

JOANNA MACY
MOLLY BROWN

THE UPDATED GUIDE TO *THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS*

— FOREWORD BY MATTHEW FOX —

COMING
BACK TO
LIFE



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THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS

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MOLLY BROWN

FOREWORD BY MATTHEW FOX



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Contents

Permissions	xvi
Message from Dalai Lama	xvii
Foreword by Matthew Fox	xix
Preface by Joanna Macy	xxiii
Preface by Molly Young Brown	xxvii
CHAPTER 1: TO CHOOSE LIFE	1
We Can Still Opt for a Life-Sustaining World	3
Choosing Our Story	5
1. Business As Usual	5
2. The Great Unraveling	5
3. The Great Turning	5
The Great Turning	6
1. Holding Actions in Defense of Life	6
2. Transforming the Foundations of Our Common Life	9
3. Shift in Perception and Values	14
CHAPTER 2: THE GREATEST DANGER — THE DEADENING OF HEART AND MIND	19
What is Pain for the World?	21
What Deadens Heart and Mind?	22
Fear of Pain	22
Fear of Despair	22
Other Spiritual Traps	23
Fear of Not Fitting In	24
Distrust of Our Own Intelligence	24
Fear of Guilt	24
Fear of Distressing Loved Ones	25
View of Self as Separate	26
Hijacked Attention	26
Fear of Powerlessness	27
Fear of Knowing — and Speaking	28
Mass Media	29
Job and Time Pressures	30
Social Violence	30
The Cost of Blocking Our Pain for the World	31

Impeded Cognitive Functioning.....	31
Impeded Access to the Unconscious.....	31
Impeded Instinct for Self-Preservation	31
Impeded Eros	32
Impeded Empathy	32
Impeded Imagination	33
Impeded Feedback	33
Coming Back to Life.....	34
CHAPTER 3: THE BASIC MIRACLE —	
OUR TRUE NATURE AND POWER.....	37
Living Systems Theory.....	38
How Life Self-Organizes	39
Water, Fire and Web.....	41
Gaia Theory	42
Deep Ecology	43
Beyond Anthropocentrism	43
The Ecological Self	44
Asking Deeper Questions	45
Ancient Spiritual Teachings	46
Abrahamic Religions	47
Asian Traditions	48
Indigenous Spirituality.....	49
The Miracle of Mind	50
Self as Choice Maker.....	51
Positive Disintegration	52
We Are the World	54
The Nature of Our Power	55
Power Over.....	56
Power With	56
Power Over Blocks Feedback	57
The Power of Disclosure.....	58
Synergy and Grace.....	59
CHAPTER 4: WHAT IS THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS?	63
History of the Work.....	64
Aims of the Work	65
Basic Assumptions of the Work	65
🌀 The Spiral of the Work.....	67
The Shambhala Prophecy.....	69
The Work That Reconnects in Corporate Settings	71

CHAPTER 5: GUIDING THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS	73
The Value of Working in Groups	74
Tasks of the Facilitator	75
Foundations of Good Facilitation	75
Capacities of an Excellent Guide	76
Engaging Full Participation	78
Working With Strong Emotions	79
Guidelines for Conducting Rituals	81
Workshop Setting and Arrangements	82
Money	83
Opening The Workshop	83
Closing The Workshop	85
Evaluation	85
Follow-Up	86
Ongoing Support for the Guide	87
CHAPTER 6: COMING FROM GRATITUDE	91
Gratitude: Teaching Points	92
Practices	93
Becoming Present through Breath, Movement, Sound and Silence	94
☞ Introductions with Gratitude	96
Open Sentences	97
Open Sentences on Gratitude	97
Gratitude Rounds	98
☞ Mirror Walk	98
Open Sentences on the Great Turning	99
The Wheel of the Great Turning	100
The Elm Dance	101
The Presence of Gratitude Throughout the Work	102
CHAPTER 7: HONORING OUR PAIN FOR THE WORLD	105
Our Inner Responses to Suffering and Destruction	106
Practices	107
Small Groups on the Great Unraveling	108
Open Sentences on Honoring Our Pain	109
Breathing Through	110
The Milling	110
Reporting to Chief Seattle	113
The Bestiary	115
We Have Forgotten Who We Are	116

“I Don’t Care” 116

Cairn of Mourning 117

Truth Mandala 119

Despair Ritual 123

Bowl of Tears 128

Spontaneous Writing 130

Imaging with Colors and Clay 130

CHAPTER 8: SEEING WITH NEW EYES 135

Brain Food..... 136

 Key Teaching Points 137

 Advice for Conveying These Concepts 138

Practices 140

 The Systems Game 140

 Riddle of the Commons Game 143

 When I Made a Difference 145

 ☞ Widening Circles..... 146

 The Cradling..... 147

 ☞ Who Are You? 152

 Dance to Dismember the Ego 154

 Bodhisattva Check-In..... 156

 ☞ Council of All Beings 160

CHAPTER 9: DEEP TIME — RECONNECTING WITH PAST AND FUTURE GENERATIONS 169

To Reinhabit Time 170

Practices 172

 ☞ Invoking the Beings of the Three Times..... 172

 Open Sentences on Time..... 173

 ☞ The Evolutionary Gifts of the Animals 174

 Harvesting the Gifts of the Ancestors 175

 ☞ Audio Recording to the Future..... 182

 Letter from the Future 183

 ☞ The Seventh Generation 184

 Field Work on the Great Turning..... 187

 The Storytellers Convention..... 189

CHAPTER 10: GOING FORTH 191

Discoveries Made So Far in the Spiral 192

Practices 193

 Networking..... 193

 Communicating Our Concerns and Hopes..... 194

Life Map.....	196
Imaging Our Power	197
The Sword in the Stone	198
Callings and Resources.....	200
Consultation Groups.....	202
Corbett	202
The Clearness Committee.....	204
Dialoging with Mara to Strengthen Our Resolve	207
Bowing to Our Adversaries	209
Creating Study/Action Groups	211
The Four Abodes	213
Five Vows	213
Circle of Blessings	215
Two Poems for the Road Ahead.....	216
 CHAPTER II: THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS	
WITH CHILDREN AND TEENS	217
What Do Children Know and Feel?	218
The Effects of Silence	220
Suggestions for Overcoming the Fear and the Silence.....	222
Using the Work That Reconnects	225
Generation Waking Up.....	225
Practices for Children and Teens	226
Mothers and Daughters Follow the Spiral.....	226
Talking Circle	227
Gratitude	228
The Human Camera.....	229
Honoring Our Pain for the World.....	229
Open Sentences.....	230
Milling with Open Sentences.....	230
Two Stories of the Truth Mandala with Children	231
Boom Chicka Boom with Feelings.....	233
Seeing with New Eyes	234
The Web of Life	235
Our Life As Gaia.....	235
The Robot Game	238
The Council of All Beings in a School Setting.....	238
Going Forth.....	239
Open Sentences for Going Forth	239
Starfish Story and Ritual	239

The Galactic Council.....	241
Planning Actions.....	241
CHAPTER 12: LEARNING WITH COMMUNITIES OF COLOR	245
Part One by Joanna Macy.....	245
Getting Started	247
Honoring Our Ancestors.....	248
The Immensity of the Pain	249
How the Pain of People of Color is Pathologized.....	250
Seeing the Industrial Growth Society with New Eyes	252
Time for Deep Cultural Awakening	254
Part Two by Patricia St. Onge.....	255
Walking Toward the Work That Reconnects	255
Deep Culture as a Lens	257
Weaving the Threads Together	261
Part Three by Adelaja Simon, Adrián Villaseñor Galarza and Andrés Thomas Conteris.....	264
Part Four: Sharing the Work That Reconnects with First Nations by Andrea Avila.....	266
CHAPTER 13: MEDITATIONS FOR THE GREAT TURNING	269
☪ The Web of Life	270
☪ Gaia Meditation	272
Death Meditation	273
☪ Loving-Kindness	274
Breathing Through	276
☪ The Great Ball of Merit.....	278
☪ The Four Abodes.....	281
Two Litanies.....	283
Appendix A: Chief Seattle's Message.....	287
Appendix B: The Bestiary by Joanna Macy	291
Appendix C: Ethics and Declarations of Rights.....	295
Appendix D: Bodywork and Movement and Using the Spiral in Writing Workshops	299
Endnotes	309
Resources	317
Index	329
Acknowledgments.....	337
About the Authors.....	342

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Message from the Dalai Lama

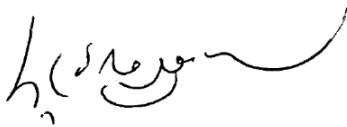
ALTHOUGH IT IS INCREASINGLY EVIDENT how interdependent we are in virtually every aspect of our lives, this seems to make little difference to the way we think about ourselves in relation to our fellow-beings and our environment. We live at a time when human actions have developed a creative and destructive power that has become global in scope. And yet we fail to cultivate a corresponding sense of responsibility. Most of us are concerned only about people and property that are directly related to us. We naturally try to protect our family and friends from danger. Similarly, most people will struggle to defend their homes and land against destruction, whether the threat comes from enemies or natural disasters such as fire or flooding.

We take the existence of clean air and water, the continued growth of crops and availability of raw materials, for granted. We know that these resources are finite, but because we only think of our own demands, we behave as if they are not. Our limited and self-centered attitudes fulfill neither the needs of the time, nor the potential of which we are capable.

Today, while many individuals grapple with misery and alienation, we are faced with global problems such as poverty, overpopulation and the destruction of the environment. These are problems that

we have to address together. No single community or nation can expect to solve them on its own. This indicates how small and interdependent our world has become. In ancient times, each village was more or less self-sufficient and independent. There was neither the need nor the expectation of cooperation with others outside the village. You survived by doing everything yourself. The situation now has completely changed. It is no longer appropriate to think only in terms of even my nation or my country, let alone my village. If we are to overcome the problems we face, we need what I have called a sense of universal responsibility rooted in love and kindness for our human brothers and sisters.

In our present state of affairs, the very survival of humankind depends on people developing concern for the whole of humanity, not just their own community or nation. The reality of our situation impels us to act and think more clearly. Narrow-mindedness and self-centered thinking may have served us well in the past, but today will only lead to disaster. We can overcome such attitudes through the combination of education and training. This book by Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown contains a wealth of advice drawn from their own experience for putting such training into effect, both on a personal and on a public level. It gives me great pleasure to express my admiration for such work and to encourage readers not only to give their approval, but to act upon it for the benefit of all sentient beings and this earth that is our only home.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

HIS HOLINESS TENZIN GYATSO
The Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet

September 7, 1998

Foreword

by Matthew Fox

A NEW MILLENNIUM, a time of planetary destruction but also planetary communication, the loss of legitimacy among our religious institutions, youth alienation, species disappearance — all these realities of our time require a book like this book and deep thinkers and activists like Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown. This is a source book in the true sense of that word *source*. It returns us to our source, our spiritual roots, so that our action will come from non-action; our action will be from our freedom and our self-awareness and not from our acting out or projecting.

Joanna Macy, the root teacher of the Work That Reconnects, represents the best of her generation's (and my) efforts to replace the dualistic, secularist and anti-mystical biases of the modern era with compassion and loving action. Though descending from an impressive line of Calvinist preachers, Macy's deepest spiritual gift is her application of Buddhism's principles that acknowledge the deep suffering of the world and resolve to assist a Great Turning beyond that suffering. Like the mystics of old, she invites us into the despair and darkness and fear that grips all of us, dispelling the notion that denial, numbing or escape are valid options. She challenges us to analysis as well as action, and she gifts us with exercises that

will strengthen our minds and hearts for the struggle ahead. Molly Brown's contribution, from years of coaching and teaching with tools of psychosynthesis, ecopsychology and the Work that Reconnects, is also welcome and substantive in rendering the book useful as well as challenging.

In many ways this book can be called a manual for mystics and prophets as we enter the 21st century. It is deep in its ecumenism and employment of interfaith and inter-spirituality practices, drawing not only on the rich Buddhist spiritual practices but also on exercises from other traditions and from the authors' imaginative experience in leading workshops in healing of despair all over the world.

It has been my privilege to be present at several of those workshops, often co-leading with Joanna, and I have always gone away deepened and strengthened by her gifts of spiritual leadership. I recall our work together on an ecojustice workshop in Munich, on bringing the virtues of darkness and awareness of suffering to the Findhorn people in northern Scotland, and our doing "Cosmic Christ and Buddha Nature" workshops in Santa Barbara, California and at the University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland, California. All these experiences rise to the surface on reading this book, and blessings of strength and spirit fill my consciousness on recalling them. That is what is so special about Joanna Macy's work — not just her passionate commitment (this may be a hint of the healthy zeal she inherited from her Calvinist predecessors) and not just her strong analytic mind — but especially her awareness that learning takes place not just in the head but in the heart and indeed with the benefit of all the chakras. With Macy, her process experiences are just as valuable as her theory. Praxis and theory come together in this book as it does for other liberation theologians the world over.

This book, deriving from four decades of inner work and of work in the field, emanating from the wisdom of our ancestors East and West and coming from the heart, mind and experience of a spiritual visionary and a committed activist for eco- and social justice, is a blessing for our times.

To write a book entitled *Coming Back to Life* implies that death is around us and has overtaken us. How can there be a return to life

without an acknowledgment of death? This seems to be the case, namely that ours has become a culture overwhelmed with death — some of it real and much of it brought on ourselves by ourselves. When one sees the young lost, cigarette corporations targeting thirteen-year-olds to render them addicts, corporations growing rich on exploiting women and child labor in Asian factories with substandard working conditions, sexual exploitation on a grand scale, climate warming and its denial, the tragedy of Fukushima, one becomes more and more aware of the presence of death. Moral death. Spiritual death. Even physical death.

And so, in times like ours, one rejoices to see this book by two persons who have committed their hearts, work and considerable passion to the theme of resurrection, of ways out of death. How do we go about coming back to life, i.e. spirit, in these troubled days? Macy and Brown offer us both theory and practice on how to do this. This is a spirit book. This is spirit work. It heals and it gives us hope, thereby empowering us on the way to a healing life. Meister Eckhart, the great Dominican mystic and prophet of the Middle Ages who was condemned by the papacy because he supported peasants, women and other outcasts, once wrote that “a healing life is a good life.” A healing book is a good book.

This book is a wisdom book because it operates from the perspective of cosmology and spirituality which are integral to wisdom traditions the world over. It does not settle for knowledge alone. In addition, because so many of its stories and teachings have come from or been tested by thousands of persons around the world in workshops of healing, that too assures the wisdom of the collective. Indeed, the wisdom of the community is strongly felt on these pages. Furthermore, the attention given to future generations not yet born adds to the role of wisdom in leading us to spiritual awareness and action — as does the passion for the more-than-human beings with whom we are called to share community.

This work is a healing work; it comes from healing women, priests in their own right, midwives of grace. It holds the promise to awaken healing in society and its institutions, in religion and in the hearts and minds of all workers for justice and ecojustice. Joanna Macy is

one of those authentic voices in our time who is a prophet speaking out on behalf of the poor and those without a voice, the young, the dispossessed, the ecologically threatened. But she does not stop there. She also passes on this prophetic voice to others — she draws it out, she coaxes us not to be afraid and not to be in denial. She encourages us, that is, she builds our courage up to find our prophetic voice and to contribute as teams and as communities to the healing work our times and pain require. We are grateful for her voice and for our own. And we all welcome this book that is sure to unite many voices, hands and hearts. May it fulfill its promise! May we all fulfill our promise.



Matthew Fox is author of 31 books including *Original Blessing*, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, *A Spirituality Named Compassion*, *Occupy Spirituality*, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times* and *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic Warrior for Our Times*.

Preface

by Joanna Macy

THIS IS A GUIDEBOOK. It maps ways into our innate vitality and determination to take part in the self-healing of our world. It presents a form of group work that has grown steadily since the 1970s, helping hundreds of thousands of men and women around the globe find solidarity and courage to act, despite rapidly worsening social and ecological conditions.

This work can be done alone and has reached into countless individual lives. It is most effectively done in groups, for its methods are interactive and their power synergistic. Workshops vary in length from one day to a full lunar cycle; but even in briefer time frames, such as in classrooms or churches, the practices can yield remarkable openings to the truth of our common condition. They can bring us into fresh relationship with our world, and not only arouse our passion to protect life, but also steady us in a mutual belonging more real than our fears and even our hopes.

I know that the Work That Reconnects belongs to us all; that makes me all the more grateful for the ways the events and preoccupations of my own life, as mother, scholar, activist, provided soil for its roots to grow and spread. The spiritual and philosophical nutrients in that soil included, from my Protestant preacher forebears,

the life of Jesus and the words of the Hebrew prophets. For the last 50 years, that ancestral legacy has been worked over and illumined by the Buddha Dharma, for which I thank kind and noble teachers in Asia and a wide-awake graduate school in the US. While I was there, systems theory set my mind on fire. Its convergences with Buddhist teachings generated insights that prepared me for the impact of Deep Ecology and shaped the Work That Reconnects from its beginning.

My life flows into this body of work in practical, strategic ways as well. Five-plus decades of activism let me harvest lessons from the movements I took part in. When I worked for a fair housing ordinance in the nation's capital, and then became a speech writer for the Urban League, the civil rights movement expanded my life in widening circles. The Movement for a New Society, which changed our family life with its macroanalysis seminars, has left fingerprints all over the Work That Reconnects. The anti-nuclear power movement, taking me to and over the gates of Seabrook and Three Mile Island power stations, as well as into Chernobyl-poisoned towns, served as impetus and cradle of our Deep Time work. Yet another stream flowing into the Work That Reconnects comes from the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, and the years that produced my book about its Gandhian and Buddhist-inspired village organizing strategies. To me the two most enduring of Sarvodaya's lessons have been: work from the bottom up, and trust the intelligence of the people.

Each person, as he or she undertakes the Work that Reconnects, has such resources to offer. My coauthor Molly Brown draws from her childhood in Los Alamos, home of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, as well as her training and practice in psychosynthesis, her intuitive grasp of systems theory and her current work to defend Mount Shasta from corporate plunder. Other colleagues bring in their backgrounds and skills as artists, naturalists, ministers, teachers, farmers. May you who read this book find that the Work That Reconnects appeals to your own experiences and strengths.

From the first public workshop in 1978, it has been the aim and the genius of the Work That Reconnects to help people open their

eyes, rather than tell them what they see and what they should think. Our aim has been to *unblock the feedback loops*, so people can trust their own experience and speak the truth of what they see and feel and know is happening to their world. This essential function of the Work That Reconnects — good medicine at any time — has been of enormous value when corporate-controlled government tightens its grip on the public mind.

In our work together on this new edition, Molly and I stopped and looked back over the years since *Coming Back to Life* first appeared. In the short time span since the US Supreme Court put George W. Bush in the White House, the changes have been swift, deep and dramatic, giving free rein to economic forces that despoil the Earth and impoverish her people. Now with greater need than ever for public monitoring and outcry, we have become a truth-deprived and fearful populace.

As these developments darken our future, our trust is in the mind's ability to discern and to choose. Despite all the very real as well as fabricated fears, despite the pace of destruction and the fog of distraction, it is still possible to turn back to the wellsprings of life. We can find, in the love that grounds us in the living Earth, clarity, courage and self-respect to free ourselves from bondage to a sick and death-dealing economy.

After 36 years, it is still the Work That Reconnects, but it's got a finer edge — like Manjushri's sword, ready to slice through the confusions and delusions that entangle the mind. I like to picture its sharp tools cutting us free from all we do not need and do not want. I think of how its practices reveal what we *do* want — and how it's right there in front of us, waiting for us to reach for it, together.

Preface

by Molly Young Brown

IFIRST MET JOANNA MACY IN 1987 at a gathering of Interhelp, an organization founded by Joanna's colleagues who wanted to help themselves and others respond to threats to their common survival. Our next connection was at a workshop with Joanna in the winter of 1991, where I learned of her vision of *nuclear guardianship*. I was especially drawn to Joanna's work because of my childhood in the Atomic City of Los Alamos, New Mexico; I felt a kind of karmic connection to the problem of radioactive materials and began to work with the Nuclear Guardianship Project that Joanna had inaugurated. When I enrolled at Starr King School for the Ministry at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley the following fall, I signed up for Joanna's class in Deep Ecology, which brought me more fully into the worlds of systems thinking, Deep Ecology and engaged Buddhism and helped me understand their common threads.

Soon Joanna and I were working together: editing (with Wendy Oser, Fran Macy and others) three pithy issues of the *Nuclear Guardianship Forum*, and teaching a year-long class in applied living systems thinking at the California Institute of Integral Studies. I began offering talks and workshops in this work through my connections in the psychosynthesis world, continuing to this day.

When Joanna asked me to coauthor the first edition of this book with her, I jumped at the chance to bring together my love of writing, my love of this work and my love for this woman. In his Foreword, Matthew Fox wrote of Joanna's prophetic voice, and her ability to pass it on to others. Writing these books with Joanna has helped me develop my own prophetic voice and build my courage to write and speak and act on behalf of Earth, something I have sought to do all my life.

I would like to share a little of my life story, to make clearer what has called me to this work. Being raised in Los Alamos, New Mexico gave me an intensive experience in what historian Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil." It has taken me a good part of my adult life to fully grasp how deeply flawed were the assumptions of the scientific/military culture that predominated there — and how good and loving people could perpetrate such harm.

Los Alamos is nestled in the forested mountains of Northern New Mexico, so my childhood playground was nature. From an early age, I camped, picnicked and played outside, establishing a strong relationship with trees, mountains, creeks and critters. I was also subtly shaped by the Native American and Hispanic cultures in the region. But my family was part of a scientific community (although neither of my parents were scientists themselves), so I learned to worship the God of Science along with the Christian God. I remember going to Family Days Open House at the Lab, the rare opportunity to go behind the security fences and see a little of what people did there. The apparatus, the cloud chambers, the accelerators, the glove boxes and the tissues studied under microscopes enchanted me. I wanted to be a Scientist when I grew up. I wanted that access to the mysterious inner workings of the world.

I also learned that there was a correct way of thinking: *logical, rational*, backed by scientific data and framed within measurable parameters. If something couldn't be measured and replicated in the lab, it probably didn't exist. Even then, one would have to defend one's understandings and hypotheses against the rigorous (and often hostile) critique of other scientists. I learned that feelings and fantasy had little place in scientific thinking, and that I had best keep

those kinds of things out of discussions. Feelings and dreams were fine for girls' slumber party chatter, but had no place in The Real World.

Nearly 50 years later, on a solo vision quest at the beginning of 1996, I saw more clearly than ever before how this "mere purposive rationality" (to use Gregory Bateson's term) distorted people's innate morality at Los Alamos — and led them to enable grievous harm to the world. I was finally able to break through my own denial about my community of origin and see how profoundly this distortion affected me as I grew up there. During the vision quest, I felt sick to my stomach and remembered how often I had stomachaches as a child, how I spent much time in the school nurse's office, especially during kindergarten and first grade. As I focused on sensations of discomfort and pain, so similar to what I had felt as a child, I found myself asking, "What is the secret? What is this deeply hidden trauma from which I have defended myself all my life?" And suddenly I knew.

My family moved to Los Alamos a few months after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. I believe now that I knew, as a small child can, that something wrong was going on. I doubtless heard radio news and conversations about bombs and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I must have known on some level that people in Los Alamos had something to do with what had happened there. I came to know that the town existed solely for the Lab to carry on atomic research, primarily focused on nuclear weapons, and instinctively I must have known that this work was wrong. Even so-called Atoms for Peace, highly touted in Los Alamos in the 1950s, was an elaborate self-justification for the main work of the Laboratory: designing weapons of mass destruction. The good that came from the Lab's work could have come anyway. It didn't justify the bad. As a child I *knew* all this at a deep unconscious level.

Yet from everyone around me, all the important people in my life, from the entire community, I heard only rationalizations, justifications and deceptions. We were special people doing important and special work, protected from the rest of the world by fences and guard gates. Even while I felt proud of the title Atomic City, I felt pain and confusion in my heart about its implications. Although I

may never have consciously thought about this deep contradiction, I carried it in my body, primarily in my digestive system. I couldn't stomach it. But neither could I, as a dependent child, speak of it. How could I let myself know that nice, good people that I loved and admired were engaged in destructive work, when they themselves could not acknowledge it? How could I challenge the myth of my whole community?

I can play the tapes of rational justification in my head, and they still have the power to confuse me. "We had to invent the bomb before the Nazis did" and then, after Germany was defeated, "we had to stop the Japanese." We have all heard justifications for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and yet we know the deep anguish most of us feel for the massive suffering engendered by that so-called justified act. In Los Alamos, however, such emotions were taboo. Emotions might call into question behavior so elaborately rationalized by thought.

Los Alamos is not alone in this practice of covering up and denying its wrongdoing, and inventing elaborate so-called rational justifications for it. The whole structure of corporate capitalism participates in this kind of self-deception, as we ignore and cover up the enormous harm done to the environment, to our fellow creatures and to oppressed peoples around the world and within our own country — for the profit of a very few and the convenience of some. Too many law-abiding, church-going, family-loving moral people enjoy their sport-utility vehicles, their vacation cruises and their GMO-laced foods with little or no thought to the true costs of those short-lived pleasures.

Living within a society that denies the pain it causes engenders deep conflict within us, but the taboos against speaking of it, or even seeing it, are subtle, strong and complex. Being nice — even being *intelligent* — means going along with the communal deception, like the mutually shared trance of an alcoholic family. Yet we do ourselves and the larger world real damage when we go along with the taboos and deny the truth of our inner knowing, as I did for so long.

I believe we can cut through denial and take a good hard look at the dysfunctional economic system that has captured humanity and

is destroying our life-support system. This is not who we really are: self-centered, arrogant, greedy, contemptuous of other humans and life-forms. No! We have been hijacked by an insane, alien culture of our own foolish making. Let's reclaim our true humanity: loving, generous, caring, connected and joyful, heroic, persevering, willing to endure suffering as part of life, heart-centered, creative and wise.

The Work That Reconnects as presented in this book can help us reclaim our true humanity. I am profoundly grateful to be part of the Great Turning to a Life-Sustaining Society, in the company of my beloved friend Joanna.



1

To Choose Life

*How shall I begin my song
in the blue night that is settling?
In the great night my heart will go out,
toward me the darkness comes rattling.
In the great night, my heart will go out.*

— Papago Medicine Woman Chant

*I call heaven and earth to record this day to your
account, that I have set before you life and death, blessing
and cursing: therefore choose life, that both you
and your seed shall live.*

— Deut. 30.19

WE LIVE IN AN EXTRAORDINARY MOMENT ON EARTH. We possess more technical prowess and knowledge than our ancestors could have dreamt of. Our telescopes let us see through time to the beginnings of the universe; our microscopes pry open the codes at the core of organic life; our satellites reveal global weather patterns and hidden behaviors of remote nations. And our electronic surveillance capacity leaves no aspect of anyone's life

safe from corporate and governmental scrutiny. Who, even a century ago, could have imagined such immensity of information and power?

At the same time we witness destruction of life in dimensions that confronted no previous generation in recorded history. Certainly our ancestors knew wars, plagues and famine, but today it is not just a forest here and some farmlands and fisheries there. Today entire species are dying, and whole cultures, and ecosystems on a global scale, even to the oxygen-producing plankton of our seas.

Scientists may try to tell us what is at stake when we burn rainforests and fossil fuels, dump toxic wastes in air, soil, sea and use chemicals that devour our planet's protective ozone shield. But their warnings are hard to heed. For ours is an Industrial Growth Society.ⁱ Our political economy requires ever-increasing extraction and consumption of resources. To the Industrial Growth Society, the Earth is supply house and sewer. The planet's body is not only dug up and turned into goods to sell, it is also a *sink* for the often toxic products of our industries. If we sense that the tempo is accelerating, we are right — for the logic of the Industrial Growth Society is exponential, demanding not only *growth*, but rising rates of growth and market

share. The logic of ever-expanding need for resources and markets is generating what is increasingly recognized as a global corporate empire, secured by military threats, interventions and occupations.

The Industrial Growth Society generates great suffering worldwide. Buddhist social thinkers see that what is at work here are institutionalized forms of the three mutually reinforcing *poisons* at the root of all

Just as a continually growing cancer eventually destroys its life-support systems by destroying its host, a continuously expanding global economy is slowly destroying its host — the Earth's ecosystem.

— Lester Brown
State of the World, 1998

ⁱ We are indebted to Norwegian eco-philosopher Sigmund Kvaloy for this term. We use it as a more inclusive term than capitalism, because it also applies to state-controlled industrial economies premised on growth.

human suffering: greed, aggression and delusion. Consumerism can be seen as institutionalized greed, the military-industrial complex as institutionalized aggression and state- and corporate-controlled media as institutionalized delusion. It follows that we are confronting in the Industrial Growth Society universal errors to which all humans are prone, rather than evil or satanic forces. It also follows that once these errors become institutionalized as political, economic and legal agents in their own right, they attain a degree of autonomy extending beyond the control and the conscious choices of any individuals involved. This understanding can motivate us not to condemn so much as to work to free ourselves and others who are in bondage to these institutionalized poisons.

In any case, we are wreaking unparalleled destruction on the life of our planet. What will be left for those who come after? What is in store for the future ones? Too busy running to think about that, we try to close our minds to nightmare scenarios of struggle over what's left in a wasted, contaminated world.

We've come so far. The life that is in us has survived so many millennia of trials and evolved through so many challenges, and there is so much promise still to unfold — yet we can lose it all as the web of living systems unravels. Yahweh's words through Moses now bear a literal truth: "I have set before you life and death; therefore, choose life."

We Can Still Opt for a Life-Sustaining World

We *can* choose life. Even as we face global climate disruption, world-encompassing nuclear contamination, hydro-fracking, mountaintop removal mining, tar sands extraction, deep sea drilling and the genetic engineering of our food supply, we can still choose life. We can still act for the sake of a livable world.

It is crucial that we know this: *we can meet our needs without destroying our life-support system.* We have the scientific knowledge and the technical means to do that. We have the savvy and the resources to grow sufficient quantities of real, unaltered food. We know how to protect clean air and water. We can generate the energy we require through solar power, wind, tides, algae and fungi. We have

birth control methods to slow the growth of, and eventually reduce, human population. We have the technical and social mechanisms to dismantle weapons, deflect wars and give everyone a voice in democratic self-governance. We can exercise our moral imagination to bring our lifestyles and consumption into harmony with the living systems of Earth. All we need is the collective will.

To choose life means to build a life-sustaining society. “A sustainable society is one that satisfies its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations,”¹ according to Lester Brown of Earth Policy Institute. In contrast to the Industrial Growth Society, a Life-Sustaining Society operates within the carrying capacity of its life-support system, regional and planetary, both in the resources it consumes and the wastes it produces.

To choose life in this planet-time is a mighty adventure. As people everywhere are discovering, this adventure ignites more courage and solidarity than any military campaign. From high school students restoring streams for salmon spawning, to inner-city neighbors creating community gardens on vacant lots, from First Nations peoples blocking oil production and pipelines on their ancestral lands to village women bringing solar and water-purifying technologies to their communities — numberless people are organizing, learning, taking action.

This multifaceted human activity on behalf of life may not make today’s headlines or newscasts, but to our progeny it will matter more than anything else we do. For, if there is to be a livable world for those who come after us, it will be because we have managed to make the transition from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-Sustaining Society. When people of the future look back at this historical moment, they will see more clearly than we can now, how revolutionary our actions were. Perhaps they’ll call it the time of the Great Turning.

They will recognize it as epochal. While the agricultural revolution took centuries and the industrial revolution took generations, this ecological revolution has to happen within a matter of years. It also has to be conscious — involving not only the political economy, but the habits, values and understandings that foster it.

Choosing Our Story

By *story* is meant our version of reality, the lens through which we see and understand what is happening now in our world. Often our story is largely unconscious and unquestioned, and we assume it to be the only reality.

In the industrialized world today, the most commonly held stories seem to boil down to three. We have found it helpful in workshops to present these three stories as all happening right now; in that sense, they are all “true.” We can choose the one we want to get behind, the one that seems to hold the widest and most useful perspective.

1. **Business As Usual** is the story of the Industrial Growth Society. We hear it from politicians, business schools, corporations and corporate-controlled media. Here the defining assumption is that there is little need to change the way we live. The central plot is about getting ahead. Economic recessions and extreme weather conditions are just temporary difficulties from which we will surely recover, and even profit.
2. **The Great Unraveling** is the story we tend to hear from environmental scientists, independent journalists and activists. It draws attention to the disasters that Business As Usual has caused and continues to create. It is an account backed by evidence of the ongoing derangement and collapse of biological, ecological, economic and social systems.
3. **The Great Turning** is the story we hear from those who see the Great Unraveling and don't want it to have the last word. It involves the emergence of new and creative human responses that enable the transition from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-Sustaining Society. The central plot is about joining together to act for the sake of life on Earth.

All together, we are changing from a society whose organizing principle is the pyramid or hierarchy to one whose image is a circle. Humans are linked, not ranked. Humans and the environment are linked, not ranked.

— Gloria Steinem

The Great Turning ⁱⁱ

Let us borrow the perspective of future generations and, in that larger context of time, look at how this Great Turning is gaining momentum today, through the choices of countless individuals and groups. We can see that it is happening simultaneously in three areas or dimensions that are mutually reinforcing. These are:

1. Actions to slow the damage to Earth and its beings
2. Analysis and transformation of the foundations of our common life
3. A fundamental shift in worldview and values

Many of us are engaged in all three, each of which is necessary to the creation of a life-sustaining society. People working quietly behind the scenes in any of these three dimensions may not consider themselves activists, but we do. We consider anyone acting for a purpose larger than personal gain or advantage to be an activist.

1. Holding Actions in Defense of Life

Perhaps the most visible dimension of the Great Turning consists of the countless actions to slow down the destruction being wrought by the Industrial Growth Society. These take political, legislative and legal forms, as well as direct action. We call them *holding actions* because they attempt to hold the line, to buy time for systemic changes to take place. Holding actions can take various forms:

- ♦ Documenting the deleterious effects of the Industrial Growth Society on ecosystems as well as on animal and human health and rights

ⁱⁱ. This term, the Great Turning, is a cultural meme that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s to convey the revolutionary nature of the changes seen as necessary for the survival of life on Earth. Craig Shindler and Gary Lapid used it as the title of their 1989 book (Craig Schindler and Gary Lapid., *The Great Turning: Personal Peace, Global Victory*. Bear & Co, 1989) advocating a turn away from war and toward peace. The term arose again spontaneously from role-plays in the Work That Reconnects, as people spoke for future beings in Deep Time practices.

- ✦ Blowing the whistle and exposing illegal and unconstitutional corporate and governmental practices
- ✦ Circulating petitions, writing letters to the editor and to officials, writing articles, blogs and books, lobbying legislators
- ✦ Giving talks, showing films, tabling in public places, organizing study/action groups
- ✦ Vigils, marches and other demonstrations of protest
- ✦ Bringing legal actions against corporations and government agencies
- ✦ Divestment campaigns
- ✦ Boycotting and picketing institutions and businesses to protest unfair and dangerous practices
- ✦ Maintaining a long-term protest camp, such as climate camps in the UK
- ✦ Blockading construction of ecologically destructive and military installations
- ✦ Civil disobedience, including trespassing and symbolic sabotage on government or corporate property, tax resistance, refusing to move when ordered to do so
- ✦ Providing sanctuary to people in danger of unfair arrest
- ✦ Fasting and hunger strikes
- ✦ Providing shelter, food, clinics and legal assistance for people especially victimized by the Industrial Growth Society

Practices, policies and institutions targeted by these holding actions include:

- ✦ Extraction, transport and refining of fossil fuels
- ✦ Nuclear power, nuclear bomb production and testing
- ✦ Hydro-fracking
- ✦ Uranium and other heavy metal mining
- ✦ Mountaintop removal mining
- ✦ Deforestation
- ✦ Genetic modification
- ✦ Dredge fishing, drift nets and factory ships
- ✦ Privatization of water (extraction and bottling)
- ✦ Chemically-based agriculture and factory farming

- ♦ Animal abuse
- ♦ Secret international trade agreements (e.g. Transpacific Trade Partnership, Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership)
- ♦ Decimation of civil liberties and Constitutional rights, including reproductive rights, along with mass surveillance by corporations and government
- ♦ Military invasions and occupations
- ♦ Torture and rendition
- ♦ Drone warfare
- ♦ Arms industry and trade
- ♦ Abuses of First Nations sovereignty
- ♦ Mass incarceration, solitary confinement, forced feeding and the prison industrial system
- ♦ Extended detention and deportation of undocumented people, including children
- ♦ Human trafficking and slavery
- ♦ Homelessness, hunger and joblessness
- ♦ Profit-based health care and Big Pharma, including their campaign against herbalists and midwives
- ♦ Assaults on state-funded social and medical supports such as Social Security and Medicare in the US
- ♦ Corporate financing of political campaigns
- ♦ Predatory financial capitalism in all its forms: credit card debt, student loan debt, subprime mortgages, hedge funds and derivatives

Climate change is global-scale violence, against places and species as well as against human beings. Once we call it by name, we can start having a real conversation about our priorities and values.

— Rebecca Solnit

This first dimension of the Great Turning is wearing. It is heroic work. When we're in the spotlight, it can bring respect and applause from the many who see what's at stake. We can also get stressed out of our minds by nonstop crises, battles lost, constant searches for funding and escalating threats and violence against activists.

Protests and civil disobedience become ever more dangerous as law

enforcement officers — and the laws themselves — treat activists as terrorists, repressing dissent, abusing demonstrators and punishing whistle-blowers. Shock tactics, arbitrary arrests and police brutality are condoned, even encouraged. As the corporate empire is exposed and threatened, the violence of its response becomes more naked and indifferent to public opinion.

So we often take a lot of punishment for this kind of activism, and may need to step back to take a breather. Let's not feel guilty in doing so, for in truth we are not abandoning the cause. We are choosing to continue the work of the Great Turning in another form — the way the head goose, when she's tired, repositions herself to fly in the wind stream of the others, and another flyer takes her place.

Holding actions are essential because they buy time and save some lives, ecosystems, species and cultures, as well as some of the gene pool, for the life-sustaining society to come. By themselves, however, holding actions cannot bring that society about. For that, we require systems and structures more appropriate to our collective needs.

2. Transforming the Foundations of Our Common Life

The second dimension of the Great Turning is also essential in order to free ourselves and our planet from the damage inflicted by the Industrial Growth Society. It has two aspects:

1. Understanding the dynamics of corporate capitalism, including the structures of law and governance that support it
2. Generating structures based on the inherent authority and rights of We the People to govern ourselves and to protect the grounds of our common life

What are the assumptions and agreements that create obscene wealth for a few, while impoverishing the rest of humanity? What indentures us to an insatiable economy that uses our larger body, Earth, as supply house and sewer? What are the structures of law that make it illegal for local communities to define their own future and protect themselves from corporate harm?

We are in an era of profound change that urgently requires new ways of thinking instead of more business as usual; capitalism, in its current form, has no place in the world around us.

— Klaus Schwab, founder
World Economic Forum

This is not a pretty picture. It takes courage and confidence in our own intelligence to look at it clearly; the rewards are great when we do. As citizens are discovering in a plethora of websites, blogs and publications, we can demystify the workings of the Industrial Growth Society. For all its apparent might, we also see its fragility — how

dependent it is on our obedience and on deception, secrecy, surveillance and force.

In this second dimension of the Great Turning, we are not only studying the structural causes of the global crisis; we are also learning old and new ways to better serve the common good. These two efforts go hand in hand. They use the same mental muscles, the same kind of knowledge, the same itch for practicality. In countless localities, like green shoots pushing up through the rubble, social and economic arrangements are sprouting to free us from injustice and ruin. They may be hard to see at first, because they are seldom featured in the media. Not waiting for our national or state politicians to catch up with us, we are banding together, taking action in our own communities. Paul Hawken, in describing this upwelling of grass roots initiatives, called these actions “the largest social movement in human history.” In the early 20th century, the Wobblies (as Industrial Workers of the World were known) struggled to “build the new within the shell of the old.” The actions that burgeon from our hands and minds may appear marginal, but they hold the seeds for the future.

Some examples of the second dimension of the Great Turning include:

- ♦ Study circles and symposia to explore and understand the workings of the global economy
- ♦ Retrieval and creation of laws to protect the commons from privatization and industrial harm, formulating and claiming

Community Rights, the Rights of Nature, the Rights of Future Generations

- ✦ Establishment of the Precautionary Principleⁱⁱⁱ as the legal basis for health and environmental policy
- ✦ Cultural recognition and legal definition of the rights of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) persons
- ✦ People's Tribunals and Truth & Reconciliation Commissions
- ✦ Restorative justice and conflict resolution to replace litigation and punishment
- ✦ Holistic measures of wealth and prosperity, e.g. the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW), Social Progress Indicator (SPI), Gross National Happiness (GNH) to replace the dangerously misleading index called the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)
- ✦ Renewable, localized, non-polluting energy generation such as wind, solar and tidal technologies
- ✦ Land trusts serving the needs of local ecosystems and future generations
- ✦ Intentional sustainable communities, such as cohousing and ecovillages
- ✦ Permaculture courses; family and community gardens; farmers' markets, local food clubs; Community Supported Agriculture
- ✦ Municipal composting, recycling and zero-waste programs
- ✦ Citizen restoration projects reclaiming streams, watersheds, wetlands and arable land

ⁱⁱⁱ. "When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof. The process of applying the precautionary principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties. It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action." "The Wingspread Consensus Statement on the Precautionary Principle." Wingspread Conference on the Precautionary Principle, January 26, 1998. [online]. [cited June 8, 2014]. sehn.org/wing.html.

- Holistic health and wellness programs; locally grown herbal medicines
- Local currencies, Time Banks, tool sharing and skill banks that cycle resources within the community
- Cooperative forms of ownership, including food co-ops, worker-owned enterprises, credit unions and state banks
- Citizen radiation monitoring networks such as SafeCast, measuring nuclear contamination from Fukushima in the absence of government monitoring and reporting
- The Occupy movement, demonstrating radical democracy in the center of town, occupying public spaces, providing free food, health care, education and talks; exploring consensus decision-making

The broadside below from the Community Rights movement in the United States, circa 2014, illustrates the originality and practicality of campaigns in the second dimension of the Great Turning.²

Community Rights: First Steps in Dismantling Corporate Rule

Since 2000, the Community Rights movement has been spreading across the United States, one city, town, and county at a time. Communities are passing new-paradigm laws that:

- 1) strip corporations of all of their so-called constitutional “rights”;
- 2) ban a variety of corporate activities that are legal but harmful to people and environment;
- 3) declare the inherent right of a community to govern itself.

These new-paradigm laws challenge existing legal structures that forbid communities to pass laws protecting their own health and welfare. Thus, each of these local ordinances is in itself an act of municipal civil disobedience.

Imagine if ...

We Change the Ground Rules

- No more playing by corporate rules.
- No more battling one corporate harm at a time.
- We no longer allow corporations to operate when they harm people and nature. 🖊️

We Learn Our History

- Why has it been illegal for communities to pass laws that protect us from corporate harms?
- What can we learn from the American revolutionaries, the Abolitionists, the Suffragists, the Populists?

We Define Ourselves and Our Responsibilities

- We are not merely consumers and workers. We are We the People. We are the sovereign people. We are guardians of life for present and future generations.
- Corporations are not “good corporate citizens”. They are merely private property — legal fictions — business structures — and we will define them as such in order to protect the health and welfare of our communities.
- To do this, we will reclaim our language and our thought-forms from corporate culture.

We Govern Ourselves

- Corporations have become a cancer on the body politic. They have to be removed from all political participation. No corporate money in politics. No lobbying. No corporate-sponsored “educating” of citizens.
- We the People have the inherent right of self-governance.

We Meet Our Common Needs Democratically

- We don’t need Safeway Corp to feed us. We can feed ourselves from local sources.
- We don’t need Fox Corp and MSNBC Corp to tell us the news or Disney Corp to entertain us. We can inform one another and entertain ourselves within our communities and through citizen-controlled media.
- We the People can reclaim our self-governing authority to restrict the creation of business institutions to those that do not harm communities, people, and nature.

We Define Rather Than Regulate

- Most regulations are written by the industries being regulated, letting “the fox guard the hen house.”
- Let’s start defining what we need and banning what we don’t.

3. *Shift in Perception and Values*

It is hard to undertake the holding actions or initiatives described above unless we are nurtured by deeply held values and ways of seeing ourselves and the world. The actions we take — and structures we build — mirror how we relate to Earth and each other. They require a shift in our perception of reality — and that shift is happening now, both as cognitive revolution and spiritual awakening. This is the third dimension of the Great Turning.

The deep imagination is also our primary resource for recognizing the emerging future, for “seeing” the visionary possibilities of what we can create right now — individually and collectively... It is our essential resource for all genuine human creativity.

— Bill Plotkin

The insights and experiences that enable us to make this shift may arise from grief for our world that contradicts illusions of the separate and isolated self. Or they may arise from breakthroughs in science, such as quantum physics and systems theory. Or we may find ourselves inspired by the wisdom traditions of native peoples and mystical voices in the major religions; we hearken to their teachings as to some half-forgotten song that reminds us again that our world is a sacred whole in which we have a sacred mission.

Now, in our time, these three rivers — anguish for our world, scientific breakthroughs and ancestral teachings — flow together. From the confluence of these rivers we drink. We awaken to what we once knew: we are alive in a living Earth, the source of all we are and can achieve. Despite our conditioning by the industrial society of the last two centuries, we want to name, once again, this world as holy.

These insights and experiences are necessary to free us from the grip of the Industrial Growth Society. They offer us nobler goals and deeper pleasures. They help us redefine our wealth and our worth. The reorganization of our perceptions liberates us from illusions about what we need to own and what our place is in the order of things. Moving us beyond tired old notions of competitive individualism, we come home to each other and our mutual belonging in the living body of Earth.

May a good vision catch me
 May a benevolent vision take hold of me, and move me
 May a deep and full vision come over me
 And burst open around me...
 May I awaken into the story that surrounds,
 May I awaken into the beautiful story.

— David Abram

Some examples of cultivating new perceptions and values include:

- ✦ Grassroots programs to raise awareness of racism in all its forms and transform attitudes, unconscious assumptions, habits and behaviors, e.g. “Unlearning Racism” and “White Awake”
- ✦ First Nation peoples bringing their spiritual message to struggles against Tar Sands extraction and pipelines and the epidemic of open pit mining. The Idle No More movement includes public protests and fasts, enriched by traditional dances and prayers, and petitions to the United Nations.
- ✦ First Nation leaders achieving a Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations.
- ✦ Initiatives to promote understanding and celebration of the Rights of Mother Earth, the Rights of Nature and the Rights of Future Generations — and our responsibility to honor and protect those rights
- ✦ Aboriginal teachings for the protection of sacred sites in Africa and Amazonia being put into writing for the development of an Earth jurisprudence.
- ✦ Shamanic traditions, including sweat lodges and trance drumming motivating, guiding and sustaining activists.
- ✦ Wilderness immersion experiences, including vision quests, helping participants to connect more deeply with wild nature, within and without
- ✦ Creation spirituality in Christianity, Sufism in Islam and versions of the Kabbalah in Judaism spreading their messages of the sanctity of all life.

- ♦ Engaged Buddhism and similar currents in Hindu, Taoist, Shinto and other East Asian traditions coming forward to teach respect for Earth and the *interbeing* of all life-forms, as grounds for both spiritual practice and social action.
- ♦ Ecopsychology expanding our understanding of mental health, including our needs for deep relationship to the natural world, and also of the psychological damage wrought by the Industrial Growth Society.
- ♦ Ecofeminism, blending political critique with the women's movement, re-anchoring us in the natural world and refigures world and self in radically relational terms.
- ♦ The environmental justice movement addressing the racism and colonialism evident in the disproportionate damage that the Industrial Growth Society inflicts on disadvantaged communities.
- ♦ Music, visual arts, poetry and visionary novels, dance, theater and film increasingly expressing our interconnectedness, allowing more novelty to break through and enable us to trust more deeply.

Though we hardly have words for it, this cognitive, perceptual and spiritual revolution is occurring at a great rate of speed. These lines from the late California poet Robinson Jeffers capture the flavor of this awakening:

... I entered the life of the brown forest,
 And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of
 stone, I felt the
 changes in the veins
 In the throat of the mountain, a grain in many centuries,
 we have our own
 time, not yours; and, I was the stream
 Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking; and
 I was the stars
 Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of
 his own summit;
 and I was the darkness
 Outside the stars, I included them, they were a part of me.

I was mankind
 also, a moving lichen
 On the cheek of the round stone...
 ... how can I express the excellence I have found,
 that has no color but clearness;
 No honey but ecstasy ...³

This shift in our sense of identity will be lifesaving in the socio-political and ecological traumas that lie before us. All honest forecasts are for very rough weather ahead. As distant markets and supplies dry up, financial institutions collapse and climate-induced disasters multiply, the shock waves washing over us could tumble us into fear and chaos.

The realizations we make in the third dimension of the Great Turning save us from succumbing to either panic or paralysis. They help us resist the temptation to stick our heads in the sand. They help us withstand the temptation to turn on each other, finding scapegoats on whom to vent our fear and rage. When we know and revere the wholeness of life, we can stay alert and steady. We know there is no individual salvation. We join hands to find the ways the world self-heals.



Though we can discern the Great Turning and take courage from its manifold activities, we have no assurance that it will unfold quickly enough. We cannot tell which will happen first: the tipping point beyond which we cannot stop the unraveling of the systems supporting complex life-forms — or the moment when the elements of a Life-Sustaining Society cohere and catch hold.

If the Great Turning should fail, it will not be for lack of technology or relevant data so much as for lack of political will. When we are distracted and fearful and the odds are running against us, it is easy to let the heart and mind go numb. The dangers now facing us are so pervasive and yet often so hard to see — and so painful to see when we manage to look at them — that this numbing touches us all. No one is unaffected by it. No one is immune to doubt, denial or

distraction in relation to the severity of our situation, nor to doubt about our power to change it. Yet of all the dangers we face, from climate change to nuclear wars, none is so great as the deadening of our response.

That numbing of mind and heart is already upon us — in the diversions we create for ourselves as individuals and nations, in the fights we pick, the aims we pursue, the stuff we buy. So let us look at it. Let's see how it happens so we can awaken. *The Work That Reconnects* helps us open up our eyes, our minds and hearts. Then, reconnected with our deepest desire, we will choose life.



2

**The Greatest Danger —
The Deadening of Heart and Mind**

*It is the destruction of the world
in our own lives that drives us
half insane, and more than half.
To destroy that which we were given
in trust: how will we bear it?*

— Wendell Berry

*Our hope is that if we keep all the distractedness going, we
will not have to look at who we are, we will not have to feel
what we feel, we will not have to see what we see.*

— Judy Lief

THE GREAT TURNING ARISES in response to what we know and feel is happening to our world. It entails both the perception of danger and the means to act. As conscious, embodied beings endowed with multiple senses, we are geared to respond: instantly we leap from the path of an oncoming truck, dash to douse a fire, dive into a pool to save a child. This response-ability has been an essential feature of life throughout human evolution; it allows us to adapt to new challenges and generate new capacities. It enables whole groups

and societies to survive, so long as their members have sufficient information and freedom to act. In systems terms, response to danger is a function of *feedback* — the information circuit that connects perception to action. Appropriate response depends on an unblocked feedback loop.

Now, however, perils facing life on Earth are so massive and unprecedented they are hard even to take in. The very danger signals that should rivet our attention, summon up the blood and bond us in collective action, tend to have the opposite effect. They make us want to pull down the blinds and busy ourselves with other things. Our desire for distraction supports billion dollar industries that tell us everything will be all right so long as we buy this car or that deodorant. We eat meat from factory-farmed animals and produce grown by agribusiness, ignoring the pesticides, hormones and genetic alterations they contain. We buy clothes without noticing where they are made, preferring not to think of the sweatshops they may have come from. We don't bother voting, or if we do, we vote for candidates we may not believe will address the real problems, hoping against all previous experience that they will suddenly awaken and act boldly to save us. Has our society become callous, nihilistic? Has it ceased to care what happens to life on Earth?

It can look that way. Reformers and revolutionaries decry public apathy. To rouse people, they deliver yet more terrifying information, as if people didn't already know that our world is in trouble. They preach about moral imperatives, as if people didn't already care. Their alarms and sermons tend to make people pull the shades down tighter, resisting what appears too overwhelming, too complicated, too out of their control.

So it's good to look at what this *apathy* is, to understand it with respect and compassion. *Apatheia* is a Greek word that means, literally, non-suffering. Given its etymology, apathy is the inability or refusal to experience pain. What is the pain we feel — and desperately try not to feel — in this planet-time? It is of another order altogether than what the ancient Greeks could have known; it pertains not just to privations of wealth, health, reputation or loved ones, but to losses so vast we can hardly comprehend them. It is pain for the world.

What Is Pain for the World?

From news reports and life around us, we are bombarded with signals of distress — of job layoffs and homeless families, of nearby toxic wastes and distant famines, of more devastating hurricanes, floods and droughts, of ever-widening military offensives. These events stir fear, sorrow and anger within us, although we may never express such feelings to others. These deep responses arise by virtue of our connectivity with all life. To be conscious in our world today is to be aware of vast suffering and unprecedented peril.

Even the words — fear, anger, sorrow — are inadequate to convey the feelings we experience, for they connote emotions long familiar to our species. The feelings that assail us now cannot be equated with ancient dreads of mortality and “the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.”¹ Their source lies less in concerns for the personal self than in apprehensions of collective suffering — of what is happening to our own and other species, to the legacy of our ancestors, to coming generations and to the living body of Earth.

What we are dealing with here is akin to the original meaning of compassion: “suffering with.” It is the distress we feel on behalf of the larger whole of which we are a part. It is the pain of the world itself, experienced in each of us.

No one is exempt from that pain, any more than one could exist alone and self-sufficient in empty space. Feeling pain for the world is as natural to us as the food and air we draw upon to fashion who we are. It is inseparable from the currents of matter, energy and information that flow through us and sustain us as interconnected open systems. We are not closed off from the world, but integral components of it, like cells in a larger body. When that body is traumatized, we sense that trauma too. When it falters and sickens, we feel its pain, whether we pay attention to it or not.

That pain is the price of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world. It is not only natural; it is an absolutely necessary component of our collective healing. As in all organisms, pain has a purpose: it is a warning signal, designed to trigger remedial action.

The problem, therefore, lies not with our pain for the world, but in our repression of it. Our efforts to dodge or dull it surrender us to

The truth that many people never understand until it is too late is that the more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer.

— Thomas Merton

futility — or in systems terms, we cut the feedback loop and block effective response.

So let us explore two questions. First, what causes this repression, and then what that repression costs us and our world.

What Deadens Heart and Mind?

What inhibits our experience of pain for our world, and the actions that it would summon? No external authority can stop us from feeling and sensing what's happening to our world nor force us to close our eyes to what's around us. So what stifles our responses, as individuals and as a society?

Fear of Pain

Our culture conditions us to view pain as dysfunctional. There are pills for headache, backache, neuralgia and premenstrual tension — but no pills for this pain for our world. Not even a stiff drink nor a Prozac prescription really helps. To permit ourselves to suffer anguish for the world is not only painful, but frightening; we imagine it threatens our ability to cope with daily life. We are afraid that if we were to let ourselves fully experience these feelings, we might fall apart, lose control or be mired in pain permanently.

Fear of Despair

A sense of some overarching meaning to our lives is as necessary as oxygen. We can face and endure tremendous hardships with heroic courage so long as we believe there is some purpose to our existence, some value to our actions. But the present planetary crises, if we dare to look at what they forebode, present vistas of such unprecedented loss as to threaten with absurdity all that we have believed in. So, fearing that our lives might be drained of meaning, we look away.

When we are brave enough to study the available data, they turn out to be more alarming than most of us had assumed. Many peace

and environmental advocates carry a heavy burden of knowledge. It is compounded by feelings of frustration, as they fight an uphill battle to arouse the public. Yet they view their own frustration and despair as counterproductive to their efforts. They take little or no time to honor their feelings, much less mourn. In their role as mobilizers of the public will, they may feel they can't "let their hair down" and expose the extent of their own distress. The consequent and continual repression of feelings takes a toll on their energies that leaves them vulnerable to bitterness, depression, exhaustion and illness.

For people of religious faith, the prospect of losing hope is particularly challenging. "God won't let this happen," many think when faced with prospects of vast destruction and loss. Even to entertain such possibilities can seem to contradict our belief in a loving and powerful God, and in the goodness of creation itself. Are feelings of despair a sign of inadequate faith? Although every major religion calls us to open to the suffering we see around us, we tend to forget those summonses. Assuming, perhaps unconsciously, that our God is too fragile or too limited to encompass that pain, unsure whether God will meet us in the midst of such darkness, we hesitate to let ourselves experience it lest our faith be shattered or revealed as inadequate.

Other Spiritual Traps

There are those of us on a spiritual path who consider feelings of distress for the world as obstacles to be transcended. Grief and anger over current social and ecological conditions are then seen as *attachments* and judged to be less valuable than experiences of tranquility.

Moreover, some spiritual seekers view the personal and the political in a sequential fashion, believing that they must achieve enlightenment or salvation before they can serve the world. "I'll find peace within myself first, then I'll see what I can do." Supposing world and self to be essentially separate, they imagine they can heal one in isolation from the other.

There is also the fear that attention to the world's suffering will only make it worse. That notion resembles a philosophical perspective

called *subjective idealism*, which sees consciousness as more “real” than the phenomenal world. This can lead to a belief that contemplating the world’s problems is negative thinking.

The understanding on which this book is based, however, is that we are inseparable from the world, and that the beauty and terror of our society co-arise with us. The crises facing us arise not from projections of our individual minds, so much as from our institutionalized ignorance, fear and greed.

Fear of Not Fitting In

A sanguine confidence in the future has been a hallmark of the American self-image and a source of national pride. The successful person — commercials and political campaigns tell us — has an optimistic can-do attitude and unquestioning faith in Progress. In such a culture, feelings of anguish and despair for our world appear as a failure of character and competence. Sadness and regret are taken as a sign of weakness, while impassivity is seen as “cool.” No one wants to be called emotional or soft or seen as a prophet of doom or a conspiracy theorist.

Distrust of Our Own Intelligence

Many of us are reluctant to express our concerns for fear of getting embroiled in a debate requiring facts and figures beyond our command. The global economy encourages us to rely on so-called experts who tell us that there is no link between nuclear power plants and breast cancer, pesticide spraying and asthma, trade agreements and joblessness. It is easy to distrust our own judgment and intuitions, especially when others around us seem to agree with the way things are. This intellectual timidity, so useful to the powerholders, can override our own perceptions and judgments.

Fear of Guilt

Few if any of us in the Industrial Growth Society are exempt from the suspicion that we are accomplices to far-reaching abuses. It is nearly impossible in today’s global economy to feed, clothe and transport ourselves without unintended harm to the natural world and

other people's well-being. Peter Marin wrote 40 years ago in an essay on moral pain:

Many of us suffer a vague, inchoate sense of betrayal, of having somehow taken the wrong turning, of having somehow said yes or no at the wrong time and to the wrong things, of having somehow taken upon ourselves a general kind of guilt, having two coats while others have none, or just having too much while others have too little — yet proceeding, nonetheless, with our lives as they are.²

We also carry a sense of accountability for the massive acts of violence perpetrated in our name. Americans have a huge burden to bear in this respect: the decimation of our native peoples; the enslavement of Africans and the oppression of their descendants; the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Vietnam War; the military and economic devastation of Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond; suppression of liberation movements around the world; drone warfare and spiraling arms exports; CIA-abetted drug traffic; torture and detention without trial; mass surveillance of governments and citizens. The painful list goes on. We prefer to sweep it under the rug, because we hate feeling guilty because it undermines our self-respect. We have neither patience nor practices for dealing with collective guilt, but we can learn. South Africa, Germany and Guatemala among other nations have shown it is possible to acknowledge moral shame with strength and dignity — and that doing so is healing. Meanwhile, until we all learn what to do with our feelings of guilt, we are likely to lock them away — and in so doing, lock up our pain for the world.

Fear of Distressing Loved Ones

Pain for the world is repressed not only out of embarrassment and guilt, but out of caring as well. We are reluctant to burden our loved ones; we would shield them from the distress we carry. For parents and grandparents this psychological dilemma is especially difficult and delicate. We don't want our children to be troubled or fearful as they face the already challenging tasks of learning and growing. Our

deep desire to protect them from harm can make us try to protect them from knowing what's happening to their world. Our silence, however, may give our children the impression that we don't know what's happening — or worse, that we don't care.

View of Self as Separate

It is hard to believe we feel pain for the world if we assume we're separate from it. The individualistic bias of Western culture supports that assumption. Feelings of fear, anger or despair about the world tend to be interpreted in terms of personal pathology. Our

distress over the state of the world is seen as stemming from some neurosis, rooted perhaps in early trauma or unresolved issues with a parental figure that we're projecting on society at large. Thus we are tempted to discredit feelings that arise from solidarity with our fellow-beings. Conditioned to take seriously only those feelings that pertain to our individual needs and wants, we find it hard to believe that we can suffer on behalf of society itself, or on behalf of other life-forms, and that such suffering is real and valid and healthy.

The world is not a problem to be solved; it is a living being to which we belong. The world is part of our own self and we are a part of its suffering wholeness. Until we go to the root of our image of separateness, there can be no healing. And the deepest part of our separateness from creation lies in our forgetfulness of its sacred nature, which is also our own sacred nature.

— Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

Hijacked Attention

Almost everywhere we go, electronic devices exert an ongoing claim on our attention. Our vulnerability to interruption makes it difficult to reflect deeply or sustain meaningful conversation. Electronic communications — smart phones and texting, email, Facebook and Twitter — all have effects on the human mind that we have barely begun to understand. As David Orr has reflected:

If useful in real emergencies, the overall result is to homogenize the important with the trivial, making everything an

emergency and an already frenetic civilization even more frenetic. As a result, we are drowning in unassimilated information, most of which fits no meaningful picture of the world. In our public affairs and in our private lives we are, I think, increasingly muddle-headed because we have mistaken volume and speed of information for substance and clarity.³

This distraction of the mind dulls our response to the fragments of news we receive, which begin to constitute a virtual reality with little more emotional impact than a video game. We drown in bits of information that engulf our self-awareness and dilute our connection to the real world around us. Not only is our attention hijacked, but our imagination as well, diminishing our capacity to envision what we might yet create.

Fear of Powerlessness

“I don’t think about that because there is nothing I can do about it.” We have all heard this response to a discussion of a social or ecological problem. Logically, it is a non sequitur, confusing what can be thought and felt with what can be done. And it is a tragic one, for when forces are seen as so vast that they cannot be consciously contemplated or seriously discussed, we are doubly victimized — impeded in thought as well as action.

Resistance to painful information on the grounds that we cannot do anything about it springs less from powerlessness (as measured by our capacity to effect change) than from the fear of *feeling* powerless.

It seems both outrageous and irresponsible that so few mental health clinicians connect the epidemics of mental distress in industrial societies with the devastating impact of our suicidal destruction of our own habitat and ecocidal elimination of whole species.

— Linda Buzzel and Craig Chalquist

The predominant model of self in Western culture — “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul”⁴ — discourages us from confronting issues for which we have no immediate solutions. We feel that we ought to be in charge of our existence and to have all the answers. And so we tend to shrink the sphere of our attention to those areas that we believe we can directly control. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the smaller our sphere of attention, the smaller our sphere of influence.

Fear of Knowing — and Speaking

The plight of a child in an alcoholic family is more familiar to us now than in generations past. We know that such a child is often afraid to acknowledge even to herself the abuse and neglect suffered at the hands of an alcoholic parent — much less disclose it to anyone else. This happens for a number of reasons, such as:

1. Any complaint or mention of the problem is likely to incur the wrath of the parent, leading to more physical and verbal abuse.
2. Disclosure to outside authorities could result in the child’s losing the only family and home she knows.
3. A child may be told she’s crazy and imagining things, inducing her to doubt her own perceptions, or at least to keep very quiet about them.

A similar drama plays out on the national political stage. For example, there is a mountain of evidence regarding the 9-11 attacks that was excluded from the 9-11 Commission’s report. It remains unaddressed by the US government, mainstream media and most of US civic institutions. Why do we avoid raising the questions and discussing the evidence publically, even with our own families and friends? Perhaps we are under similar pressures as the child in the alcoholic family:

1. We may fear retribution from the Powers That Be: being fired, blackballed, imprisoned or disappeared.
2. Like the child who clings to an abusive parent, we may cling to an image of our leaders as essentially well meaning, even if

incompetent. “Our government would never knowingly allow that to happen! How can you suggest such a thing?”

3. Perhaps more prevalent, especially for public figures, is the fear of risking reputation and public confidence by being seen as crazy as the oft-ridiculed conspiracy theorist.

The trouble is that the more we in the US avoid discussing 9-11 publically, the more taboo the subject becomes. And the more we live under a collective cloud of ignorance and denial on this matter, the more docile and obedient we become, abdicating our civic responsibility to take remedial measures.

Mass Media

The corporate global economy, with the increasing pressures it exerts on individuals, families and communities and its spreading control of information channels makes it difficult for people to hear the world's cries of distress.

Most Americans get their news from corporate-controlled media. At the same time, right-wing interests and ideologues are buying up the major newspapers, radio and television stations across the country which people have looked to over the years for balanced reporting. Now too often, they find misinformation, outright deception and the fomenting of false fears in once-trusted media. Such manipulation of the news keeps people ignorant and confused about what's really going on.

The world is babbled to pieces after the divorce of things from their names.

— Wendell Berry

Moreover, corporate-controlled media serve largely as entertainment, soporific, and as a goad to consume. As the economy has globalized and corporations have sunk their teeth into every society they can reach across the world, the monoculture they purvey spins dreams of an unobtainable and irresponsible life style. The message of this monoculture is dramatized by Australian activist Benny Sable. At protests against clearcutting, uranium mining and other corporate depredations, he stands motionless, often high atop a pile

of casks marked radioactive, in a black wetsuit painted with a skeleton and these words:

CONSUME
OBEY
BE SILENT
DIE

Job and Time Pressures

The worldwide financial crisis forces people to scramble for jobs and makes them insecure in those jobs they manage to hang on to. Moonlighting, workers rush from one job to another to piece together a living wage. Most young families in North America, in order to pay the bills, need both parents to hold a job — or try to. The pace accelerates, taking its toll on every spare moment, every relationship. As employment benefits are cut, labor unions destroyed and social health and welfare programs decimated, the world narrows down to one's own and one's family's survival. There's little time or energy to learn about the fate of the world — or to let it sink in. If a free hour is left at the end of the day, it's easy just to zone out in front of the tube.

Social Violence

These economic hardships tear the fabric of our society and breed violence. Jobless youth, inflamed by the brutality portrayed by the media, act out their hopelessness and sense of betrayal. We walk fearfully on our own city streets, put armed police in our schools, barricade ourselves behind locked doors or take refuge in gated enclaves. Demagogues direct our frustrations against other groups, blaming those most victimized. For the failures of corporate capitalism, we scapegoat each other.

You can hold yourself back from the suffering of the world: this is something you are free to do... But perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering you might be able to avoid.

— Franz Kafka

Whether or not the violence of our society injures one physically, it colors our common life. It finds

expression in everyday thoughts and acts, in verbal abuse and road rage as well as police brutality at home and military brutality abroad. We try to protect our heart with a defensive armor that closes it to the pain of our world.

The Cost of Blocking Our Pain for the World

We may try to protect ourselves from feeling pain for the world, but that very effort costs us a great deal. We pay a high price in diminished awareness, understanding and authenticity.

Impeded Cognitive Functioning

Repression takes a mammoth toll on our energy and dulls our perceptions of the world around us. It is not a local anesthetic. If we won't feel pain, we won't feel much else either — loves and losses are less intense, the sky less vivid, pleasures muted. As a doctor working with Vietnam veterans observed, "The mind pays for its deadening to the state of our world by giving up its capacity for joy and flexibility."⁵

Repression of our anguish for the world affects our thinking as well. It weakens our cognitive functioning. We cut ourselves off from information that contradicts our preferred assessment of the situation and that might arouse stressful feelings. Consequently, there's less of our natural intelligence available to us.

Impeded Access to the Unconscious

To filter out the truth of one's situation is a form of self-deception. This subliminal censorship impedes access to the vast realm of the unconscious, that wellspring of intuition, creativity and foodstuff for genius, the part of us that knows we're embedded in life.

What we ban from consciousness does not disappear. On an individual level, we store repressed material in our bodies where it may manifest as illness. And on the collective level, as Carl Jung pointed out, the distress we would banish gets acted out on the stage of history.

Impeded Instinct for Self-Preservation

The instinct for self-preservation, recognized as the most powerful drive in the biological realm, is essential to the preservation of our

species and the ongoingness of life. In the ancient Hindu chakra system, this drive is identified with the base chakra or *muladhara*. It represents and feeds our instinctual nature, source of our claim on life itself.

To be afraid to look at and respond to that which threatens all life constitutes a blocking of the *muladhara*, cutting off primal intelligence and energies essential to survival. This chakra not only represents a last line of defense in the protection of life, but it also feeds the erotic currents of our days and years. Opening the base chakra — and thereby our full will to live — means opening ourselves to the repressed tears and rage of our pain for the world.

Impeded Eros

To be cut off from this root chakra robs us of our birthright to deep ecstatic connections within the web of life. Without Eros, our lives become more desiccated and robotic, even as we dream up robots to serve us. This loss of Eros has led to a flourishing of pornography in which we pathetically try to revitalize our sexual natures in contrived and trivializing ways. The frustration of so basic an urge can lead to violence as well.

When the erotic drive is weak, we pay less respect to the aesthetic dimension of life. No longer seeing the arts as essential, we use them for embellishment and display of wealth, and we cut support and funding for art, music and drama in our schools and communities.

At the same time, we see a desperate pursuit of pleasure and short-term gratification in our culture today. There seems to be a new hedonism in the consumption of goods, entertainment, sex, alcohol. This hedonism derives from more than sheer appetite. Its frantic quality does not reflect a healthy lust for life so much as the contrary: the absence of — and yearning for — a truly erotic connection to life.

Impeded Empathy

Eros nourishes our rootedness in the web of life, fostering empathy, that vital connection to those with whom we share this world. Without empathy, our natural capacity to sense and identify with

the joy and suffering of others is crippled. Instead, we tend to project our repressed fears and anger onto other people. Carl Jung called this the projection of the Shadow. The 9-11 event made us afraid, and people in the US were given an enemy as an object for our fear: Muslim people of the world. This allowed us to feel justified in our military actions against Muslim countries and fosters fear of those in our midst. It is hard to feel empathy for those we fear and hate, precisely when empathy is most needed. Zhiwa Woodbury has captured the dismal situation this leads to:

Unfortunately, it seems all too predictable that a freedom-loving, gun-toting, substance-abusing, individualist country like America will approach the end of life as we know it with a fair amount of anti-social pathology, transposing the breakdown of our life support system into a breakdown in the social order, with many responding to the existential threat with paranoia and hostility, deciding it's "every man for himself" or, alternatively, seeking security in like-minded militias and religious cults.⁶

Impeded Imagination

Free play of the imagination requires trust in life and courage to walk where there is no path. It takes us beyond our perceptions of what is to what might be, opening us to new ways of seeing and new ways of being. The powers of mind are then liberated from the dead hand of habit. Imagination suggests alternatives to the dominant narratives of our time and can keep us from surrendering to conformity and mob mentality.

This crucial source of all creativity is blocked when we resist images, ideas or feelings that might trigger moral pain.

Impeded Feedback

All open systems, be they organic or social, self-regulate by virtue of feedback — that is, by monitoring the results of their moment-by-moment behavior. Our sensory, cognitive and emotional responses can bring us information to guide our actions. If we consider that we are

an integral part of our world, then we can see that closing our hearts and minds to its suffering blocks feedback essential to life.



Silencing our deepest responses to the condition of our world not only fosters a sense of futility, but also mires us in it. Each act of denial, conscious or unconscious, is an abdication of our power to respond. It relegates us to the role of victim, before we even see what we can and want to do.

Coming Back to Life

Our pain for the world, including the fear, anger and sorrow we feel on behalf of life on Earth is not only pervasive. It is natural and healthy. It is dysfunctional only to the extent that it is misunderstood and repressed. We have seen in this chapter how that repression happens in today's culture and what it costs us.

We don't break free from denial and repression by gritting our teeth and trying to be nobler, braver citizens. We don't retrieve our passion for life, our wild, innate creative intelligence, by scolding ourselves and soldiering on with a stiff upper lip. That model of heroic behavior belongs to the worldview that gave us the Industrial Growth Society.

The most remarkable feature of this historical moment on Earth is not that we are on the way to destroying our world — we've actually been on the way quite a while. It is that we are beginning to wake up, as from a millennia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves and each other. This awakening makes the Great Turning possible. We described it in Chapter 1 as a shift in consciousness, the third dimension of that revolution. It is so central to the arising of the Life-Sustaining Society that it is like the hub of a turning wheel.

The worldview emerging now lets us behold anew and experience afresh the web of life in which we exist. It opens us to the vast intelligence of life's self-organizing powers, which have brought us forth from interstellar gases and primordial seas. It brings us to a larger identity in which to cradle and transcend our ego-identified fears. It lets us honor our pain for the world as a gateway into deep

participation in the world's self-healing. The group work of the last four decades that this book describes is based on this worldview.

More basic to the Great Turning than any ideas we hold is the act of courage and love we make together when we dare to see our world as it is.

And I would travel with you
 to the places of our shame
 The hills stripped of trees, the marsh grasses
 oil-slicked, steeped in sewage;
 The blackened shoreline, the chemical-poisoned water;
 I would stand with you in the desolate places, the charred places,
 soil where nothing will ever grow, pitted desert;

 fields that burn slowly for months; roots of cholla & chaparral
 writhing with underground explosions
 I would put my hand
 there with yours, I would take your hand, I would walk
 with you

 through carefully planted fields, rows of leafy vegetables
 drifting with radioactive dust; through the dark
 of uranium mines hidden in the sacred gold-red mountains;

 I would listen with you in drafty hospital corridors
 as the miner cried out in the first language

 of pain; as he cried out
 the forgotten names of his mother I would stand
 next to you in the forest's
 final hour, in the wind
 of helicopter blades, police

 sirens shrieking, the delicate
 tremor of light between
 leaves for the last
 time Oh I would touch with this love each
 wounded place

— Anita Barrows⁷



3

The Basic Miracle: Our True Nature and Power

*Something inside me has reached to the place
Where the world is breathing.*

— Kabir

*We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one
directly, affects all indirectly.*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

THE VIEW OF REALITY EMERGING NOW IS BREATHTAKINGLY new to those of us who have been shaped by the Industrial Growth Society. Supported by postmodern science and ancient spiritual traditions, it brings a fresh understanding of our relationship to the world and of powers within us for its healing. Liberating us from constricted notions of who we are and what we need, it brings us home to our true nature — in league with the stars and trees of our thrumming universe. This view is basic to the Great Turning and fundamental to the work this book presents.

We people shaped by western civilization have struggled to master the natural world around us. We have studied the Earth and the

cosmos, determined to discover the essential building blocks of life. We have acted as if we could know and control the world. We came to think of ourselves as made of better stuff than the animals and plants and rocks and water around us. Our technologies have amplified disastrously the ecological and social effects of that kind of thinking. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson commented on this:

If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. As you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your folks or conspecifics against ... other social units, other races and the brutes and vegetables.

If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell.¹

Perhaps we made our biggest error in thinking of the world as made of “stuff” to begin with. Fortunately — and paradoxically — our very search for mastery and knowledge through science has brought us to the dawning realization that the world, indeed the universe, seems not to be composed of stuff at all. Each time we have grasped what appeared to be a basic building block, it has dissolved into a dance of energy and relationship. And so we awaken today to a new kind of knowledge, a growing comprehension of our connectivity — and even identity — with everything in the universe.

Living Systems Theory

Modern science and the Industrial Growth Society grew up together. With the help of René Descartes and Francis Bacon, classical science veered away from a holistic, organic view of the world to an analytical and mechanical one. The machines we made to extend our senses and capacities became our model for the universe. Separating

mechanism from operator, object from observer, this view of reality assumed that everything could be described objectively and controlled externally. It has permitted extraordinary technological gains and fueled the engines of industrial progress. But, as 20th-century biologists realized with increasing frustration, it cannot explain the self-renewing processes of life.

Instead of looking for basic building blocks, these scientists took a new tack: they began to look at wholes instead of parts, at processes instead of substances. They discovered that these wholes — be they cells, bodies, ecosystems, even the planet itself — are not just an assemblage of parts. Rather they are dynamically organized and intricately balanced *systems*. These scientists saw each element as part of a vaster pattern that connects and evolves by discernible principles. The discernment of these principles gave rise to General Systems Theory.

Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, known as the father of general systems theory, called it “a way of seeing.”² And while its insights have spread throughout the natural and social sciences, the systems perspective has remained just that: a way of seeing. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson called it “the biggest bite out of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that mankind has taken in the last 2000 years.”³

How Life Self-Organizes

By shifting their focus to relationships instead of separate entities, scientists made an amazing discovery — amazing at least to the mainstream western mind. They discovered that nature is self-organizing. And they set about discerning the principles by which this self-organization occurs. They found these principles or systems properties to be awesomely elegant in their coherence and constancy throughout the observable universe, from sub-organic to biological and ecological systems, and mental and social systems as well. The properties of open systems permit the variety and intelligence of life-forms to arise from interactive currents of matter/energy and information. These properties or *invariances* are four in number:

1. Each system, from atom to galaxy, is a whole. That means that it is not reducible to its components. Its distinctive nature and

capacities derive from the dynamic relationships of its parts. This interplay is synergistic, generating *emergent properties* and new possibilities, which are not predictable from the character of the separate parts. For example, wetness could not be predicted from the combination of oxygen and hydrogen before it occurred. Nor can anyone can predict the creative solutions that may emerge when a group of people put their wits together.

2. Thanks to the continual flow-through of matter/energy and information, open systems are able to self-stabilize and maintain their balance in what von Bertalanffy called *fliessgleichgewicht* (flux-equilibrium). This homeostatic function enables systems to self-regulate amidst changing conditions in their environment. They do this by monitoring the effects of their own behavior and realigning their behavior with preestablished norms, like a thermostat. Feedback — in this case, negative or deviation-reducing feedback — is at work here. It is how we maintain body temperature, heal from a cut and ride a bicycle.
3. Open systems not only maintain their balance amidst the flux, but also evolve in complexity. When challenges from their environment persist, they can fall apart or adapt by reorganizing themselves around new, more functional norms. This is accomplished by feedback — in this case, positive or deviation — *amplifying* feedback. It is how systems learn and evolve. This feedback is blocked and ignored at the risk of system collapse.

When a system is unable to adapt its norms, perhaps because of the scale and speed of change, the positive feedback loop goes into *overshoot* and *runaway*. As ever-increasing oscillations upset the balance of its interrelated parts, the system loses coherence and complexity — and begins to unravel.

4. Every system is a *holon* — that is, it is both a whole in its own right, comprised of subsystems *and* simultaneously an integral part of a larger system. Thus holons form *nested hierarchies*, systems within systems, circuits within circuits.

Each new holonic level — say from atom to molecule, cell to organ, person to family — generates new emergent properties that are not reducible to the properties of the separate. In

contrast to hierarchies of control familiar to organizations in which rule is imposed from above, in nested hierarchies (sometimes called *holonarchies*) order tends to arise from below, as well as be summoned or inspired by its larger context.

The system self-generates from adaptive cooperation between its parts for mutual benefit. Order and differentiation go hand and hand, components diversifying as they coordinate roles and invent new responses.

Water, Fire and Web

The mechanistic view of reality separated substance from process, self from other, mind from matter. In the systems perspective, these dichotomies no longer hold. What appeared to be separate and self-existent entities are now seen as interdependent and interwoven. What had appeared to be *other* can be equally construed as a concomitant of *self*, like a fellow-cell in the neural patterns of a larger body. What we had been taught to dismiss as mere feelings are responses to our world no less valid than rational constructs. Sensations, emotions, intuitions, concepts all condition each other, each a way of apprehending the relationships that weave our world.

As systems we participate by virtue of constant flow-through in the evolving web of life, giving and receiving the feedback necessary to the web's integrity and balance. To convey this dynamic process, theorists have used a variety of images. Fire and water are prominent among them. "We are not stuff that abides," said systems cybernetician Norbert Wiener, "We are patterns that perpetuate themselves; we are whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water."^{3a}

Or we are like a flame, said several early systems thinkers. As a flame keeps its shape by transforming the stuff it burns, so does the open system. As the open system consumes the matter that passes through it, so does it also process information — ever breaking down and building up, renewed. Like fire, a system both transforms and is transformed by that on which it feeds.

Another frequent image is that of a neural net. By their interactions, nerve cells differentiate and create new neural assemblies at

their holonic level within the larger body, enhancing diversity and therefore complexity. They generate intelligence as they weave ever more responsive nets. Systems political scientist Karl Deutsch took this image as a model for social systems, showing that free circulation of information is essential to healthy self-governance.

I believe that mycelium is the neurological network of nature. Interlacing mosaics of mycelium infuse habitats with information-sharing membranes. These membranes are aware, react to change, and collectively have the long-term health of the host environment in mind.

— Paul Stamets

Our emerging understanding of fungi provides another potent image for the connectivity of open systems. Microscopic cells called *mycelia* — the fruit of which are mushrooms — spread nearly invisibly underground to create a vast network that permeates the soil and fuses with the roots of plants and trees to share water, food and vital information.

Gaia Theory

Systems theory has transformed the way we see our planet home. In studying the chemical composition of our atmosphere, scientist James Lovelock discovered that the balance of its proportions, which stays within the narrow limits necessary for life, indicates self-regulating processes at work — the hallmark of a living system.

In collaboration with microbiologist Lynn Margulis, Lovelock developed a hypothesis that presents the entire biosphere of Earth as a self-organizing system.

For the first time in our history we can actually see our whole planet and recognize it as a living being — and we can understand that we are not its privileged rulers, . . . but only one part, and not even an indispensable part, of its body.

— Elizabet Sahtouris

Thankfully, Lovelock did not call this hypothesis, soon to become a theory (the “hypothesis of self-regulative processes of the biosphere” or another name respectable to his fellow scientists). Instead he listened to his friend, novelist William Golding, who suggested he call it Gaia for the early Greek goddess of Earth, thereby catching people’s poetic

imagination. Like the Apollo photo of Earth from space, this name for Earth has transformed the way many of us now think of our planet home. We no longer see Earth as just a rock we live upon, but as a living process in which we participate. Earth takes on a presence in our consciousness as source of all we are and can become.

Deep Ecology

What does it mean or matter to be interdependent with all Earthly life? In exploring this question, deep ecology arose, both as a philosophy and a movement. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, a mountain climber and scholar of Gandhi, coined the term in the 1970s.

In contrast to reform environmentalism, which treats the symptoms of ecological degradation — clean up a river here or a dump there for human benefit — deep ecology questions fundamental premises of the Industrial Growth Society. It challenges the assumptions, embedded in much Judeo-Christian and Marxist thought, that humans are the ultimate measure of value. Often expressed as *biocentric*, this perspective holds that we must break free from the species arrogance that threatens not only humans but all complex life-forms within reach.

Deep Ecology, or biocentrism, is a law of nature that exists independently of whether humans recognize it or not And the failure of modern society to acknowledge this — as we attempt to subordinate all of nature to human use — has lead us to the brink of collapse of the Earth's life support systems Biocentrism is ancient native wisdom ..., but in the context of today's industrial society, biocentrism is profoundly revolutionary, challenging the system to its core.

— Judi Bari, forest activist

Beyond Anthropocentrism

It is hard to experience our interrelatedness with all life if we are blind to the human-centeredness embedded in our culture and

consciousness. Deep ecologist John Seed, an Australian rainforest activist, described both the ways it constricts us and the rewards we find in moving beyond it.

Anthropocentrism means human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute “human race” for man and “all other species” for woman...

When humans investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric self-cherishing, a most profound change in consciousness begins to take place. Alienation subsides. The human is no longer a stranger, apart. Your humanness is then recognized as merely the most recent stage of your existence, and as you stop identifying exclusively with this chapter, you start to get in touch with yourself as mammal, as vertebrate, as a species only recently emerged from the rainforest. As the fog of amnesia disperses, there is a transformation in your relationship to other species, and in your commitment to them.⁴

John Seed pointed out that this liberation is far more than an intellectual process. For him, as for many others, it comes through taking part in actions on behalf of Earth.

“I am protecting the rainforest” develops to “I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking.” What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature. The change is a spiritual one, sometimes referred to as deep ecology.⁵

The Ecological Self

Arne Naess has a term for the wider sense of identity that John Seed describes. Naess calls it the *ecological self* and sees it as the fruit of a natural maturation process. We underestimate ourselves, he said, when we identify self with the narrow, competitive ego. “With sufficient all-sided maturity” we not only move on from ego to a social

self and a metaphysical self, but an ecological self as well. Through widening circles of identification, we vastly extend the boundaries of our self-interest, and enhance our joy and meaning in life.

A welcome and significant feature of this concept is the way it transcends the need to sermonize about our moral responsibilities. When we assumed that we were essentially separate, we called people to be altruistic — that is to favor the other (*alter* in Latin) more than the self (*ego* in Latin). This is not only philosophically unsound from the perspective of deep ecology, but it is also ineffective.

What humankind is capable of loving from mere duty or moral exhortation is, unfortunately, very limited The extensive moralizing within the ecological movement has given the public the false impression that they are primarily asked to sacrifice, to show more responsibility, more concern, and better morals [But] the requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves.⁶

Asking Deeper Questions

Naess and his activist colleagues called for a deep, long-range ecology movement. Whether or not it is generally recognized as a movement, certainly deep ecology ideas have circulated widely, enlivening green activists and academics alike.

These ideas have evolved into a deep ecology platform — including such principles as the recognition that life-forms have an intrinsic right to exist, and that human population should not exceed the carrying capacity of Earth. However, deep ecology is neither an ideology nor a dogma. Of an essentially exploratory character, it seeks to motivate people to ask, as Naess put it, “deeper questions” about their real wants and needs, about

We call on the spirit of Gaia
Awaken in us a sense of who we truly are: tiny ephemeral blossoms on the Tree of Life. Make the purposes and destiny of that tree our own purpose and destiny.

— John Seed

their relation to life on Earth and their vision for the future. Such questions act as a solvent, loosing up encrusted mental structures, freeing us to think and see in fresh ways.

Ancient Spiritual Teachings

The view of reality offered by systems science and deep ecology is remarkably convergent with ancient teachings of our planet's people. At the same time that we are rediscovering the process nature of our world as a dynamically interrelated whole, our appreciation deepens for how spiritual traditions from East and West, North and South, have carried this understanding through the ages. We find it not only in Taoist, Hindu and Buddhist sages and scriptures, and among Indigenous peoples who still know and live this truth. We also find this vision expressed in the mystical teachings of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Perhaps only we who are shaped by the Industrial Growth Society have forgotten our embeddedness in a larger, living whole.

Mere purposive rationality unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life ... its virulence springs specifically from the circumstance that life depends upon interlocking circuits of contingency, while consciousness can see only short arcs of such circuits as human purpose may direct.

— Gregory Bateson

The meeting of these spiritual traditions with the Westernized, modern mind may well be, as Arnold Toynbee asserted in relation to Buddhism, the most significant occurrence of the last century. These traditions serve to embody and enliven these understandings — so that they become real to our experience and efficacious in our lives. We do not live by conceptual abstractions. We are not brains on the end of a stick. We are flesh-and-blood beings, and ideas become real for us through our senses and imagination — through stories, images and rituals that enlist our capacity for devotion, our tears and laughter.

Approached solely by the intellect, ideas lack power to lift us into new perspectives and new meanings for our lives. Our ancestors knew this, hence their ritual celebrations

to honor Earth and their yogas to open body and mind. Moreover, practices derived from spiritual traditions can help us stay steady and alert in the face of the Great Unraveling.

Abrahamic Religions

Understandings comparable to those of systems theory and deep ecology run through all three major religions of the Western world. They point beyond the narrow confines of orthodoxy to the basic miracle of life itself. From the Jewish Renewal movement, prophetic voices, such as those of Rabbis Zalman Schachter, Lynn Gottlieb, Arthur Waskow and Michael Lerner, invigorate Biblical summons to social and ecological justice.



From the vast and varied landscape of contemporary Christianity come similar calls to honor the sacredness of all life. We hear them in Creation Spirituality articulated by Matthew Fox; the new cosmology put forward by Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Sr. Miriam MacGillis; and radical Catholic witnesses for peace from Kathy Kelly of Voices of Creative Non-Violence to Jim Wallis of Sojourners. Their witness goes back to the practices of the early church as well as the figure and teachings of Jesus and beloved figures like Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology.



And from Islam comes a resurgence of Sufism, that ancient mystical river of devotion that unites us with the beauty of this world and with the courage to protect it. Rumi, who sings the enrapturing sacredness of all life, is perhaps the most popular poet of our day, while contemporary Sufi teacher Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, author of *Darkening of the Light*,⁷ helps us see that our forgetting this sacredness now threatens the whole planet with suffering and death.



Although these movements are nourished by their own distinctive religious roots and practices, they are ecumenical in their reach and readiness to act together. We see this, for example, in the program and vitality of Interfaith Power and Light, a national network linking religious congregations in practical responses to climate change, and in Rabbi Arthur Waskow's Shalom Center,

which defines itself as “ a prophetic voice in Jewish, multi-religious and American life.”

Shalom Center

Spiritually Rooted, Strategically Focused Plan of Action on the Climate Crisis

We begin convinced of these truths:

That human action, driven by global corporations we are calling Big Carbon or Carbon Pharaohs, are bringing a climate crisis on all life-forms on Planet Earth — a crisis of a breadth and depth unprecedented in the history of the human species.

That in the religious, spiritual, and ethical traditions of practically all cultures on the planet are teachings, stories, practices, and symbols that could . . . heal our wounded Earth and move toward a planetary Beloved Community.

That such teachings, stories, practices, and symbols are present in the traditions rooted in the Bible, beginning with the very first insight into human history — the story of the Garden of Eden — appearing again and again in ways that invite their urgent use to face “the fierce urgency of Now.”⁸

Asian Traditions

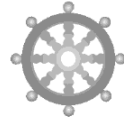


The rich religious heritage of Asian culture through the ages offers distinctive portals into the intrinsic connectivity of all life. Taoism reveals the reciprocal and complementary interplay of apparent opposites that gives rise to the phenomenal world. Within the vast panoply of Hindu traditions are stories, practices and devotional songs that train the imagination to see the irrepressible vitality at the core of existence.



Buddhism especially helps us to understand the new ecological paradigm and to put it to work for the sake of life. The core doctrine of the Buddha Dharma, basic to its psychology and ethics, is the *dependent co-arising* of all phenomena — arguably the clearest conceptualization of mutual causality prior to general systems theory. The genesis of the Work That Reconnects was strongly influenced by Joanna’s immersion in systems theory and Buddhism.

Buddhist teachings and practices, deriving from our connectivity with all life, help us experience the world in terms of process rather than in terms of things to grasp or reject. They confront us with the fear, greed and ill will at the root of human suffering. Meditations, such as loving-kindness, compassion and joy in the joy of others, further de-condition old patterns of fear and competition, serving as ground and compass in a fluidly interdependent world.ⁱ



The Buddha Dharma provides images of interconnectedness and models for a life of action. From Mahayana Buddhism comes the Jewel Net of Indra, a polycentric vision of reality in which each being at each node in the vast net of everything is a gem reflecting all the other gems. As in the holographic model presented by contemporary science, each part contains the whole.

The *bodhisattva*, the Buddhist hero figure, is one who deeply comprehends the dependent co-arising of all things. This one knows that there is no private salvation and therefore turns back from the gates of *nirvana* to reenter *samsara* (the world of suffering) again and again, until every being, every blade of grass, is enlightened. The choice to act for the sake of all beings — that intention known as *bodhichitta* — arises naturally when we open to our mutual belonging. As we realize our *interbeing* (a word coined by a Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh) we also realize that we are all, in a sense, *bodhisattvas*.

Indigenous Spirituality

Voices from yet more ancient wellsprings of wisdom yield teachings to us now. Shamanic traditions of the Indigenous peoples of America, Africa, Australasia, Old Europe, Siberia and Arctic regions resurface in our day with a similar message. Their voices find a hearing because they tell us what we yearn to know once again: that as kin to the animals and plants, rocks and winds of this sacred world, we can tap its powers, take part in its healing.

ⁱ See Chapter 13 for further details.

Hear me, four quarters of the world — a relative I am!
Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is!
Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand, that I may be like you.
With your power only can I face the winds.

— Black Elk



At the same time, archeological evidence brings us knowledge of the Goddess of pre-patriarchal cultures. Embodying not only the abundance of Earth, but also the reverence and fairness this abundance requires, she guided hunter-gatherer societies, gave rise to agriculture and ancient arts over warless millennia. Despite persecutions and inquisitions, remnants of this Earth-based wisdom still survive on the margins of the major religions, in practices of Wicca or witchcraft, and today's neo-paganism. Goddess wisdom breaks down the mind-matter dichotomy erected by patriarchal structures of thought, and points to Earth's self-organizing powers. Many see the women's spirituality movement as a return to the goddess, calling for justice and resacralizing life.

The Miracle of Mind

The image of the neural net and Gaia theory both convey a major systems insight: mind is not separate from nature; it is *of* nature. Mind pervades the natural world as the subjective dimension within every open system, however simple, said systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo. With our human brain composed of 100 billion neurons, it is hard for us to imagine the subjectivity of a single-celled creature, but, as Laszlo has pointed out, there's no reason or logic to deny that it exists.

If we remember that some 10^{11} neurons form the complex cerebral nets (physical events) which correlate with human

mind-events, we must beware of attributing anything resembling human mind-events to lesser systems, such as atoms or molecules. Their mind-events must be entirely different in “feel” from ours, yet they can be mind-events nevertheless, i.e. types of sensations, correlated with, but different from physical processes.⁹

In affirming the presence of mind in nature, Gregory Bateson took another tack. Instead of relating it to the interiority of systems, he saw mind in the circuits of information that interconnect and guide living systems:

The total self-corrective unit that processes information is a system whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or what is popularly called ‘self’ or ‘consciousness.’¹⁰

Self as Choice Maker

The mind, like any open system, is self-organizing. While its mental operations can be influenced from without, they cannot be controlled. This is because external pressures can only operate in interaction with a system’s internal codes, which are conditioned by past experience. As the system complexifies, it becomes less determined by its environment, more autonomous.

In humans, and some other big-brained mammals, mind is endowed with a remarkable feature: self-reflexive consciousness. It emerged by necessity, when the system’s internal complexity grew so great — and its range of options so large — that it could no longer survive by trial and error alone. It needed to evolve another level of consciousness in order to weigh different courses of action; it needed, in other words, to make choices. A new level of self-monitoring emerged in ever-complexifying assemblies of feedback loops. The self-observant *I* arose. It arose by virtue of decision-making.

So as many a sage has pointed out: however dire the circumstances we find ourselves in, we can always choose our response. The power of choice is our nobility, our refuge. In both systems theory

and Buddhism, choice-making is seen as definitive of the self. We discover who we are in our choices.

Positive Disintegration

Sometimes the best choice is to let go, to fall apart.

Dangers to their survival prompt living systems to evolve. When feedback tells them — and continues to tell them — that their old norms and behaviors are no longer effective in current conditions, they respond by changing. They adapt to such challenges by seeking and incorporating more appropriate norms. They search for values and goals that allow them to navigate in more varied conditions, with greater resilience and connectivity. This is serious business, because a system's norms are its internal codes by which it defines itself. Ervin Laszlo calls this process exploratory self-reorganization.

In humans, our internal codes and organizing principles are basic to our sense of self. The realization that they are no longer valid can be very disorienting, making us frighteningly unsure of who we are. This sense of being off track can be experienced in religious traditions as a call to repentance. This loss of previously valid norms is painful and confusing, but psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski calls it *positive disintegration*¹¹ because it allows more adaptive understandings of self and world to arise.

In periods of major cultural transition, the experience of positive disintegration is widespread. Such is the case now in this time of the Great Unraveling. Everywhere anomalies appear that don't fit our expectations, because — in systems terms — they don't match previous codes and beliefs. Bereft of comfort, confidence and old coping strategies, we may feel that our world is falling apart. Sometimes we panic or shut down; sometimes we get mean and turn on each other.

Today in the early 21st century, we face challenges humankind has never faced in our 150,000-year journey. Never before have we seen mass extinction of species brought on by human depredation of habitats and ecosystems. Never before have we grappled with human-caused climate disruption across the planet. Never before have we exposed ourselves and all other life-forms to the levels of radiation and radioactive particles currently being released by the production

of nuclear energy and weapons, massively intensified by catastrophes on the scale of Fukushima. Never before has the biosphere endured such onslaughts of chemical pollution and genetic tampering, including many whose consequences we cannot ever undo.

It's difficult to comprehend the enormity of these assaults on life. We want to turn away. We have no formulas or examples to follow as we struggle to cope. History cannot instruct us, except by analogy. Our old codes do not apply, no matter how hard we try.

It helps to recall that the life living through us has repeatedly died to old forms and old ways. Positive disintegration is integral to the evolution of living systems. We know this dying in the explosion of supernovas, the relinquishment of gills and fins in moving onto dry land, the splitting of seeds in the soil. We know this in the cyclical growth, flowering and decomposition of plants through the seasons. As they live out their life cycle in one form, plants break down into compost to nourish other life-forms, including new plants of the same species. Our own life story attests to this, as we learned to move beyond the safeties and dependencies of childhood.

It is never easy. Some of the uglier aspects of human behavior today arise from fear of the wholesale changes we must now undergo. Opening our awareness to global calamity and letting ourselves feel the anguish and disorientation are integral to our spiritual ripening. Mystics speak of the "dark night of the soul." Brave enough to let go of accustomed assurances and allow old mental comforts and conformities to

Like all other living things, we must make our descent into the darkness then wait for some new kind of wisdom to take root.

— Valerie Andrews

Let go of the place that holds, let go of the place that flinches, let go of the place that controls, let go of the place that fears. Just let the ground support me Walking in the dark night is a way to practice faith, a way to build confidence in the unknown I learn to practice courage in the vastness of what I can't see

— Stephanie Kaza

fall away, they stand naked to the unknown. They let processes that their minds cannot encompass work through them. Out of darkness, the new is born.

We Are the World

It becomes clear, then, that our planetary crises could serve to engender a new birth of consciousness: self-reflexivity on the next holonic level. It would emerge from the necessity for swift collective choice-making at the level of social systems.

It has been assumed in the modern west that choice only occurs at the level of the individual. Even elections are determined by individuals casting votes that then are counted. This form of choice-making is too slow and too easily corrupted to respond adequately to the survival challenge we face.

However, today we are seeing people act together in a new way on behalf of life on Earth. Bodhichitta is manifesting collectively. Groups of people from all walks of life are acting in spite of the threat of social censure, personal injury, imprisonment, even death. Their motivation cannot be reduced to private gain, but it can be understood as manifesting a collective consciousness in defense of life on Earth.

This holonic shift does not sacrifice, but indeed requires, the uniqueness of each individual and his or her perspective. It begins, almost imperceptibly, with a sense of common fate and a shared intention to meet it together. It emerges in unexpected behaviors, as individuals in countless settings meet to speak and respond to what is happening to their world. It manifests in an unpredictable array of spontaneous actions, as people step out from their private comforts, giving time and taking risks on behalf of Earth and their fellow-beings. It includes all the hopes and changes that constitute the Great Turning. Acting together, we discover greater confidence and precision than we may have expected. Given the dynamics of self-organizing systems, this is hardly surprising.

Paul Hawken, in his book *Blessed Unrest*, gave staggering numbers to this phenomenon and offered a dramatic biological metaphor, that of the immune system and how it functions. He explained how the immune system in any organism learns to recognize self