

## Active Hope, January 4, 2015

### Thought to Ponder:

“To be alive in this beautiful, self-organizing universe –  
to participate in the dance of life with senses to perceive it,  
lungs that breathe it, organs that draw nourishment from it –  
is a wonder beyond words.”

– Joanna Macy

### Sermon: Active Hope

(c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

Today's sermon stands alone, but it is also the second part of a two-sermon series on the work of Joanna Macy. A wise woman of our times, Joanna has touched my life, helping me to learn some tools to keep moving forward, even when the work is discouraging, even when the future appears but a disillusioning fog to me, even when it is difficult for me to see what difference my labors make.

I studied with her in person last fall and will do so again this spring. In between, I have been immersing myself in her writing. Macy has been an activist much of her adult life, which stretches to her mid-80s, and she is still going strong, training and organizing, imagining a different world, and speaking and acting to create that world. Her work began in the anti-nuclear movement – anti nuclear weapons and anti nuclear power – but it has broadened to work on behalf of the planet itself, our beautiful, vexing, suffering planet, our good earth home.

I ended that first sermon with a prayer Macy wrote to the beings of the future, for she understands her work to be for the future ones we will never see, but can only hope will be present to receive the fruits of our labors.

*O you who come after, help us remember: We are your ancestors. Fill us with gladness for the work that must be done.*” (*Prayers for a Thousand Years*, Roberts and Amidon, eds., HarperSanFrancisco, p. 158.)

So with gladness for the work that must be done, let us explore Joanna Macy's work a little further, beginning with what she describes as the stories of our times.

Activist and former Harvard Business School professor David Korten says, “When the stories a society shares are out of tune with its circumstances, they can become self-limiting, even a threat to survival. That is our current situation.” (Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p. 13) Joanna enters

into her activism by considering three stories that describe our times.

The first story she calls “business as usual.” This story sees the great technological and economic strides people have made, particularly since the industrial revolution, and says we are on the right track. This story measures success by continuous expansion, economic growth, and increasing markets and products. This story centers on the self at the expense of the larger world, encouraging people to “get ahead,” to find mates, marry, and have children, and to consume more and more stuff.

During a walk on a 50-degree early November morning, I run into my neighbor. We both remark on the beautiful weather. But when I say the warm temperatures are creepy because of what they might signify about climate change, my neighbor replies, with great confidence, “Oh, we have nothing to worry about.” His was a “business as usual” response.

The “business as usual” story encourages us to pillage the earth to assuage our hunger for endless consumption, with no concern for sustainability. The “business as usual” story also relies on our feelings of inadequacy by telling us that whatever we have isn't enough. We need more clothes, or bigger houses, or a different hair color, or better makeup, or sweeter perfume. We need a bigger television and the newest phone. No matter how much we consume and accumulate, it is never enough.

Joanna calls the second story “the great unraveling.” In this story, the world is falling apart. This story interprets economic decline, climate change, mass extinction of species, social division and wars, and depletion of resources to mean the earth is dying and taking us with it. Grim statistics support the conclusions of the great unraveling story. But, all by itself, the great unraveling story is enervating because it depresses people to the point of paralysis, rendering us unable to take necessary action to make changes in behavior and consciousness.

I tend to gravitate to this second story, and I understand well how paralyzing the grim picture can feel. That's actually why I began to study Joanna Macy's work and trained with her in a week-long workshop last fall. I needed to tap into what Joanna calls “active hope,” which is present in the third story we tell ourselves about our times. And that is what she (and others) call the “Great Turning.”

Joanna reminds us that 10000 years ago, the Agricultural Revolution gradually led to a radical shift in the ways human beings lived. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution created the same kind of radical change, though far more quickly. Another such radical shift is underway. It's hard for us to see, because we are in the middle of it; we are part of it. Some call it the Ecological or Environmental Revolution, some call it the Sustainability Revolution. Some, including Joanna Macy, call it the Great Turning.

In their book, *Active Hope*, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone write: *“In the story of the Great Turning, what's catching on is commitment to act for the sake of life on Earth as well as the vision, courage, and solidarity to do so. Social and technological innovations converge, mobilizing people's energy, attention, creativity, and determination in what Paul Hawken describes as 'the largest social movement in history.' In his book Blessed Unrest, he writes, 'I soon realized my initial estimate of 100,000 organizations was off by at least a factor of ten, and I now believe there are over one – and maybe even two – million organizations working towards ecological sustainability and social justice.’”* (p. 27)

The Great Turning involves three kinds of action – and our congregation is involved in all three. They are “holding actions” – work undertaken to protect what is left. Holding actions can take many shapes: campaigning, taking legal actions, withholding our support from certain products or behaviors (or, conversely offering our support to products or behaviors that help sustain our planet). We can attend rallies, lobby government officials, sign petitions, and boycott. We can, literally, put our bodies in the paths of bulldozers and chain saws. Attending the climate march in New York, as some in our congregation did last fall, is an example of a holding action.

The second aspect to the Great Turning is creating and adopting life-sustaining systems and practices. Put simply, we change the way we live. Our congregation built as green a building as possible, with solar panels on the roof. We recycle, compost, and conserve water here, and encourage parishioners to do so at home. We send teams to work on Habitat for Humanity houses. In aggregate, we are driving smaller, more fuel-efficient cars. Many of us curtail air travel, walk or ride bikes, and car pool to consume less fossil fuels. We garden, organically, or purchase food from local organic farmers, and eat plant-based diets as much as possible. Those are all life-sustaining systems and practices that have made their way into the mainstream in this congregation and in many sectors of the world beyond these walls.

The third aspect to the Great Turning is a shift in consciousness. Joanna Macy harkens back to Apollo 8 in 1968, the mission from which the first photographs of earth were taken from outer space. Coupled with a growing awareness of our impact on our planet, those photographs have helped us to see ourselves as integrally connected to Earth – our planet one living system of which we are a part. Macy and Johnstone write: *“No longer just citizens of this country or that, we are discovering a deeper, collective identity. As many indigenous traditions have taught for generations, we are part of the Earth.”* (p. 31)

We see that shift in the Seventh Principle of the UUA, which is to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. And we see it in this church's Mission Statement, which is, in part, to care for the Earth. We see it in our emerging understanding that we are

an integral, interwoven, interdependent part of the earth. And, as such, our actions to heal and protect are part of the earth trying to heal itself.

Joanna Macy loves to describe how rainforest activist John Seed speaks of his work: “*When asked how he handles despair,*” she writes, “*...John Seed replied, 'I try to remember that it's not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rainforest. Rather, I am part of the rainforest protecting itself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking.'*” (p.94)

We are all part of the Great Turning, even if the only thing we do is to sit patiently through this sermon. Most of us do much more than that, in actions large and small.

But, as we drift along in a sea of discouraging and often frightening news, how do we keep hope alive? How do we sustain the energy to continue to move forward? Joanna Macy's answers to those questions are what I find especially compelling.

She has conceived of a spiral – she calls it the “spiral of the work that reconnects” – that I find myself returning to again and again. One enters into the spiral through the door of gratitude. Always begin with gratitude: Gratitude for the privilege of being alive in these times, gratitude for the people near and far who take up this work, gratitude for our beautiful planet. Sometimes, she says, the only gratitude she can muster in a given moment is gratitude for the ones who revealed the terrible information she needed to know. The Senate releases a horrific report on torture? Thank you for putting that report together. Thank you for releasing it to the public. Always begin with gratitude. From there one moves into the next sector of the spiral, called “honoring our pain.”

Macy and Johnstone write: “*Dedicating time and attention to honoring our pain for the world ensures that there is space to hear our sorrow, grief, and outrage... Admitting the depths of our anguish, even to ourselves, takes us into culturally forbidden territory. From an early age, we've been told to pull ourselves together, to cheer up or shut up. By honoring our pain for the world, we break through the taboos that silence our distress. When the activating siren of inner alarm is no longer muffled or shut out, something gets switched on inside us. It is our survival response.*”

*...Our pain for the world not only alerts us to danger, but also reveals our profound caring. And this caring derives from our interconnectedness with all life. We need not fear it.” (p. 38)*

After beginning with gratitude and honoring our pain, the third sector of the spiral comes into view: “Seeing with new eyes.” In this sector, one opens one's ears and eyes to the possibilities for action, seeing what is already being done, re-visioning the world and imagining how one might help birth that

new world.

When I participated in the workshop last fall, Joanna split us into several groups and gave us 15 or 20 minutes to list all the ways we could think of that people were working on the Great Turning. In just that short amount of time, each group listed an astonishing and inspiring array of programs, ideas, and actions.

Seeing with new eyes allows us to find our ways to plug in, adding our creativity, voices, and muscles to the mix. Then we are ready for the last slice of the spiral: “going forth” – engaging in the work that is calling.

Let's hear about it in song:

That's the Way We Climb,  
Words and Music by Jud Caswell

looking at the mountain and it seems too steep to climb  
looking at the mountain and it seems to steep to climb  
it takes a lot of courage and it takes a lot of time  
put one foot in front of the other, one foot in front of the other  
one foot in front of the other, that's the way we climb.

looking at the sadness and it seems too deep to mend  
looking at the sadness and it seems too deep to mend  
look into a stranger's eyes until you see a friend  
put on hand in the other, one hand in the other  
one hand in the other, that's the way we mend.

looking at our differences it seems too hard to love  
looking at our differences it seems too hard to love  
but everyone's the same about the most important stuff  
listen to each other, listen to each other  
listen to each other, that's the way we love.

looking at yourself it seems there's nothing you can do  
looking at yourself it seems there's nothing you can do  
but if you do the best you can then I will do it too  
lean upon each other, lean upon each other

lean upon each other, that's what we can do.

looking at the distance and it seems too far to go  
looking at the distance and it seems too far to go  
the road that leads to justice may be longer than we know  
put one foot in front of the other, one foot in front of the other  
one foot in front of the other, that's the way we go

That is the spiral. And because it is a spiral, one begins again and again, with gratitude, and works through revolution after revolution.

Here is what I have found since studying Joanna Macy's work: The three world views she presents: "business as usual," "the great unraveling," and "the Great Turning" help me to locate which view I am hearing presented at any given time, but also which story I am telling myself. That's a helpful reminder to turn my attention and focus to the story I want to participate in – the Great Turning. The spiral, beginning with gratitude and moving to honoring our pain, seeing with new eyes, and going forth, gives me the tools I need to keep hope alive and to move with it. The spiral reminds me to re-engage with the work, time after time.

Trusting the Spiral, by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone

*Active Hope is not wishful thinking.  
Active Hope is not waiting to be rescued  
by the Lone Ranger or by some savior.  
Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life  
on whose behalf we act.  
We belong to this world.  
The web of life is calling us forth at this time.  
We've come a long way and are here to play our part.  
With Active Hope we realize there are adventures in store,  
strengths to discover, and comrades to link arms with.  
Active Hope is a readiness to engage.  
Active Hope is a readiness to discover the strengths  
in ourselves and in others,  
a readiness to discover the reasons for hope  
and the occasions for love.  
A readiness to discover the size and strength of our hearts,*

*a quickness of mind, our steadiness of purpose,  
our own authority, our love of life,  
the liveliness of our curiosity,  
the unsuspecting deep well of patience and diligence,  
the keenness of our senses, and our capacity to lead.  
None of these can be discovered in an armchair or without risk.  
(p. 35)*

Here is to hope, then, active hope, for the earth that calls to us, and for us, who call tenderly and lovingly to our earth, our blue-green ball, our planet home.