

Earthy spirituality for an evolving planet

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**Sex
and
Spirit**

Sam Keen on sex and war
Joanna Macy on erotic ecology



Joanna Macy

The eroticism of deep ecology

Joanna Rogers Macy is author of *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (New Society Publishers) and *Dharma and Development: Religion as Resource in the Sarvodaya Self-Help Movement* (Kumarian Press). She is a Buddhist scholar and co-founder of Interhelp, an international network sharing psychological and spiritual resources for social-change activists. Macy and her husband, Francis, have raised three children and now reside in San Francisco, where she is on the faculty of the California Institute of Integral Studies.

She was interviewed for *CREATION* by Charlene Spretnak, author of *Green Politics: The Global Promise* (with Fritjof Capra) and *The Spiritual Dimension of Green Politics* (both from Bear & Company).

CREATION: You're probably best known for your work with despair-and-empowerment workshops, presenting ways in which people can address their fear and despair in the nuclear age, work through it, and become activists to turn the tide. Currently, you're more likely to be heard lecturing on ecology, or what the Greens call "eco-peace." How did you arrive at this convergence in your own work?

MACY: I consider it a natural progression because what we find when we are bold enough to open to our experience of pain for the world, which is what we do in the despair work, is to find that this suffering *with* our world is compassion. This caring for our world springs from our organic interrelatedness with all beings. As we confront our feelings of despair and have the courage to tell the truth about what we feel and know and see happening to our world we find that our perceptions, and indeed our distress, are explicable only in terms of our interdependence, our embeddedness in the web of life.

Another term for that dependent co-arising is "deep ecology." I frankly consider it to be the modern Western version of that non-linear understanding of reality that the Buddha taught after he sat under



C. Busch, CSJ

Joanna Macy

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“You are a living miracle of cooperation and symbiosis.”

the bodhi tree. It's a radical relatedness. It is bolstered today by the findings of the science of ecology. Deep ecology takes us beyond an anthropocentric point of view, and that in itself is tremendously liberating of our vision and energy. While deep ecology work is a natural extension of the despair-and-empowerment work it is very upbeat, tapping into deep, awesome, and playful knowings.

CREATION: Someone from another

planet who observed what's going on here would be astounded that the basic truths of ecology are often the last things to take hold in people's consciousness. Right now at this post-modern moment in history, a transitional era during which we *hope* we're moving toward the Ecological Age, one hears a lot of proposals for what new institutions and values and cultural structures might be like. Why do you suppose it is that ecology is utterly absent from many of those proposals and grand visions?

MACY: Are fish aware of water? I think it's so integral to our lives that it's invisible. So the work that we have to do is to name what is or should be obvious, to dignify what we already know subliminally, so we can tap the resources already present around us and in us. For example, the ecological understanding of power—a reconceptualization I consider to be the major cognitive revolution of our time—is a synergistic view, rather than the patriarchal, power-over sense. We are all familiar with the play of synergy; it is actually not new at all. With our lovers, our children, our friends, our students, with our friends and co-workers we know the excitement and pleasure we feel when we enhance the competence and freedom of others. But we don't think of it as power because we have been conditioned by millennia of hierarchical thinking. So deep ecology work helps us see and tap into the powers that are already there, in our relationships and in our bodies. We can begin then to learn from the body. We can pay attention and reverence to the extraordinary miracle of symbiosis of a multiplicity of beings that are there in our body, the intestinal bacteria, the forms of life teaming on the surface of your skin. You are a living miracle of cooperation. That is what life is. That is power.

On the level of social change work a number of colleagues in Interhelp and I have been promoting the empowering concept and practice of spiritually based communities. That is an organic way of interrelating people in local self-organizing systems that will give people nourishment and resilience in their activism. These groupings can serve as “rough weather networks,” providing primary allegiances and mutual support that can help people weather repressive governmental measures, harassment by



police and FBI, or right-wing fundamentalists, or whatever the forces of violence that are stirred up in our efforts to heal the world.

CREATION: It sounds like those spiritually based communities are rather like the affinity groups in the peace movement we had a few years ago, many of which had a spiritual orientation.

MACY: Right.

CREATION: And yet about a year after the Freeze did so well on the ballot, the peace movement fell apart in large measure. So many little affinity groups disintegrated, and some larger groups, as well. Why do you think people didn't hang together in the small groups?

MACY: This is just a guess, but perhaps they didn't consider themselves to be in it for the long haul. We need a psychospiritual orientation here that amounts to a lifelong commitment. We're not going to get rid of nuclear weapons or ecological destruction or the dangers of totalitarian government next week or next year. I can sustain this kind of commitment only when I am embedded in a matrix of deep caring and mutual reinforcement and inspiration, when I'm walking side by side, shoulder to shoulder, with brothers and sisters for whom I would die. These rough weather networks can take us through a hard time. And I have seen already how this sense of bonding and these support groups are allowing people to demonstrate a courage and a resilience that they could never have alone in a short-term group.

CREATION: What is your understanding of the political relevance of deep ecology in alternative circles?

MACY: An example can be seen in those ecological warriors who risk their lives for other species. You see this in Greenpeace. You see it in the Chipco movement in India where the participants—most are female—from villages go out and hug the endangered trees. You see it in the Rainbow Warriors in Australia, who climb the trees or chain themselves to the trees to protect them from illegal logging of the rain forests.

To serve for the long haul the practice of deep ecology involves meditations, rituals, and gatherings that help us unlearn our anthropocentric conditioning—the conditioning that limits our sense of identity to what is inside our

bag of skin or to our own species—and help us to reinhabit our world. Brian Swimme talks about the tight constraint of the solely human compartment and about how we must expand our identity beyond that. I reverberate with that because I've experienced it with people in all walks of life as we do deep ecology work.

Let me put it this way: each of us, and each cell in our bodies, is the product of four-and-a-half billion years of life story. I was there and you were there with the Big Bang. We were there with that flash of lightning that catalyzed organic life in the primordial soup. We were there in the Devonian seas when animal life crawled up on dry land. Each of us was there, as was each molecule of our bodies. The memory of that and of all forms of life through which we have passed and the many dyings through which we have gone and the many new birthings—all of that is in our neurological system and in the matter and stuff of our bodies. So we are our planet in a sense. When we can widen our scope to see that our story is that long, it gives us a tremendous sense of ballast and resilience in facing the enormous perturbations of our time.

CREATION: It also broadens our view such that activism is a matter of fighting for and protecting "I the ocean," "I the rain forest," "I the whales."

MACY: And John Seed, of the Rain Forest Information Center, put it just that way when I asked him how he deals with his own despair, because it's a very uphill struggle with many reverses and countless disappointments. "Well," he said, "when I feel despair, I remember what I really am. I am that part of the rain forest that is trying to protect the rain forest in human form. The rain forest is protecting herself through me."

CREATION: Does your own sense of deep ecology include the erotic?

MACY: Emphatically. Deep ecology is essentially erotic, for eros is the pattern that connects. Finding our deep ecology, we find our mutual belonging, with a sense of profound celebration and play. It is the deep dance we experience in sexuality as well as our responses to beauty. The dance invites us home again into the pulsing web of life, where our awareness and participation is, in a sense, the universe making love to itself. ○

"We develop our capacity to draw strength and teachings from the animals."