

Spring 2000

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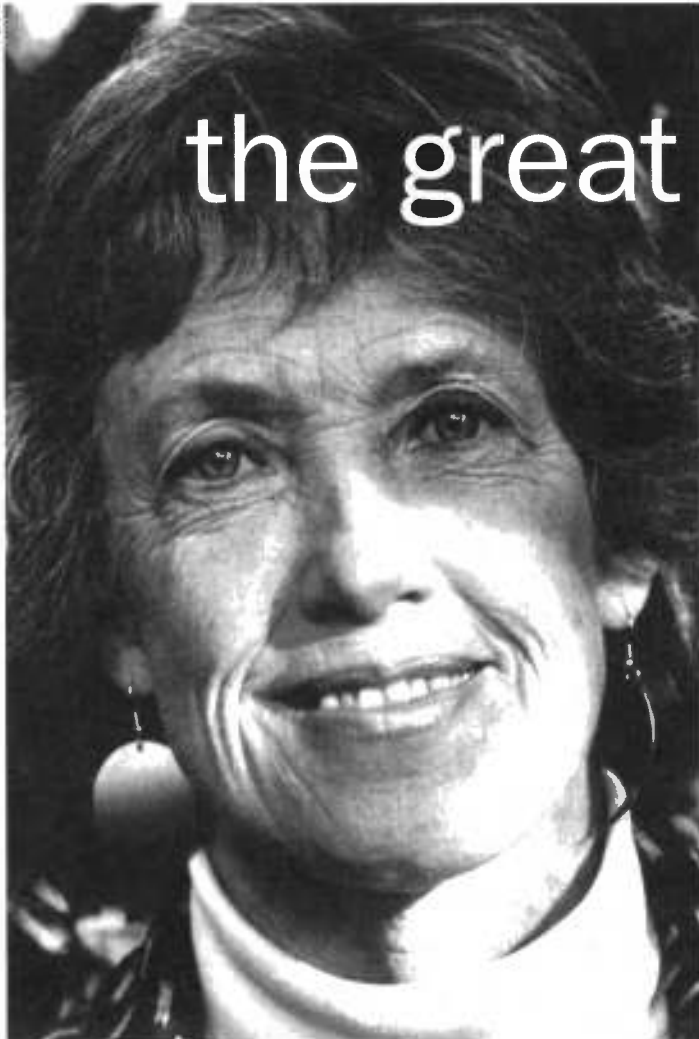
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Issue #13

Catherine Abbott



the great turning

Joanna Macy, writer and Buddhist scholar, took time out from the WTO protests to speak with *YES!* editor Sarah Ruth van Gelder. Their conversation took place the day following the massive blockade of the WTO and the labor-led march through Seattle

Sarah: We've been focused on the activities surrounding the WTO here in Seattle for the last few days. As we speak, people are being arrested for walking in the "no-protest" zones and bused off to jail. Before we head back into downtown ourselves, I want to ask for your reflections on change at a larger level, which you're calling "the Great Turning."

Joanna: The term "Great Turning" is just one way to name the vast revolution that's going on because our way of life cannot be sustained.

There are three main dimensions of it that I see. The first involves holding actions that slow the destruction caused by the industrial growth society. This economic system is doomed because it measures its success by how fast it uses up the living body of Earth – extracting resources beyond Earth's capacity to renew, and spewing out wastes faster than Earth's capacity to absorb. It is now in runaway mode, devouring itself at an accelerating rate.

Holding actions are important because they buy time. They are like a first line of defense; they can save a few species, a few ecosystems, and some of the gene pool for future generations. In Seattle this week we saw how holding actions – in this case nonviolent blockades – can slow down efforts to give transnational corporations a yet freer hand in plundering our heritage.

But holding actions are not enough to create a sustainable society. You've got to have new social and economic structures, new ways of doing things. And these seem to be springing up at a faster rate than at any time in our human history. I consider *YES!* so important, precisely because you are pointing to these innovations, which are rarely reported in the mainstream, corporate-controlled media.

Alternative structures and analyses constitute the second dimension of the Great Turning. They were sure evident in all the teach-ins and resource sharing going on this week in Seattle. People are wising up to the assumptions and agreements that allow a few to get richer and richer while more and more people sink below the poverty line. Fresh social and economic experiments are sprouting, and new alliances are forming too. Yesterday I marched alongside farm workers and longshoremen, and I was moved to see how labor unions and environmental groups are making common cause at last.

But new coalitions and new ways of production and distribution are not enough for the Great Turning. They will shrivel and die unless they are rooted in deeply held values – in our sense of who we are, who we want to be, and how we relate to each other and the living body of Earth. That amounts to a shift in consciousness, which is actually happening now at a rapid rate. This is

the third dimension of the Great Turning, and it is, at root, a spiritual revolution, awakening perceptions and values that are both very new and very ancient, linking back to rivers of ancestral wisdom.

I loved the banners and banter of yesterday's marchers, how they conveyed these values with such exuberance and humor, making fun of our greed and shortsightedness, and celebrating solidarity with all life from sea turtles to butterflies. The ancestors were in our midst, too; every block or two, a United Farm Workers' group with drums and feathers stopped to perform an Aztec dance.

Of course, a consciousness shift by itself is insufficient for the Great Turning; you also have to have the holding actions and the creation of alternative structures. These three dimensions are totally interdependent and mutually reinforcing. I love seeing it this way because it gets us off that dead argument: "Is it more important to work on yourself? or Is it more important to be out there on the barricades?" Those are such stupid arguments, because actually we have to do it all. And as we do it together, it gains momentum and becomes more self-sustaining.

You know, I often imagine that future generations will look back at us and say, "Oh, bless 'em. Those ancestors were right there in the Great Turning! There was so much they had to change, and they didn't even know if they could pull it off."

And we might not pull it off. There's no guarantee that this tremendous shift will kick in before our life support systems unravel irretrievably.

Actually, the very fact that there's no guarantee of success is what will draw forth our greatest courage and creativity. If I could give you a pill or potion to convince you that everything is going to be okay, that would hardly elicit your purest creativity and chutzpah.

We could wait around forever before we act, trying to compute our chances of success. But our time to come alive is right now, on this edge of possibility.

From our own life experience, we know there's never a guarantee – whether we're falling in love, or going into labor to birth a baby, or devoting ourselves to a piece of land, turning the soil and watching for rain. We don't ask for proof that we'll succeed and that everything will turn out as we want. We just go ahead, because life wants to live through us!

Sarah: In social movements of the past, it seems to me that people looked to a leader or to some doctrine to lead them forward. Now, people seem to take the responsibility upon themselves; they seem to want to

know in their bones what needs to be done and how they can, authentically, be a part of it.

Joanna: Yes. Everywhere I go, talking with folks of all ages and walks of life, I sense this search for authenticity. People are wanting to take responsibility for their lives, both politically and spiritually. It's beautiful.

At the most fundamental level, there's an appetite for reconnecting with the sacred. Instead of depending on anyone else for that connection, we want to be able to know it and embody it ourselves.

What is the sacred? It's the ground of our being. It's the whole of which we are a part. It's what imbues our life with meaning and beauty. Of course, there are different ways of perceiving our relation to it. Mainstream western society has, by and large, related to the sacred by projecting it outwards, setting it apart as a God "out

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there" to worship and obey. We made the sacred *transcendent*, and in its honor created ziggurats, cathedrals, masterpieces of art and choral music – perhaps our greatest cultural achievements.

But after several millennia of assigning the sacred to a transcendent dimension removed from ordinary life, the world around us begins to go dead and loses its luminosity and meaning. The Earth is reduced to a supply store of material resources and a sewer for our wastes. And in such a world, devoid of the sacred, anything goes – buy up, sell off, consume as much as you can!

What's so beautiful about being alive at this moment is that the pendulum is starting to swing the other way. We are retrieving the projection. We are taking the sacred back into our lives. The swing is from transcendence to immanence. The most vital movement of our era involves making the sacred immanent again. I see it happening in every spiritual tradition – in the Jewish Renewal movement, in Creation Spirituality, in women's spirituality, and in the resurgence of Wicca, and the teachings of ancient indigenous peoples. We are reawakening to the sacredness of life itself, in the soil and air and water, in our brothers and sisters of other species, and in our own bodies.

I spoke of this as a swing of the pendulum, but a metaphor I like even better comes from Ludwig

Feuerbach, a German theologian of the mid-19th century. He said that our apprehensions of the sacred have a rhythm like the pumping action of the heart. Just as the heart pumps blood out from the center of the body, we project outwards our sense of the sacred, so that we can behold its majesty and fall on our knees before it in wonder and awe. Feuerbach reminded us that the heartbeat is a two-way action – systole and diastole: the pumping out is followed by drawing the blood back through the heart. When the sacred becomes too remote, you take it back in, to let it lubricate your life. The retrieval of the projection is not an endpoint either. When we get stuck too long in immanence, the sacred becomes indistinguishable from anything else; it becomes bland, taken for granted. So the heart beat goes on, ever renewing our sense of the holy. To perceive it this way frees me to see that they need each other, these two movements of the heart.

It's okay for me to be here. It's okay for me to hurt, even, because I belong. I am part of the sacred living body of Earth through all time

Sarah: Tell me a little more about how it affects someone to start seeing the sacred as more immanent.

Joanna: To see all life as holy rescues us from loneliness and the sense of futility that comes with isolation. The sacred becomes part of *this* encounter – part of you sitting in front of me, present in that stand of bamboo, and even in myself. I don't have to go to Chartres Cathedral to be in the presence of the Divine. It's right here.

This means that our sorrow is sacred, too. Within us all is grief for what is happening to our world – the despoiling of Earth, the extinction of our brother/sister species, the massive suffering of our fellow humans. But when we feel isolated, we stifle that sorrow and rage in order to fit in better and to avoid aggravating the loneliness.

Experiencing the sacred as immanent helps people to befriend their pain for the world and not fear that it will further isolate them. This is a matter of practical urgency, because to repress and discount the grief and dread we feel on behalf of all beings locks us into the status quo. In the work I do with groups, we reframe our pain for the world, recognizing it as the capacity to

“suffer with,” which is the literal meaning of compassion. It is not only honored in all spiritual traditions, it also serves as wholesome feedback, necessary to our survival. To recognize this brings us back to life: “It's okay for me to be here. It's okay for me to hurt, even. It's okay for me to weep for people who aren't even born yet. That's because I belong. That's because I am part of the sacred living body of Earth through all time.”

This sense of belonging is spreading with the “new story” of our universe that Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Sister Miriam McGillis and others are bringing in now. Drawing from the latest discoveries of science, they show how each of us is an inseparable part of this ever-unfolding story since it first began in the primal “flaring forth.”

Everywhere I see people starting prayer groups and healing groups, sacred circles and home churches. They don't wait until they have Masters of Divinity degrees, or are ordained. They're ordaining themselves. They are gathering together because they find they can experience this sacredness better in groups.

Moreover, people are expressing this sense of belonging by stepping forth. That was obvious in yesterday's march. People came in the scores of thousands because their hearts' desire now is for more than just drawing a paycheck so they can pay the mortgage and sit in front of the tv. They want to be out there with their fellow-citizens, taking risks for the sake of something greater than their separate, individual lives.

When you act on behalf of something greater than yourself, you begin to feel it acting through you with a power that is greater than your own. The religious term for this empowerment is grace, and we conceived of it as coming from God. Now, we are feeling graced by other beings and by Earth itself. Those with whom and on whose behalf we act give us strength and eloquence and staying power we didn't know we had.

We celebrate this, for example, in the Council of All Beings. In that reverent and playful community ritual, we step aside from our human identity to speak on behalf of other life-forms. As the beings report the suffering they now experience, it becomes clear that their fate depends on that very species that is behaving with such greed and fear. So they decide to offer to the humans their own particular strengths. Whether you speak for eagle or worm or cypress tree, you think of what gifts you could share – farseeing eye, patience, readiness to go through the dark. In the process we realize that the gifts we're naming are already known to us and available. We just need to practice knowing that and remembering that we are sustained by each other

in the web of life. Such practice helps us to decondition ourselves from centuries of old-paradigm thinking, which we've used in ways that have made us so lonely and selfish and nuts and powerless. It all goes together. Greed and powerlessness go together.

So we practice knowing our true power, which comes as a gift, like grace, because in truth it is sustained by others. We can draw on the wisdom and beauty and strengths of our fellow humans and our fellow species like so much money in the bank. I find that incredibly empowering, because it means I can go into a situation and trust that the courage and intelligence required will be supplied.

Sarah: Let's circle back, now. How does this shift toward experiencing the Divine as immanent relate to the Great Turning you spoke of earlier?

Joanna: That's a great question. I think the felt presence of the sacred will be like fuel for the Great Turning. It will help us hang in there through a tough time. In the breakdown of the Industrial Growth Society, things will get a lot harder and scarier for a while. And when we get scared we get mean. We turn on each other. I think our greatest danger is fear and the blaming and scapegoating that fear arouses. To hold the conviction that all life is holy will help us withstand the temptations to demagoguery and divisiveness.

Sarah: So this implies a different way of treating those whom we consider opponents?

Joanna: Yes, yes. There's no private salvation in this. The people who don't agree with us become like a noble adversary, challenging us to develop our smarts and courage. We still have to walk together into the future. They're like brother/sister cells in the larger body of life. We may have to take some pretty strong, surgical steps to limit their exercise of greed, hatred, and stupidity. But those three poisons, as they're known in Buddhism, are the problem. We want to liberate our adversaries and ourselves from these three. We're not really free until they're free too. I think that helps with the exercise of nonviolence, don't you?

Sarah: Yes. It's such a tricky business because I think it can be very difficult to say, for example, "There's a real problem with corporate globalization. There's a real problem with the WTO." And at the same time recognize that the individuals who are involved in those activities are nonetheless as sacred as any other beings.

Joanna: And that they're in bondage to our real enemies, which are greed, hatred, and delusion. Delusion or ignorance means the notion that we are separate, that we can be immune to what we do to other people. Remember at the march yesterday, there was a tall figure on stilts dressed as the fat industrialist? I laughed and booed with the rest. I think it's great to make fun of Greed – so long as we don't demonize individuals who are caught up in its claws. I admit, it does get hard to avoid making people like Charles Hurwitz the target of my rage, and to remember, as Gandhi asked us to, that our target is not the person but their actions – the clearcutting of the redwoods, the lockouts of the steelworkers.

Sarah: One of the major sources of conflict around the world is differences in ethnicity, culture, and religion. If this sense of the Divine becoming immanent, if that is happening across religious traditions, could that be a sign of hope for conflicts among religions?

Joanna: Mmm. My mind flies to Afghanistan and the resurgence of a totalitarian patriarchy where the sacred is seen as punitive. Yet, out of the same religion comes Rumi and Hafiz and the Sufi tradition with its celebration of the sacredness of all life.

Fundamentalism rears its head in all religions now. It's a reaction against the radical uncertainty of this moment in history. In such times, we tend to revert to the security of rock-bound belief and vent our anxieties in scapegoating others. The temptation to take refuge in our own self-righteousness is strong. But now there's also a strong current in the other direction. Last June, when my husband Fran and I were in Israel – that land so epochally torn by competing claims to the sacred – what we heard most of all from the Jews and the Arabs was their spiritual hunger to reconnect with each other. Clearly those to whom the sacred is becoming immanent have a role to play in easing the hatreds bred by the fundamentalists. And they are playing that role already.

People are sick and tired of being pitted against each other when there's already so much suffering and the Earth itself is under assault. They're ready to reconnect and honor the life we share. That is the great adventure of our time. And it's happening. ✱

Joanna Macy is a scholar of Buddhism and general systems theory and author of Coming Back to Life; World as Lover World as Self; the Dharma of Natural Systems; and Rilke's Book of Hours.