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Serving the Earth, Serving One Another

An Interview with Joanna Macy

In a world of spiraling ecological and social crises, where does one find hope? Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy talks with Tellus Senior Fellow Allen White about how understanding the interdependence of our world prepares us for the fight to improve it.

You are one of the best known scholars joining systems theory with deep ecology and Buddhist teachings. What are some of the key experiences that shaped your worldview and activism?

I grew up in New York City from the mid-1930s through World War II. Most of my classmates at the Lycée Français, where I attended school, were war refugees whose parents had fled the breathtaking collapse of their home countries. This exposure brought me a sense both of instability *and* of a shared world that binds us in both plight and choices.

Meanwhile, as we moved from one apartment to another at the edge of East Harlem, not far from school, family life for me was overshadowed by the tyranny of my father and fears for my mother. I found comfort and some peace of mind at the Sunday services of our liberal Protestant church. Even more restorative were the long summers spent at my grandfather's farm in western New York, some distance from the Congregational church where he served as preacher. When help in the fields was needed, I enjoyed the physical work, and when it wasn't, I enjoyed wandering off into the buzzing and humming vitality of the natural world.

In college, I majored in religion, which back then was almost entirely biblical history. The spiritual calling I had felt in my teenage years did not survive. I found God being defined out of existence by the early church fathers. Possessor of all the power and wisdom, He would always have the last word, while I was trapped in a dead-end world. Furthermore, in the post-World War II period, theologians tended to reject any nature mysticism, regarding it as a dangerous reminder of the Nazi use of mythic cults of blood and soil. So before I graduated, before my natural ecstasies of being alive in a living universe where suffocated, I turned away from the faith of my fathers.

Fifteen years later in 1965, with three young children and a husband bearing responsibilities for the American Peace Corps, I found myself in India working with Tibetan refugees. They were fleeing over the Himalayas to escape the ravages of the Chinese occupation. I fell in love with their humanity, their natural openness amidst enormous suffering. They had lost everything—their culture, their land—arriving destitute and sick, exposed to the diseases of the hotter climate. Yet they had this serenity, a readiness to encounter and be one with the world, evident in the biggest smiles I had ever encountered. A community of lamas, monks, and lay people from Eastern Tibet drew me in from the beginning, and a friendship grew that has only deepened over the intervening decades.

In their company, I grew to learn and love the Buddha Dharma (as Buddhists call their faith) and also to love my world—even to experience the world loving me back. This capacity would become intrinsic to my life and work, even in a time when we humans are decimating the living body of our planet. To serve Earth in collaboration with other beings, humans and other species, is a source of incomparable gratitude.

Both systems thinking and Buddhism have infused the holistic view of the human condition found in your writing, teaching, and activism. How did you come to grasp a synergy between the two?

Eventually returning to the US, I entered graduate school in preparation for teaching world religions at the university level. Systems theory hadn't occurred to me—I didn't even know what it was. The connection came through a fortuitous turning point in my intellectual and spiritual journey. At the outset of my third year of graduate study, I asked for a blessing from His Holiness Karmapa, leader of a major Tibetan lineage. For the next three weeks, every night brought instead of sleep a remorseless torrent of visions and comprehensions, with images of reticulating branches, neural networks, and widening deltas that left me both exhausted and exhilarated.

Toward the end of that period, I happened to stop by a seminar on systems theory and philosophy. I instantly knew I had to stay. Drawing on the work of Ervin Laszlo, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, and others among that early generation of systems thinkers, I was stunned by the convergence between the principles they discovered and those of the early Buddhist Dharma. My growing fascination led to my doctoral dissertation on the resonances between these two schools of thought, especially their recognition of reciprocal, nonlinear causality. This work has had a lasting impact on my life and work.

Given your long exploration of these two frameworks, how have you come to see the relationship between science and spirituality?

Science has been dominant, of course, in the modern era. Its technology has driven the capitalist corporate economy in service to industrial growth at the expense of ecosystem and human health. Too often, science has been co-opted to create pesticides, fissionable materials, fossil fuels, and tools of mass surveillance. Scientists have long claimed their discoveries are value-free,

resulting from pure objectivity and insulated from our fears and our dreams. But this, we now understand, does not stand the test of reality. We twist our perceptions by pretending they can be value-free. A case in point is the American Psychological Association which has allowed its members to serve as consultants to the military in its use of torture.

You have suggested that experiencing the pain of humanity’s mistreatment of Earth can open a path to a better destination for people and planet. Would you expand on this hopeful idea—how does empathy connect the individual with our collective destiny?

At the time of my graduate studies, I was active in opposition to nuclear energy production. Research I did for a citizens’ lawsuit shocked me with discovery of the dangers of operating reactors even without an accident, especially for power plant workers and nearby residents. These hazards include increased incidence of miscarriage, birth defects, stillbirths, solid tumors, and leukemia. However, except for the few engaged in legal action against the plant operators, ordinary people had little appetite for discussing such hazards and, more broadly, the destruction of our natural world. This lack of human response, which many of us interpreted as public apathy, was difficult to reconcile with the powerful human instinct for self-protection and self-preservation.

The concept of “psychic numbing,” developed by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, struck me as pertinent. I noted that people were hardly apathetic in their immediate care of their families even as they averted their gaze from the industrial harm inflicted on natural systems. I learned that the word apathy comes from the Greek *apatheia*, which combines *a* (meaning “without”) and *pathos* (meaning “passion or suffering”). In other words, apathy can mean the refusal or inability to suffer mental pain. From the systems perspective, this is tantamount to blocking feedback, which is eventually crippling if not suicidal, for the capacity to register feedback is essential to the health and survival of every living system.

As a meditation teacher, I began to experiment with groups, seeking ways for us to understand the avoidance and repression of mental distress. For example, when and how do we choose to validate and tolerate moral pain and not block it out? We recognized that despair is what we feared the most to face—and as we confronted and explored despair, we called what we did “despair work.” We discovered almost immediately that when we chose as a group to allow and express feelings of grief, outrage, or fear about what is happening to our world, that a sense of liberation emerged, along with increased energy and alertness. Instead of being mired in despair, the opposite occurred. We had tapped into the depths of our caring, and that caring reveals a mutual belonging.

You describe the path toward social action as a dynamic Spiral of gratitude, honoring pain, seeing with fresh eyes, and going forth. Could you tell us a little more about this dynamic?

We see it as a Spiral instead of a cycle because every time you go around, you experience each station in a deeper or wider way. You start with gratitude, taking stock of the immediate gifts of being alive in a living Earth, with air to breathe, sensations to inform, and connections to enjoy and respond to. Amidst the mounting uncertainties surrounding us, pausing for gratitude grounds and steadies us so that we can turn our attention to what is hard to take in. Now to name some of the losses and dreads of our lives today brings a sense of closeness, a release from isolation. At some level, we all know that there has never been anything like what we are facing now in terms of the contamination, suffering, and burning of our world. To unburden the heart reveals its immensity. You are, in effect, birthing an interconnected self, a highly relational self, what the deep ecology movement called the ecological self. This is what mystics and indigenous people also hold to be true: we are our world.

Just as you have sensed the pain of what we are doing to the natural world, this same pain widens your sense of who you are: not just a competitor looking for her own place in the sun but a being interwoven with all others in our planet's web of life. You can count on this kinship with all beings for its reciprocity. As you work to serve the world, the Earth is supporting and serving you.

Can the concept of the Spiral also apply to organizational transformation?

Yes, that is my experience. Gratitude arises as we reflect together on what drew us to this organization in the first place and what we appreciate in each other. This fosters solidarity and trust. It also generates honesty and a readiness to see what's not working and to be specific about what you find discouraging and/or pointless. Once you have taken the first step of gratitude and seen it open the door to mutuality between you and the organization, that clears the way for looking at root assumptions and routines that block fulfillment. Seeing with fresh eyes opens new possibilities for both the organization and the larger constellation of the parties affected by its choices, including distant suppliers and future generations.

To engage the imagination and foster social transformation, the Work That Reconnects network depicts three stories: Business-as-Usual, the Great Unraveling, and the Great Turning. What are the basic plots of these scenarios, and how in your experience does recognizing them serve social change?

These three stories align very closely, I am told, with Tellus's global scenarios framework: Conventional Worlds, Barbarization, and Global Transitions. The first of these, Business-as-Usual, which we also call the Industrial Growth Society, is well underway, reinforced by extractive economies and speculative financial markets. We hear less about the other two because it is not profitable for corporate-controlled media to report on those forces overtaking the current system.

The future remains indeterminate. We cannot know whether the Great Unraveling or the Great Turning will prevail, but we can choose which we want to put our lives behind. So when I say, “Yes, the Great Unraveling is happening,” I do so not out of resignation but as a wake-up call. Awareness of it serves motivation. The knife edge of uncertainty can call us to greater attention and immediacy. I consider it a waste of time to dwell on the question of whether I am hopeful or hopeless. There’s no such word in Buddhism; it distracts us from the present moment and all the possibilities it offers.

GTI stresses the importance of a Global Citizens’ Movement—a meta-movement linking discreet social movements across issues and geographies—as a necessary catalyst for change toward a great transition. How do you see the prospects for such a movement? And perhaps more importantly, how can we hasten its coalescence?

Yes, the convergence of movements for justice, peace, and ecological sustainability is absolutely essential for the survival of complex lifeforms, and I see it underway wherever I look. From the viewpoint of mutual causality, all these disparate movements can serve and undergird each other synergistically. I am encouraged by the embrace of intersectionality guiding many activists today who link their feminist work, for example, with their work against racism and environmental degradation. All these once-competitive elements begin to form an exquisite living mosaic, analogous to the vision of Indra’s net in Mahayana Buddhism, where all the jewels reflect and complete each other, creating a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. I believe what is emerging is a planetary nonviolence at the intersection of social justice-based, faith-based, and Earth-based activism. And that’s what makes this a wonderful historical moment to be alive in.

About the Interviewee



Joanna Macy is an eco-philosopher and scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. A key voice in the movements for peace, justice, and environment, she interweaves her scholarship with five decades of activism. She created the Work That Reconnects Network, a program that offers a framework and methodology for personal and social change. Her books include *Buddhism at Work*, *Dharma and Development*, *Greening of the Self*, *Widening Circles*, and the co-authored *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy*. She holds a PhD in Religious Studies from Syracuse University.

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