

Joanna Macy, PhD: The Tireless Voice of a Wise Elder Activist

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Author Note

The opinions expressed here are those of the author alone. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

Abstract

One is never too old to be a catalyst for positive change. Indeed, the voices of our elders are needed now more than ever. Joanna Macy is a prime example. The seasoned activist, still writing, continues to advocate for social and environmental justice as she elucidates the intersection of Buddhism and systems science. The challenge for humanity is to awaken, demonstrate care for one another over financial gain, change our thinking and behavior, and celebrate life on Earth.

Keywords: Buddhism, ecology, social justice, environmental justice, systems theory

Introduction

The most remarkable feature of this historical moment is not that we are on the way to destroying our world—we've actually been on the way quite a while. It is that we are beginning to wake up, as from a millennia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves, and to each other. Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act. We belong to this world.

– Joanna Macy
Joannamacy.net

This is how Joanna Macy, PhD sees humanity at this time in the story of our existence.

Joanna is a visionary, anti-nuclear activist, writer, deep ecologist, systems theorist, teacher, Buddhist scholar and, at 90, a wise elder. It has been a long and circuitous life journey, woven by the threads of spiritual seeking, insatiable curiosity and passion for justice and activism. Her work “addresses psychological and spiritual issues of the nuclear age, the cultivation of ecological awareness, and the fruitful resonance between Buddhist thought and postmodern science.” (*Joanna Macy and Her Work*: www.joannamacy.net)

For 40 years Joanna taught her signature program *The Work That Reconnects*, a practice that: . . . helps people transform despair and apathy into constructive, collaborative action. It brings a new way of seeing the world as our larger living body. This perspective frees us from the assumptions and attitudes that now threaten the continuity of life on Earth. (*Joanna Macy and Her Work*: www.joannamacy.net).

Put another way, the work guides participants to “find solidarity and courage to act, despite rapidly worsening social and ecological conditions.” (*Coming Back to Life*, p. xviii) Her work continues, unabated, through the numerous facilitators trained to teach it. To provide a full portrait of Joanna Macy’s important leadership in these critically important areas, this article presents a recent interview with her. The interview Joanna Macy granted for this Journal article in August 2019 is excerpted below following a biographical sketch.

Background

Joanna Rogers, a Depression era child and the middle of three children, was born in California and grew up in New York City, where she was educated at the Lycée Français. Her father, a Yale graduate, chose a life outside the Protestant ministry of his forbears and became a stock broker and an angry, controlling and withholding individual.

Life in New York City was fraught with tension, and Joanna longed for peace. She felt most at home at her paternal grandfather’s farm, east of Buffalo. The seven summers she spent there from ages 9 to 16 would inspire the growing girl’s lifelong bond to nature and spirituality, reinforced by her relationship with a maple tree and a horse.

Joanna’s troubled teenage years coincided with World War II. She found refuge inside New York City’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine and at a conference for young Presbyterians where she felt a deepening connection to God and Jesus. During the summer of 1946, before entering Wellesley College, Joanna participated in a Presbyterian youth program where she led worship services and taught Bible School, which influenced her academic choices.

At Wellesley, she pursued a major in Biblical History, only to become disheartened in her senior year by neo-orthodox theology and its dialectics. What once had felt like her vocation had come to feel burdensome and suffocating. When a favored professor noticed her resistance and challenged her to relinquish her Christianity, she realized she could choose to walk away. It would take Joanna years --- through worldly travels, studying international conflicts, marriage to Fran Macy, mothering three children, life overseas and engagement with Tibetan refugees --- to redefine her identity and find the Buddhist path that truly spoke to her soul.

Upon returning to Washington, DC in 1969, Joanna committed herself to civil rights work and anti-war action. Hungry for intellectual stimulation, she took graduate courses in world religions, particularly Buddhist philosophy and, in 1972, when her husband’s work took the family to Syracuse, she entered Syracuse University’s graduate program in religion. In 1974, Joanna happened upon and enrolled in a Religion Department seminar on general systems theory. “Almost immediately I saw that the systems view of reality fit the patterns I had been seeing...flows of energy, matter, information--flows that interacted in coherent patterns, patterns that gave rise to cells and galaxies and minds.” (*Widening Circles*, p.142)

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Studying systems theory, a Western discipline, enlivened and consumed Joanna, for it confirmed an ancient Buddhist Dharma (teaching) she had received, “That the ground of being is fluid. That it is empty of everything but relationships. Systems theory...brought language and concepts and empirical data, showing how these relationships constitute our world, and how they work.” (*Widening Circles*, p. 142) It was this confluence of Buddhism and science that she chose for her dissertation topic.

A turning point in Joanna’s life came in 1975. Alarmed by the OPEC oil crisis, the Macy family began to examine the issues of living in a wasteful society vs. conserving resources and cultivating ways to live in harmony with the natural world. Their reflections took place in community, from local social gatherings in Syracuse to a Movement for a New Society Quaker workshop on simple living in Philadelphia. Joanna writes:

How is it for us to live in a country that consumes half the world’s resources? In the group we looked at the wasteful clutter that clogs our lives. We considered our truer needs--the need for community and creative work. And we took a fresh look at how we were actually spending our energy, money, and time. (*Widening Circles*, pp. 151-152)

The workshop experience prompted the Macys to sell their suburban home and create a cooperative household within the city. Welcoming housemates from outside their family and sharing food costs and communal responsibilities freed up time and energy to devote to studies, and get more involved in social issues and travels.

Joanna traveled back to India to immerse herself in the Tibetan community-in-exile her refugee friends had established. She relates an ancient prophecy shared by one of her teachers that deeply resonated with her:

There comes a time when all life on Earth is in danger. Barbarian powers have arisen. Although they waste their wealth in preparations to annihilate each other, they have much in common: weapons of unfathomable devastation and technologies that lay waste the world. It is now, when the future of all beings hangs by the frailest of threads, that the kingdom of Shambala emerges.

You cannot go there, for it is not a place. It exists in the hearts and minds of the Shambala warriors...Now comes the time when great courage is required of the Shambala warriors, moral and physical courage. For they must go into the very heart of the barbarian power and dismantle the weapons. To remove these weapons...they must go into the corridors of power where the decisions are made...These weapons are made by the human mind. So they can be *un*made by the human mind! The Shambala warriors know that the dangers that threaten life on Earth do not come from evil deities or extraterrestrial powers. They arise from our own choices and relationships.

So, now, the Shambala warriors must go into training...They train in the use of two weapons...compassion and insight. Both are necessary. We need this first one because it provides us the fuel...to act on behalf of other beings. But by itself it can burn us out. So we need the second as well, which is insight into the dependent co-arising of all things. It lets us see that the battle is not between good people and bad people, for the line between good and evil runs through every human heart. We realize that we are interconnected, as in a web, and that each act with pure motivation affects the entire web, bringing consequences

we cannot measure or even see...We need as well the heat of compassion, our openness to the world's pain. (*Widening Circles*, pp. 161-162)

As the 1970's progressed, Joanna's knowledge of humanity's capacity to destroy our world was expanding. From her son Jack's studies in environmental engineering, Joanna learned about thermal pollution from nuclear reactors. A Cousteau Society symposium barraged her with many threats to the biosphere: decimation of marine life from oil spills and plutonium pollution, dying plankton, radioactive contamination from nuclear power plants, industrial resistance to environmental responsibility, desertification, acid rain, drought. Joanna sank into grief. What released her malaise was learning from and connecting with others in the anti-nuclear power movement and the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka. There, Ghandi and Buddhist-inspired village organizing strategies showed how working from the bottom up and trusting the intelligence of the people could create positive change.

In 1978, taking lessons from grassroots activism, wisdom from East and West and her spiritual stirrings, Joanna initiated the workshops that would eventually be known as *The Work That Reconnects*. More than 40 years later, the workshop exercises invite participants of all ages and backgrounds "into fresh relationships with our world, and not only arouse our passion to protect life, but also steady us in a mutual belonging more real than our fears and even hopes." (*Coming Back to Life* p. xxiii)

Joanna continued writing, teaching, and speaking across the globe about our living Earth. Her 1991 book, *World As Lover, World As Self* begins with these words, "Our planet is in trouble. It is hard to go anywhere without being confronted by the wounding of our world, the tearing of the very fabric of life." After referencing the 1986 chemical fire in Basel and the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster, she continues:

In the face of what is happening, how do we avoid feeling overwhelmed and just giving up, turning to the many diversions and demands of our consumer societies? It is essential that we develop our inner resources. We have to learn to look at things as they are, painful and overwhelming as that may be, for no healing can begin until we are fully present to our world, until we learn to sustain the gaze. (*World As Lover, World As Self*; pp. 3-4)

Interview

In an interview with this author in August 2019 in Berkeley, California, Joanna Macy shared her perceptions of Earth, human beings, and our responsibility to repair the damage we have wreaked.

What grounded you early on and how did it influence you or inspire your life's work?

A spiritual outlook and practice has been important to me from the beginning. I come from a long line of liberal Protestant preachers, Congregationalists and Presbyterians depending on where they were setting up their church, New England or western New York. From that and from my experiences with the New England student Christian movement, which politically radicalized me. This was right after the second World War which brought me into keener awareness of political and social challenges. But then I left --- I walked out on the institutional

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church. It was the study of the early church fathers that I could not stomach. They were an argumentative bunch determining who was right and who was wrong, meanwhile excluding the rest of humanity. After dropping the studying of the faith of my fathers, I felt somewhat at sea until 15 years later with three children and a husband helping run the American Peace Corps in India. There I encountered the Tibetan refugees. I was working with them, for them, so they could stay together --- both lay people and lamas and monks --- and not be scattered into road gangs and residential schools. In serving them, my life was changed by their way of being human and from then on I was devoted to the study and practice of Buddhist teachings.

How had the early teachings you received inspire your life's work or did it really radically shift when you adopted Buddhism?

It was the same. The Mahayana Buddhist figure of the bodhisattva fit exactly what I heard from Jesus and from the luminaries, the saintly people, the revolutionaries. There was Oscar Romero, Pope Francis now and Laudato Si. All of that was totally right down that faith didn't amount to a hill of beans if it wasn't for making a joyous and just life for everyone.

Do you currently have a spiritual practice? And, if so, what is it?

It's basically Buddhist, but I'm doing it with a heart that grew up with the Sermon on the Mount. I'm laughing now because I was about to do a teaching for a Buddhist magazine. There was a little q & a and one of the questions was, "Is there a non-Buddhist teacher or guide in your life who you would turn to? And I thought, and I just answered, "Jesus," but also two of my great teachers were trees--an apple tree and a maple tree --- and a horse.

You talked about the horse from your grandfather's farm?

Yes, and I also talk about the maple tree. I started the first chapter of that memoir with what she meant to me and then the fact that the Buddha got enlightened under a tree. And Buddha, Jesus, Moses, they were outside all the time! They were being taught by the sun and the moon and the raging storms and the hunger and the thirst and their fellow beings. Part of what's dooming us as a species now is that we've sealed ourselves up indoors. So many people who are making the decisions just go from their office building or their presidential palace or White House to the limousine. That's their out of doors. No wonder we're in a pickle.

Reading your memoir, I was struck again and again by how you recounted very felt-sense images and dreams with great detail and clarity and how you got propelled forward with them. I was thinking particularly about the eight-spoked wheel when Jack was born, and I'm wondering if these kinds of images and dreams continued to arise in you in recent years and through your eldering years.

They've just started up again. I was struck in the last week where my heart is breaking over the loss of the Amazonian rain forest, because I think that we can't lower our greenhouse gas emissions an iota without the rainforest down there. With Bolsonaro's election in Brazil declaring his plan to declare the Amazonian rainforest open for business, I had a vision of two curtains closing over our future — one was the IPCC report, the other was Bolsonaro's purchase. Visions and dreams are very strong in my life right now.

Is there any one in particular in this last week that is coming to you right now that you can share?

Yes. One is very simple. I seem to be having trouble writing as easily. The dream was of a wave at the beach. The sand is marked by many footprints. With the incoming tide, there's a whoosh and a great flat circle of water washes up on the beach and withdraws. And it just wipes out everything. And so I thought, that's what can happen. With the societal collapse that is coming with climate breakdown, it shows all we'll lose. And I shudder. Whether Shakespeare or the Buddha, the cultural gifts of our whole human story could all just go...pshhhh. After that wave receded, it looked as if nothing had ever been there.

As you reflect back on this lifetime of yours--what you've studied, what you've seen, what you've experienced--what are the things you most want your children and grandchildren to receive as your legacy?

That I love this world. I hope they get that from me. That I love this world. And the world loves you back. There's this reciprocity. What's coming so strongly now are the memories of my years at my grandfather's farm. It's where my mind wants to go now. It's interesting how it was just seven summers, just between the ages of 9 and 16, and barely a quarter of those years. I was bored a lot of the time — no kids my age, no programs, no sports, no theatrics, envying my friends who went to camp. But I was there and it's inside me now. I close my eyes and I can almost smell again, hear the thudding of the horses' hooves and the cows' returning from pasture, coming into the barn. This seems so vivid to me. It's been 75 years and it still fills me with longing and gratitude.

And my own Buddhist scholarship, because I'm not just a practitioner. I am teacher, writer, scholar and I've done pretty original things, showing how systems theory and Buddhism are the only highly developed schools of thought that are non-linear. And that's where we have to go now for our planet is a living system. It's alive. When I believed in a God, I could feel supported and guided by God and that's called grace. You can also feel supported by Earth herself and the life of Earth, and her own rising consciousness, especially from a systems perspective. At any rate, there's a kind of pantheism, an animism the sense that everything's alive. And it leads me to know I belong to Earth no matter what, that we're already home.

Yes, thank you. So that leads into this next question. I was looking at activism and the drive to foster positive change, especially regarding Earth and healing right now. In your writing, in talking about the central tenet of the Dharma, what I got was dependent co-arising and I'm wondering if this concept is related to what I've heard called the "hundredth monkey effect," the hypothetical phenomenon in which a new behavior spreads to a whole group once a critical mass adopts it.

Yes, I think it is. The thrust of what the Buddha taught two and a half millennia ago is that we inter-are or inter-being, and that is coming forward now with the teachings of the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. And so the hundredth monkey story illustrates how we influence each other and in that influencing we can shift toward inter-thinking, collective awareness, collective consciousness. That interests me. And, in a way, the hero figure of the bodhisattva is the one who is the boundless heart and sees others as equally valuable as herself or

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himself. You just automatically feel/see us as a collective and our natural desire is for honoring and celebrating life together and working for justice. And I'm greatly inspired by your tradition [Judaism], right from the get-go. The Hebrew prophets had a huge impact on me when I was studying them in college: Isaiah, Amos, and all those great old guys. Too bad they didn't hear what the women were saying! But then there's so much to do and to see what we can rebuild after patriarchy before patriarchy stamps out life.

Can we do it? My teacher Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi said, "The only way we can get it together, is TOGETHER!" These teachings are so vital to doing this work, while technology seems to be running amok, and we have simultaneously the capacity to do instant communication, seconds...

Nanoseconds.

Nanoseconds, and at the same time be consumed by this device that we carry around that gives us information, whether it's true or not, and we can stare at it all day long, and we can play games with people on the other side of the world. I'm curious about how we can get the most vital teachings out there in this urgent moment.

It's a big question. It's just nip and tuck because so many of those who have enough food in their stomach to be able to think, enough freedom of movement to be able to act, are zoning out over their email. You just go to anywhere in any city, in any conveyance, in any bus, airport, anywhere --- it's like we're in little bubbles of isolation and we need desperately to act together. And how can we pull our attention away from this or break this bubble open?

How can we? These are useful tools if we use them as a tool.

Oh, yes, that's true. But, it's almost as if I go into any public spot and I look around and I see what everybody's doing. It's as if they don't even see each other. It's preoccupying young people and burdening them and obsessing them and making them so anxious.

So, speaking of young people, I saw on your refrigerator you have a photograph of Greta Thunberg.

Oh, she lives in my heart.

Mine, too. If she were sitting here right now, what would that conversation between you and Greta be like do you think?

Oh, my, why I would want to thank her, and bless her. And encourage her to keep on. I was called by the student strike leaders last week. And they said, "The grownups, the adults, take hope from what we're doing. But we don't. We're feeling more despair."

I find myself driven to try to understand what we can expect and what we cannot expect from the corporations that run the governments. With the corporate globalization of our planet they've gone beyond the control of humans. This of course is scary, to put it mildly, but I'm

looking for any evidence that anyone can make it up the ladder from board of directors or the CEO or the CFO and not make profits their final choice. Corporations used to have a triple bottom line: profits, social equity and ecological sustainability. The last two were shrugged off quickly, if they ever mattered. Now it's just profit. When there's only one variable in a system it cannot maintain balance, and it ends up in a positive feedback loop that's on runaway, heading toward a collapse. It's devouring itself and devouring its larger body.

So, how did we get to that? No wonder the young people are in despair. My hope is that the adults and even those within the corporations would allow themselves to feel despair. Or those out here, just an hour away at the Lawrence Livermore Nuclear Lab where the latest forms of nuclear weapons are being insanely produced, far more than we need, far more different ways to kill, millions pouring in there, and they're automatic --- preparing a collective death, as if we have abdicated our capacity to choose. So, my question for your publication or your readers or for any of us, since what distinguished humans, what was the sophisticated capacity to self-reflexive consciousness, giving us this capacity to choose: I'm going to go here and not there, I want to do this, not that? How can we retrieve that again and choose, therefore, choose life? That's what Yahweh said right at the beginning, didn't He? "I've set before you, Life and Death. Therefore, choose Life." It's that simple! It's like we've all put our heads in a bag. Such a beautiful species, such a complex, beautiful brain. And the brain that's here; it's so complex.

If we could only connect the neck, the head and the heart. It's like the neck has taken off from here up. Well, I think you've already answered this, but I'm going to pose it anyway, because it's not only the current leader of this country who suffers from what a friend of mine calls malignant narcissism, a condition that has no treatment or cure. And he's not the only world leader who's suffering, incapable of empathy and compassion and really self-reflection. So how do you, if you do, maintain hope in the face of all this?

My hope comes from, what I was just saying, this capacity to choose. Just because we haven't been using it doesn't mean we cannot. We could wake up and choose. Because it's not the demented narcissists that just now have forbidden the Democratic candidates to debate on climate. It was the centrists in Congress. They can't be qualified as narcissists. But you can qualify them as having accepted money from Wall Street. Does their complicity with and their obedience to Wall Street mean you can't talk about the most important issue of our time?

It's not too late for us to wake up, so what do you want to do? What makes you wake up glad in the morning? What makes your heart sing? It's linking arms with others and working for our beautiful world and working for the youngsters and the young people and working to feed the hungry. There are so many wonderful things to do. Look beyond the media and get out and see how people are showing so much bravery and initiative, taking care of each other in so many ways. So, something might wake people up. Maybe it's the Amazonian rainforest. Maybe something will make a difference more than their money and their comfort, their political and physical comfort. And just look at the people you've mentioned: Zalman Schachter and your son and the people in Takoma Park and the people that we love to link our arms with around the world. We're not going to stop that. We wouldn't think of stopping that. And, to give up is so boring! That's my final statement.

Conclusion

Perhaps that fuller presence is beginning to occur. Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, 17, speaks truth to power before world climate summits and propels global mass climate strike demonstrations. Young people sacrifice school days or even postpone college to work with Fridays for Future. Extinction Rebellion activists employ nonviolent civil disobedience to avert ecological collapse. Actor and activist Jane Fonda, 82, uses her celebrity and civil disobedience to teach and activate citizens about the climate crisis through Fire Drill Fridays. Citizens Climate Lobby, Climate Action Network, Health Care Without Harm, 350.org, Pachamama, Drawdown.org and many other organizations are attracting more participants to get involved in their communities to research and implement carbon sequestering solutions. Now in 2020, with the 50th anniversary of Earth Day coming on April 22nd, the question looms: Are enough earth stewards waking up and collectively engaged to effectively reverse the human emissions of greenhouse gases and the existential threat scientists have been warning about for half a century?

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