

An Interview with Joanna Macy



Courtesy of Joanna Macy

by Mackenzie Stewart

Dr. Joanna Macy, writer and workshop leader, is the author of *Despair and Empowerment in the Nuclear Age*. In this book she analyzes the sense of futility that undermines human endeavor in an age threatened by nuclear holocaust, and she provides exercises for restoring a sense of power to correct the imbalances of our planet. Well-known for her work in "despair and empowerment," she travels extensively throughout the United States, giving workshops.

This Spring Dr. Macy visited the Cenacle Retreat House in Rochester to conduct a workshop in "deep ecology." Based on the concept of the ecological interdependence of all organisms on the Earth, the "deep ecology" workshop helps participants to respond personally to the major ecological crises facing the planet, and brings them to a sense of their own power in the face of these threats.

The following interview was conducted by phone earlier this year. Enjoy. -psr

TCJ: You have spoken about the "four environmental crises" which we are facing today. Can you describe these crises?

JM: Drawing on the fine work of Marshall Massey of the Quakers, we can differentiate the dangers to our life support system into four distinct ecological crises.

The first is a crisis of sustainability. That is the run-down, through deforestation and overgrazing, for example, that spelled the death of previous civilizations in Sumeria, Babylonia, and Roman North Africa. It occurs when, through loss of topsoil, loss of crop land, forestland, and grazing land, an ecosystem can no longer sustain itself.

Now add to that the loss of fisheries through the poisoning of the seas. So we are facing a non-renewable situation in terms of food production, whether its marine or agricultural. That is crisis number one.

Number two is the crisis which could spell not only the death of our civilization, but the incapacity to generate future cultures, and that is the degeneration of the gene pool, the loss of genetic diversity that is required for our planet to sustain living systems. That loss of diversity can be dramatically seen in the extinction of plant and animal species, which seems to be on an exponential curve now.

Less visible but more

dangerous, say the agronomists, is the loss of diversity in food grains. That is due not merely to environmental conditions, but also to sheer human greed, through food companies monopolizing the production of seeds through patenting them and through promoting hybrids.

We are becoming for our food dependent on a drastically reduced number of seeds, whether it's wheat or corn or other food materials, which makes us very vulnerable to plant disease and vagaries of weather. Some experts see that as the greatest danger to our survival.

The third crisis is one that is in the news now through the devastation of our rain forests, particularly the tropical rain forest, that green belt around the middle of the earth that generates a large percentage of our oxygen. The oxygen we need to breathe is generated also by the plankton, and the plankton is endangered by the poisoning of the seas.

So between depredations on the rain forests and on the oceans, we're facing an alarming crisis. Jacques Yves Cousteau said nine years ago that we could suffocate in thirty years if we didn't radically turn around in our ways of behavior. With loss of oxygen, all that would remain would be anaerobic or non-oxygen-requiring species.

The fourth crisis is one that doesn't take any time to develop. It could happen one minute from now, with the accidental or deliberate pushing of the button that would launch a nuclear exchange, which in turn would produce a cloud of ash and smoke that would induce a nuclear winter. There have been a number of scientific studies on this, particularly in the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., that demonstrate that this nuclear winter would not be limited to the aggressor or victim nations but would spread around the globe. It would be long enough to produce freezing and famine that could pretty much do us in.

TCJ: This all sounds pretty grim. In moving from the universal perspective to the individual, you have done and are doing extensive work around the country and the world in what might be described as "spiritual activism" or, maybe more appropriately, "planetary activism," and bringing the two together. How do you describe the work that you do to help bring people to the point

where they can respond to these crises?

JM: First of all, let me say that our capacity to change this situation is very clear. These dangers are not visited upon us from without by any kind of malignant supernatural or extra-terrestrial force. They are the karma or the results of our own actions, and we can turn that around, we can stop it. We can stop generating the poisons, we can alter the lifestyles that are the root cause of these crises.

Fortunately that change doesn't necessarily take time. It involves a waking up, and waking up is something we can do from one minute to the next. New awareness can alter our perceptions, our relationships, our behaviors. Because we are so systemically inter-related, any action on your part or on my part has repercussions that we cannot measure in a linear way.

TCJ: So you're saying that even small actions in our daily lives could have major effects in the crises you've described.

individual efforts against such a huge and many-headed beast is like trying to fight a forest fire with a squirt gun. The tendency for many of us seems to be to hide our heads in the sand, to go on with our work and to do our own solitary meditation practice, and hope it will all go away.

JM: You remind me of the great quote from Edmund Burke, who said, "The greatest mistake of all is to do nothing because you can't do everything."

TCJ: This gets back to the repercussions of an individual's actions being greater than measure for measure, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but having possibilities - like a snowball rolling down a hill - that are much greater than we can ever dream.

JM: That's right. It's like we are neurons in a larger brain, and that brain is beginning to think. We cannot, with our limited perceptions, see the whole. So it is simply a question of doing with whole-heartedness what we would like to see everyone else do, and not stopping. We musn't

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JM: Absolutely. Integral to the mentality that has gotten us into this fix is a linear mode of thinking, and notions of causality as operating in a one-way fashion by aggregation. It leads us to think of growth as incremental rather than exponential. Because we are so intricately inter-related, because, as saints and teachers have said, we are one body, what one does in a seemingly isolated way has repercussions on the whole body that we cannot explain in a linear fashion.

Science itself, now, as it turns to a more holographic image of the universe, is seeing that the part includes the whole. Each of us is a microcosm of the whole. Even acts as mundane as composting our garbage or recycling our bottles and paper, or talking to a neighbor have repercussions far beyond our capacity to measure them.

When the awakening comes, we won't know it until after it has happened. We will see that there has been this utmost danger, this near tragedy through which we have passed. We thought it would kill us, and then we turn and look; and instead of killing us, it has shown us our true identity, and we are no longer the same people. We are members of each other. Maybe that will be the only way we'll know we've passed through it.

TCJ: I'm really glad that you can see the positive in the midst of being on the brink of nuclear holocaust, widespread famine; environmental pollution of land, air and sea - that there may be some light at the end of the tunnel.

JM: I believe we can only see the positive if we have the guts to look the dangers smack in the face. Otherwise, our optimism is shallow and wishful thinking.

TCJ: Well, there's the feeling that

make the mistake of saying, "Well, I'm not going to do it because I don't see a hundred thousand or a million other people doing it." That's the great defeat.

But to just act as if you were acting on behalf of all humanity, as if that act could be multiplied a million-fold, that, I'm beginning to understand, is the meaning of "faith." You just act on that faith, you just do your little number, and by the very nature of the way systems work, that will be multiplied.

TCJ: You use an interesting term - the word *neuron*. The picture that I get is that you're moving from an individual to a planetary perspective, and the very crises that are threatening us with extinction can also contribute to our being able to see the whole picture of the earth as one, and each one of us as being a nerve that can reach out and feel the pain of the earth. By communicating that, then somehow we are each contributing something to a process larger than ourselves.

JM: Precisely. And the pain we feel is simply living proof of our inter-connectedness. We can extrapolate from that to understand our power, which is not as separate, isolated individuals, but as the synergy of people working together.

TCJ: So being open to the pain and frustration and helplessness that we feel when in reading the paper about the devastation of the rain forests and so on is actually an integral part of the process and not something that we should run away from.

JM: Absolutely. When you pick up the news and read painful information, then you just breathe it through your body and say, "Oh boy, that hurts!" And that

hurts because we are so intricately interwoven. For me or you simply to receive and integrate that information in itself is part of the healing. Healing can only take place through awareness and connection.

TCJ: As a teacher, you've put together a number of different workshops that empower people to take action. Can you briefly describe the different workshops that you do?

JM: Well, there's the sort of classic "Despair and Empowerment Workshop," where a main thrust is finding our authority in our own experience, where we validate our felt responses to what is happening on our planet, and let our pain for the world be a doorway for knowing our inter-connectedness and our latent power.

Secondly, as an extension of that are the "deep ecology workshops" I have been undertaking, which focus even more on our inter-relatedness with all beings. For example we "remember" our evolutionary journey on this planet, and discover how empowering that is.

And we practice speaking on behalf of other life-forms in a ritual we call the Council of All Beings. We can stand up on our hind legs and say, "No!" to this nuclear power plant or to that toxic waste dump, knowing that we do so not just as an isolated individual with his or her opinions, but that we speak on behalf of all beings, on behalf of four and a half billion years life.

And we feel gratitude for being given a human life that allows us to communicate with the policy makers, and indeed to become policy makers ourselves.

TCJ: I had noticed that in *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, you have a T'ai Chi exercise that you use in your workshops. Would you describe how you find that that fits in with the work you do?

JM: I think you are referring to Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain. I find this exercise a useful way to recognize and incorporate the shadow - that is, we don't need to try to keep our doubts or our angers or our hostilities or our pain outside of us. When we do, that leaves us off balance in a defensive posture. Through the gestures of Embracing Tiger and then Returning to Mountain, we act to incorporate all our experience. That exercise reminds me that we don't need to exorcise or cut away any part of our experience, and that it is rather in embracing all of our responses that we can find both the strength and resilience requisite for effective action.

TCJ: So the tiger is all of the crises that we're working with now.

JM: That's one way of looking at it. Another way is to see the tiger as the fears and panic that we might feel in response to these crises.

TCJ: So it's embracing our own pain that we are ordinarily trying to get away from.

JM: Yes. The tiger could be both the bomb itself, so the speak, and it could be one's panic in the face of it. None of that needs to be swept under the rug. We don't have to fight off a piece of our experience. All of it can be taken in, we're big enough. And only in taking it in can we return to find our balance and our stability.