that doesn't confirm their map. They become desperate to find the smallest scrap of information that proves they know where they are. They reject all other information; they treat as enemy the very information that would help them get unlost, pushing it and its messengers aside.

3. When this strategy fails, people reach the point when they can no longer deny that they're lost. Fear and panic set in; stressed and scared, their brains stop working. They can't think straight, so every action they take is senseless, only creating more exhaustion and more problems.

4. By now, confused and panicked, people search frantically for any little sign that's familiar, the smallest shred of evidence that makes them feel unlost. But they *are* lost, so this strategy fails and they continue to deteriorate.

Do you recognize any of these behaviors? Have you observed them in your colleagues or in yourself? Do they describe what's going on in society? Are we lost?

People lost in the wilderness, whose immediate survival is at stake, have only one option left at this point. They must accept their situation: they are truly lost. As Laurence Gonzales, author of *Extreme Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, states, "Like it or not, you must make a new mental map of where you are or you will die. To survive, you must find yourself. Then it won't matter where you are. *Not being lost is not a matter of getting back to where you started from; it is a decision not to be lost wherever you happen to find yourself. It's simply saying, 'I'm not lost, I'm right here'*" (italics added).

Gonzales's stages of being lost, in my experience, precisely describe the behaviors common in our organizations these days. How many of us are exhausted and overwhelmed? How many of us think that solutions can be found by working harder, faster, with more urgency? How many of us experience a sense of dread or foreboding as we realize that things aren't working as planned? How many of us desperately grasp

How do we find a sane way forward?

for even the smallest shred of evidence to reassure us that things are not as bad as they are?

Can we acknowledge that we *are* lost, that our familiar practices and maps no longer provide the information we need to find our way through? *Being lost is frightening only until we admit that we are lost.* Once we stop denying our situation, fear dissipates. Our brains turn back on, our thinking becomes clear again, and we can recognize the truth of our situation. It becomes possible to settle down, quiet our minds, look around, and discover that there is more than enough information available to create a new map that accurately describes where we are, a map that can help us find our way.

The Darkening Storm of Global Culture

So where are we? How to describe this world that confounds our attempts to change it, that frustrates, exhausts, and imperils us? What are its features, its characteristics? This brave new world feels like it materialized suddenly, out of nowhere, but it came from somewhere. It is the result of many different values, decisions, and influences interacting, intensifying, strengthening, and changing as they fed on one another and, finally, emerged as a powerful culture, with new and different characteristics that could not have been predicted.

Here is how I would describe our present world. I offer these statements so that we might see fully and accurately where we are, what we're up against as leaders. I no longer believe we can turn around these

Leading Out of the Wilderness

When people are lost, they don't know any other solution except to frantically keep using the old maps that got them lost in the first place. Getting unlost is not a change in geography; it's a change of mind. We have to recognize that our old maps have failed us, and that we're capable of developing new maps out of our current predicament if we calm down and gather together with the recognition that "We're not lost. We're right here."

This needs to be a collective recognition, not just an announcement by the leader. It's up to the leader to call people together, using one of the many well-honed processes that simultaneously lead to good collective thinking and forge new relationships among staff. These days, there are many processes that work to fully engage people to work together both to understand their dilemmas and use critical thinking to solve them.

However, it's essential to note that any of these processes requires a change in the beliefs usually held by leaders who sit at the top of a hierarchy and are accustomed to top-down decision making. Here are some of the major beliefs that underpin participative processes in general:

1. All problems and challenges arise from complex causes and conditions.
2. We need multiple and diverse perspectives to see and understand this complexity.
3. Everyone's perspective is of potential value in helping us see complexity clearly.
4. Frequently, the solutions we need are already here, already being practiced somewhere in the organization.
5. People support solutions they had a role in creating.
6. People act responsibly when they care about an issue.
7. People yearn to be back in thoughtful, productive conversations with colleagues where they can discover solutions that work.

These beliefs stand in stark contrast to the familiar ways leaders make decisions these days. Leaders seem to believe that the tougher and more complex the issue, the more they need to hide away until they come up with a solution that they then announce to the organization. Predictably, their solutions fail to account for the complexity of the situation, and invariably they use processes that have failed many times over. This approach not only fails to solve issues, but it is terribly destructive of the very things we need to get unlost: clear thinking, trusting relationships, new approaches and innovations. Only by taking the time to engage staff, with their diverse and unique perspectives, will we be able to create the new maps so necessary for this time.

destructive dynamics at a global scale, but I fervently believe that as leaders we can work to counteract them within our own organizations. Using the values, ideals, and practices we have learned to cherish, leaders can create islands of capacity in the midst of this darkening storm. *Although the culture is lost, we do not have to be.* But our first task is to see as clearly as possible what's going on in the tumult around us.

As I contemplate writing these descriptions, they are simultaneously obvious and depressing. This is a familiar experience for me—moments of clarity accompanied by feelings of overwhelm and grief. But I've learned if I let these negative emotions in and just sit quietly with them,

they can result in clear seeing. With clarity, I can discern the path of right action and right work.

This brave new world is

- A world of emotions moving to extremes, where anger becomes rage, opponents become enemies, dislike becomes hatred, sorrow becomes despair
- A world closing shut, where individuals, groups, ethnicities, and governments fortify their positions behind impermeable boundaries
- A world where critical thinking scarcely exists, where there is no distinction between facts and opinions, between science and beliefs

- A world where information no longer makes a difference, where we hear only what we want to hear, always confirmed and never contradicted
- A world desperate for certainty and safety, choosing coercion and violence as the means to achieve this
- A world solving its crises by brinkmanship and last-minute deals, no matter how important or disastrous the consequences may be
- A world growing more meaningless as the values of consumption, greed, and self-interest take hold
- A world of people who formerly felt powerful and constructive now feeling powerless and exhausted

Perhaps these statements confirm the work you're doing if that work tackles one or more of these problems. You may be actively working for social justice, civility, the environment, democracy, health equity, food justice, healthy communities. You may be leading programs that teach nonviolence to children, listening skills to adults, participative processes to communities, critical thinking skills to teams, high-engagement strategies to leaders. Most of my friends and close colleagues are engaged in one or more of these causes, as I have been also. Our work must continue, without a doubt. Yet to be wise leaders, we need to understand the powerful, destructive dynamics of this time and not get caught up in them ourselves.

Or perhaps after reading this negative list, you want to tell me of the positive things going on in this world, the good outcomes you're getting from your work, how you *are* making a difference. Please recall that my intent is for us to see this world in all its life-destroying detail and not grasp, as lost people always do, for small bits of evidence that the old maps still work. As skilled leaders, how do we find our way out of these destructive dynamics? First, we must know where we are. Only with accurate maps can we find the strength and confidence to provide meaningful leadership in a terrible time.

I encourage you to sit with this list for a while and, if need be, let it lead you through the stages of denial, hopelessness, and grief until you arrive at the quiet

*Being lost is frightening
only until we admit that
we are lost.*

place of accepting what is. We're not lost, we're right here. This is how we discover the path of clear seeing, of sane behavior, and go forward with our work wholeheartedly.

Practices for Creating New Maps

Although the world is becoming more lost, as leaders we have the means to shape our organizations as islands of capacity, places that encourage people to think their way out of problems and dilemmas rather than frantically scrambling about. Here are a few suggestions for how to develop new maps; these apply to any situation where, if people continue as they're doing, it will only get them into more trouble, such as pushing harder with a failing project, using worn-out processes that aren't working, or going round and round with an issue, unable to solve it.

1. *Admit we're lost.* As a leader, you have the greatest vantage point—you can see the patterns and behaviors of the entire team or system. If you see that people are behaving like those lost, your first task is to find ways for people to recognize that for themselves. Most often, lost people *don't want to know that they're lost*. So you can't just announce it at a meeting. When people are stressed and overwhelmed, our brains basically stop functioning. Under stress, we lose the capacity to think, to see the bigger picture, to think forward, to make moral judgments. We become good only at tasks

and minutiae, doing those with greater urgency as our stress increases.

Your first task as the leader is to turn people's brains back on, and this is only possible by creating an environment that offers rest, calm, settling down. You can't do this during a staff meeting or in rooms where you usually race through tasks and agendas. The setting is crucial: it needs to signal we're slowing down, coming together, and even enjoying each other's company. Food helps. And the group can't be too large, no more than twenty or so. For larger groups, host multiple small groups, or use a process such as the *World Cafe* that encourages intimate conversations in large groups. (See www.theworldcafe.com.)

In this relaxed atmosphere, start a reflective conversation on the subject of being lost. Perhaps circulate the stages of being lost described here, including Gonzales's final statement that "we're not lost, we're right here." These stages are a lens for us to see our own and our colleagues' behavior. This rich conversation makes visible key dynamics: how we treat disconfirming information; how we treat each other; how stressed and overwhelmed we are.

It's important to do this in a conversational format; this strengthens relationships and people realize we're all in the same boat. Recognizing we're lost *together* is a very different experience from feeling lost alone. And Gonzales is right: we realize we're not lost, we're right here. We have what we need to get unlost, which is each other's perspectives, intelligence, caring, and companionship.

2. *Create new maps.* At this point, the energy of the group usually shifts dramatically—people become open and curious, eager to find a way out of the current situation. Just as if you were huddled together on a mountainside, appreciate that every person present might have information and perspectives that prove essential for getting out of this predicament. Use any process that respects each person's perspective and makes it easy for them to speak truthfully about what they're seeing. There are many good processes out there: Circles; Councils; Open Space Technology; After Action Reviews, and others.

We're not lost, we're right here.

Of course, taking time to engage everyone is radical leadership these days! Nowadays, when leaders start to feel nervous or panic, they withdraw and huddle with a few trusted advisors, leaving the organization to fend for itself while they figure things out. This approach—far too common these days—only increases staff's feelings of anxiety and fear, which leads them to disengage and blame the leader for whatever the problem is. This chain reaction only results in more failures and greater desperation. To become unlost, leaders have to come out of their offices and engage with staff fully, with deep appreciation for the insights that will be offered by everyone.

3. *Make it up as you go along.* As we play with new maps and gradually find our way out of the wilderness, we would do well to recognize that everything we try is an experiment. I listened to a scientist state that "these days, if you're not making it up as you go along, you're out of touch with reality, because reality is changing all the time."

If our new maps are experiments and we act like good scientists, we'll pay attention to the data we get back. We'll welcome *all* information and not push away what we don't want to hear. We'll involve diverse people to get the benefit of multiple perspectives and views. And we'll treat mistakes as what they truly are, opportunities to learn from experience and do better next time.

What I've described here—taking time to notice where we are, reengaging with each other, reflecting together, learning from experience—these are simple processes that used to be how we did our work. Now more common are the behaviors of the lost: panicked people going round in circles, quick to blame and unable to think. It takes conscious leadership to help

Leaders have the means to shape our organizations as islands of capacity.



people notice how lost we are and provide these simple processes for discovering useful new maps.

I hold in my heart the vision of what's possible if we use our leadership not to change the larger system but to do what we can, where we are, to create places and people who use the values and practices that support our best qualities. Amid all the noise and tumult, it's up to us to step forward as those rare leaders who create the conditions to bring people together in calm, reflective ways, who make it possible for people to rediscover their capacity to think and to reconnect with one another. If we sit together, surrender our need to blame, reclaim our wonderful human minds, and use all the information available, we can find our way through to solutions. And even when these solutions don't work as we'd hoped, we'll learn from them, feel renewed from working well together, and have stamina for the work ahead. We'll shift from the behaviors of the lost, exhausted, and overwhelmed, to discover our creativity and capacity. And we'll realize, as countless people have over millennia, that we humans can find our way through anything as long as we're together.

*Margaret (Meg) Wheatley, Ed.D., is a well-respected writer, speaker, and teacher for how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubling time. She has written several bestselling books, beginning with her path-breaking *Leadership and the New Science*, first published in 1992. She is cofounder and president emerita of the Berkana Institute (www.berkana.org). Berkana has been a leader in discovering new organizational forms based on a coherent theory of how living systems change. Wheatley received her doctorate in organizational behavior and change from Harvard University and a master's in media ecology from New York University.*