

# woman of power

*Journal: Interviews on*  
"Womanpower"  
a magazine of  
feminism,  
spirituality,  
and politics



PREMIER ISSUE

**Womanpower**

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# Interview on "Womanpower"

## POWER

**W**e live in an extraordinary time — here at this moment on planet Earth. News reports and our environment bombard us with signals of distress. The perils which face us increase daily in intensity and have become standard features in our psychic landscape. These perils come from three different directions and exist on an unprecedented scale. The threat of nuclear war has the majority of the public believing that a nuclear war will occur in their lifetimes and that they will not survive it. The progressive destruction of our life-support system assails us in the air we breathe and the water we drink.



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The misery of the world's people grows as conditions of hunger, homelessness, disease, political oppression, and torture multiply.

These developments are facts of life in our present world which shape the wider contexts of our lives. To be aware of them on any level is to feel pain for our world and our collective future, a pain made all the more poignant by the uncertainty, for the first time in recorded history, of the survival of our species and of our planet as a viable home for conscious life.

My workshops on Despair and Empowerment in the Nuclear Age involve opening ourselves up to feel the pain which this awareness brings. As we allow ourselves to feel our pain for the world, we find our connection with each other. And that is the beginning of knowing our power.

In the process of my work, it has become clear to me that we are gaining a new experience of what power is. The new concept of power involves the ability to be open to this sense of interconnectedness. Our pain for the world is the living proof of our interconnectedness. We wouldn't hurt for those who are suffering, or for those yet unborn, if we weren't fundamentally related to them. It might seem odd to think that we could approach power through pain, but it has become vibrantly clear that the very nature of our feelings of fear and anxiety about the perils of the world spring from the same source as our power, and that source is our interconnectedness.

## PERSONAL POWER

**P**ersonal power in this sense is the ability to interconnect, to acknowledge that we are each part of a vast organism that is in trauma. We are neurons in a larger brain, and that brain is starting to think. Personal action, then, as we move with this sense of power, means that we don't have to have all the answers or all the courage or all the love or skills in order to make a difference; no one person in this larger brain can. We learn therefore to open to a power that works through us and allows us to draw on the resources of others—this is synergistic power.

The old, top-down, patriarchal notion of power implied that each of us had to have all the answers in order to be effective. Given the current world situation facing us, this is not possible. Part of the sense of futility that possesses the American public and the Western world is that the dangers confronting us are so huge that many of us, recognizing that as individuals we haven't the wisdom to change them, succumb to despair.

I felt that way, too, but I said it out loud. Some people saw me as morbid, others as lacking in faith; but many, as I spoke openly of my feelings of horror at what I saw happening to our world, responded to that honesty. As they, in turn, revealed the depth of their own planetary anguish, beneath the veneer of "business-as-usual," a kind of magic occurred. We viewed each other with new respect. Energy was released and a sudden sense of community so real that, amidst the shared sorrow and rage, laughter erupted—even hilarity. As insights, compassion, strength; and

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# Joanna Rogers Macy

new strategies began to emerge, I learned how we feed each other once we are open, as if we were tapping a new level of intelligence, a collective knowing.

We can see this level begin to operate in the consensus process in group decision-making. Of course, we are still struggling to perfect that process and other forms of direct participative democracy. We are like amphibians, just on our way, between forms.

If we open up in honesty to what we are experiencing about our world, and communicate it, then we can find ourselves in a web of community where interpersonal intelligence can operate. It begins to flow through us, we can feel the pulse of it, and then all sorts of "miracles" begin to happen.

This is the way nature works, in the evolution and self-organization of ever more complex open systems. In an ecosystem, through dynamic interrelationships between the parts, flexible adaptations arise that are beyond the intelligence of any particular part.

Working for our common survival, we realize that we are parts of such an ecosystem—a human ecosystem, a larger body. No single one of us need be the Savior or the Great Leader, even if we could—for the time for that kind of solo hero act is over. The nature of our situation is too intricately interwoven to be resolved by a Lone Ranger or even a Joan of Arc. Today's idea of heroism should involve deep relatedness and mutual participation, the courage to open up to the web of life, to the pain and joy of all beings—and thus to their resources. Then energy flows, information flows, wisdom arises; we join hands in a larger dance.

The notion of synergistic power is to me the greatest cognitive revolution of our time. It represents an evolutionary leap, which we are challenged to make right now, and it is a necessary leap if we are going to survive. Quite simply and radically, it is a leap from individual intelligence to collective intelligence.

Please do not confuse collective intelligence with some kind of uniform, totalitarian group-think, where we relinquish our idiosyncracies and diversities. In the evolution of complex open systems, integration and differentiation go hand-in-hand. The brain functions because the component neurons are distinctive, carrying highly diversified characteristics and capacities. Similarly, it is in intimate interaction that we discover our uniqueness, our irreplaceability. We learn that each time we fall in love.

## WOMEN AND POWER

I do not state that women are endowed with a capacity to feel more pain for the earth than men, but I know from my own experience in this work that women appear to be particularly open and responsive to the signals of distress from the larger body of which we are part.

This responsiveness appears to have a social basis.

Some of the fine work done by Carol Gilligan\* and others shows women have been socialized to be more responsive to relationship than to principle. This may also have a biological ground because of the capacity for childbirth, which builds into the psyche as well as the body a visceral, uterine connection with the future and the larger world.

The concept of synergistic power summons us to develop our capacities for nurturance and empathy. This is especially important for men, who have been socialized to be competitive. But this notion of power

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also presents a challenge to women, who have been conditioned to please and be passive and nurturing. For us power can mean being assertive, taking the risk to give honest feedback, and participating more fully in the body politic.

To really move into the experience of synergistic power involves courage on the part of women. Although this power involves receptivity, it doesn't mean that women need to be "soft" as in patriarchal notions of femininity. It challenges us, rather, to stop colluding with patriarchal hierarchies, to stop giving away our power for the sake of approval, comfort, and security, to take responsibility for what we know to be true and what we want to see happen. The synergistic power of open systems takes not only courage but also smarts. We need the cleverness or subtlety of claiming power while 1) avoiding the patriarchal model of how powerful people behave, and while 2) affirming our innate femininity without defining it in the old

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Jungian and Taoist modes which equate it solely with the receptive and passive. So we walk a path between two outmoded styles: the bully and the doormat.

Synergistic power requires the courage of confronting people with a demand for their honesty. It takes courage to ask people to tell the truth. Yet we need that desperately now because our government is lying to its people more and more—about toxic wastes, and the arms race, and its foreign policy.

As we women struggle for our sense of self-worth and effectiveness, we must remember this: The power which women must exercise is the power that comes from the wholeness of the earth's being. That

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\*Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1982.

## Meditation: The Four Abodes

"This exercise is derived from the Buddhist practice known as the Brahmaviharas, or the Four Abodes of the Buddha, which are lovingkindness, compassion, joy in the joy of others, and equanimity. Adapted for use in a social context, it helps us to see each other more truly and experience the depths of our interconnections.

The guided, group form goes like this:

Sit in pairs. Face each other. Stay silent. Take a couple of deep breaths, centering yourself and exhaling tension. Look into each other's eyes. You may never see this person again: the opportunity to behold the uniqueness of this particular human being is given to you now.

As you look into this being's eyes, let yourself become aware of the powers that are there . . . Open yourself to awareness of the gifts and strengths and the potentialities in this being . . . Behind those eyes are unmeasured reserves of ingenuity and endurance, of wit and wisdom. There are gifts there, of which this person him/her-self is unaware. Consider what these untapped powers can do for the healing of our planet and relishing of our common life . . . As you consider that, let yourself become aware of your desire that this person be free from fear . . . from hatred . . . from greed . . . from sorrow . . . and the causes of suffering . . . Know that what you are now experiencing is the great lovingkindness . . . It is good for building a world.

Now, as you look into those eyes, let yourself become aware of the pain that is there . . . failures and losses, griefs and disappointments beyond the telling . . . Let yourself open to them, open to that pain . . . What you are now experiencing is the great compassion. It is good for the healing of our world.

As you look into those eyes, open to the thought of how good it would be to make common cause . . . Consider how ready you might be to work together . . . acting boldly and trusting each other . . . As you open to that possibility, what you open to is the great wealth: the pleasure in each other's powers, the joy in each other's joy.

Lastly now, let your awareness drop deep, deep within you like a stone, sinking below the level of what words or acts can express . . . Breathe deep and quiet . . . Open your consciousness to the deep web of relationship that underlies and interweaves all experiencing, all knowing . . . It is the web of life in which you have taken being and in which you are supported . . . out of that vast web you cannot fall . . . it has brought you into being . . . feel the assurance of that knowledge. Feel the great peace . . . rest in it . . . Out of that great peace, we can venture everything. We can trust. We can act."

—adapted from **Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age.**

knowledge allows us to stand firm on behalf of the planet and other beings, not giving in to old notions of domination and obedience. We women need to say, "No, we won't obey, we won't give in, we won't give our power away to those who would exact obedience from us." We need to say these things, not because we are wonderwomen, but because we know that we are connected with a much larger power, a synergistic power which operates in nature on behalf of the earth and the future. We have to be ready for confrontation, for civil disobedience, even for jail. We must be prepared to be ostracized, wiretapped, possibly tortured. Thousands of our sisters experience that at this moment.

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*"The anger that we women feel now is sacred. It is a sacred power. It is essential to us."*

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There is enormous power in withdrawing consent. We often feel a sense of futility and powerlessness in the face of the huge machinery of government and corporations and the military. But withdrawal of consent gives us a great deal of leverage—the final leverage.

We have to be brave, braver than the hero model of the patriarchy, braver than St. George slaying the dragon. Our bravery is closer to the Buddhist model of the Bodhisattva (an enlightened being) who takes joy and power through her identification with all beings. In a sense we know about that through our experience of love, of raising children, of being with a lover. It is the experience not of dominating another, but of eliciting another's strength.

One thing I would stress to women is that this sense of openness is not sentimentality. It is scientifically based. The systems view of life emerged from the life sciences in our century, and is now borne out in physics as well as in the political, economic, and psychological sciences. One of the important empowerment tools available to women now is an understanding of systems theory or ecology. (One important book about this is *The Systems View of the World* by Ervin Laszlo, George Braziller Publishers.)

This transition in our concept of power is radical. It involves seeing power not as a property we own, not as something we exert over others, but as a verb, a process that we participate in. This is a huge evolutionary shift. Given our biology and conditioning, women are particularly adept at grasping it and making it operative. This is probably one reason why women are at the forefront of the anti-nuclear movement. It gives me hope in what they do.

I wept with anger as I saw pictures of missiles being installed in Germany and England. I was enraged. That anger is good energy, and we women can use it, when we move beyond petulance and self-pity. Synergistic power implies that we can use this rage when we move into that part of our anger which is on behalf of Gaia, on behalf of earth, of our future, of the coming generations of humanity. It is not anger at particular men who are in positions of political power, but rather, rage at succumbing to devastation. It is not

rage at people, but at domination. If it turns into power-against, then it enmeshes us in its own gears and grinds us up in its own machinery.

The anger that we women feel now is sacred. It is a sacred power. It is essential to us. The anger of women now has an almost maternal quality, as when we snatch the matches from the hand of an obstinate child. "Just stop," we say. "Stop it! That's enough!" We aren't hating the child who is bullying another or playing in self-destructive ways. We simply and firmly remove him from doing any more damage to himself or to others.

**A** central theme in every major faith is to break through the illusion of separateness and realize the unalterable fact of our interdependence. This theme has been often hidden and distorted, given the institutionalization of religion and the authoritarian cast it frequently assumed in the last two millennia of patriarchal culture; but it is still there. From Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Native American and Goddess religions, each offers images of the sacred web into which we are woven.

Each faith, at its core, recognizes that in confusion, fear, and greed we forget, and we fall prey to divisiveness. Each faith offers ways to overcome that amnesia, and break out of the prison cell of egocentricity. To awaken us once again to our true community, these traditions offer prayer and meditation, story and ritual, and also,—always—moral action.

We are now emerging from the patriarchal era. Some wonderful spiritual practices are emerging as well or being reclaimed. Meditations have been very important to me and others because they are helpful in deconditioning us from old notions of power which weaken and divide. It is not enough to just have a mental recognition of this power, because, unfortunately, we have been emotionally, habitually conditioned to succumb to it. We are children of our culture and have been conditioned from birth to the illusions of separateness and competition and scarcity. Therefore we need to school our deepest responses by mental disciplines or exercises. They can be done early in the morning or throughout the day. They allow us to experience our identity with earth, to let Gaia inform us. We enlist the power of our will and imagination, both of which are essential in order to see what is—that we are one body. Such meditations help us break through the illusions that have been imposed by thousands of years of patriarchy. The Four Abodes Meditation, reproduced on these pages, is an especially powerful tool for learning to see and listen to each other.

In conclusion, let me say that the birth of this magazine is a welcome sign that women are ready to look at power. In the earlier days of the women's movement, we women accepted the notion of power as it was defined by the patriarchy, and turned away from it as something immoral or obscene. Now we are ready to meet the challenge of redefining power in terms we can experience and communicate, in terms that the world needs. ○○

*Special thanks to Bobbi Lev, who leads Joanna's workshops in Massachusetts, for this interview.*

### Excerpts from **Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age**

*"The old concept of power . . . saw reality as composed of discrete and separate entities . . . Power, thereby came to be seen as a property of these separate entities, reflected in the way they could appear to push each other around. It became identified with domination . . . it is still defined as having your way with other people."*

*"We are the universe becoming conscious of itself."*

*"Power is like a verb: it happens through us. We experience it when we engage in interactions that produce value. We can experience that with loved ones and fellow citizens, with God, with music, art and literature, with seeds we plant, materials we shape . . . In each case it involves attentive openness to the surrounding physical or mental environment and alertness to our own and others' responses. It is the capacity to act—and to act in ways that increase the sum total of conscious participation in life."*

*"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 . . . these wholes—be they cells, bodies, ecosystems, and even the planet itself—are not just a heap of disjunct parts, but dynamic, intricately organized and balanced systems, interrelated and interdependent in every movement, every function, every exchange of energy."*

*"We must move beyond the dichotomy of sacred and secular. Instead of vesting divinity in a transcendent, otherworldly being, we recognize it as immanent in the process of life itself . . . like us, God is dynamic—a verb, not a noun . . . we open to voices long unheard. That indeed is the meaning of religion: to bond again, to remember. . . ."*

*"Power, which is the ability to effect change, works not from the top down, but from the bottom up. It is not power-over, but power-with; this is what systems scientists call synergy . . . Power, far from being identified with invulnerability, requires just the opposite—openness, vulnerability, and readiness to change. This indeed is the direction of evolution. As life forms evolve in intelligence, they shed their armor, and reach outward to an ever wider interplay with the environment. They grow sensitive, vulnerable protuberances—ears, noses, and eyeballs, lips, tongues, fingertips—the better to feel and respond, the better to connect in the web and weave it further."*