

Issue for UN special session  
on Disarmament

AP

Association for Humanistic Psychology

# NEWSLETTER

No army can stop an idea whose time has come.  
—Victor Hugo



photo by Beverly Ramsay

Let There Be Life!

July-August 1982  
Special Issue

Thoughts on action by Helen Caldicott, Richard Grossman, Carl Rogers, Marjorie Drath, Dean Brown, Patricia Mische, Daniel Ellsberg, Ram Dass, Joanna Macy, Jean Millay, Don Parker, O. W. Markley, Arthur Deikman and more....

# Interview With Joanna Macy

by Liz Campbell

LC: You suggest that a shift in consciousness toward the collective is necessary for our survival. Do you think this is likely to occur?

JOANNA: I think it is happening already. We are tuning to each other more, the antennae are sharpening. One way that is becoming evident is in the growing number of experiences people are having that don't jibe with their ordinary consciousness, identified with their separate egos; information appears to be coming "from outside". Reporters at *Psychology Today* were astonished last year at the number of people who, in response to a questionnaire, acknowledged having para-psychological experiences, like clairvoyance and telepathy. Some interpret these occurrences as "occult"; but they are not interventions from a supernatural dimension. They are the gradual emergence of a new holonic level of consciousness, from out of our own interactions as open systems. We are like neurons in a larger brain, and we are becoming aware that that brain is beginning to think.

**Why not bring gifts to our fellow inhabitants of the earth, instead of weapons? Why not help the world overcome the causes of conflict instead of taking sides? Why not wage peace instead of war?**

—Barry Commoner

That is what is going on in what we call the New Age or the Aquarian Age; and it is essential if we are going to make it. Given the fragility and limited resources of our planet, given our needs for flexibility and sharing, we have to begin to think together in an integrated, synergistic fashion, rather than in the old fragmented and competitive ways.

LC: Would you explain this shift in consciousness toward the collective?

JOANNA: For most of us up until now, intelligence has been seen as a function of separate brains lodged inside separate skulls. But now our interactions—the way we impinge on each other through our economic and political and military developments—are becoming so complex and interdependent that they require a built-in, self-monitoring capacity. If we are not to blow it as a society, or commit suicide as a species, a real measure of self-reflexivity must arise on the next systemic level—that is on the social or transpersonal level. Our present modes of social decision-making—even such fine inventions as the ballot-box—are too crude, too slow and too fallible for the alert and responsive self-governance we need if we are going to survive.

LC: General Systems theory provides the core of your thinking. You have stated that systems thinking turns upside down our old ideas of order. Would you explain?

JOANNA: Well, our old ideas of order spring from the dichotomy we made between mind and matter. Matter was seen as inert and random, with order having to be imposed from above by Mind. Whether you are Aristotle, Descartes or Newton, mind appears as the organizing principle, aloof from nature. It follows then that power must be exerted from above to impose order on that which is otherwise chaotic and mindless. And that ordering is equated with

uniformity, as in the industrial process where people are made into interchangeable parts in the production line.

Radically different is the systems view in which life itself is seen as self-organizing. Like all theories, the systems view offers us just a model, of course; Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the biologist who was the father of general systems theory, called it "a way of seeing". This way of seeing turns the lens on reality so that, instead of beholding a lot of random, separate, discrete entities, we become aware of interconnecting flows—flows of energy, matter and information—and we see life forms as patterns in these flows. Here order appears intrinsic to the dynamics of life itself, as these patterns interact to self-organize and sustain themselves. It appears, in other words, in the emergence of living systems—be they atoms, molecules, cells, organisms, families, clans, societies. . . Each is a dynamic organization of interdependent parts, and out of their interplay ordered complexity arises.

By the way, the insight into the self-organizing character of life is very close to the Buddhist teaching of "dependent co-arising". For Buddhists one of the meanings of the word dharma is just that—"the way things work", the principles by which they interact and affect each other.

What the systems view makes clear—and this is a key point to note—is that order and differentiation go hand in hand. Subsystems are able to integrate as they differentiate (like nerve cells in the brain). This is in direct contrast to the old view where it was assumed that order requires uniformity, the better to be subordinated to a separate and superior will.

Here mind is not separate. Indeed, it is out of the integrating, differentiating, self-organizing capacity of life that intelligence arises. At a certain point the internal complexity of a given system can become so great that in order to self-regulate, it needs to monitor itself, it needs to make choices. This choice-making is the birth of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity, or free-will—and we see it in highly complex, integrated systems like the brains of human beings and other higher mammals.

I call this a "holonic shift" in consciousness. Arthur Koestler coined the term "holon" to refer to any living system, meaning that it is both a whole, containing subsystems and a part, embraced in a larger system. Self-consciousness, until now a feature of the individual, higher mammalian brain, will make a holonic shift as it arises in the social systems of which we are a part.

LC: Does this suggest that the order we need cannot be imposed from above?

JOANNA: Not any more, not if it is going to work in the long run. Seeing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, scarcity of resources, pollution of the environment, people sense the urgent need for order and control. What is particularly poignant and dangerous is that many of these people are still caught in the Newtonian paradigm, and suppose that order must be imposed from above by authoritarian measures. People like Robert Heilbroner, in *The Human Prospect*, as well as many politicians, especially in Soviet socialist states, advocate measures

which would impose uniformity of thought and behavior. This stems from the fallacy of equating order with uniformity. Their notion is that we can only have fair distribution of resources and non-suicidal behavior, if some wise council or philosopher-king takes charge.

The systems perspective offers a radical contrast. Karl Deutsch, for example, who is a political scientist and systems thinker, argues that the body politic is much like a neural net. Like the brain, society is a cybernetic system, which only functions well where there is free circulation of information, matter and energy. That is how our mind-bodies work. I put my hand on a hot stove and I rapidly withdraw it, because I get the feedback that my fingers are burning. If I were to begin censoring reports from my internal body-system, I might keep my hand on the stove. The free circulation of information is essential to flexibility and survival.

What first frightened me most about the future of our society was when, in June of 1977, I learned that our government had deliberately suppressed a report about the effects of oilspills on the oceans. There are, of course, many other instances of censorship, as of studies on nuclear waste and cancer. I understand that this is done in order to placate the oil companies or the nuclear industry; but for any system to suppress feedback—to close its perceptions to the results of its behavior—is suicidal.

As open systems dependent upon larger, evolving systems, we must stay open to the wider flows of information, no matter how painful they are or how inimical they appear to our primitive notions of self-interest. What is required of us, for our survival, is an expanded sense of self-interest, where the needs of the whole, and other beings within that whole, are seen as commensurate with our own. Only then can we begin to think and act together. For that we need what the Buddhists call the "boundless heart"—and I believe we have it within us by virtue of our nature as open systems.

LC: Buddhism is clearly important to your thought. How does it fit into the systems view of life?

JOANNA: Well, as different as they may appear on the surface, one an ancient spiritual path and the other a modern scientific model, they show remarkable convergences, as I pointed out in an article six years ago in *Philosophy East and West*. Both see life processes as dynamic and self-organizing. Both see mentality as co-extensive with the physical world. Both see the concept of self as a sometimes useful, but essentially arbitrary or fictitious construct imposed upon the flow of experience.

What is beautiful is how Buddhist teachings can reveal the metaphysical and moral implications of the systems view—implications that many systems theorists themselves are unaware of, conditioned as they are (and we all are) by the materialistic and competitive assumptions of our culture.

I spoke of the need to expand or dissolve our constructs of the individual ego and its needs, if we are to adapt to the challenges of our time. The Buddhist teaching of anatta, or no-self, is of immense help here. So are the Buddhist meditations which help us expand and *experience* our conscious participation in life beyond the prison-cell of the isolated ego. Similarly the bodhisattva, the model of the

hero who derives her/his power from the recognition or inter-existence with other beings, can be inspiring and meaningful to us at this time in our planetary journey. I use it a lot in my workshops on nuclear despair, just as I use adaptations from Buddhist meditations.

The world is our cloister.

—Joanna Macy

Of course, *all* the major spiritual traditions of our planet are useful to us in making the "holonic shift" toward collective consciousness. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, the Native American religions—each grapples with the problem of the self (what does one do with the clamoring "I"?), each offers ways of transcending it. The growth of interest in these paths shows how ready we are becoming now to make that shift. We are sensing that we simply cannot function any more out of the old model of the sovereign, individual ego, with its strident ambitions, its petty needs.

LC: This is called the Information Age. We are told that the rapid increase in telecommunication technology will transform our lives in the near future. Certainly Alvin Toffler presents a new world shaped by our information technology. What connection do you see between this technology and the emergence of collective consciousness?

JOANNA: I see our telecommunication technology serving as a crude nervous system for an emerging collective consciousness. One of the first to recognize its profound effects on our perceptions was Marshall McLuhan. He saw that television serves as an extension of our bodies, extending our senses and, in a way, our participation in life. However, if we can't control the media—if we can't *feed back* to it our own responses and needs—the traffic is only one-way; it is not true participation. We become passive. But the potential is enormous. Through citizen-controlled cable television or such efforts as Duane Elgin's proposal for "video democracy", our communication technology can begin to serve as an efficient adjunct nervous system, extending our awareness of each others' strengths and needs. I say "adjunct", because we have, through the intersystemic flows of consciousness, other modes of communication.

It is amazing to me that three quite independent, consciousness-expanding developments occurred at the same time in our society. One was the advent of television, with the torrent of information it makes available to us. Another was the drug experience, opening realms of experience extending far beyond what we associated with the ordinary, individual consciousness. And the third was the popular encounter with eastern spirituality. In a quite extraordinary serendipity, all three co-occurred to begin to dislodge us from the mind-cram of the "skin-encapsulated ego".

LC: How do you see the shift to collective consciousness occurring? Will the move to a higher level of integration be a sudden jump, or does the restructuring happen piece-meal at different times in different parts of the systems?

JOANNA: I can't know, of course, being but one neuron in the net. Perhaps it will occur as slow as the advent of individual self-consciousness, in flickering glimpses, on and off, over generations or centuries. But in the holonic

shift to collective consciousness, the beat is accelerating now. You can see it all around you in the way people interact, in the burgeoning of cooperative grassroots enterprises and in the awareness of planetary crises. Look at the rapid spread of consensus decision-making and of worker-shared management, look at the mushrooming movement for a nuclear freeze. It is happening from the bottom-up, as it always does—and must—in the self-organization of life processes.

For many this period of change is painful and baffling. Conscious systems re-organize by letting go of the codes and constructs, by which they formerly interpreted experience, and they only let go when those constructs prove dysfunctional. Ervin Laszlo explains this as the exploratory self-organization of cognitive systems, which is somewhat analogous to Prigogine's thesis of dissipative structures in the physical realm. Dabrowski called it "positive disintegration".

It can be highly uncomfortable, a dark night of the soul. Susceptible to new sensations and confusions, opening like an open wound to the pain of our world, one can feel one is "falling apart", bereft of one's old sense of self-confidence and copefulness. It can make some of us frantic; some of us in desperation go mean. What it really is is a birthing-time—and the darkness like that of the birth-canal, squeezing, pressing, pushing us into a new realm of consciousness.

That there is an organizing force within the earth process with both physical and psychic dimensions which needs to be acknowledged in language and in imagery. It needs to be named and spoken of in its integral form. It has a unified functioning similar to the more particular organisms with which we are acquainted. When we speak of earth we are speaking of a numinous maternal principle in and through which the total complex of earth phenomena takes its shape. Recently biologist Lewis Thomas, when considering the integration of life systems of the earth, had a sudden intuition in which he saw the total life process of earth as a single cell. Such is their radical inter-dependence.

—Thomas Berry

Sudden jump to collective consciousness? Maybe. Our survival would seem to depend upon it, because there is so little time left, given the exponential character of the dangers we face. But I am impatient with people who feel that we are automatically going to make it, who see our "transformation" as a sure thing. To me that is a little cheap. No transformation or birth is ever guaranteed, nor is it won by glib assurance. It is by walking through the dark, and risking everything we have, that we can somehow earn the way to transform; all the great teachers say that. I'm sure there are planets where life came to intelligence and then blew it, through stupidity and greed. And if we fail? Well, it's worth the gamble. Who knows but what this itself may not be the point and purpose of our evolution up to now: to have reached a moment, under the shadow of the mushroom cloud, where we know finally, at last, for once and all, that we are one.

Imagine all the people living life in peace. . . . You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. . . .

—John Lennon

LC: Regarding the nuclear threat, do you see that contributing to our recognition of the need for new ways of perceiving?

JOANNA: Absolutely. And in that sense the nuclear crisis is like a gift to us, goading us to wake up. As a quintessential expression of our greed and paranoia, the Bomb, for all its horror, serves as a spiritual teacher. It shows us the suicidal tendency inherent in our conception of ourselves as separate and competitive beings. What it is saying, of course, is nothing new, for saints and mystics over the ages have said, "It is love or it is hell." Somehow we never took them all that seriously; we thought their words were meant for folks with a holy vocation, distinct from ordinary, practical life. Now we see that message is not meant just for holy or especially virtuous people, but for *all* of us. It is like the Bomb is taking us by the scruff of the neck and pushing our nose right into what we do with our greed and sloth, our stupidity and fear and self-righteousness.

And what is beautiful in our time—beautiful beyond words—is that we are beginning to cop to that. I feel very fortunate to live in this time.

LC: Let's discuss responsibility from the systems perspective. For what and to whom are we responsible?

JOANNA: Responsibility is inseparable from our perceptions once we tune to our interconnectedness; it is not added on as a moral "should". I get impatient with preachers and teachers who shake their fingers at their flock and scold them to become more caring or accountable. I also distrust people who act solely out of altruism, "I want to do something good for other people." Responsibility is not when you decide moralistically that you are going to take care of things for other people; that can backfire, be a power trip. It is the *ability to respond* that arises when you identify with other beings and with the larger whole.

Responsibility toward self and other become indistinguishable, because each thought and act affect the doer as much as the done-to. In the systems view this is evident in the interdependence between structure and function: the living system is literally shaped by what it does, just as the pumping action of the heart molds its form. This is directly analogous to the Buddhist concept of karma (as I pointed out in an article in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1979). Each interaction affects both parties.

The old patriarchal notion of power, in which most of us have been socialized, is a one-way street: it is equated with power-over, with domination, with having your way on other people. Look it up in the dictionary; it's *still* defined that way more often than not. It is a highly dysfunctional notion, as we can see by the widespread sense of powerlessness in our society; and it is also inaccurate, because living systems do not work that way. Systems work synergistically, in a win-win game.

continued. . . .

I suspect that the most far-reaching cognitive revolution of our time is in our perceptions of what power is. And it is high time. For to see power as a zero-sum game ("You win, I lose") is becoming suicidal. It fosters the illusion that power involves invulnerability and the armor of defense, whereas in fact the power of open systems resides in their openness—the vulnerable openness necessary for interaction and flexibility. We know this in our personal lives, in the mutual energy experienced when we love someone; it is the same kind of synergy we see in ecosystems or in our own bodies.

LC: This is a good time to move into your personal story, how you came to bring systems theory together with your practice of Buddhism and your work for social change.

JOANNA: My journey into the Buddha Dharma began much earlier than my exposure to systems theory. While living in India in the mid-sixties with my husband and three children, I worked with a community of Tibetan Buddhist refugees. It was their extraordinary quality of presence to the world, the dimension of freedom and buoyancy I saw in them, that brought me to Buddhist philosophy and practice. From the outset I saw the Buddhist way as one which can free us to act in the world, rather than drawing us away from it. I stress this because so many in our culture tend to see Buddhism as a path of withdrawal, where one rejects the world to focus on inner peace or perfection.

In the course of my PhD program at Syracuse University I became acquainted with general systems theory. My initial response was one of astonishment. I got so excited reading my first book on systems (it was by Ervin Laszlo), that I could only read a few paragraphs at a time. I'd go outside and look at the sky and trees and cry—out of sheer joy, I guess—and then I'd run back inside and read some more. Systems theory offers elegant conceptual structures and graphic scientific data that illustrate the "dependent co-arising" of life phenomena—which is the Buddha's doctrine of causality. That is what I wrote my dissertation on.

LC: And where does your work in Third World development fit in?

JOANNA: With my interest in the spiritual roots of social change, or the ethics of "dependent co-arising". I had come to know a people's self-help movement in Sri Lanka, called the Sarvodaya Movement, which is inspired by Buddhist teachings. In 1979 I returned to spend a year with them, living in a village, participating in the programs, riding my motorcycle through the paddy fields and rubber groves, getting to know the families and the monks. I went to study the role of religion in engaging people in community development and in defining what development is. For them it is "everybody waking up"—which is what the name Sarvodaya means. My book on that, *Dharma and Development*, will be out later this year.

I learned a lot from Sarvodaya that has affected my own work here in America in the peace movement. You know, Sarvodaya, which is active now in over 3,500 villages in Sri Lanka and touches the lives of millions, began with just a handful of highschool students in a holiday workcamp. I think that the Movement spread with such vitality and speed because its leader, Ariyaratna, a former highschool teacher, genuinely believed in the power of his

countrypeople—power "from the bottom-up"; he believed in their self-respect and their capacity to care for each other.

We have that capacity, too—it is inherent in us as open, interconnected systems. In my workshops on nuclear anxiety I had adapted some Buddhist meditations of mental exercises, to help us experience that capacity more directly and immediately. They make us more aware of our potential for collective consciousness.

LC: In the evolution toward collective consciousness, what role, in the systems view, does intentionality play?

JOANNA: The systems view stresses the role of intention, and it is not an intention sitting off on a cloud in the sky, directing the drama. It emerges as we evolve and open to wider connections. In the process it moves to include the well-being of others and of the larger whole. As we broaden the scope of our mind-heart, our individual purposings begin to recognize each other, dance together. In this wider, deeper dance with reality, there is pain, for we open ourselves to the griefs of victims and victimizers. But there is also great delight, because we begin to realize—and make real—our mutual belonging. We come home to that.

LC: In what sense can this evolutionary journey be seen as a return to the Source?

JOANNA: Well, as a systems thinker, I see it as a recognition of our essential interconnectedness; it is the experience of the subsystem as it becomes conscious of how it is embraced or cradled in vaster systemic knowings. As a Buddhist, that experience becomes vivid to me as participation in the Jeweled Net of Indra. That Mahayana image is very important to me in the work I do; it is a holographic model of reality where intelligence and compassion can exist entire at each node in the net. As a Christian I see it in a similar fashion—as our capacity to experience ourselves as synapses in the Mind of God.

In each case the journey is a return to the unity from which life began, but experienced more richly now because of the diversity and complexity of the patterns we have been dancing. We are the universe becoming conscious of itself—and that movement seems to be a spiral. At each successive "return" we recognize our commonality with greater awareness—come home to each other with more surprise and delight. When we, after inventing and brandishing our nuclear weapons, can learn to love the Russians, as a people we have been so paranoid about, that will lift us to a whole new level of mutual enjoyment, a higher awareness of what love is.

*Joanna Macy has a doctorate in comparative religion from the University of Syracuse. Her personal journey is discussed in the interview. Her current work concentrates on Despair and Empowerment workshops, training, and writing to facilitate people's deepening responses to the hazards and threats surrounding us. Much of her effort goes into the Interhelp Network (See page 14) which she helped form. She also plans to work further with the self-help movement in Sri Lanka.*

*I had a perfect opportunity to interview Joanna. We were snowbound in the Sierras for five days and our discussions were long and exciting. I can't think of anyone I'd rather be stranded with.* □