

Joanna Macy: The Work That Reconnects

by Dennis Rivers



Portrait of Joanna Macy by Rob Shetterly from the exhibit, "Americans Who Tell the Truth"

"How will I go on?" I ask myself, as I drive up the long road to the retreat center on the hillside. I am here to spend a week with the multitalented Joanna Macy; scholar, writer, translator of Rilke, ecological activist, and spiritual teacher. Perhaps I will find out.

In spite of my best efforts over the past thirty years, the world is not becoming a happier place. Every hour on planet Earth, a thousand people starve to death (three quarters of them children,) elephants and people step on Vietnam-era landmines in Southeast Asia, and children in faraway countries are born with birth defects from the long-lived dust of weapons I helped to pay for: depleted uranium munitions in Iraq and Agent Orange defoliant in Vietnam. The Earth heats up and species die -- I won't go on with this catalog of sorrows. I am sure you could add a hundred items to the list. Meanwhile a chorus of strange voices reassures me that everything is perfect just the way it is; it is just my attitude that is out of whack. Other voices tell me that the magic of the market would fix it all, and whisper the latest stock tip in my ear. Stop resisting *what is*, Dennis.

Into the blizzard of my confusion walks Joanna Macy, Berkeley eco-philosopher with deep eyes that remind me of a 95-year-old Navajo grandmother. There is a way, she says to all of us. We will explore it together. You have resources within you that you have not yet touched. Life calls you to become courageous and compassionate guardians of the earth and all her creatures. The Web of Life is a web of connections. I offer you the work that reconnects.

The Work That Reconnects

Early on in our time together, we do the Elm Dance; holding hands, swaying, moving in circles, singing along with the music, lifting our arms up toward the sky, kneeling down and reaching toward the earth; all symbolic gestures of reconnecting: reconnecting with one another, and reconnecting with the Earth of which we are an expression. The melody is haunting and sounds vaguely Eastern European. (I learn later that it originated in Latvia.) In the late 1980s, Joanna introduced the Elm Dance as a practice of reconnecting in communities across the swath of territory that had been contaminated with radioactive ash and dust from the Chernobyl meltdown. The people

downwind of the meltdown were, and still are, living through an ongoing, slow-motion catastrophe of cancer and birth defects that is beyond any straightforward fixing or healing. This new idea echoes down the hallways of my mind, how to stay human in the middle of an ongoing, slow-motion catastrophe. It actually takes a couple of months for the meaning of the dance to sink in for me: we are all downwind of the troubles. We are all living through an ongoing, slow-motion catastrophe called the industrial growth society. And our first challenge is to stay human, to stay open to one another, to not shut down, not withdraw, not space out, not numb out, not freak out, not cop out. However understandable those responses would be, they will only make our very difficult situation even more difficult. Take the hand of the person next to you, add your voice to the song. One of the deepest gifts we have to give to one another is also one of the simplest: "You are not alone, I am here beside you."

Begin with Gratitude

Joanna introduces us to what she calls "the spiral of the work." If there is a strength within us that we *could* open to, what would be the first step of such an opening? For Joanna, the first step is gratitude. My mind fills up with paraphrases of St. Francis of Assisi: Let us give thanks for the warmth of the sun, let us give thanks for the light of the moon, let us give thanks for the laughter of children echoing down the street. In spite of everything that is going desperately wrong in the world, it is still possible to be amazed and grateful for the gift of your own existence. Although at first glance gratitude would seem to require some positive event, Joanna wants us to explore deeper levels of gratitude that are not conditioned by external circumstances. We are continually bombarded with intensely manipulative messages that we are "not good enough" in some way that can only be fixed by buying a specific product. The practice of gratitude, according to Joanna, is a revolutionary act, the soul's repudiation of the central "I shop therefore I am" dogma of consumer society. That dogma has two unhappy effects: it fills the world up with junk and it turns people away from their own hearts. There are dimensions of life, such as friendship, meditation, and closeness to nature, that can be cultivated and appreciated, but they cannot be bought. This gets me to thinking about the "walk in beauty" tradition of the Dine (Navajo) people. Perhaps the more pain we are going to encounter, the more beauty we need to open ourselves toward. In my mind, gratitude is entwined with beauty in a way that I can't explain, but I can feel the deep connection. This could be part, I scribble a note to myself, of a survival kit for living more compassionately in the middle of a slow-motion catastrophe.

A Transformative Vision of Suffering

Joanna walks across the meeting area and traces, with her steps, the four quadrants of a medicine wheel. This becomes a mandala of truth telling, a place to express the feelings that the captains of our sinking ecological ship don't want to hear, and perhaps that we ourselves don't want to hear. In the first quadrant, she places dead leaves; these will represent our grief and sorrow. In the second quadrant, she places a stone the size of your hand; this will represent our unspoken fear and how easy it is to become immobilized by it. In the third quadrant, she places a strong stick, about a yard long and perhaps an inch and a half in diameter; this will represent the rage we feel when we look at mountains covered with stumps or schools robbed to pay for aircraft carriers. In the fourth quadrant, she places an empty wooden bowl; this will represent our desperate sense of insufficiency, of being powerless to protect the people and the animals and the Earth we love.

She marks the center of the circle with a large handkerchief made of four colored squares. Then, she turns to us, and invites us, one by one, to come into this circle and share a set of feelings that are beyond the boundaries of ordinary conversations. The grief comes in many forms, and the four emotions blend into complex chords. A parent laments, "no matter what I do, I can't protect my children from the culture of violence and consumerism in which we live. Even if we don't have a TV in our house, the kids will see endless murders and advertisements on someone else's TV."

As each person confesses their grief with the help of the leaves,

their fears with the help of the stone, their rage with the help of the stick, and their powerlessness with the help of the empty bowl, we in the surrounding circle answer, "I hear you," and "I am with you." (Looking back on this experience, I am struck by how much this is an ecological transformation of the ritual of confession. Not, "Father I have sinned..." but instead, "Sisters and brothers, I need to tell you things that I somehow can't say to anyone else.")

The purpose of this exercise, Joanna explains, is not simply to discharge pent-up emotions. Nor is it about achieving the sort of catharsis or working through that would allow a person to let go of their painful feelings and move their attention to other concerns in their life. Joanna is fiercely determined to show us a different way. *Your pain*

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for the world, she insists, arises out of your love for the world and your deep connection to the web of life. Your pain for the world is neither a mistake to be corrected nor an illness to be cured. The way forward does not consist of getting rid of your pain. The way forward is to enter deeply into the heart of your pain for the world, and to discover the powerful love that is hidden there. Energized by that love, you will find new ways to join with others and participate in the healing of the world around you.

In relation to all the feelings mapped by the four quadrants, Joanna invites us into a transformational re-framing of our pain. Your rage, she says, is coming out of your love of justice. Honor your love of justice and reaffirm it! The anguish of powerlessness that you feel comes directly out of your deep love for everybody. *Honor your anguish and reaffirm your love!* As I listen to Joanna explain the exercise and travel with us through it, I am struck by what a radical teacher she is. Against a giant chorus of voices, books, videos and seminars telling us that everything is perfect just as it is, telling us that all we have to do is change our attitude and we won't feel bad any more, Joanna invites us to expand our heart-mind to include both joy and sorrow, *and to increase our capacity to experience both* as we take up the great task of healing our wounded world. The sharing session lasts about two hours, and I find myself feeling incredibly close to this circle of people, burdened as we may be with the sorrows of an unraveling planet. I go out to sit in the sun for a while and see what sense I can make out of Joanna's reframing of feelings, in terms of everything else I know about her life and thought.

As spiritual teacher, Joanna stands inside of both Christianity and Buddhism. Her grandfather and great-grandfather were Presbyterian ministers, and her spiritual life first took shape inside the forms of Protestant Christianity. As an adult, Joanna has made a deep exploration of Buddhist thought and practice, especially among Sri Lankans and Tibetans. Within the framework of Buddhism, Joanna invites us to become Shambala Warriors, guardians of the integrity of life, armed with karuna and prajna (compassion and wisdom) arising from our original nature of Buddhahood and infinite connectedness, such original nature empowering us to hold in our hearts the pain of all sentient beings for the sake of helping them. Accepting pain as part of the human predicament gives us a calm courage, we no longer need to hide or to flee, because we understand it would not do any good. In both traditions, Joanna would probably be seen as a feminist radical because of the way she focuses on the forms of emotional pain that grow out of caring for others, rather than seeing human suffering as exclusive byproduct of attachment (Buddhism), or exclusively a consequence of

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sin (Christianity).

Within the framework of a faith life focused on Jesus, what she calls her "root tradition," Joanna invites us to understand and accept both crucifixion and resurrection as timeless and ongoing elements of the spiritual life. In taking this position, she draws strength from the words of Jesus: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Applied today, this teaching confronts us with a serious spiritual challenge: As countless species are crucified to extinction by the industrial growth society, will we turn away and leave them to their unhappy fate, or will we bear their pain as our own and try to save as many as we can. When we bear the pain of others as our own, the pain does not magically go away, (the crucifixion part); but the pain changes, and we ourselves are transformed by the love we extend to others, (the resurrection part.) The saints and mystics of Christianity perennially reaffirm that there is a greater love that is always wanting, and always waiting, to perform acts of goodness and mercy through our hands, and to transform us in the process.

Seeing with New Eyes

Yesterday's Truth Mandala has two paradoxical effects. First, because we are not *holding back* our various distresses about the fate of the Earth, we are also not *holding on* to them (and inadvertently amplifying them) as much either. That gives us some extra energy and attention to explore and learn. Second, our expressions of grief and anger show us how much we are woven into the world, and suggest to us, once again, that the billiard ball model of the isolated self is completely unworkable.

As Joanna explains this phase of our time together, I get the sense that "seeing with new eyes" is a fractal sort of idea, in that it means something similar at many different levels. Seeing with new eyes is part three of Joanna's four-part lesson plan. And it points toward a body of exercises in which we embrace, by gradual degrees, our connectedness with everything and everyone. It is also the process inside of people that we hope most to encourage, the shift in identity away from separation and toward connectedness. And, at the world level, it represents what Joanna and many Deep Ecologists call the Great Turning, a global recognition connectedness.

I make some mental notes about this, because the shift from being an isolated little ego to being part of a family and a team is also part of the maturational journey of every human being. It's good to put the new name on it so people will pay attention to it, but I think it is also good to remember that we are not introducing some new idea from outer space. Practically everybody appreciates the idea of being considerate of others. The Great Turning represents the moment when you realize that we have drawn our circle of consideration too narrowly. Our powerful technologies and our escalating consumption have given human beings a giant footprint; now we need to be a lot more careful about where we step. This is not just a matter of scolding people to be more polite. What will we ourselves eat when we have paved over all the farm lands, or wrecked them with chemicals or Frankenfood seeds that are programmed to die?

A Council of All Beings is perhaps the best-known group exercise associated with Joanna Macy and her colleague, the deep ecologist John Seed. A Council of All Beings is an exuberant celebration of *letting back in* all the elements of nature, of humanity, and of reality, that have been shut out by our bean counting money madness.

We each make a mask and sit in a circle, passing around a talking stick, and taking turns. One person speaks as River. (Over the past 150 years, the Cuyahoga River, as it passes through Cleveland, Ohio, has had so much toxic junk dumped into it that it has caught fire on ten different occasions.) "Set me free me!" River cries, "let me breathe!" "Where are my children, where are my life forms?" She asks.

Glacier takes a turn and invites us to consider a being whose life stretches across millennia: "I nurture the rivers, I nurture the valleys, I bring food to all the people who live in the variegated plume of my abundant waters as they rush to the sea. How will they live, when I am gone?"

Future Children speak, reaching toward us with millions of little hands, saying, "Thank you for working day and night, year after year, to find responsible ways of storing nuclear waste. We feel your bodhisattva love radiating down through the centuries. We are hidden in the womb of time and we cannot

speak to you directly. We need you to thank one another, to appreciate one another, to nurture one another as you work to protect the integrity of life, of our life."

And so it goes around the circle. The ancestors speak. Future beings speak. People in our various wars zones speak, huddling behind mud walls and hoping to live through the day, and asking for something even more fundamental than either justice or mercy, asking for the simple recognition that they are there, that they exist.

I know it would be easy to ridicule all of this as bleeding heart liberalism run amok, but wait, slow down. Every time we shut out one of these voices, we shut down something important in ourselves. How much can we shut down in ourselves and still have a life? Every time we shut out one of these voices, we become blind to the world from which that voice came. How much blindness can we tolerate, and still survive as a nation?

The news is full of stories that illustrate the walled-off separate self as it runs to madness. Children die in China because milk producers there put white plastic powder in the milk to give falsely high protein readings. Here in the U.S., farmers and agribusiness corporations are feeding tons of antibiotics to farm animals penned up in unhealthy conditions. This is breeding a new generation of drug-resistant super-bacteria that will probably cause horrific epidemics among humans -- all for the sake of higher profits right now. (Each year in the U.S., 18,000 people a year die from a growing list of drug-resistant bacteria infections.)

This is what happens when people feel disconnected from one another, disconnected from the natural world, and disconnected from ancestors and future beings (trapped in a rootless and windowless present). And these outrages, repeated a thousand-fold, add deep elements

of moral challenge and spiritual depth an exercise like the Council of All Beings. The industrial growth society wants us to become passive, silent and uncomplaining accomplices to the tearing down of mountains and the poisoning of the seas: really, to be passive in the face of our own undoing. In Council we break the silence and give voice to a creative and compassionate *defiance*.

We will speak for all those, two-legged, four-legged, six-legged, finned and winged, who have been silenced -- the bees, the frogs, the salmon, and native peoples around the world.

We will remember all those, past, present and future whose well being has been forgotten -- the children of Falluja, born with birth defects due to the toxic residues of depleted uranium munitions.

In the sacred space we create by our intention to be part to the healing of the Earth, we bust out of the mental prison of being accomplices, and speak the dream of a world brought back to balance.

Going Forth

A workshop with Joanna Macy comes close to a shaman's journey. You enter into a different dimension, a time outside of ordinary time. In this time outside of time, you receive the seeds of new life from ancestors and future beings. The challenge then is to return to your village and plant a new garden. Toward the end of her book, *Coming Back to Life*, Joanna restates an inspiration from the novelist and minister Frederick Buechner:

To find our calling is to find the intersection between our own deep gladness and the world's deep hunger.

"I can't tell you what to do," Joanna says in the quiet of our last morning together, "and I can't assure you that we will be successful either in promoting the Great Turning, or in preventing more ecological catastrophes." That is the gift of unknowing, she explains, that shifts our focus from the results we want to obtain to the wisdom and compassion we want to embody. The previous evening, we had built a ramp in the middle of our meeting room, a symbolic leaping-off place that ended with an eighteen-inch cliff. One by one, to the sound of applause and shouts of encouragement, we each marched up the ramp, declared our specific intentions, and leapt into the unknown.

Now we sit in meditation, and the morning sun filters through the tall windows into the quiet room. To help us persevere in the fulfillment of our intentions, and to help us find strength in the hearts of our sisters and brothers, Joanna offers us five green vows to sustain us through our many journeys:

I vow to myself and each of you:

To commit myself daily to the healing of our world and the welfare of all beings.

To live on earth more lightly and less violently in the food, products and energy I consume.

To draw strength and guidance from the living Earth, the ancestors, the future beings, and all my brothers and sisters of all species.

To support each other in our work for the world and to ask for help when I feel the need.

To pursue a daily spiritual practice that clarifies my

mind, strengthens my heart and supports me in observing these vows.

The day unfolds into an afternoon of leave taking, each of us challenged, by this extraordinary teacher, to make our hearts large enough to contain both joy and sorrow, to make our hearts large enough to hold all life.

Please note: This article draws on my experiences in several of Joanna Macy's workshops and retreats. These experiences have been imaginatively recreated as if they happened in one setting. In order to maintain the agreed-upon levels of privacy of Joanna Macy's workshops, all quotes in this article from workshop participants, and all representations of them, other than Joanna Macy herself, are composites altered enough to protect the identity of the individual portrayed.

Eco-philosopher **Joanna Macy, Ph.D.**, is a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. A respected voice in movements for peace, justice, and ecology, she interweaves her scholarship with four decades of activism. She has created a ground-breaking theoretical framework for personal and social change, as well as a powerful workshop methodology for its application. A video presentation of her workshop is available free of charge at www.TheWorkThatReconnects.org.

Her wide-ranging work addresses psychological and spiritual issues of the nuclear age, the cultivation of ecological awareness, and the fruitful resonance between Buddhist thought and contemporary science. The many dimensions of this work are explored in her books *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (New Society Publishers, 1983); *Dharma and Development* (Kumarian Press, 1985); *Thinking Like a Mountain* (with John Seed, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess; New Society Publishers, 1988; New Society/ New Catalyst, 2007); *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory* (SUNY Press, 1991); *Rilke's Book of Hours* (1996, 2005) and *In Praise of Mortality* (2004) (with Anita Barrows, Riverhead); *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* (with Molly Young Brown, New Society Publishers, 1998); Joanna's memoir entitled *Widening Circles* (New Society, 2000); and *World as Lover, World as Self* (Parallax Press, 2007), *A Year With Rilke*, Harper One. For more information about Joanna Macy's books and workshops, please visit www.JoannaMacy.net.

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"Americans Who Tell the Truth" is a non-partisan series of portraits by artist **Rob Shetterly**. Past and current Americans are represented in a travelling exhibit that is hosted by schools, universities, churches, and various community groups around the country.

With this remarkable collection of portraits, Rob intends to remind people of the dignity, courage and importance of some of America's truth tellers and, whether or not you agree with a particular subject's point of view, to create dialogue that will help each of us figure out which truths we value most as citizens in a democracy. See the website for more information: www.americanswhotellthetruth.org.