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# NewAge

J O U R

FEBRUARY 1991

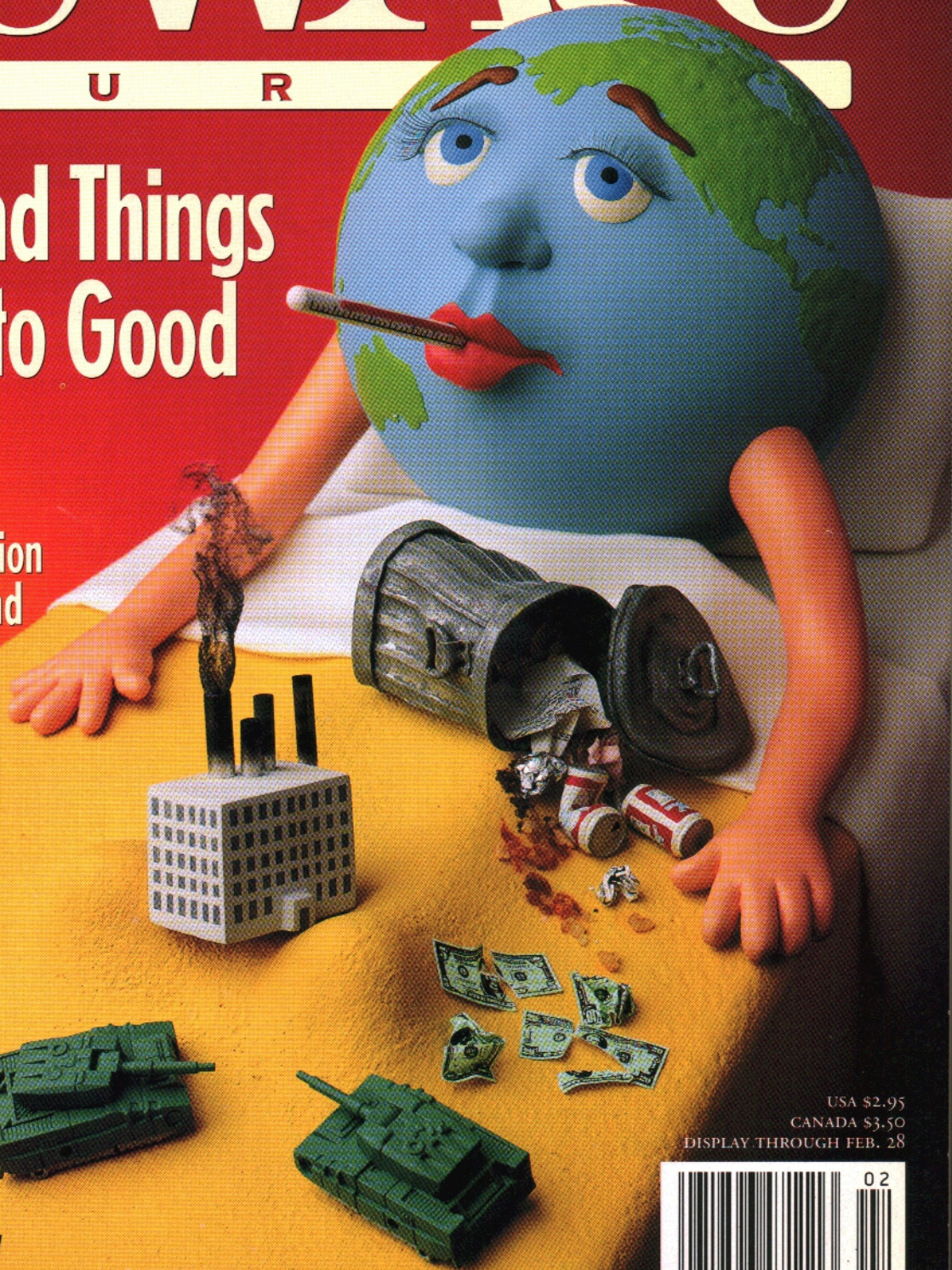
## When Bad Things Happen to Good Planets

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# What's So Good About Feeling Bad?

*Deep ecologist Joanna Macy helps us find meaning—and hope—in the suffering of the world.*

YOU KNOW THE FEELING. THAT MOMENTARY SUFFOCATION as the morning headlines envelop you with the Persian Gulf, the crumbling economy, AIDS, inept politicians, famine, toxic waste, homelessness. That flash of anger when you hear the president of a West Coast lumber company rationally defending a plan to clear-cut some of the last remaining stands of ancient redwoods. That vague dread that fills your soul late at night when you try to imagine what life on our ailing planet will be like for your grandchildren. ¶ Human history has had no shortage of gloomy periods, but at no other time has our awareness of

A NEW AGE JOURNAL INTERVIEW BY  
JONATHAN ADOLPH AND PEGGY TAYLOR



Joanna Macy: "We have to respect the fact that we are confronting something for which the stories of our species, our teachers, our ancestors, our language, have not prepared us."



the extent and complexity of our problems been greater. Scientists, ecologists, biologists—experts around the world—now calmly discuss what was once unthinkable: that as a result of our own actions, human life on this planet could cease to exist. How are we supposed to deal with this?

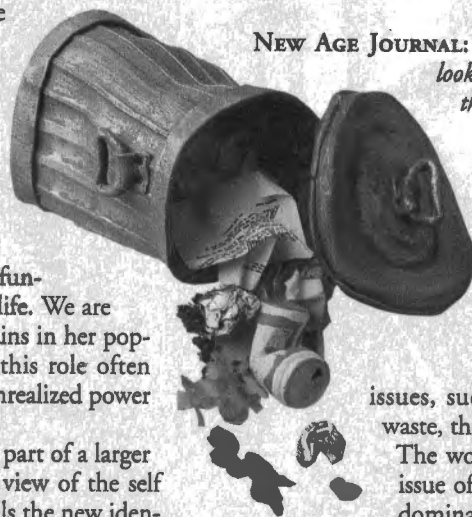
“As a society,” observes author, Buddhist scholar, and deep ecologist Joanna Macy, “we are caught between a sense of impending apocalypse and an inability to acknowledge it. Not surprisingly, people are feeling despair. But what is surprising is the extent to which we hide this despair from ourselves and one another.”

For more than a decade, Macy, author of *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (1983) and co-author of *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings* (1988), has dedicated herself to helping people confront—and even appreciate—despair. “Like grief,” she argues, “despair must be worked through. It must be named and validated as a healthy, normal, human response to the planetary situation.” Drawing from her scholarship in both Buddhism and the cutting-edge science of general systems theory (which explores the dynamic interdependence of all things), Macy argues that this psychic and spiritual distress is actually heartening evidence of our fundamental interconnection with a larger web of life. We are like neurons in a vast nervous system, she explains in her popular workshops and seminars, and although this role often brings us pain, it can also become a source of unrealized power and inspiration.

At the same time, acknowledging that we are part of a larger whole helps us transcend the limited, isolated view of the self that got us in this fix in the first place. Macy calls the new iden-

imaginatively sensing its body from within,” she explains. As a final strengthening exercise, the life forms spontaneously offer the humans gifts—lichen offers patience; the lion, a strong voice; caterpillar, the courage to transform.

When Macy is not giving workshops, writing (two books exploring the links between Buddhism and general systems theory are due out this year), or teaching (she’s an adjunct professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies), she’s most likely to be working on nuclear issues—for it was “the poison fire” that for a time in 1977 filled her with such despair that she often found herself rocking in a fetal position on the floor. In 1988, she created the Nuclear Guardianship Project, whose goal is to establish above-ground waste-storage facilities run by specially trained citizens who would view their work as a spiritual discipline and pass on their expertise, generation to generation.



**NEW AGE JOURNAL:** *We decided to give you a call after we looked back at “How to Deal with Despair,” the article you did for NEW AGE JOURNAL in 1979. As we read it, it still seemed very fresh, very pertinent. The despair that you were talking about is unfortunately still very much with us, and perhaps has even intensified. You were focusing mostly on nuclear issues back then.*

**JOANNA MACY:** Well, even back then it was actually environmental issues, such as animal extinction and nuclear waste, that got me started working with despair. The work quickly became identified with the issue of nuclear war because that was the predominant anxiety of the time.

## We have the resources to heal our world—whether we’re going

ity that emerges the “ecological self” and considers this now-occurring transformation “the most fascinating and hopeful development of our time. It is one of the reasons I am so glad to be alive today.”

To help speed this shift in how we view ourselves, Macy has developed a number of visualization exercises and group rituals. Perhaps the best-known of these is the Council of All Beings, in which participants assume the identity of other life forms—fish, animals, trees, even an entire swamp—and then share their species’ feelings of frustration and disappointment with human representatives in an open forum. Developed by Macy and Australian ecologist John Seed in 1985, the Council has since been enacted around the world by groups of a dozen to a hundred participants, in locations ranging from the Grand Canyon to a police armory. Working with Matthew Fox, developer of creation spirituality, the Council has even been incorporated into the celebration of the Catholic Mass.

Central to the experience, says Macy, is using the imagination to dislodge the participants from “the usual human roles” they play, thus providing an empowering sense of connection to the larger world. “We take time to see this life form in our mind’s eye, carefully and from every angle, and to enter it,

*Do you think that’s still the predominant anxiety?*

No. In fact, I think people might almost look back to the fear of nuclear war with a certain nostalgia. Today’s dreams and apocalyptic visions are of a severely degraded planet, where we’ll be struggling in subhuman conditions just to stay alive. I think this degradation is in a way harder to face than the quick annihilation of nuclear war. It’s almost easier to think there won’t be future generations at all than to think they might be subject to tremendous suffering. At any rate, I’m now finding that people’s despair is much closer to the surface than it was back in ’79.

*What makes you say that?*

I see it in the people who come to my workshops. They are ready to feel their pain right off the bat. I notice it in people’s conversations, in works of art and writing, and in people’s responses on the street. When you talk to the public, you no longer find people who don’t think there’s a problem. The despair is very great and people seem much more ready to acknowledge it and express it.

My experience is that this pain for the world, which I think is a more accurate term than despair, is almost universal. And people feel it not only in reading reports and seeing the news on television, but in their own neighborhoods as well. The world that’s pictured in children’s books no longer exists. Nor does the world that we remember from our childhood or from tales of our parents’ childhood. So the question that preoccupu-

*Jonathan Adolph is senior editor and Peggy Taylor is editor of NEW AGE JOURNAL.*

pies me is, How do we live with that? Because we all feel it.

*And yet people's tendency, at least during the '80s, seemed to be to busy themselves with trying to make more and more money.*

Yes, well that behavior can be understood as a form of avoidance. Our culture has been gripped by a kind of manic denial that feeds the engines of consumerism. It's very short-term thinking rather than long-term because the future looks so bleak. It's *carpe diem*—live it up now, because who knows what's to come.

*Perhaps one reason we have trouble coming to some type of internal reconciliation with our situation is because our situation is something new. I don't think past generations ever had to face this type of an anxiety.*

I think you're entirely right. And I think that that is a place to begin, with respect and compassion for ourselves in acknowledging the uniqueness of our situation. We have to respect the fact that we are confronting something for which the stories of our species, our teachers, our ancestors, our language, have not prepared us. So to simply note that we are in an unprecedented situation is the first step toward health. I think it's equally essential to have a sense of compassion for ourselves. When we pick up the newspaper or look out at that layer of smog hanging over our major cities, one of the first instincts is to feel guilty and say, "I should be doing something about this."

There's a feeling of guilt that automatically kicks in: Why aren't I superwoman, why aren't I out there like the Tibetan divinity Chenrezig with a thousand arms and a thousand eyes coming to the rescue of all beings? What is the matter with me that I am letting this happen?

That's why I think it's so important to emphasize how unprecedented this situation is. An awareness of that helps us to catch ourselves when we let the guilt overtake us, and that's important because guilt just shuts us down. We have to remem-

## to do it is another question.

ber that none of our ancestors was ever confronted with this. And yet we are—we who have in some way been called to be alive in this time.

*That sounds like something the theologian Thomas Berry said at a recent conference: He said he finds it comforting to remember that we did not ask to be born. Rather, he said, we were chosen to be alive in the late-twentieth century. We didn't create this mess, we don't have to feel guilty about it, but we're here now, so it's up to us to respond creatively to the situation before us.*

Yes, and I believe he also says that we are never confronted with something that we don't have the resources to meet.

*Do you believe that's true?*

Oh, yes. We have the resources to heal our world. Now, whether we're going to do that or not is another question.

*Well, isn't that the ultimate question—whether we have the courage to do it in the face of all the political and economic constraints that will be thrown up in the way?*

Oh, yes. But I think that when we wake up—when we turn and become radically present to our world and take part in its healing—we're going to come alive in a new and vital way.

*What do you mean by being radically present?*

Being awake. Not denying what is happening to our world, and not getting distracted out of a sense of presumed powerlessness or indifference. It is as simple—or as difficult—as that. The forces that are militating against this, that would discour-

# Harvesting the Gifts of Our Ancestors

## *A ritual for empowerment.*

**O**UR CULTURE ENCLOSES US IN A TINY COMPARTMENT of time, increasingly cut off from past and future. But we can reclaim our birthright and inhabit broader reaches of time by sensing the companionship of those who have gone before. They are with us. Even as you read this page, your ancestors are present—in your curiosity or in the set of your jaw.

When I lead the following visualization exercise in workshops, we stand and move to music—actually walking backward, then forward, with eyes closed—but you can also do it staying still. Take at least half an hour:

From this present moment begin to move back in time—through the events and encounters of this day, this week, this month, this year. . . . Walk back through the decades into your young adulthood, your adolescence, your childhood. . . . Soon you are a baby in your mother's arms, now back in her womb and returning to the climactic point of this life's conception. . . . But what lives in you did not begin then. Walk back into your parents, into *their* lives, then back into the wombs that bore *them*, back into your grandparents. . . . Continue slowly back, into and through the nineteenth century, into ancestors whose names you no longer know, but whose gestures and smiles live on in you. . . . Keep moving back upstream in this river of life, back through the Industrial Revolution. . . . back into simpler, harsher times marked by the seasons, back into the Middle Ages. . . . Move back through times of plague and pilgrimage into the lives of ancestors with hands—like yours—that chiseled the stones of great cathedrals, and eyes—like yours—that tracked the movements of the stars. . . . Keep going back, to the dawning of the civilizations we know, and enter the early, wandering times. . . . the small bands in forest settlements, their feasts and rituals around the sacred fire and their long marches in the ages of ice.

Back through the millennia you walk with them, to your beginnings in the heartland of Africa. And now, with the very first ones, you stand at the edge of the forest.

Pause now, looking out over the savannah. The journey of your people lies ahead. Walk forward on it now. Retrace your steps, returning through time. Each ancestor has a gift to bestow: Open your arms and hands to receive it, as you walk forward through the centuries.

They who passed on to you the texture of your skin, the shape of your back, the marrow in your bones, also have courage to bequeath, and stubbornness and laughter. These gifts are yours for the taking.

Garner them, as you come forward through the years to this present moment, this brink of time. They who loved and tended this Earth bequeath you the strength and wisdom you will need now to do what must be done, so their journey may continue. —Joanna Macy



# Listening to the Beings of the Future

*Using the imagination to gain courage.*

**J**UST AS THE LIFE THAT PULSES IN OUR BODIES goes back to the beginnings of the Earth, so too does that heartbeat carry the pulse of those to come after. By the power of our imagination we can sense the future generations breathing with the rhythm of our own breath or feel them hovering like a cloud of witnesses. Sometimes I fancy that if I were to turn my head suddenly, I would glimpse them over my shoulder. They and their claim on life have become that real to me.

Given the power of the life that links us, it is plausible to me that these future generations want to lend us courage for what we do for their sake. As they look back across time to this critical period, when we are inflicting so much on our world that is and will be irremediable, I imagine they wish they could help and be heard. So I listen to them in my mind.

What I imagine hearing them say keeps me going. Sometimes it's just a whisper of "thanks," when I crawl out of bed an hour early to finish a report, or squeeze in a late-night meeting with environmental activists. I hear them thanking my activist colleagues, too, who also get tired and discouraged. Sometimes the comments of the future generations erupt unbidden. More than once I have been tempted to throw in the sponge on the Nuclear Guardianship Project (see main story) because I lack organizational and technical skills. "I'm no expert on radioactive wastes," I mutter. "It's not *my* job to store them. It's depressing and I'm tired and I have better things to do with my life."

Then comes this presence at my shoulder, and I feel an almost physical nudge: "Come on now. Just do what you can. This 'poison fire' is going to be around for so long; help your people contain it while they still can." And there's an edge of laughter in the words I imagine I hear. "After all, you are the one who's alive now!"

So at gatherings and workshops we often begin with an evocation of the "Beings of the Three Times." We invite their presence at our deliberations. Calling first on beings of the past, we take a moment to speak their names out loud, spontaneously and at random—names of ancestors and teachers who came before us and cherished this Earth. Then we call out the names of those living now, with whom we work and share this time of danger. When we call on the beings of the future, however, there is silence—for we do not know their names.

Still, though they are faceless and nameless, we ask for a sense of their presence, so that we may be faithful to the work that must be done. For it is for their sake, too, that we work to restore our land.

—J.M.

age us from being awake to our world are, of course, huge. Our society is hooked on the need to be smilingly affirmative and hopeful, which blocks us from being present to our world. And this clinging to hope is encouraged by the entertainment industry and by the consumer-goods industries, which discourage us from confronting or owning our anguish for the world. They tell us we're happy, or about to be happy, if we just buy this toothbrush or that politician.

*So is it a difficult task to become radically present?*

Well, not really. In fact, it takes an effort to *repress* our responses to our world. To be present to our world—to be awake—is a natural state, I think, so I don't see it as entailing very hard work. But it does require that we experience a shift in our relationship to our world, where we no longer believe we are in any way separate from it or immune to what happens to it.

Liberating oneself or waking up is actually the goal of most spiritual paths. But I think it's important to distinguish between liberating ourselves to be *present* to our world and liberating ourselves to *escape* from our world. And I stress the notion of presence in our world because I want to counteract the tendency in patriarchal religious systems of viewing the spiritual path as one of transcending or escaping from our world into higher realms.

*But it seems a natural response to want to escape from a distressing material world. How can we be so present to all that pain and not be consumed by it?*

You reframe it. When I, for example, feel grief or anger or sorrow or guilt about what's happening to the world, then I say, "I am feeling the pain of my world, I'm able to suffer with my world." And I view the ability to suffer in that way as very good news. It means that we are open to life outside our own skin, which means we are capable of compassion—a word that means, literally, "to suffer with." We are compassionate beings,

## I think people might almost

which is the definition of the bodhisattva in Buddhism.

I think it's important that we make it clear to ourselves that the pain we feel for the world is not idiosyncratic—that it cannot be reduced to private pathology. There is nothing wrong with us for feeling it. When we are present, we see that our pain arises from the interconnectedness of all beings. So our pain is a testimony to what I call our deep ecology—our profound interconnectedness with all life forms.

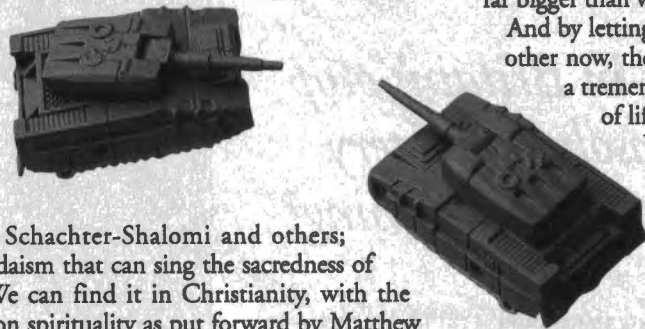
*You've written about the emergence of an "ecological self" that would acknowledge and respect these interconnections. What makes you think our species is going to—as you put it—"wake up"?*

There are three key factors that are helping us move toward a wider notion of the self than the conventional concept of the skin-encapsulated ego that has dominated our thinking for many centuries. The first factor is the impact of the overwhelming dangers of our time—dangers of mass annihilation, dangers of long-term breakdown—that are forcing us to look beyond our isolated ego. The second factor comes from science. It is the emerging new paradigm of reality in which everything is seen as intrinsically interrelated. This is most clearly expressed, I believe, in general systems theory. Far from there being a separation between mind and matter, we find that these represent two dimensions of experience that are inextricable. And nature itself, far from being something that mind can lord over and push around, is self-organizing and alive.

From the perspective of systems theory, you can't draw any clear boundary around what you consider to be mind on the one hand and self on the other. As anthropologist Gregory Bateson ended up saying, Mind is the pattern that connects. It interconnects in ways that have allowed the universe as a system to observe itself and know itself. This is fundamental to the sense of deep ecology that I believe is the ground of our power. And that is why I feel great confidence and indeed authority in affirming that our pain can be the ground of our power. Our pain for the world is a very immediate way of recognizing and bowing to our interconnectedness. If all I am is a separate isolated little self with a capital *I* and a label called "Joanna" then there is no reason why I should weep on behalf of the children of Chernobyl, except perhaps out of some sentimentality or some overload of Puritan guilt. Just as in our own body—you get a bellyache and your body is giving you a signal not to eat that green apple again—the pain is a healthy signal, alerting us to the trauma of our world.

The third force drawing us toward a more ecological self is the resurgence of nondualistic spiritualities, in which the material world is not dismissed as less real and less valuable than some higher realm.

We find this in Buddhism, especially in the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, but we also find it in Judaism in the work of rabbis such as Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and others; there's so much in Judaism that can sing the sacredness of the here and now. We can find it in Christianity, with the rapid spread of creation spirituality as put forward by Matthew



Oh, yes, faith is there for us, but it may not be the kind of faith that our grandparents had. I have faith—I have faith in the self-organizing of open systems.

*And what does that mean?*

It means that the world is organized in a way that naturally generates connections and consciousness. But having that kind of faith doesn't mean that everything is going to turn out OK for us. I think we have to have the kind of faith that can help us let go of hope.

*Please explain.*

We generally think of hope in terms of something we've known—after all, we can only hope for familiar things—so it tends to be a rearview mirror, reflecting old ways of thinking and old images of how things can be. But to be open to the radically new requires letting go of those images. That's part of what happens in the dark night of the soul or in the crucifixion, to use the imagery that we're going to be using at a workshop next Easter at Findhorn, a community in Scotland. When you go through the dark night of the soul, you let go of all the old securities that structured your faith or gave shape to hope. You surrender to the assumption that what brought us into being is far bigger than we can ever comprehend.

And by letting go, and instead being radically present to each other now, there is almost an incandescence of love. There is a tremendous capacity to see the preciousness of the gift of life right now, and to feel the interconnectedness.

We experience the gift of deep ecology, our bondedness with each other. It's like when I experience the pain of the mothers in Baghdad, or the villagers in the Indian jungle where they're building nuclear power plants, or the hungry ones in the Sahel or in downtown Oakland. If I'm not defeated by that

## look back to the fear of nuclear war with a certain nostalgia.

Fox and others. We find it in the goddess religions. And of course we find it in the Earth-based religions of the Native Americans and other primal peoples. So this is a swing back from the dualisms that had been imposed on religious traditions by hierarchical thinking. And it's high time, because I don't think we can save ourselves or our world unless we fall in love with it, unless we see the world's reality. We need to go back to these early teachings to resanctify our world, to get over this aberration, this split between the sacred and the profane.

*In other times when people looked to restore and replenish their souls, they had the promise of a life beyond the Earthly life. But now you're saying we should be focused on the here and now. What can we turn to now to replenish ourselves?*

Well that reminds me of the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, where Saint Paul talks about the three things we need to have—faith, hope, and love. Faith, in the traditional sense, is gone. Those religious certitudes don't work for most people anymore. And hope—that's out the window. Look at what we're doing to our world. Even the people who are the most active can't say that they're hopeful it's going to work. To me, feeling hopeful or hopeless is really more a function of our glands or what we had for breakfast than anything else. Sometimes I feel hopeful and sometimes I don't. So what does that leave us with? Love. That's all we've got, and I think that's totally sufficient.

*There are certainly religious people who claim to have faith.*

pain, if I take it for what it is, I understand that I feel it because they are part of my own body. They're part of my deep ecology, and our survival is linked, each to the other.

*Is it enough merely to be present?*

Oh, no, it's not enough. But that's where you have to begin. Being present to the world leads you into action. I think you go crazy if you don't act.

*So you have an obligation to act?*

Absolutely. But I think that talking about it as an obligation, as a moral ought or should, is not very effective. My experience is that it's more effective to invite people to expand their sense of self-interest than to sermonize at them about what they ought to do, as if it were some kind of obligation or sacrifice. Now, obligation is a funny thing. You're obligated to feed yourself in order to stay alive, for example, but I don't need to plead with you to eat or say, "Please don't cut off your leg: That would not be a moral thing to do." It wouldn't even occur to you to cut off your leg because it's part of your body. Well, the trees in the Amazon rainforest are part of our bodies too. They're our external lungs. So when we begin to realize that all of life is part of our body, taking care comes as naturally as feeding ourselves.

We don't have to get too literal about the metaphor of the world as our body, but it can point us toward experiencing an

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 91]



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JOANNA MACY

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37]  
expanded sense of self-interest.

*Won't expanding our sense of self-interest just bring us more pain?*

Not necessarily. If you understand your interconnectedness in the web of life, you can experience the pain not as something that belongs to you, not as something that you carry around in a basket, but as something that's going through you. A particularly helpful practice is a Buddhist visualization exercise I use in workshops. You breathe through the pain, let it move through your heart and release it back to the healing resources of the web of life. You don't carry it around. Because we are conditioned by a static, limited notion of the self, most people are afraid that if you feel despair you're going to be stuck in it, you're going to be mired in it, or you might break apart. And so it's helpful to

experience that feelings can come and go and that though our connection with the world brings pain, we're not the kind of objects that will break. Pain and despair come and go just like feelings of love, delight, and empowerment.

*So there are all kinds of feelings we can*

When we realize that all of life  
is part of our own body, then  
taking care comes as naturally  
as feeding ourselves.

*experience through our connection to the web of life, not just fear.*

Right. But if you don't let yourself experience the fear, you get stuck with it. If you let yourself experience it, and as we say, breathe it through, then the tubes are clear, so to speak, that connect you with

other beings, and there's room for other feelings.

Just as we can choose to be open to the pain of other beings, we can also choose to be open to their power. Since we are interlinked with them, we can let their resources of intelligence, devotion,

courage, and stamina be understood as part of our own efforts. We can be allied with them and realize we don't need to do everything by ourselves. That's a recipe for burnout.

*You also have said that we can be allied with non-human life forms, birds and fish and so on.*

That's right.

*How does that happen?*

I learned this from two friends who, on the eve of my departure for a year in a village in Sri Lanka, bestowed gifts upon me. "I give you the gift of not being afraid of the dark. It's the gift of the deep-diving trout. And I give you the gift of being able to see very far—the gift of the eagle." Those gifts sustained me through some very hard

times. I knew that this giving was poetic and metaphorical, that there was a child-like quality to it, but I also knew that there was something true about it. Both from my understanding of general systems theory and of the teachings of the Buddha on dependent co-arising, I knew that we are so interrelated in this holographic kind of universe that, in a sense, the trout's fearlessness of the dark was mine as well. So, in similar fashion, at the end of a Council of All Beings, the life forms that speak through us offer their gifts to the humans. And we accept them and they are real.

*What is dependent co-arising?*

That is the Buddha's central teaching. It's called his teaching on causality. Thich Nhat Hanh is spreading this very teaching by his use of the word *interbeing*. He talks about how we inter-are. He'll pick up a piece of paper and show how if you are awake, if you are attentive, you will see in it the tree from which the wood came that made the pulp, you see the sun and the rain that helped the tree to grow from a seed, you see the soil, you see the woodcutter that cut it down, you see what the woodcutter had for breakfast, and so on. You can be so present to your world, he conveys in his teachings, that you can see in every phenomena all that helps bring it

into being. Nothing can be separated out.

*And how does this let you have the trout's fearlessness of the dark?*

By showing me that those words are more than just flights of poetic fancy. We do know that our universe is structured almost holographically, where the whole is present in the parts, so when you give me the gift of the strength of the horse or the courage of the lion, you are calling forth something that is already available to me anyway, and you make me conscious of it. If I accept this gift, I become more conscious that I can draw this from the co-arising web of life.

Because we gain such strength from our interconnections, I believe people concerned about the world should undertake social action in a group—whether you're a group of mothers like those in Middletown, Pennsylvania, who gathered information to sue the plant that ran Three Mile Island, or a group of families like those who brought the Love Canal controversy to light in Niagara Falls, or a group of people like those who held vigils along the tracks of the nuclear trains. I want to foster this because I find that wherever you find courage and creativity, you usually find people supporting each other. This is not a time for the brave and heroic loner.

*But these days it seems as though even that community you cite as a resource might be very hard to find.*

Then you just have to create it yourself. You go to the people around your block or in your church or where you work. My experience is that people are ready to come forth. My husband and I have formed many action groups over the years around issues we felt strongly about. But I think you're absolutely right. The lack of community is causing anguish for people today, and it's also very disempowering. One of the first steps an oppressor takes is to isolate people from one another. People are much harder to oppress when they're not isolated from each other. And what could be recognized a lot more is that being together for the sake of a larger issue and taking risks together toward a common goal that is bigger than either of you is a truly dynamite way to build community.

Take the Nuclear Guardianship group that's meeting at my house this afternoon. Three years ago I got on the phone and I called ten friends and said, "I'm obsessing about radioactive wastes and I want company to help me learn more about it. I think that we need to evolve a new notion about taking care of it." And I explained the idea of nuclear waste guardianship. I

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asked them to meet with me once a month for six months. Now this was a diverse group and included a poet, a nuclear engineer, a cosmologist, an environmental lawyer, a dancer, a psychotherapist, and a few crazies like me.

We have been studying about radioactive waste in a group because it's so depressing to try to learn about it by yourself. We take turns teaching, and we do a combination of left- and right-brain learning. We might use role playing, or meditation, or do some exercises that help us get in touch with our despair, or we might do drumming and dancing. I could never get my mind around this information if it weren't a team effort and if we did not use these different modes of learning.

*Do you feel it's important to have a spiritual basis for a group like this?*

Yes I do. I do. Each time my Nuclear

I don't think we can save the world unless we fall in love with it.

Guardianship group meets, for example, we observe the three S's—study, strategy, and spirituality. The study part is very important because there's so much misinformation and because we tend to think that only the experts can understand. The strategy part is very important because it leads to coherent and sustained action, and that is the most empowering thing of all. The spiritual part is very important because I just don't think you can stand to face the pain of what you're learning unless you anchor it in a very big context. For us, the spirituality part includes what I call "deep time work," in which we use imaginative role play to go backward and forward in time to be with the beings of other times, so we can feel their claim on life and feel that they are some kind of unseen companions [see related stories on pages 35 and 36].

*You'd go back to your ancestors?*

Yes, but mainly we go to the future. Here's an example from one of our group's early meetings. I put a sign on the front

door of my house that said, "Chernobyl Time Laboratory: 2088," and I put Russian music on in the background. As people came in, I said, "Welcome! Our work here at the time laboratory of this Guardian Site is based on the importance of journeying backward through time. This is because the decisions made by people in the late-twentieth century on how to deal with the poison fire will have such a long-term effect on all following generations. We've got to help them make the right decisions. So you have been selected to go back in time to a particular group in Berkeley, California, that has come to our attention. They're meeting,

exactly a hundred years ago today, to try to understand, with their very limited mentality, about the containment of the poison fire. It'll be easy for them to feel stupid and discouraged, so from our superior vantage point in the year 2088 here at the Chernobyl Lab we're going to go backward in time to enter their bodies as they do this study so they don't get discouraged."

*So what happened?*

Everybody really got into it. After the introduction, I proceeded with the teaching that I had prepared on modes of containment for nuclear waste, and each one of us sensed within us the presence of a



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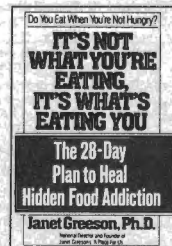
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future being who cared desperately that we understand about the poison fire and that we not feel defeated by our own notions of our limited intelligence or courage.

*So you're saying there is a larger intelligence that we can tap into?*

No, I'm not saying that exactly. I'm saying that our intelligence and courage are grossly underestimated and that they are virtually unlimited. We need to find ways to draw more deeply from them, and a sense of caring connection helps us do that. So when I get discouraged in my work, I feel there are beings of the future time at my side saying, "Come on, Joanna. You can do it. You're alive now, and we're not. Give it all you've got."

*So feeling cared for generates courage?*

Yes. And feeling counted on. I'm willing to try anything to expand my imagination. I could try thinking of myself as a slug, although that doesn't exactly get me activated. I think the imagination is a marvelous tool that can take us out of dysfunctional, ineffective notions of what we are and what we need. The imagination can help us see that we don't need to live the way we do, so wastefully, on this planet. The imagination can help us develop new visions of the future and steps to move toward it.

*Speaking of future generations, what would you say to people who are thinking of bringing children into the world now?*

I think that it's an act of love and tremendous courage. I remember when I made that decision thirty-five years ago there was nothing but blithe joy. I know that for many people today it is a very difficult decision. But when you bring a new being into the world, and you have that kind of concern, it can be a tremendous vote of love and confidence for us all. It hurts me to see young couples now wondering if they should feel guilty about having a baby, or wondering if they're indulging themselves to do this most elemental and beautiful act of our biological and spiritual nature. When young friends of mine make the choice and bring forth life now, I feel doubly grateful because I know they do it in a context that is so problematic. It would be so easy for them to say, "No, the prudent, the wise, even the compassionate thing to do is to hold back. No, I won't tax the planetary system anymore," or, "I will adopt a child from a suffering or underprivileged family." And I have no quarrel with those options, but when I see young men and women choosing to bring in life, I'm very moved. It's an act of faith, it's a commitment to our time.

I also see that there are some very amazing children being born now. Some of these children are so wise and so present that it seems as if they're meant to be here now. I can't deny the influence on me of my beloved Tibetans, who think in these ways.

*Do you think that feeling personally responsible for the condition of the planet can be a double-edged sword for some people? So many books have come out recently saying what you can do to save the planet or what you can do to save the rainforest or how you can help animals. The more people know about what they could do, the more they begin to feel they should do it. And if they don't, they feel guilty.*

What is important to me is that there are clearly ways—and we need to find them—to act on behalf of all beings that don't burn us out and that don't inflame our sense of our own marvelousness. My friends and I often get so driven. There are not enough hours in the day. We feel guilty for what we don't do, and so forth. I think it's important to see that just as our pain for the world shows our connection, then that connection can allow us to rest, and realize that we don't have to do it all ourselves. If we are indeed like nerve cells in the mind of an all-encompassing being, then out of this web we cannot fall. No failure or stupidity can ever sever us from that living net because that is what we are. And what we're a part of goes far beyond the control of what is in our paltry little egos or what can be judged by our finite little minds. A woman in a workshop last month quoted someone (and I'll quote her): "We are called not to be effective so much as to be faithful." And really that is all we can do—be faithful. If I'm continually judging the results of my actions, trying to measure how effective I've been in dismantling the war machine or stopping the effluents of toxic waste or what have you, I can wear myself out in very short order. And as an interdependent part of a larger enterprise, I can't measure that anyway.

So in order to really enjoy what you're going to do, I suggest that you pick just one thing, at most two, and learn about it. So if I know that my son Jack is working on recycling legislation, good. I don't need to do that. If I know my next-door neighbor is working on outlawing pesticides, great, she's doing that for me. I'll work on the poison fire, so you don't have to make that your priority. Just find something you love or feel special concern about and get in there. Keep at it. You don't have to do everything today. We are in it for the long haul, and we all have a part to play. ●