

# Active Hope

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

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Last April I preached an Earth Day sermon that talked about it being too late to turn back the effects of climate change. It painted a bleak picture, but offered a message of hope in that we could still find beauty and meaning and purpose in doing the right thing and caring for our Earth home and all its inhabitants. It was based in part on an article by Joanna Macy called, “It Looks Bleak. Big Deal It Looks Bleak.”

But I heard from a few of you afterward that the message had too much despair and not enough hope. I listened. And I began to seek more hope.

This summer at the Unitarian Universalist camp I’ve been going to since 1994, I took a morning group called “Active Hope.” It was based on the workshops Joanna Macy has been offering throughout the country and even the world for decades. And this September I was lucky enough to take a workshop directly from Joanna Macy.

Macy has written a book called *Active Hope*, and the subtitle is: “How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy.” That’s really what it’s all about, isn’t it? How to confront the conditions of our world without despair taking over? The conditions like nuclear waste, climate change, resource depletion, mass extinction of species, and so on, and so on. It’s so much easier to just go along with business as usual, trying to do what we can, but mostly trying not to think too much about it. It’s too scary to think about, so most of the time we avoid it—we keep busy, we distract ourselves, we don’t allow ourselves to feel the fear and the grief.

Coming to terms with climate change in particular is difficult because of the unique situation it poses. Macy says, “We need each other in ways we never have before. Because all through human history there was this tacit assumption that life would continue on this planet. Oh yeah, there were wars, there was poverty, there was plague and pestilence. Death, of course, and illness and old age and all of that. But always there was that tacit assumption that life would continue and that the work of our hands and hearts would go on for future generations. And that’s what’s lost now. And that loss of certainty for the ongoingness of life is the pivotal psychological reality of our time, I believe.” (from the DVD)

The loss of certainty for the ongoingness of life. That’s scary indeed. And yet, it’s the uncertainty that energizes us. If the world is going to end no matter what we do, then why do anything? And if we know everything is going to be OK, then where’s the motivation to act? It’s the not knowing that elicits our greatest creativity and courage. It’s the uncertainty that allows us to influence what happens, and helps us come most alive.

If we are to turn around this ship we’re on, we need to do it fast. Other shifts of the magnitude we’re looking at took centuries to achieve. We don’t have that much time.

One of the great gifts of hope I gained at the workshop is the concept of discontinuous change. It's a sudden shift that can't be predicted by what comes before. The analogy is to put a bottle of water in the freezer. As it cools down, there is a steady, continuous change in temperature, but the water doesn't change much in appearance until it gets near the critical threshold of its freezing point. Then, all of a sudden, it happens and the water changes from liquid to solid. It's like the concept of a tipping point, where the accumulated effects don't show up until finally something puts it over the top and tips it in the new direction.

Active Hope isn't dependent on being able to see results, but merely on being able to **imagine** the world we wish for and then work to realize that vision of the world. As Macy says, "we can't know how things will unfold. What we can do is make a choice about what we'd like to have happen, and then put ourselves fully behind that possibility." (*Active Hope*, p. 191)

Macy's workshops, which are now being led by facilitators around the world, are designed to help people open their hearts, to face their pain for the world and move beyond it.

The work starts with gratitude, as we did this morning with the opening words. Gratitude builds trust and resilience, widens our perspective, and strengthens us to face difficulties.

The next phase is honoring our pain for the world. This allows us to break through the cultural taboos that we usually abide by. It allows a space for our feelings of sorrow, grief, and outrage to be expressed. As Macy says, this suffering with the world is the most natural thing in the world. It is wholesome and healthy. She says "don't be afraid of your heart breaking open. The heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe. It's that big." (DVD)

This opens us up to be able to see with new eyes, the next phase in the process. A new perspective is offered that is empowering. It involves a wider sense of self, a different kind of power, a richer experience of community, and a larger view of time.

The final stage is going forth, which involves envisioning the future we hope for, and identifying practical steps to work toward that vision.

In the course of the 5-day workshop, I felt myself being opened up. The exercises done in pairs, in small groups, or in the whole group connected me to others, to the Earth, to the ancestors and the future generations, and to my deeper self. Driving home afterward, I felt energized with new purpose and commitment. I want to take a more active role in caring for our planet. I want to be more dedicated to the Great Turning.

The work starts with the description of three stories of our time:

Business as Usual—leading to disaster

The Great Unraveling—recognizes the disaster that Business as Usual is leading to. It lifts up things like economic decline, climate change, resource depletion, social division and war, mass extinction of species

--can feel overwhelming

The Great Turning, aka the Ecological Revolution, the Sustainability Revolution—embodied by those who know the first story is leading to catastrophe and refuse to let the second story have

the last word. On a par with the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, it's about transitioning from an industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society.

Three dimensions of the Great Turning:

- Holding actions—actions that seek to stop the damage, like protests, boycotts, etc.
- Life-sustaining systems and practices—like CSA's and farmers markets, socially responsible investing, etc. new economic and social structures
- Shift in consciousness—a deepened sense of belonging in the world, leading to a greater compassion

All three stories are happening. We all spend time in all three, even within a day. But we can choose where we want to put our energy.

I realize I have been spending a lot of time in Business as Usual, maybe because I have felt powerless to affect change. When I gave my attention to the state of the world, I saw the Great Unraveling, and it made me want to hide away with my head in the sand. I have never considered myself to be an activist, but I feel I am now motivated to do what I can to stop the damage, to work on creating life-sustaining systems and practices and to work toward greater compassion through a shift in consciousness and helping others to do so. I want to put more of my energy into the Great Turning.

One of the key learnings I got from the workshop is that it is important, even crucial, to do this work in community. We need support, we need comrades to walk with us as we take on this tremendous task. Macy compares it to adventure stories, and talks of the hero having a team to help get to the goal. Think Frodo and the Fellowship of the Ring.

In that spirit, I ask you now to turn to a neighbor.

As you look at this neighbor, rest into your breathing. Before you is a human of planet Earth. The opportunity to behold the uniqueness of this particular being is given to you now . . . . Open your awareness to the pain that is in this person's life. As in all human lives, there are sorrows in this one. Though you can only guess at the, there are disappointments and failures, losses and loneliness . . . there are hurts that this person may never have told to another human being . . . now you cannot take that pain away, but you CAN choose to be with it. As you sense your readiness to be with another's suffering, know that what you are experiencing is th great compassion. It is excellent for the healing of our world.

Now open your awareness to the gifts and strengths in this unique being . . . . Though you can only guess at them, there are behind those eyes unmeasured reserves of courage and intelligence . . . of patience, endurance, wit and wisdom . . . There are gifts that even this person is unaware of having . . . . Consider what these powers and potentials could do for the healing of our world, if believed and acted on. . . . As you consider that, experience your desire that this person be free from fear . . . free from greed . . . from hatred and confusion and from all the causes of suffering . . . As you feel how much you genuinely want this, know that what you are experiencing is the great loving-kindness . . . . It is such good medicine for our world.

Thank this neighbor and breath deeply again.

If you are interested in exploring this further, I'll be co-leading one-day workshops with Betti Lambro, who is here with us today. (Let Betti stand and be recognized.) The first one is Saturday, November 5<sup>th</sup>, in the annex, and they'll be roughly monthly after that.

Meanwhile, may we be grateful for the challenges that call us to rise to our best selves. May we find or make safe spaces to honor our pain for our troubled world. May we see with new eyes and experience ourselves as part of a greater whole, and may we go forth to do what we can to keep our beloved Earth sustainable for life far out into the future.