

# What Is Our Work?

## Chapter 30

An essay by  
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In this essay, Margaret Wheatley challenges each of us to proclaim the "new story" of organizational change throughout our culture. The old, hierarchical, mechanistic model of organizations is fast disappearing and is being replaced by a model based on self-organizing systems, servant leadership, and life itself. This new paradigm for the twenty-first century will lift up both spirit and creativity.

I believe our work is changing. The world is calling us to share our knowledge about servant leadership, even as the countervailing voices of domineering leadership grow louder. This call adds a new dimension to our work. Not only must we continue to explore the ideas and practice of servant leaders, we now must become clarion voices, broadcasting our message to as many people as we can reach, moving into arenas we ignored or avoided.

I meet too many people who falter in expressing their voice because others have told them that their ideas about leaders, organizations, and

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people are crazy. It is time to change this definition of craziness. We, in fact, represent the new sanity, the ideas and values and practices that can create a future worth wanting. In our spirits and in our experience we hold a new story, and it is time to share it with everyone we meet.

Those who carry a new story and who risk speaking it abroad have played a crucial role in times of historic shifts. Before a new era can come into form, there must be a new story. The playwright Arthur Miller noted that we know an era has ended when its basic illusions have been exhausted. I would add that these basic illusions not only are exhausted but also have become exhausting. As they fail to produce the results we want, we just repeat them with greater desperation, plummeting ourselves into cynicism and despair as we lock into these cycles of failure.

### The New Story's Role

I was introduced to the critical nature of the teller-of-new-stories role in reading the work of physicist and author Brian Swimme. Brian has spent the past several years developing a new story of the universe, based on his belief that creating a new cosmic story is the most important work of our times, because "it will usher in a new era of human and planetary health."

Lest you believe that cosmic stories can only be told by physicists or the hooligans, Brian's idea of a cosmic story is one that answers such questions as: What's going on? Where did everything come from? Why are you doing what you do?

For me, it is important to label this as story, because it helps call attention to the realization that all of our activities and beliefs spring from stories. Science tells a particular story; so do all religions. As individuals telling our stories to one another, we create an interpretation of our lives, their purpose and significance. And through shared stories, we see patterns emerge that unite our separating experiences into shared meanings.

I believe that you and I have an important theme to contribute to this new cosmic story. As students and believers in servant leadership, we tell a story that is quite different from the dominant one of our times. I would like to contrast in some detail the new and the old stories. My hope is that in seeing the great polarities between these two, you will feel even more strongly called to give voice to the new.

For at least 300 years, Western culture has been developing the old story. I would characterize it as a story of dominion and control and all-encompassing materialism. This story began with a dream that it was within humankind's province to understand the workings of the universe

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and to gain complete mastery over physical matter. This dream embraced the image of the universe as a grand, clockwork machine. As with any machine, we would understand it by minute dissection, we would engineer it to do what we saw fit, and we would fix it through our engineering brilliance. This hypnotic image of powers beyond previous human imagination gradually was applied to everything we looked at. Our bodies were seen as the ultimate machines; our organizations had all the parts and specifications to ensure well-oiled performance; and in science, where it had all begun, many scientists confused metaphor with reality and believed life was a machine.

This dream still has immense hypnotic power over us. For every problem, we quickly leap to technical solutions, even if technology is the cause of the initial problem. Science will still save us, no matter the earthly mess we've created. In our bodies, we long to believe the promises of genetic engineering. Our greatest ills, perhaps even death, will vanish once we identify the troubling gene. We need only invest more in technology to yield unsurpassed benefits in health and longevity, and all because we are such smart engineers of the human body.

In most of our endeavors—in science, health, organizational management, self-help—the focus is on creating better functioning machines. We replace the faulty part, re-engineer the organization, install a new behavior or attitude, create a better fit, recharge our batteries. The language and thinking is all machines. And we give this image such hegemony over our lives because it seems our only hope for combating life's cyclical nature, our only hope of escape from life's incessant demands for creation and destruction.

When we created this story of complete dominion over matter, we also brought in control's unwelcome partner, fear. Once we are intent on controlling something, we can only interpret its resistance to our control as fearsome. Since nothing is as controllable as we hope, we soon become entangled in a cycle of exerting control, failing to control, exerting harsher control, failing again. The fear that arises from this cycle is notable in many of us, especially in our leaders. Things aren't working as they had hoped, but none of us knows of any other way to proceed. The world becomes scarier and scarier as we realize the depths of our ignorance and confront our true powerlessness. It is from this place, from an acknowledgment of our ignorance and lack of power, that the call goes out for a new story.

But the old story has some further dimensions worth noticing. This story has had a particularly pernicious effect on how we think about one another and how we approach the task of organizing any human endeavor.

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When we conceived of ourselves as machines, we gave up most of what is essential to being human. We created ourselves devoid of spirit, will, passion, compassion, even intelligence. Machines have none of these characteristics innately, and none of them can be built into its specifications. The imagery is so foreign to what we know and feel to be true about ourselves that it seems strange that we ever adopted this as an accurate description of being human. But we did, and we do. A colleague of mine, as he was about to work with a group of oil company engineers, was warned that they had "heads of cement." He cheerfully remarked that it didn't matter, because they all had hearts, didn't they? "Well," they replied, "we call it a pump."

The engineering image we carry of ourselves has led to organizational lives together where we believe we can ignore the deep realities of human existence. We can ignore that people carry spiritual questions and quests into their work; we can ignore that people need love and acknowledgment; we can pretend that emotions are not part of our work lives; we can pretend we don't have families, or health crises, or deep worries. In essence, we take the complexity of human life and organize it away. It is not part of the story we want to believe. We want a story of simple dimensions: People can be viewed as machines and controlled to perform with the same efficiency and predictability.

It is important to recognize that in our experience, people never behave like machines. When given directions, we insist on putting our unique spin on them. When told to follow orders, we resist in obvious or subtle ways. When told to accept someone else's solution, or to institute a program created elsewhere, we deny that it has sufficient value.

As leaders, when we meet with such nonmechanical responses, we've had two different options. We could criticize our own leadership, or we could blame our followers. If we the leader were the problem, perhaps we had poor communication skills; perhaps we weren't visionary enough; maybe we'd chosen the wrong sales technique. If our people were the problem, they lacked motivation, or a clear sense of responsibility, or it could be that this time we'd just been cursed with an obstinate and rebellious group. With so much blame looking for targets, we haven't taken time to stop and question our basic beliefs about each other. Are expectations of machine-like obedience and regularity even appropriate when working together?

Trying to be an effective leader in this machine story is especially exhausting. He or she (but in this story it's primarily he) is leading a group of lifeless, empty automatons who are just waiting to be filled with vision and direction and intelligence.

The leader is responsible for providing everything: the organizational mission and values, the organizational structure, the plans, the supervision. The leader must also figure out, through clever use of

incentives or coercives, how to pump energy into this lifeless mass. Once the pump is primed, he or she must then rush hither and yon to make sure that everyone is clanking along in the same direction, at the established speed, with no diversions. It is the role of the leader to provide the organizing energy for a system that is believed to have no internal capacities for self-creation, self-organization, or self-correction.

As I reflect on the awful demands placed on leaders by the old story, I wonder how anyone could survive in that job. Yet the mechanistic story has created roles for all of us that are equally deadly. It has led us to believe that we, with our unpredictable behaviors, our passions, our independence, our creativity, our consciousness—that we are the problem rather than the blessing. While the rest of nature follows obediently in the great mechanistic parade of progress, we humans show up as rebellious and untrustworthy. Our problematic natures are the very reason we need to create organizations as we do. How else could we structure such recalcitrance into vehicles of efficient production?

In this story, such key human traits as uniqueness, free will, and, creativity pose enormous problems. Machines are built to do repetitive functions that require no thought and minimal adjustment. Conformity and compliance are part of the expectations of this story. Creativity is unwanted, because it is always surprising and therefore uncontrollable. If we tolerate creative expressions, we find ourselves with unmanageable levels of diversity. A machine world is willing to sacrifice exploration for prediction. Guaranteed levels of performance are preferable to surprising breakthroughs. In our machine organizations, we try to extinguish individuality in order to reach our goal of certainty. We trade uniqueness for control and barter our humanness for petty performance measures.

It is one of the great ironies of our age that we created organizations to constrain our problematic human natures, and now the only thing that can save these organizations is a full appreciation of the expansive capacities of us humans.

### **The New Story as a Tale of Life**

So it is time for the new story. Our old one, with its alienating myths, is eating away at us from the inside, rotting from its core. Fewer of us can tell it with any conviction. Many more of us are beginning to understand that our experience and our beliefs tell a story that celebrates life rather than denying it. We can see these in the pronounced increase in conversations and writings about destiny, purpose, soul, spirit, love, legacy, courage, integrity, meaning. The new story is being born in these conversations. We are learning to give voice to a different and fuller sense of who we really are.

I would like to characterize the new story as a tale of life. Setting aside our machine glasses, we observe a world that exhibits life's ebullient creativity and life's great need for other life. We observe a world where creative self-expression and embracing systems of relationships are the organizing energies, where there is no such thing as a separate individual, and no need for a leader to do it all.

As I develop some of the major themes of this new story of life, I will be drawing on the work of modern science. However, I know that science is only lending its voice to a story that in fact is very ancient. We can find this story in early primal wisdom traditions, in modern indigenous tribes, in most spiritual thought, and in poets old and new. It is a story that has never been forgotten by any of us and that has been held for us continually by many peoples and cultures. Yet for those of us emerging from our exhaustion with the old mechanistic tale, it feels new. And it certainly opens us to new discoveries about who we are as people, as organizations, and as leaders.

For me, one of the most wonderful contrasts of the old and new stories came from thinking about a passage I read in Kevin Kelly's book, *Out of Control*. As he reached for language to describe life, he moved into sheer exuberance. (I always pay attention when a scientist uses poetry or exuberant language; I know that something has touched him or her at a level of awareness that I don't want to ignore.) Kelly was trying to describe the ceaseless creativity that characterizes life. He said that life gives to itself this great freedom, the freedom to become. Then he asked, "Becoming what?" and went on to answer:

"Becoming becoming. Life is on its way to further complications, further deepness and mystery, further processes of becoming and change. Life is circles of becoming, an autocatalytic set, inflaming itself with its own sparks, breeding upon itself more life and more wildness and more 'becomingness.' Life has no conditions, no moments that are not instantly becoming something more than life itself."

Kelly's passionate descriptions of processes that inflame, breed more life and wildness, create more deepness and mystery, stand in stark contrast to the expectations we have held for one another. I like to contemplate Kelly's description of life with the lives we describe when we design an organizational chart. The contrast between the two is both funny and sobering. Could we even begin to tolerate such levels of passion and creativity in our organizations? But can we survive without them?

In the 1960s, the great American poet A. R. Ammons told the same story in different and precise language:

Don't establish the boundaries.  
First the squares, triangles,  
boxes of preconceived  
possibility, and then  
pour life into them, trimming  
off left-over edges, ending potential:  
let centers proliferate  
from self-justifying motions!

In both recent science and poetry, we are remembering a story about life that has creativity and connectedness as its essential themes. As we use this new story to look into our organizational lives, it offers us images of organizations and leaders that are both startling and enticing. It offers us ways of being together where our diversity, our uniqueness, is essential and revered. It offers us an arena big enough to embrace the full expression of our infinitely creative human natures. And for the first time in a long time, it offers us the recognition that we humans are, in the words of physicist Ilya Prigogine, "the most striking realization of the laws of nature." We can use ourselves and what we know about ourselves to understand the universe. By observing with new eyes the processes of creation in us, we can understand the forces that create galaxies, move continents, and give birth to stars. No longer intent on describing ourselves as the machines we thought the universe to be, we are encouraged now to describe the universe through the life we know we are.

As we look at life through the lens of human nature and human desire, we are presented with some wonderful realizations. Our own desire for autonomy and creativity is reflected in all life. Life appears as boundlessly creative, searching for new possibilities and new capacities wherever it can. Observing the diversity of life forms has become a humbling experience for many biologists. At this point, no one knows how many different species there are or where the next forms of life will appear, except that now we even expect them to appear elsewhere in our solar system.

Life is born from this unquenchable need to be. One of the most interesting definitions of life in modern biology is that something is considered alive if it has the capacity to create itself. The term for this is *autopoiesis*, self-creation, from the same root as poetry. At the very heart of our ideas about life is this definition that life begins from the desire to create something original, to bring a new being into form.

As I have read about and observed more consciously the incredible diversity of life, I have felt witness to a level of creativity that has little to do with the survival struggles that we thought explained everything. Newness appears not for simple utilitarian purposes, but just because it is possible to be inventive. Life gives to itself the freedom to become, as Kevin Kelly noted, because life is about discovering new possibilities, new forms of

searching for connections. Because we misperceive life, we create responses in others that we then rail against. We then use their difficult behaviors to justify a controlling style of leadership. Many of the failures and discontents in today's organizations can be understood as the result of this denial of life's forces, and the pushing back of life against a story that excludes them.

As an example of these competing forces, think about how many times you have engaged in conversations about resistance to change. I have participated in far too many of these, and, in the old days, when I still thought that it was I who was "managing" change, my colleagues and I always were thoughtful enough to plan a campaign to overcome this resistance. Contrast this view of human resistance to change with Kelly's images of life as "further processes of becoming and change ... circles of becoming, inflaming itself with its own sparks, breeding upon itself more life and more wildness." Who's telling the right story? Do we, as a species, dig in our heels while the rest of life is engaged in this awesome dance of creation? Are we the only problem, whereas the rest of life participates in something wild and wonderful?

The old story asserts that resistance to change is a fact of life. Having created a world image that sought stability and control, change has always been undesired and difficult. But the new story explains resistance not as a fact of life, but as evidence of an act against life. Life is in motion, constantly creating, exploring, discovering. Newness is its desire. Nothing alive, including us, resists these great creative motions. But all of life resists control. All of life pushes back against any process that inhibits its freedom to create itself.

In organizations of the old story, plans and designs are constantly being imposed. People are told what to do all the time. As a final insult, we go outside the organization to look for answers, returning with benchmarks that we offer up as great gifts. Yet those in the organization can only see these packaged solutions as insults. Their creativity has been dismissed, their opportunity to discover something new for the organization has been denied. When we deny life's need to create, life pushes back. We label it resistance and invent strategies to overcome it. But we could change the story and honor the resident creativity of those in our organization by figuring out how to invite them in. We need to work with these insistent creative forces or they will be provoked to work against us. Life isn't life unless it is free to create itself.

And most organizations deny the systems-seeking, self-organizing forces that are always present, the forces that, in fact, are responsible for uncharted levels of contribution and innovation. These fail to get reported because they occur outside "the boxes of preconceived possibility." There is no better indicator of the daily but unrecognized contributions made by

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people, than when a municipal union decides to "work to rule." Cities cease running, civil functions stop, even though the rulebooks and policy manuals were designed to create productive employees. No organization can function on the planned contributions of its members. Without acknowledging it, we rely intensely on individuals going beyond the rules and roles. We rely on them to figure out what needs to be done, to solve an unexpected problem, to contribute in a crisis situation. But we seldom take this experience and use it to question our beliefs about structure, leadership, or motivation.

We also deny these systems-seeking forces when we narrow people to self-serving work, when we pit colleagues against one another to improve performance, when we believe people are most strongly motivated by promises of personal gain. When we deny people's great need for relationships, for systems of support, for work that connects to a larger purpose, they push back. They may respond first by embracing competition, but then lose interest in the incentives. Performance falls back to precontest levels. In organizations driven by greed, people push back by distrusting and despising their leaders. In organizations that try to substitute monetary rewards for a true purpose, people respond with apathy and disaffection.

It is possible to look at the negative and troubling behaviors in organizations today as the clash between the forces of life and the forces of domination, between the new story and the old. Once we realize that we cannot ever extinguish these creative forces, that it is impossible to deny the life that lives in our organizations, we can begin to search for new ways of being together. Robert Greenleaf seemed well tuned to these forces. In expressing the need for servants to be leaders, and leaders to serve, he knew that the energy, desire, and talent for organizing comes from people. And though he drew from traditions other than science to explore his ideas about leadership, I feel a strong connection to his work through the understandings about organization that I have gleaned from the sciences. We act in service to the great creative desires that each of us carries. We serve one another because it is the nature of life to move toward one another. It is the nature of life to want to serve.

In many different places, the new story is emerging. It is, in its essence, a story about the human spirit. This realization is surfacing in many different disciplines and people. For those who have focused on organizations, I find it delightful to note that W. Edwards Deming, the great voice for quality in organizations, and Robert Greenleaf both focused on the human spirit in their final writings. Deming concluded his long years of work by stating simply that quality was about the human spirit. As we grew to understand that spirit, we would create organizations of quality. Greenleaf understood that we stood as servants to the human spirit, that it was our responsibility to nurture that spirit.

Following different paths, they arrived at the same centering place. We can create the lives and organizations we desire only by understanding the enlivening spirit in us that always is seeking to express itself. Servant leaders help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness; they welcome the surprises we bring to them; they are curious about our differences; they delight in our inventiveness. They trust that we can create wisely and well, that we seek the best interests of our organization and our community, that we want to bring more good into the world.

### The Hope of the New Story

This new story gives us hope because it reveals some of life's beauty. In *The Soul's Code*, James Hillman comments that beauty is an essential need. Our human hearts long for beauty. "A theory of life," he notes, "must have a base in beauty if it would explain the beauty that life seeks." The stories that we tell one another and the societies we create must allow us to see one another's beauty. Otherwise, we cannot love what we see.

We who hold this story feel both its beauty and its promise. What might we create if we lived our lives closer to the human spirit? What might our organizations accomplish if they trusted and called on that spirit? I want us to be telling this story in health-care organizations, in schools, in religious denominations, in corporations. I want us to stop being quiet in the presence of business people who sit on our boards and in our executive offices. As they offer their story as the standard, I want our voices to emerge with what we know to be true. I want business logic to stop being the only story; I want business imperatives to stop moving us away from the deeper realities we know. The old story has failed abysmally, even in the for-profit sectors where it still dominates. Why would we continue to let such thinking move unchallenged into other kinds of organizations?

I would like to end by returning to the historic importance of the teller of new stories. When it is time for a new story to emerge, holding on to the past only intensifies our dilemma. We experience our ineffectiveness daily, and if we fail to find anything new, we descend more deeply into a profound sense of loss.

What we ask of the tellers of the new story is their voice and their courage. We do not need them to create a massive training program, a global approach, a dramatic style. We only need them to speak to us when we are with them. We need them to break their silence and share their ideas of the world as they have come to know it.

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If you carry this story within you, it is time to tell it, wherever you are, to whomever you meet. Brian Swimme compares our role with that of the early Christians. They had nothing but "a profound revelatory experience. They did nothing, nothing but wander about telling a new story." As with these early believers, Brian encourages us to become wanderers, telling this new story. Through our simple wanderings, we will "ignite the transformation of humanity."

And he leaves us with a promise:

What will happen when the storytellers emerge? What will happen when, "the primal mind" sings of our common origin, our stupendous journey, our immense good fortune? We will become Earthlings. We will have evoked out of the depths of the human psyche those qualities enabling our transformation from disease to health. They will sing our epic of being, and stirring up from our roots will be a vast awe, an enduring gratitude, the astonishment of communion experiences, and the realization of cosmic adventure.

What a wonderful promise. I invite you into the telling.