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INQUIRING MIND

SPRING 1991

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VOLUME 7, NUMBER 2

Coming Home:

Reflections on the ecological/spiritual crisis, featuring
D. H. Lawrence, Alan Watts, Annie Dillard, Gary Snyder, Joseph
Goldstein, Ram Dass, and others....



The Great Assembly

Chan-jan
8th Century, China

"In the great Assembly of the Lotus all are present—without divisions. Grass, trees, the soil on which these grow—all have the same kinds of atoms. Some are barely in motion while others make haste along the Path, but they will all in time reach the Precious Island of Nirvana. . . . Who can really maintain that things inanimate lack buddhahood?"

From *Thinking Like a Mountain*,
New Society Publishers, Philadelphia,
PA.

I Am a Savage

Chief Seattle, Circa 1854

Our ways are different from your ways. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red

man. But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage and does not understand.

There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the unfurling of leaves in the spring or the rustle of insects' wings. But perhaps it is because I am a savage and do not understand. The clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lonely cry of the whippoorwill or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? I am a red man and do not understand. The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of a pond, and the smell of the wind itself, cleansed by a midday rain or scented with the piñon pine.

The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath—the beast, the tree, the man, they all share the same breath. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the

stench. But if we sell you our land, you must remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his breath also receives his last sigh. And the wind must also give our children the spirit of life. And if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where even the white man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow's flowers.

So we will consider your offer to buy the land. If we decide to accept, I will make one condition. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. I am a savage and I do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffalos on the prairie, left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive.

What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts soon happens to the man. All things are connected.

You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your chil-

dren that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children what we have taught our children, that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.

This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man

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Guarding the Earth

An Interview with Joanna Macy

EDITED BY
BARBARA GATES

Buddhist scholar and deep ecologist Joanna Macy expresses her understanding of Buddhist teachings through her creative activism. All of her work—her courses, her workshops, her writing, her organizing—is rooted in the teaching of dependent co-arising, an understanding that all things are interrelated and mutually responsible. Her writings include: *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (New Society Publishers, 1983), *Dharma and Development* (Kumarian Press, 1983), and *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of all Beings* coauthored with John Seed (New Society Publishers, 1988). Two books are coming out this year (1991): *World as Lover, World as Self* (Parallax Press) in May and *Mutual Causality: The Dharma of Natural Systems* (SUNY Press) in June.

Joanna Macy is currently focusing on the Nuclear Guardianship Project, which she initiated in 1988. The Guardianship Project calls for community-controlled, ground-level care of radioactive waste instead of transporting it to deep geologic burial

sites as the government now proposes to do. Presently, wastes are in temporary storage—some in leaking tanks and drums, unlined trenches and pools and even cardboard boxes. The two designated "burial" repositories are already presenting problems: salt brine is leaking into the New Mexico site, and the Yucca Mountain site is geologically at risk because it borders the Nevada testing site.

The concept of guardianship is an extension of mindfulness. As Joanna Macy explained to us, "It deftly and dramatically reverses our habitual approach to a problem by making it clear that we

mustn't bury what we don't like, out of sight and out of mind, whether it's radioactive waste or the truth of what's going on in the Persian Gulf War. But we can take care of it, if we just keep it where we can see it, and continue to look at it."

In describing its goals, the Nuclear Guardianship Project states:

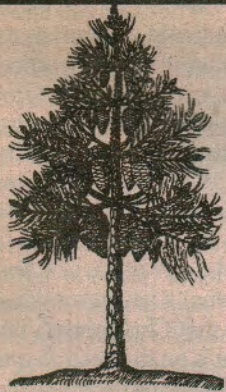
To curtail rampant radioactive contamination, the Project calls for a halt to the production and transportation of nuclear wastes, and for citizen involvement in the responsible care of the wastes

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Joanna Macy

Catherine Busch Johnson



With this issue

we have begun using recycled paper. We felt we could no longer conscientiously do otherwise. May all beings be happy.

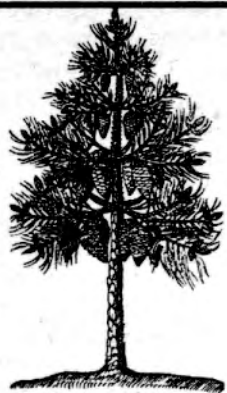
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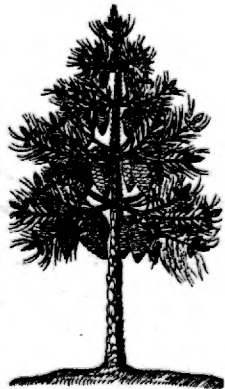


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A Publication of the Dharma Foundation

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produced to date. It promotes the guardianship of the wastes at their points of generation in monitored, retrievable storage facilities. And it develops educational programs which include spiritual practice to begin the training in technical knowledge and moral vigilance required to establish and maintain these Guardian Sites.

Joanna Macy's unwavering guardian stance turns our old habits of mind upside-down and inspires hope where there is often despair or denial.

This interview was conducted in January 1991 in Berkeley, California by Barbara Gates and Wes Nisker.

Inquiring Mind: In the Guardianship Project, you call for citizen involvement in the responsible care of radioactive waste. How are the teachings of mindfulness incorporated into guardianship training to help us and future generations participate in the guardianship of the waste?

Joanna Macy: Mindfulness teaches us that we don't have to like something to look at it. We can actually free our selves from constantly saying, "This is terrible, isn't this disgusting?" or "I can't stand this." Mindfulness helps us disidentify. We don't have to approve or disapprove of what we're being mindful about. Whatever we're looking at is just there. And this stance helps us a lot in being present to it.

Neither government nor industry has an impressive record in preparing people for working with the "poison fire" (what we call the radioactive waste). The training is notoriously sloppy. Along with training in technical procedures, *mindfulness* is the training that is required. You and others who do sitting practice have been engaged in Guardianship Training already, and you didn't even know it!

IM: After having looked deeply into ourselves, we then have more capacity to face anything.

JM: Exactly. To look at the external

virtually erased that experience for almost 50 years. When it came up, flooding me with grief and rage, it felt like it would undo my life — challenging all my beliefs in sanity and decency. I thought, Oh, Joanna, all these years that you've gone into religion — into Biblical history, then world religions, then the Dharma and meditation — was it just to prettify reality. Was it because all the while you sensed the horror at the heart of it all?

When I went to India, I told the Rinpoche, "I've lost my sense of what end's up, and my faith that there are objective structures to reality." He just beamed and said, "Very good. This is going to save us a lot of time." He knew, of course, that if you're attached to an ideology or a faith system, it'll get in the way of that guardian eye, of that capacity to be totally, radically present.

IM: How did the Guardianship Project come into being?

JM: I've been in a kind of dance with radioactive waste for the last 14 years. Back in Washington, D.C. in 1978 I engaged in a citizens' lawsuit to stop faulty storage of high-level waste at a nearby nuclear reactor. While our citizens' group lost its case against the Virginia Electric Power Company, working on the suit taught me a lot. Night after night, to substantiate our legal claims, I had sat up studying the statistics, and trying to understand the phenomenon called ionizing radiation. Not only does radioactivity cause cancers, immune diseases, still births, sterility, and genetic mutation, but the wastes that release this radioactivity are frighteningly mismanaged.

This introduction to the enormity of the problem also led me to develop the Despair and Empowerment work that I have conducted around the world during the intervening years. I tried to confront our capacity for denial. I could see how we as a society were ready to turn our faces away from the radioactive waste, as well as other horrors we didn't want to see. For

JM: It's difficult to find a way of describing it that we can digest or relate to....As Ralph Nader's organization stated in a recent overview: the radioactivity generated by nuclear waste every year in the United States alone—and we only have a quarter of the world's reactors—is equal to 240 times the radioactivity released by the Chernobyl disaster. And don't forget that this radiation has a hazardous life of up to 250,000 years. Some of it, like the nickel in reactor containments, lasts for

IM: What is a potential scenario for guarding it and containing it?

JM: We decide that for the sake of the future beings and for the sake of this generation, too, we're going to take care of the poison fire. That means wherever it's generated, we keep it on-site. We don't transport it because the transportation is very risky. We've already had over a thousand accidents on the highways with this stuff. So local communities take political respon-

...you can't watch the poison fire if you're keeping inner toxic wastes buried out of sight and out of mind.

millions of years.

Now statistics about the waste are misleading because of what they *don't* include: Everything connected with the fuel cycle and nuclear weapons production becomes radioactive. Nuclear waste is not just some byproduct; every building, every truck, every pipe, every piece of equipment every step of the way becomes not only contaminated but *contaminating*. In that sense, the poison fire is almost mythic in nature. Like King Midas in his greed, it transforms what it touches.

And nobody wants to look at it, even many environmental activists. On Earthday 1990, radioactive waste was barely mentioned. We allow ourselves to believe that there's nothing that we can do—except, as the government proposes, bury it deep under the ground.

IM: What are the potential problems in burying the waste?

JM: In burying it, we are pretending to ourselves that we have a final solution to the problem. We are saying to ourselves, all right, now we've buried it, and it's gone. We don't need to think about it anymore. But there is no final solution here. No containers last as long as the radioactivity they contain, and when sealed off underground, they will be inaccessible for repair and replacement. After you bury them, the casks corrode, the earth shifts and the radioactivity seeps into the ground water. For instance, in the case of Carlsbad, the radioactivity will seep into the Pecos River, into the Rio Grande and on out into the Gulf of Mexico.

When I was at Los Alamos last month, I learned that a group of scientists who had worked on Star Wars are now busy exploring ways that nuclear waste might be transmuted. They've actually found a way on paper to do it. They figured out how—using a half a mile long accelerator—you can add neutrons to the nucleus of radioactive waste elements. At the present time, the process would be prohibitively expensive, but it may someday be feasible. Perhaps we may even get smart enough to do something beneficial with the waste. These scientists now recognize that the waste must be kept accessible, and that if we hide it, we can't get it back to transmute it.

Some antinuclear activists want to wish the waste away; they say, "Not in my backyard!" This is known as the NIMBY syndrome. Others call for a new Manhattan Project, a mammoth government research campaign to develop practical technology for the transmutation of the waste. I say, that's great, go ahead. But meanwhile don't lose sight of the fact that we already have the technology to contain the waste. It's a technology of the heart. It's a technology of mindfulness. All we need to do is to pay attention to it. Thanks to present machineries of monitoring and repair, this attention will be sufficient to keep the radioactivity out of the biosphere and out of the bodies of living beings. But *no* technology for long-term care exists if it subtracts the essential factor of human intention and involvement.

sibility for citizen-controlled guardianship, both in the decisions about how to handle it and in actually overseeing the monitoring.

IM: Describe what would happen at a Guardian Site.

JM: At these Guardian Sites, the waste containers would be religiously monitored and repaired. This means continually watching, testing the soil, testing the water and air. It means to repair as embrittlement, leaks and seepage occur. The people who would be doing the technical work would be the nuclear engineers that we've been training over the last 50 years. In addition to the technicians, countless others—people like you and me—would go to the Guardian Sites as well to support the technicians and ensure public safety. We would also be guardians.

As a species, we humans have always honored the extraordinary gift of attention. Because attention to the poison fire would ensure the health of all beings and our genetic continuity, it would be a sacred act. And it would be viewed as such.

The guardian sites—Rancho Seco, Three Mile Island, Hanford, etc.—would become places of attention and remembering, of remembering the story that produced the poison fire. You might go on a pilgrimage to say, Seabrook or Rocky Flats to pay homage to the guardians or for the spiritual renewal involved in this act of homage. You might go for the great Remembering, because it is there that the stories are told about how we almost destroyed our planet with nuclear weapons and nuclear power.

When I think about how beings of the future will relate to our radioactive legacy, an unexpected danger occurs to me: the danger that they may not take seriously the toxicity of these wastes. The beings of the future need to believe the danger, that is, believe that their ancestors knowingly produced plutonium that cripples and kills for one quarter of a million years. They will have to come to terms with that.

IM: And the future generations need to remember this again and again because they could easily convince themselves that no one could ever have unleashed something so awful.

JM: Yes. We cannot uninvent the nuclear technology, so we must remember what happened at Alamogordo, at Hiroshima, at Nagasaki, at the testing site in the Nevada desert, what happened to the people around Hanford. This must be enshrined in our collective memory so that we can learn from it and be vigilant.

The challenge for the beings of the future will be in accepting what their ancestors have done, and for that acceptance to occur, a measure of forgiveness will also be necessary.

So these sites will be places of remembering, of acceptance and forgiveness. They will also be places of moral vigilance. We might go to them for merit. We might go to offer gifts. And, just as we now go to Barre or to Spirit Rock for meditation retreats, we might go to a Guardian Site for meditation practice, or to teach meditation—because we need, at these places, to

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poison fire will be a piece of cake after having confronted some of what comes up within us. It builds courage. The Tibetan community that I've been involved with invited me back to India this past summer to instruct me in a practice that they consider important for dealing with the poison fire. It has to do with building fearlessness.

You see, if you're going to watch the poison fire, then you have to find out if there's anything else you'd rather not see. In other words, you can't watch the poison fire if you're keeping inner toxic wastes buried out of sight and out of mind.

IM: Could you give a more specific example.

JM: I remember thinking as I prepared to go to India: okay kiddo, you want to be able to look at the poison fire, then you've got to be able to face the horrors in your own life, too. And—pow! Once that willingness was there, a buried memory surfaced that was extremely painful. I had

me this became the big koan, the big mystery—have we finally created something that we cannot face?

In 1988, I began to study the issue of radioactive waste in a more systematic way. I called ten friends together: a nuclear engineer, a poet, an environmental lawyer, a cosmologist, a psychotherapist, some ordinary folks like me, and said, "Will you work with me for six months? We'll meet once a month to study and teach each other about radioactive waste, and, because it's so hard to look at, we'll blend together the three S's: study, strategy, and spiritual practice." In the process of studying the poison fire, our "guardian group" learned how voluminous and pervasive the problem truly is. And, of course, the group is now continuing into its third year.

IM: Can you give us a hint as to the dimensions of the problem?

harness the technology, so to speak, of cultivating vigilant awareness. I don't see the practice of vipassana as being undercut or invalidated by doing it at a Guardian Site. Quite the contrary. There would be times of intensive practice, watching what comes up in the body and mind. Then there would be shifts for watching the monitors. It's like when you're in a monastery, you sit and walk and sit again, and then you go out and sweep the temple compound. You sweep up every piece of trash and you do that very, very attentively.

So this poison fire would be watched, and that very act of attention and commitment to life would not be that different from the spiritual practices that people have seen as valuable over the millennia.

In the coming times, I imagine, people will look back at our religious traditions and notice how much they feature fire. In the Old Testament, there's Moses and the burning bush; you can't get too close to the fire. In the Bhagavad Gita, there are the great flames of Vishnu when Krishna turned into fire on the battlefield. If I were looking back from a future perspective, when our spiritual calling was to guard the poison fire, then how would I read these scriptures. I would say, "Oh, these were given to us to help us have the courage and understanding to guard the poison fire."

The guardianship of this poison fire can continue through generations that will wonder if perhaps this was a sacred gift given to us to help us wake up.

IM: So perhaps the shape of the nuclear cooling tower will become the shape of the new temple....

JM: After the Guardianship idea took hold in my mind, I went on a pilgrimage to Three Mile Island. It was in 1984, five years after the accident there. As I was coming down from our summer cabin in Central New York into the Susquahanna Valley, I imagined bands of future pilgrims coming down to the great monastery at Three Mile Island. I came over the hill and looked down to the river. My god! I saw the island in the Susquahanna and these enormous cooling towers. They take your breath away. I experienced a rush of awe, the way you feel looking at a pyramid or Chartres Cathedral. I could see how people in the future (if we make it so that there are any people in the future) might look at these towers. They dwarf everything else, and rise in a sweeping curve like giant vases set down by the gods.

I called up the utility company and said, "I'd like to come visit the plant because I'm writing a story about it." They said, "You need to write a letter requesting a visit and then we'll let you know." And I said, "I'm only here for one more day." And they said, "What kind of story?" And I said, "It's a story about the future monastery at Three Mile Island." And they said, "Oh, it's fiction!" "It's not fiction," I said, "It just hasn't happened yet!" And they said, "If it's fiction, we don't see why you need to come, because you can make it all up." And so I said, "Well, the citizen groups I've talked to have been very helpful, and they were happy to talk with me." Then the authorities said, "Okay, okay, okay."

They sent a car for me and I went and spent the day.

It was an amazing day. They began showing me more and more. They had taken the lid off the reactor where the accident had occurred and lowered a video camera in. They had just screened the video for the first time. So they said, "Come on, you've got to watch this!" On the screen I could see a landscape of cliffs and rubble. My guide pointed: "Now, those are the remaining fuel rods, and this shows it really was a meltdown...." I said, "This experience that you are accumulating is so important for all of us, because you are among the first to deal with the problems of cleanup, and this is going to be the big preoccupation of generations to come. I hope that you realize how valuable your work is and let us all know about it."

I recognized then that the people working to clean up the utility were guardians, but they weren't treated as such. And right near here, in Sacramento, there is a guardian site at the Rancho Seco nuclear plant even though its employees don't know it. They're sitting there guarding the highly radioactive fuel rods because the reactor has been closed down by popular vote.

IM: But these nuclear technicians haven't been through your Guardianship Training. In addition to mindfulness practice, what other training is important for guardianship?

JM: At our guardian group meetings we use imagination to help us get our minds around the nature

of this waste. For example, at our last meeting, one of the members had made a huge map of the United States. It filled our living room. We moved back the furniture, spread it out, took off our shoes, and walked around on it. On the map you could see all the nuclear reactors, the uranium mines, the radioactive dumps and the transportation routes to bring the waste to Yucca Mountain and Carlsbad, etc. We did a drama right on the map where we identified with the poison fire in a particular site. This was such an amazing learning tool. In the process, we were building our moral imagination. That has to be trained as well. We have to build the moral imagination to imagine what is already at hand. We must imagine the real because the world we've created is so outrageous that we have to use our imagination to even believe what is so.

We must also use our imaginations to encompass the time span of the poison fire and its effects. In our guardian group, we've become interested in the question of time itself and in those philosophers and mystics who were looking beyond chronological time to other dimensions where things are simultaneous. We've discussed the way chronological time is a function of our kind of consciousness. When we develop

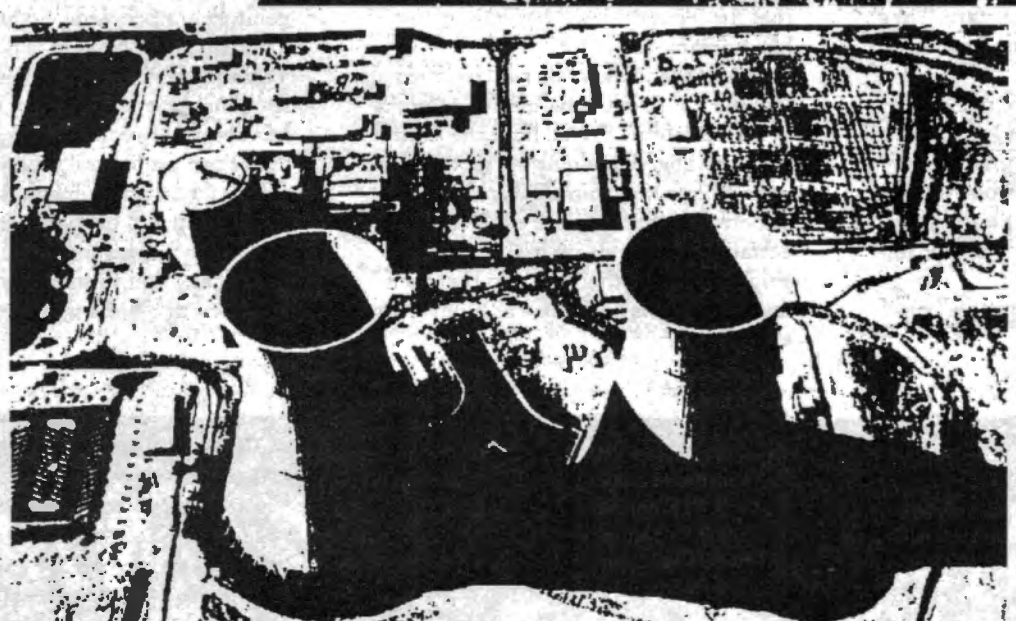
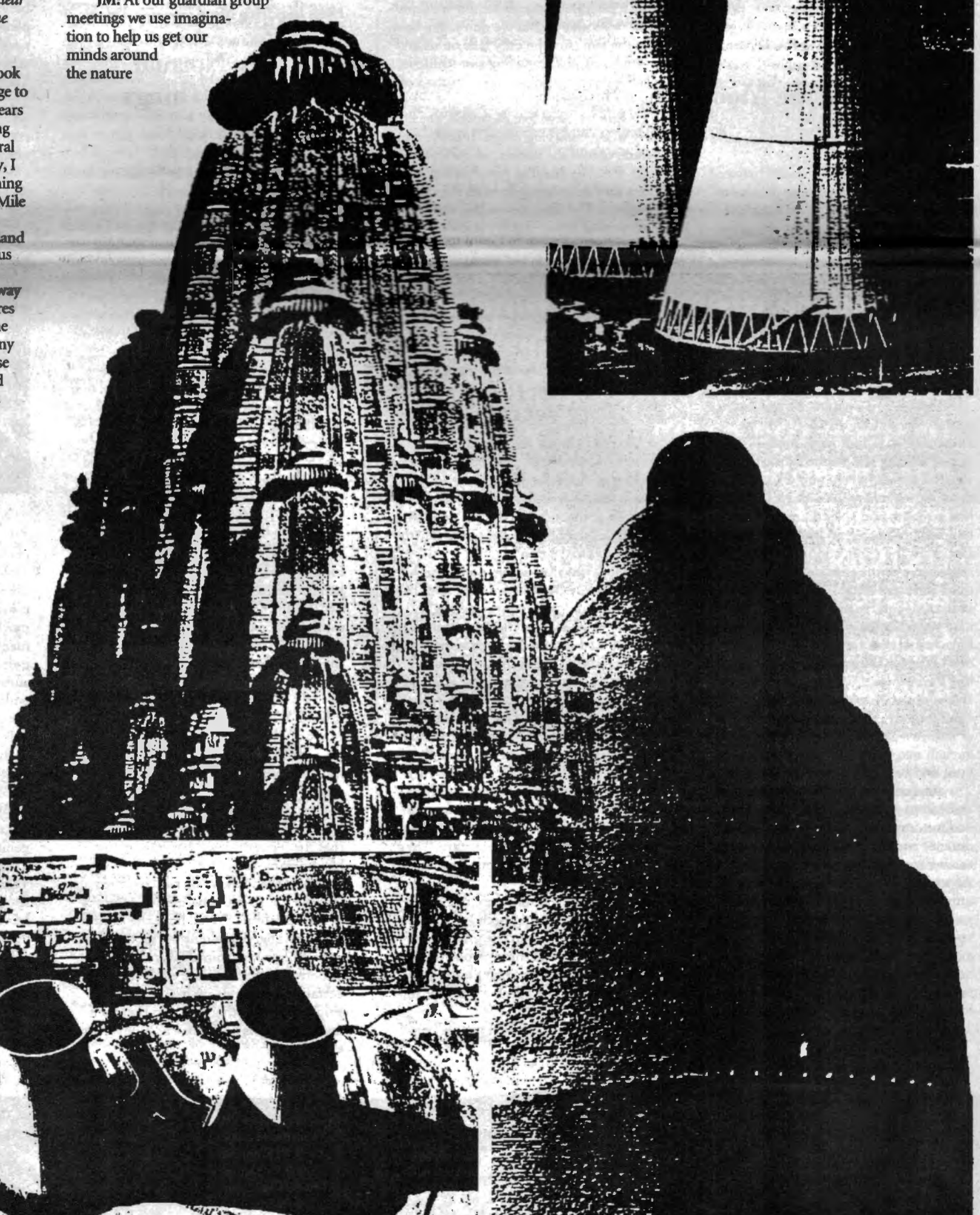
packets for organizing guardian groups around the country and around the world, we plan to include ways of exploring this. I've already been doing workshops on time, or, as we call it, "deep time." We're going from deep ecology to deep time. Deep ecology occurs in deep time; it means that we not only dependently co-arise with other beings now, but with beings of the past and future as well.

IM: With radioactive waste and the war in the Persian Gulf and the effects of these on beings of the future....the whole space-time continuum is like a guardian site....

JM: Yes. I have come to see that the guardian stance, the intention to sustain the gaze, is necessary to the guardianship of our earth, at every stage.

One of the things that has scared me

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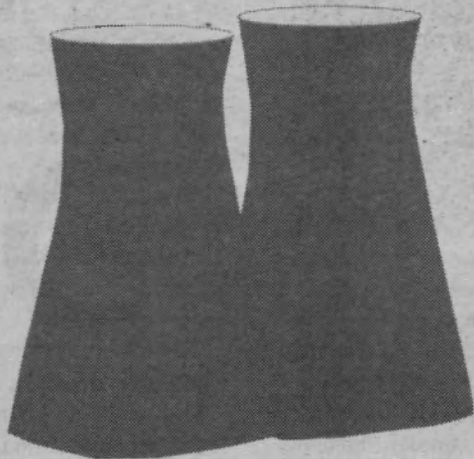
the most about the war in the Persian Gulf is how ready we humans are to lie to each other. As they say, "the first casualty of war is truth." We see this in the administration's speeches and press conferences, and we see it in ourselves; it's easier to accept a lie than to look at our own doubts, our own pangs, our own sense of dread about what this war might be. So we ride along with the Pentagon's reports and the current spasms of patriotism, but inside us is a yearning for fresh air.

Truth is as precious as air when someone has got a pillow over your face or is holding your head under water. And if we do nothing else but just protect our capacity to see truth, we're doing crucial work. We're never going to be able to self-correct from our disastrous course if we don't keep the feedback loop open. We need to main-

tain true contact with the world out there, so we don't get mesmerized in our own dream.

IM: What an incredible task. If we're going to really look at nuclear waste or at the war, then the enormity of our greed, hatred, and delusion is exposed. This could be extremely painful.

JM: Yes, but we can reframe our pain as compassion. As we open to our anguish, we can see it as our ability to share in the suffering of our world. And that is the literal meaning of compassion: to suffer with. This



transmutes the pain into the power to act.

At a conference in New Mexico, a psychiatrist who had been at a presentation of the Nuclear Guardianship Project made this comment: "Just to hear about the possibility of relating to nuclear waste in this way is healing, regardless of what the

practical steps may be – that is because we have, until now, felt such a deep unconscious shame about what we have created that will poison the world and the DNA of future beings for the next three million years. It has cut us off from our future – from a spiritual relationship with future generations. So when we

hear about the Guardianship Project, then intention springs up – the intention to be responsible – and we think, 'Yeah, I can watch the radioactive waste.' At that moment within us our relationship with future generations is healed." That moved me a lot, because it put into words what I've felt – and what has been motivating me all along. ■

The Nuclear Guardianship Project welcomes your financial contributions, volunteer hours, ideas and prayers.
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