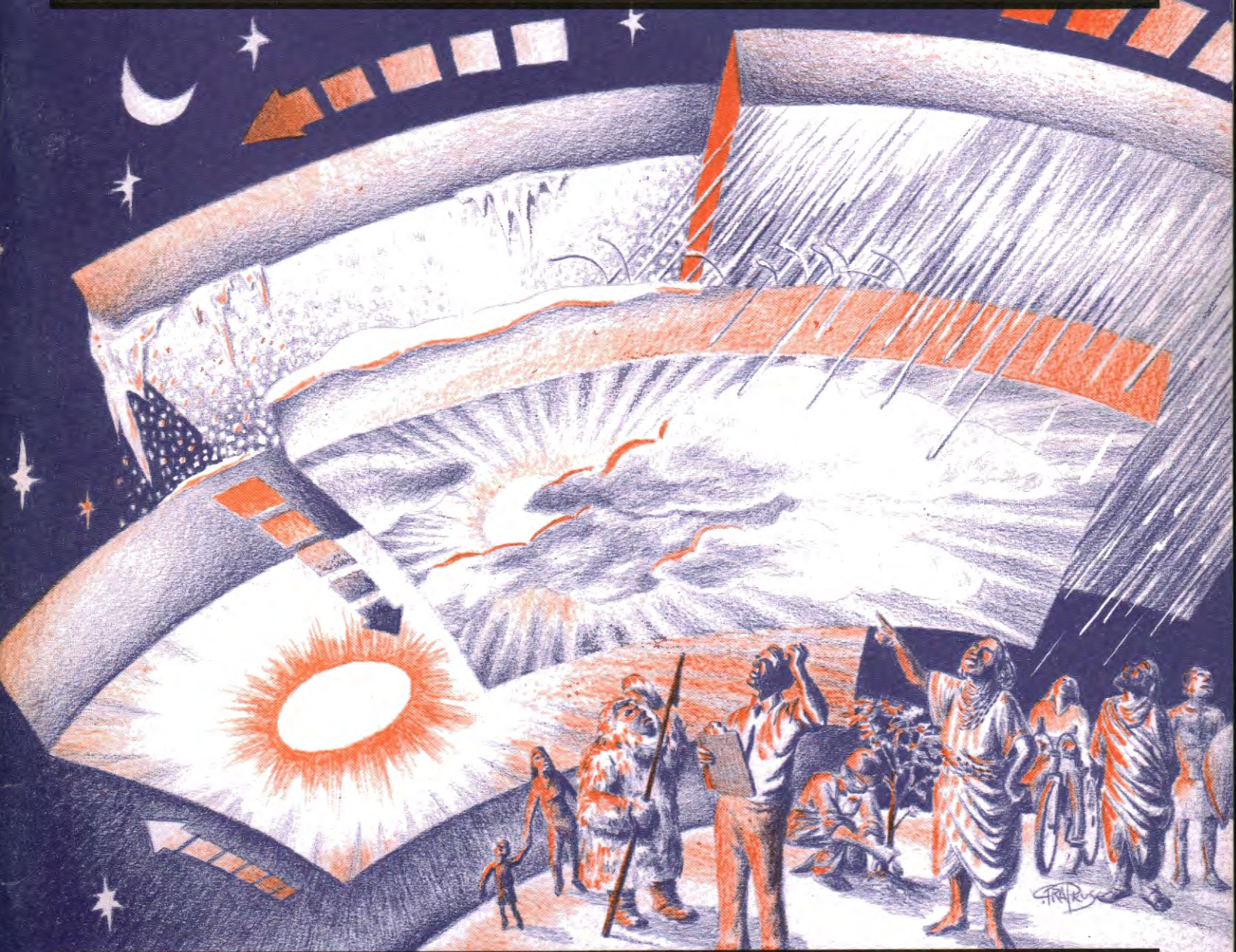


Joanna Macy, Deep Ecology, 101 Ways To Heal The Earth

IN CONTEXT

A Quarterly Of Humane Sustainable Culture



Global Climate Change
Social and Personal Responses

No. 22 \$5

Breaking The Spell

An Interview with Joanna Macy, by W. R. Prescott

Facing the truth about our environmental problems is the first step toward empowerment for change

How are we to confront the prospect of global climate change? The newspaper's litany of hotter temperatures, rising seas, and shifting weather patterns can create a numbness difficult to shake off. But shake it off we must, and Joanna Macy tells us how to begin.

Joanna Macy is a deep ecologist and a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies. She is perhaps best known for her workshops on despair and empowerment and for her books, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, and *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings* (with several co-authors). Joanna travels widely to give her workshops – universally described as deeply moving and inspiring – and she recently spoke with Guest Editor Bill Prescott by telephone from London.

Bill: My first question is about denial. Although people have some idea about the depth and scope of global climate change, it's not like the problem of the possibility of nuclear war. Global climate change is a reality that's beginning to take hold, and we have only a decade or so to make major structural changes in society and in personal lifestyles before environmental breakdown forces us to make them. And so the problem of denial is urgent. How can people overcome the systems of denial that they see in themselves, their friends and other people, as well as in society at large?



Joanna Macy

Joanna: First of all, we need to recognize that denial itself is the greatest danger we face. We have the technology to make sweeping and fairly effective changes. But not much can be done until we're ready to acknowledge the situation we're in, to let it sink in.

That kind of acknowledgement isn't easy. Our fear of despair functions to filter out painful information, and furthermore it's

not in the interest of our economic system, as it is presently structured, for us to get alarmed. It's in the perceived self-interest of the state, the corporations, and the media which serve them for us to imagine that everything is just fine and that we are happy – or that we're just about to be happy if we buy this product or

The great erotic connection of
telling the truth
is like the kiss that woke up
Sleeping Beauty.

that product. So to break through this protective screen we've erected, it's very helpful to see it as a *spell*, like in the old fairy tales.

It's like the spell that grips the courtiers in the castle of the Fisher King in the legend of the Holy Grail: They're in the middle of the Wasteland where nothing grows anymore, and both the land and the rulers have lost their powers of regeneration. But they're mesmerized, so they maintain the status quo. They all move around on automatic, like smiling robots. We are under a comparable spell, and we can break out of it the way the Fisher King and his courtiers did. Thanks to Parsifal's caring questions – "What aileth thee?" – they encountered what they already knew beneath the denial and the repressed despair, and that smack of reality woke them up. That direct connection – the great erotic connection of *telling the truth* – was like the kiss that woke up Sleeping Beauty.

So we break the spell by loving ourselves and each other enough to tell the truth. Our own experience, as

inhabitants of an endangered planet, gives us the authority and the authenticity to tell the truth about what we see and feel and *know* is happening to our world. That profound inner movement of acknowledgement brings a great release of intelligence and creativity, because repressing what we know is a tremendous energy drain. It's not so much a question of incorporating new information – sitting down at the desk and learning a new lesson – but rather relaxing our defenses and saying, "Okay, yeah, I *know* this is going on." There is a level on which this awareness is already present.

Obviously, we still need to transmit critically important information, but let's do it in a way that respects the fact that on some deep level, people know they are living on an endangered planet. And indeed, it is that inner knowledge which produces what we mistakenly take for apathy or indifference. The work that I have been doing over the last ten years convinces me that so-called "public apathy" does not stem from indifference or callousness or even ignorance so much as from fear of pain. And that pain itself stems from an innate capacity to suffer *with* our world.

We make the mistake of thinking that we are essentially separate and fragile, and that if we acknowledge this terrifying information we'll break. It's a mistake that is fostered by our culture and our political-economic system. So we need to respect ourselves and realize how tough we are – tough enough to be fully present to our world and not break.

Bill: *Once people have broken through and seen the emerging reality of global climate change, how can they keep from going crazy? How can they stay sane and healthy and fully engaged in appropriate action, especially considering how overwhelming this is emotionally – as overwhelming as nuclear war, even if not as immediately dramatic.*

Joanna: I think it's *more* overwhelming than nuclear war, because it is actually happening, and we'll have to actually *live* it instead of being given a quick exit.

So how do we stay engaged and not go crazy? We will be confronting painful information all along the way, so again, it's a matter of how we handle the pain. Our culture, with all its baggage of reductionist ego-psychology, would suggest that pain is abnormal and

unhealthy – that if you weep for your world, or for beings you don't even know and who aren't even born yet, it's a sign of some kind of neurotic maladjustment.

But we are fleeing from that pain when we say, "Don't talk to me about global warming. Don't talk to me about the ozone layer, or the dying species. Look, I've got problems enough. I've got a family to support and payments to meet. If I were to let all that stuff in, if

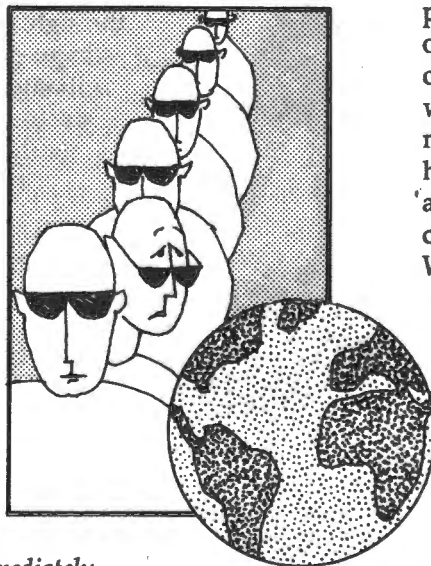


I were to let myself experience it, I wouldn't be able to get out of bed in the morning. *Don't ask me* to let that in. There's nothing I can do about it anyway."

What we have to do is *validate* the pain that arises in confronting this situation. It does *not* stem from any personal pathology. On the contrary, it's a measure of our humanity, and indeed of our evolution, that we are capable of suffering with our world and being open to what is going on beyond the confines of our skin. We must help people realize – and it means continually having to realize it ourselves – that this thing they're asked to take in, this grief, stems from our capacity for compassion, which literally means "to suffer with." We are compassionate beings, and if we stifle our compassion, our capacity to be present to our world, we go dead. We go dead.

So to not go crazy or go dead, we need to reframe our inner responses constantly, with respect and compassion, and not scold ourselves or each other. The key thing here in being fully present to our world is *not* to try to go it alone. Hook up with a group. Go to your church, your community center, your neighborhood school. Find a group, or start your own. Even if you're only three people, it makes a difference. You can't break a spell all by yourself. You've got to reach for that hand. You've got to look into each others' eyes. It's hard just to read about this in the papers, unless you can say to yourself, "Okay, Tuesday night I'm going to be meeting with my group and I'm going to tell them how hard this is to deal with."

So we talk with each other. We mount actions together, we take risks together. This all breeds a tremen-



dous sense of solidarity— we begin to feel in league with beings all around the earth, and with beings of the future too, and also with the beings of the past who loved this earth and tended it for so many centuries and generations. And we are reminded again of what we have always known throughout our long evolutionary journey — that we can do *amazing* things, if we do them together. Then, in addition to our cumulative individual efforts, there is also that which we cannot predict: the synergy of the interaction of our efforts, which can produce unforeseeable and amazing results, as well as high adventure.

There are some fine and effective networks to plug into, like the Global Greenhouse Network that Jeremy Rifkin and others have launched. These are not something extra to pile onto your life, on top of everything else — the PTA, the Altar Guild, whatever — but they can become rather a basic organizing principle for the other activities. “I am participating in the healing of my world and I am not doing it alone. I am part of a great company, a vast fellowship of those who are waking up to the fact that we can participate in the healing of our world.”

Bill: *You’re saying that the key to personal sanity is basic grassroots organizing.*

Joanna: Absolutely.

Bill: *To any grassroots organizer you couldn’t say anything better, anything more exciting.*

Joanna: I certainly find this true in my own life. For example, I’ve found myself repeatedly drawn back to the issue of nuclear waste. For each of us there are different issues that speak to us with particular force. Well, if it were not for working on a campaign with other people — in this case a lawsuit against a power company for faulty storage of high-level waste — I would have gotten mired in despair over the horror and immensity of the problem. I found great buoyancy and courage in our joint effort. We actually lost the case, and the situation is still bleak, but more and more people are joining us — and I learned about the kind of magic that happens when you’re working with others for a cause bigger than yourself. It is high and heartening adventure.

Bill: *And it brings out the best in you if you’re telling the truth. But let me touch on another point. There’s been a*

good deal of talk recently about the idea that people can’t perceive the threat of global climate change, because we’re neurologically incapable of doing so for evolutionary reasons. We’re only capable of perceiving immediate threat: things like bears and sabertooth tigers. This is a common theory among environmentalists — that something as invisible as a changing atmosphere or ozone depletion can’t be perceived in a way that motivates people to take action.

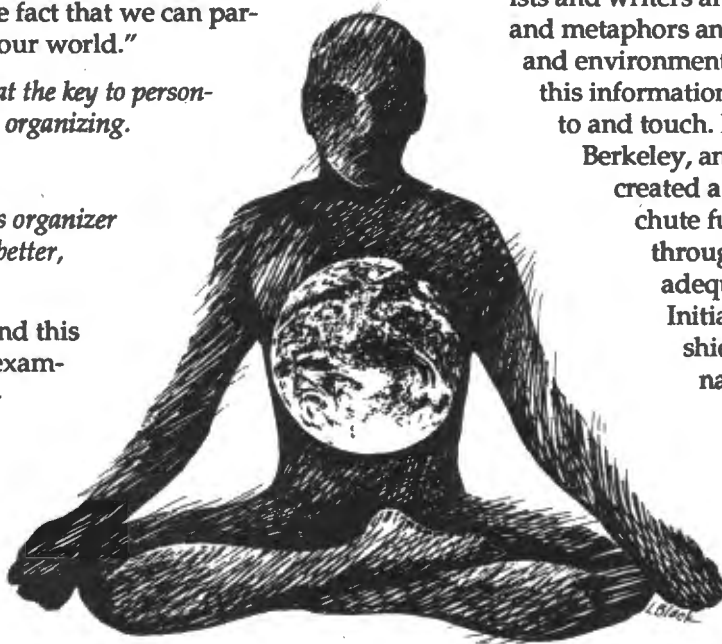
Joanna: Well, there’s a basis for saying that. How do you mobilize people for something that is sensorily beyond their apprehension? Particularly when they have been affected by the fantasy world of television, where catastrophic pronouncements about the greenhouse effect can be taken as just another TV drama.

Bill: *Just as Americans relate to other countries as though they were shows that come on occasionally.*

Joanna: Precisely. So how do you make this real for people? It’s a wonderful challenge to artists and writers and teachers — to create images and metaphors and graphics, to create events and environments that can help us internalize this information. We need stuff we can relate to and touch. I have a young neighbor in Berkeley, an environmental architect, who created a great umbrella, a huge parachute full of holes with lights shining through, to convey to people the inadequacy of our Strategic Defense Initiative and its alleged nuclear shield. It is a matter that is ordinarily conveyed only by statistics. Here you walk in and you say “Oof! Yeah!” Let’s get the kids involved, and the artists, and turn this information about global warming into something real. We’re good at that kind of thing.

Bill: *So to make the very basic societal and lifestyle changes that need to be made so rapidly, what else do we need to do on an inner level?*

Joanna: I think that society and our planet need for us to wake up to who we are and what we are, which is a fundamental challenge to the concept of self. The idea that we are separable entities, that we can be aloof from each other and aloof from what we do, that we are so fragile that we need to keep endlessly consuming to complete ourselves is completely dysfunctional and, I believe, pathogenic.



For the profound and far-reaching changes that are required now, we have to make a fundamental shift in that assumption about the self, and consequently in the ways we organize our common life.

A whole new sense of who we are in relation to our world is emerging. It is coming out through a revisioning of our religious traditions, and it is coming out through science too. That's why I teach general systems theory and systems cybernetics, because those are cognitive tools that can help us make this shift. New resources and new vistas are bubbling up like well-springs, nourishing and releasing us into a sense of our interconnectedness and the power that springs from that. Key among them is what is called the New Story

**"We need to realize how tough
we are – tough enough to be
fully present to our world
and not break."**

or the New Cosmology, as Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and others articulate our inheritance in the unfolding and majestic story of our Earth. [See IC #12.] In this context we can see that the challenge of global warming is a challenge for us to grow up into our true nature, as inherent parts of our planet body. We will continually now – and in an accelerating fashion – be discovering how to work together in transformative ways.

I was amazed in talking with Jeremy Rifkin about how far-reaching some of this work is – already it's like a chain reaction. Communities around the world are responding to the greenhouse effect. My husband is in the Soviet Union right now, and reports how these people, for the sake of their environment, are acting and taking unprecedented risks, in relation to their political safety and their employment, for the sake of the ecological integrity of our planet. This is amazing. People are ready to risk their comfort and even their lives not on behalf of themselves, and not even on behalf of our species, but on behalf of life on Earth. You won't read about it in the newspapers, but this is a shift that is *epochal* in nature. If we sense that high adventure and see ourselves within that context, that will hasten the necessary changes that our society has to make. And maybe – *maybe* – it will be in time. ♣

AN EARTH-CENTERED CURRICULUM

In the schools of the future, the living Earth has been moved to the very center of the curriculum. Elementary-grade children know that "everything is connected to everything else" and that there is no "away" to throw things to. For upper grade students, the divisions called biology, chemistry, and physics are gone; systems and system interactions are the objects of study. Real-world problems that will be part of students' adult lives – like population growth and global climate change – are topics around which science and social studies teachers build joint lessons.

The textbook has become archaic, replaced by computer-based knowledge programs with associative retrieval capability. A student calls for information on an assigned topic, and the computer provides it together with animated graphics, sounds, and illustrated statistical patterns that demonstrate principles and interactions in whole-systems ways. The student can explore new lines of inquiry in any direction – laterally to a related subject, back to the historical roots, or up to the airiest new sprouts of speculative hypothesis. The computer's knowledge is continuously updated. The role of the teacher has changed from "information giver" to "research director."

Our students of the future are empowered to see how they as individuals contribute to problems and can be part of the solutions. They do not feel – as many of their parents do – that they are in the grip of forces beyond their control. They use the knowledge they obtain to formulate alternative courses of action for themselves and their communities.

These students abhor the despoiling of the Earth for transient benefits, and they live lightly. They understand their responsibility to future generations; they enjoy the Earth and leave it to be enjoyed by others. Some have developed true ecological wisdom and see the human relationship to nature in a new way. Our Earth-centered curriculum has taught these students a vital lesson – how to distinguish between short-term benefit and the long-term good.

– Richard Golden

Richard Golden is Director of the Climate Protection Institute.