

## Book Review

### *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*

Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, New World Library, CA (2012)

*Bit by bit, we are losing our world. We are losing the forests, the fish, the bees; we are wiping out whole species. We are losing the richness of community and most of what makes life meaningful. We are now on the brink of losing the biological support systems we need to survive. (223)*



A friend, a colleague who loves the earth and has worked ceaselessly on behalf of all life for many years, recently confessed that he is depressed. Many of us share this feeling. Here we are facing the greatest crisis that humans have ever faced because we have modified the life sustaining system of the planet, and people are out — shopping. Yes, it's Holiday Season in the United States, and how I wish we could give a gift of the earth we grew up in to our children and their children. But we're not even close — we're not even asking the right questions. Those of us making decisions between the years of 1995 and 2020 will be found wanting. No Great Generation here — yes, dedicated, brilliant, knowledgeable, persistent, compassionate and hardworking people, and thanks to all — but no great culture.

But we can't despair — that's actually what the 'forces of evil' (the theological language feels appropriate) want. But we do, occasionally, need help to carry on. I found Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone's book, [ACTIVE HOPE: How to face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy](#) to be a formidable reminder of why we continue to work in the face of power, and how to take care of ourselves as individuals and communities of intention at the same time.

The premise of the book is that all cultures live in stories, fictions that guide our faith and our actions. They tell three active cultural stories that are competing narratives in

our lives today: “Business as Usual,” “The Great Unraveling” and “The Great Turning.” The first is, of course, the most dominant and it promises endless economic and technological success that will make our lives better. The argument doesn’t question whether growth is a good, but rather how to grow the economy so that everybody (or some people) can get ahead, meaning consume more. The second narrative is the opposite, the critique of that story that describes economic decline, resource depletion, climate change, economic injustice and mass extinction. Most of us participate in both of these stories all the time as the first has structured the very environment we live in everyday while the second is evident in the literal unraveling of earth and social/ economic systems unfolding before our eyes.

It is the third story, The Great Turning, that moves us beyond first two powerful narratives, and it is here where we may find strength and sustenance in an alternative vision of life on earth. Macy and Johnstone identify three dimensions and each of us, no doubts, will see our work in one of these. In the dimension of Holding Actions, we struggle to counter the unraveling of our social and ecological fabric seen locally in our anti-fracking, fair wages, and cleaning up West Valley campaigns. The second dimension is called “Life-Sustaining Systems and Practices” and speaks to the ways we are consciously reinventing our culture — through local food systems, cooperatives, financial reforms, simple living, feed-in tariff energy policies and so on. We can’t just be against, we have to offer alternatives of what people/societies can do instead.



They call the third dimensions “Shifts in Consciousness.” How do we move beyond the individualistic, isolated view of humans to a connected, compassionate community of all beings? This is both an ancient story, and a new one as the vectors of spirituality and science merge to give an alternative view of the universe and our place in it. Edmund Carpenter once said, “We don’t know who discovered water but we can be sure it wasn’t a fish.” Such is the power of stories and the reinforcing structures and spatial practices built into the environment. Yet, we, as an intelligent species, can see outside

these stories and actually choose. “When we find a good story and fully give ourselves to it, that story can act through us, breathing new life into everything we do.” (33)

But how do we work? How do we move courageously into a good story without getting discouraged? That is what the rest of the books addresses and in addition to its discussion, Macy and Johnstone offer exercises that let the reader delve deeply into their own feelings and anxieties about the world. They call this book “Active Hope” because it suggests that hope is a practice, not wishful thinking.

*The practice of Active Hope involves being an activist for what we hope for in the world. We’re using the term activists here to mean anyone who is active for a purpose bigger than personal gain. (217)*

Macy and Johnstone describe the image of a spiral that takes us into the world while maintaining our sense of deepest self. The spiral always returns to *gratitude*. Thankfulness and blessedness as the base of our being — not frustration and anger. Gratitude moves us to action on behalf of our world, the earth, and people everywhere; it is the source of our being as is so clear in the Haudensaunee prayer of Thanksgiving. But we also need to honor our deep pain at the violence toward the earth and all its creatures that we see all around us. The author’s articulation of this condition frees us to acknowledge that pain. Without the expression of grief, we carry an unhealed wound that enslaves us.

*We feel distress when other beings suffer because, at a deep level, we are not separate from them. The isolation that splits us from the living body of our world is an illusion; the pain breaks through it to tell us who we really are. (75)*

If we recognize and acknowledge our pain with the world, we feel our deepest identity as ecological-selves inter-twined with all life on earth. If we feel this pain, we cannot continue to live the way we do. But so often those of us working in the social and ecological justice movements are afraid to talk about our pain — it feels so negative. But Macy and Johnstone argue that by honoring the pain of loss instead of discounting it, we acknowledge how deeply we care about the earth and all people. Honoring our pain is affirming as long as we move through the pain or spiral in and out of it. To deny grief is paralyzing.

The discussion above is a brief summary of Part One: The Great Turning. The second section, “Seeing with New Eyes” and part three, “Going Forth” are as rich as the first, filled with many empowering insights. Here are just two illuminating points that might give all of us a different sense of grounding in our individual and collective work.

A wider sense of self: We are all aware of the ‘hyper-individualism’ of industrialized cultures that has caused us to remove ourselves from the larger circle of communities

and being. An alternative ecological self is deeper and wider, not just in space and across species, but in time. From this viewpoint, 'act your age' takes on a totally different perspective. If we see ourselves as a part of the flow of life that started 3.5 billion years ago, we can see how we come from a creative life force, a force that now resides within us. I am not only me, but am the result of countless ancestors, and will continue into future generations. Both those behind me and those to come move through my being, just as the earth and its life moves me. Therefore, each of us is wide and the actions we take during our time on this planet are part of a larger flow of creative energy. That power, that creative life force, moves through us and motivates us to be centered in our intentionality, in our sense of gratitude and direction.

The gift of uncertainty: Nelson Mandela once said, "It always seems impossible until it is done." (186) And here is the gift of uncertainty — an idea that hadn't occurred to me, but of course. Macy and Johnstone write: "Thank goodness for uncertainty. When we know the future isn't yet decided, there is room for us to play a role in influencing what happens." (230) It is this uncertainty that calls our attention, that moves us to gather with others and take action again and again, because we never know where the tipping point may be, where an action might begin a shift that moves mountains and cultures.

The Great Turning, points to the new way of living on this earth, our home. Millions of people across the globe are engaged in this creative practice of active hope to stop the destruction, to provide new ideas about how to live meaningfully, and to shift the consciousness of our extraordinary species away from the suicidal path we seem to have chosen into a cosmology of gratitude and wonder.

The book ends with a promise that begins "*I vow to myself and each of you . . . To commit myself daily to the healing of our world and the welfare of all beings. . .*"

I do hope, actively, that many of you choose to read the book. It is an empowering story that lightens our collective work. For me, the practice of active hope both lightens and deepens our work for ecological and social justice; it names our task and for me personally has given me energy and renewed strength. I hope it will move my friend out of despair as well.

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