

BY JOANNA MACY

BOOKS

Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age

Dharma and Development

Thinking Like a Mountain

(with John Seed, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess)

Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory

Rilke's Book of Hours

(with Anita Barrows)

In Praise of Mortality:

Selections from Rainer Maria Rilke's Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus

(with Anita Barrows)

Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World

(with Molly Young Brown)

Widening Circles: A Memoir

World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal

A Year with Rilke

(with Anita Barrows)

Pass It On: Five Stories That Can Change the World

(with Norbert Gahbler)

AUDIOVISUAL

The Work That Reconnects, DVD

BY CHRIS JOHNSTONE

BOOK

Find Your Power: A Toolkit for Resilience and Positive Change

AUDIO

The Happiness Training Plan, CD

(with Miriam Akhtar)

Ambient Dulcimer

(with various artists)

ACTIVE HOPE

How to Face
the Mess We're in
without Going Crazy

JOANNA MACY &
CHRIS JOHNSTONE

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Acknowledgments

We begin with gratitude, remembering the words of Thich Nhat Hanh: “If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow: and without trees, we cannot make paper.” So it is with this book. Without all those who’ve played supporting roles, it would simply not be here. So our thanks extends to all who have helped, particularly:

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The countless colleagues in the Work That Reconnects, who have engaged with it as a practice, offered it in places all over the planet, and added their own distinctive contributions. As we take the essence of this approach to wider audiences, we are aware of the ways you have enriched it; our pleasure in your company is boundless.

Introduction

“D^angerous,” “frightening,” “out of control” — as we go around the room, people are calling out the word or phrase that comes to mind as they complete this sentence: “When I consider the condition of our world, I think things are getting...” Over the last few decades, we’ve done this process with tens of thousands of people in a wide range of settings. The responses we hear echo survey findings that show high levels of alarm about the future we’re heading into.¹

Such widespread anxiety is well-founded. As our world heats up, deserts expand and extreme weather events become more common. Human population and consumption are increasing at the same time as essential resources, such as freshwater, fish stocks, topsoil, and oil reserves, are in decline. While reversals in the economy have left many feeling desperate about how they’re going to manage, trillions of dollars are spent on the making of war.² Given these adversities, it is no surprise if we experience a profound loss of confidence in the future. We can no longer take it for granted that the resources we’re dependent on — food, fuel, and drinkable water — will be available. We can no longer take it for granted even that our civilization will survive or that conditions on our planet will remain hospitable for complex forms of life.

We are starting out by naming this uncertainty as a pivotal psychological reality of our time. Yet because it is usually considered

The greatest danger of our time is the deadening of our response

too depressing to talk about, it tends to remain an unspoken presence at the backs of our minds. Sometimes we're aware of it. We just don't mention it. This blocked communication generates a peril even more deadly, for the greatest danger of our times is the deadening of our response.

We often hear comments such as "Don't go there, it is too depressing" and "Don't dwell on the negative." The problem with this approach is that it closes down our conversations and our thinking. How can we even begin to tackle the mess we're in if we consider it too depressing to think about?

Yet when we do face the mess, when we do let in the dreadful news of multiple tragedies unfolding in our world, it can feel overwhelming. We may wonder whether we can do anything about it anyway.

So this is where we begin — by acknowledging that our times confront us with realities that are painful to face, difficult to take in, and confusing to live with. Our approach is to see this as the starting point of an amazing journey that strengthens us and deepens our aliveness. The purpose of this journey is to find, offer, and receive the gift of Active Hope.

WHAT IS ACTIVE HOPE?

Whatever situation we face, we can choose our response. When facing overwhelming challenges, we might feel that our actions don't count for much. Yet the kind of responses we make, and the degree to which we believe they count, are shaped by the way we think and feel about hope. Here's an example.

Jane cared deeply about the world and was horrified by what she saw happening. She regarded human beings as a lost cause, as so stuck in our destructive ways that she saw the complete wrecking of our world as inevitable. "What's the point of doing anything if it won't change what we're heading for?" she asked.

Active Hope doesn't require
optimism

Intention

The word *hope* has two different meanings. The first involves hopefulness, where our preferred outcome seems reasonably likely to happen. If we require this kind of hope before we commit ourselves to an action, our response gets blocked in areas where we don't rate our chances too high. This is what happened for Jane — she felt so hopeless she didn't see the point of even trying to do anything.

The second meaning is about desire. When Jane was asked what she'd like to have happen in our world, without hesitation she described the future she hoped for, the kind of world she longed for so much it hurt. It is this kind of hope that starts our journey — knowing what we hope for and what we'd like, or love, to take place. It is what we do with this hope that really makes the difference. Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for.

Active Hope is a practice. Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we *do* rather than *have*. It is a process we can apply to any situation, and it involves three key steps. First, we take a clear view of reality; second, we identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we'd like things to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed; and third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction.

Since Active Hope doesn't require our optimism, we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we choose what we aim to bring about, act for, or express. Rather than weighing our chances and proceeding only when we feel hopeful, we focus on our intention and let it be our guide. Q

THE GIFT IS BOTH GIVEN AND RECEIVED

Most books addressing global issues focus on describing either the problems we face or the solutions needed. While we touch on both of these, our focus is on how we strengthen and support our intention

to act, so that we can best play our part, whatever that may be, in the healing of our world.

Since we each look out onto a different corner of the planet and bring with us our own particular portfolio of interests, skills, and experience, we are touched by different concerns and called to respond in different ways. The contribution each of us makes to the healing of our world is our gift of Active Hope. The purpose of this book is to strengthen our ability to give the best gift we can: our finest response to the multifaceted crisis of sustainability.

When we become aware of an emergency and rise to the occasion, something powerful gets switched on inside us. We activate our sense of purpose and discover strengths we didn't even know we had. Being able to make a difference is powerfully enlivening; it makes our lives feel more worthwhile. So when we practice Active Hope, we not only give but we receive in so many ways as well. The approach we describe in this book is not about being dutiful or worthy so much as it is about stepping into a state of aliveness that makes our lives profoundly satisfying.

THREE STORIES OF OUR TIME

In any great adventure, there are always obstacles in the way. The first hurdle is just to be aware that we, as a civilization and as a species, are facing a crisis point. When we look at mainstream society, and the priorities expressed or goals pursued, it is hard to see much evidence of this awareness. In the first chapter we try to make sense of the huge gap between the scale of the emergency and the size of the response by describing how our perceptions are shaped by the story we identify with. We describe three stories, or versions of reality, each acting as a lens through which we see and understand what's going on.

In the first of these, Business as Usual, the defining assumption

is that there is little need to change the way we live. Economic growth is regarded as essential for prosperity, and the central plot is about getting ahead. The second story, the Great Unraveling, draws attention to the disasters that Business as Usual is taking us toward, as well as those it has already brought about. It is an account, backed by evidence, of the collapse of ecological and social systems, the disturbance of climate, the depletion of resources, and the mass extinction of species.

The third story is held and embodied by those who know the first story is leading us to catastrophe and who refuse to let the second story have the last word. Involving the emergence of new and creative human responses, it is about the epochal transition from an industrial society committed to economic growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the healing and recovery of our world. We call this story the Great Turning. The central plot is finding and offering our gift of Active Hope.

There is no point in arguing about which of these stories is "right." All three are happening. The question is which one we want to put our energy behind. The first chapter is about looking at where we are and choosing the story we want our lives to express. The rest of the book focuses on how we strengthen our capacity to contribute to the Great Turning in the best way we can.

THE SPIRAL OF THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS

The journey that begins in chapter 2, and that continues throughout the book, is based on an empowerment process we have offered in workshops for decades. Initially developed by Joanna in the late in 1970s, it evolved and spread, with the vital contribution of a growing number of colleagues. It has been used on every continent except Antarctica, has been conducted in many different languages, and has involved hundreds of thousands of people of different

faiths, backgrounds, and age groups. Because this approach helps us restore our sense of connection with the web of life and with one another, it is known as the Work That Reconnects.³ Through helping us to develop our inner resources and our outer community, it strengthens our capacity to face disturbing information and respond with unexpected resilience. In our experience of doing this work, again and again we've seen energy and commitment mobilized as people rise to their role in the Great Turning.

We've written this book so that you can experience the transformative power of the Work That Reconnects and draw on it to expand your capacity to respond creatively to the crises of our time. The chapters ahead guide you through the four stages of the spiral it moves through: Coming from Gratitude, Honoring Our Pain for the World, Seeing with New Eyes, and Going Forth. The journey through these stages has a strengthening effect that deepens with each repetition.

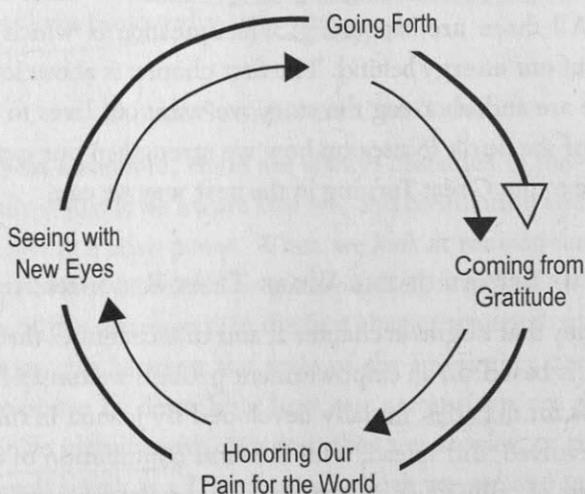


Figure 1. The spiral of the Work That Reconnects

While rich rewards can be reaped while journeying alone, the benefits of the Work That Reconnects grow quickly with company. We encourage you to seek others with whom to read this book or share notes along the way. Bringing our concerns into the open is a key part of facing the mess we are in, though for reasons we will explore, fear often prevents this type of sharing. We will examine what makes it so difficult to talk about our planetary crisis and provide tools that support us in having the empowering conversations our times call for.

We encourage you to gain familiarity with the tools we describe by trying them out. Scattered throughout the book are "Try This" boxes inviting you to experience practices we find valuable both for personal use and in groups.

WHAT WE BRING

At the heart of this book is a collaborative model of power based on appreciating how much more we can achieve working together than as separate individuals. The story of our coauthorship is a fine example. The seedling idea sprouted out of a conversation about lessons we had learned from our experience of the Work That Reconnects. What surprised and excited us both was how often, in the many hours of talking that followed, insights would surface that neither of us had received before. While the core framework, concepts, and practices of the Work That Reconnects are well tested, we have been able to enrich, hone, and add to them in ways that bring together a great deal of material not published elsewhere.

There is an old saying that two eyes are better than one, since out of two different perspectives comes the depth of three-dimensional vision. As coauthors we come from different backgrounds, live on different continents, and draw from different sources, all of which

has contributed to the rich synergy we have experienced and that is expressed through our writing.

Joanna is a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. She has taught at several universities in the United States and has traveled the world, offering trainings to enliven and empower our responses to planetary crisis. In her early eighties, she lives in Berkeley, California. She has been an activist for more than five decades; is a respected voice in the movements for peace, justice, and ecology; and has either written or cowritten a dozen books, most of which have been translated into other languages.

Chris is a medical doctor who has specialized in the psychology of behavior change, resilience, and recovery from addiction. Living in the United Kingdom, he works as a coach, trains health professionals in behavioral medicine, and has pioneered the role of resilience training in promoting positive mental health. An activist since his teenage years and now in his late forties, he has taught and written about the psychology of sustainability for more than twenty years.

The two of us met in 1989 at a weeklong training led by Joanna in Scotland. Called "The Power of Our Deep Ecology," it was a life-changing event for Chris. We have worked together many times since. This book describes the work we share and cherish. It is offered not as a blueprint solution to our problems but as both a set of practices and insights to draw strength from and as a mythic journey to be transformed by. Rebecca Solnit writes:

An emergency is a separation from the familiar, a sudden emergence into a new atmosphere, one that often demands we ourselves rise to the occasion.⁴

When we face the mess we're in, we realize that Business as Usual can't go on. What helps us rise to the occasion is experiencing

our rootedness in something much larger than ourselves. The poet Rabindranath Tagore expressed this idea in these words:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world.⁵

This is the stream we are following. It points us toward a way of life that enriches rather than depletes our world. It takes us to our gift of Active Hope. When we face the mess we're in by offering this gift, our lives become enriched too.