

Imagine the world in women's hands ...

By Jane Whiting

When Margaret (Meg) Wheatley speaks, women not only listen but are inspired to action. She met recently with women in Ottawa as part of The Berkana Institute Women's Leadership Revival Tour, and used a quote by United Nations Director General Kofi Annan, "The Future of the world depends on women," to reinforce the tour's topic.

The Ottawa event was co-sponsored by the Adlerian Counseling and Consulting Group. Adlerian President Marion Balla supports Wheatley in her mission to empower women around the world to step forward and offer their leadership and service to the community.

"Meg is a truly grounded person with such clarity of purpose," says Balla. "She has written three major books on leadership and women in development. Through the Berkana Institute, which Meg co-founded, she works to help communities around the world. The leadership tours, in addition to funding the work of the institute, spread the message of making the world a more healthy and loving place."

Wheatley describes the purpose of the tours in Canada and the U.S. as being a means to help women revive their desire to lead. However, her definition of leadership is unique and does not involve formal rulership or creating more bosses. "A leader is anyone who is willing to help – who sees something that needs changing and takes the first step forward. It is based on a very different understanding that even big changes begin with very small acts by just one person or a small group."

She adds that the tours have a two-fold purpose. "First, it's essential that women everywhere realize what is happening around the world. Women are leading the way, especially in the poorest nations where they have a very different vision of their societies and the issues that need to be paid attention to. These women are acting in much more future-orientated, ethical ways."

The second part of the tour's purpose, Wheatley says, is for everyone to realize that great changes often begin with very humble beginnings. "Two of the most recent Nobel Peace Prize winners are credited with huge, world-wide contributions that began with incredibly small actions on a very personal level. So, it's important for women to notice what they care about and, while thinking small, know that in this connected-networking world our actions can grow and grow."

While not advocating that female leaders or rulers would make the world a kinder and gentler place, Wheatley explains what women can do at the community level when they have better economic resources. "In third world countries and Eastern Europe, women have shown that they pay attention to the children, improve health conditions, and advance education by increasing literacy levels. Women reinvest what they earn into their communities, and by their nature, they are thinking beyond themselves – so everyone benefits."

In Ottawa, Wheatley addressed a wide and diverse audience. "I speak to young people, women and men of all ages and from different backgrounds – I've never limited myself to one group or sector of the community. What we really need is people who will create the changes that they personally feel must be made from a grass-roots perspective – whether it's fairness in the school classroom or treatment in the workplace."

Wheatley believes that most formal leaders – even the good ones – are just too busy, too distracted and too overwhelmed by the demands of leadership to take care of everything. Her basic premise is that if we are going to change things for the better we have to realize that it up to us to do something at the individual level.

"So many of us feel powerless, but we can change what we care about. My message is to notice what you care about and what gets your attention. If it's about the quality of education, go and volunteer at your child's school. It doesn't have to be perfect first step and you don't have to know where it's going ..."

Stimulating conversation with others and connecting people in large groups is one of the goals of the Berkana tours. Wheatley is frequently approached by women who tell her that they have been profoundly shifted by talking to others and hearing powerful ideas. "When they know what they need to do, it can change them deeply. People become energized when they get involved and join company with others."

Margaret J. Wheatley has a doctorate in Organizational Behaviour from Harvard University. She has worked as an organizational consultant, speaker and writer since 1973, and is married with seven children and 14 grandchildren. To learn more about the Berkana Institute, based in the U.S. visit www.berkana.org.