

## Dry Leaves: To Behold Worlds Ending

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The year I settled into the circle which was to enact my first Truth Mandala, Joanna Macy had long published her first book with Anita Barrows of translated Rilke poems. Reciting from heart, she invoked one of his poems: *Go to the limits of your longing*. And thus she led us into what was to become one of the most profound experiences of my life until that day. Joanna spoke it not in English, but in German. To probably all of my fellow workshop participants sitting there cross-legged on the floor, what she intoned in her unmistakable voice was all but a guttural sense of what was to come. A foreboding, sensed somewhere in the body. After all, we all had heard things about this Truth Mandala thing...

Little did she know she was speaking in my mother tongue. I understood every word she was saying, in German and in a language older than words:

*Laß dir alles geschehen: Schönheit und Schrecken.  
Man muß nur gehen. Kein Gefühl ist das fernste.*

*Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.  
Just keep going. No feeling is final.*

What unfolded in the next hour and a half or so was just that – beauty and terror. The beauty of 30 some people speaking their truths, expressing their emotions in stance, body, gesture and voice; in tears, agony, silence and wailing. The beauty, also, of finding myself no longer alone with the immensity of my visceral experience of the dying world. And yes, the terror of saying *that* out loud. The terror of hearing so much unspeakable truth being expressed. That day was the one-year anniversary of 9/11.

Truth be told, little did *I* know she was speaking in my mother tongue, that deeper language. I only sensed the most superficial of what she was saying that day. But here I was, a scientist trained in the ways of the planet and the ways of humans treading on it, still in the early days of my professional becoming, yet well socialized into the dissociation of our feelings from facts which we scientists call “objectivity.” And here

was someone arguing this dismissal and suppression of our feelings about the state of the world is as sick and disastrous and consequential as any blind dissociation. Here was someone utterly believable suggesting that experiencing our pain for the world – however grievous – would free us and reconnect us to our innate ability to work more energetically and effectively for the preservation of what we loved.

*Nearby is the country they call life.  
You will know it by its seriousness.*

Her invitation was nothing short of a lure off the cliff. The “safety” I thought I had a firm foothold in was my professional identity, my only “capital” in science and policy debates (namely untainted, unassailable, allegedly value-free credibility), and some notion of what I thought I could bear without losing my sanity. Everyone in their right mind, be warned: working with Joanna is dangerous to your career! (I can’t be sure, but she may – with that chuckle in her voice – have even said as much herself.)

I don’t recall much else about the Truth Mandala that day. I remember the stick, the rock, the leaves and the empty bowl at the center. I remember that terrible silence before it all began. And then it did. For some it was the crushing of human bodies under the weight of two toppled towers; for others it was the carpet bombing of Bagdad; for yet others it was the corruption underpinning deforestation. For me it was climate change. Not just because as a geographer and climate communication expert, it was my field of study, but because – to me – it encompassed and epitomized practically all other forms of human destruction of the environment. At the heart of my grief was the nearly inconceivable degree of suffering we are creating for ourselves and the more-than-human beings on this Earth. *Give me your hand*, she implored. And I did. My heart’s imagination of all that was ending by our hand was coming unhinged. That day, I cried over a plate of dry leaves until they nearly dissolved.

## **Worlds Ending**

Joanna Macy’s life of nine decades on planet Earth has spanned so many endings, but none so grave and ultimate as the threat of nuclear annihilation and the destruction of the Earth’s life support system – its

biota, climate, waters, and soils. She entered the public sphere through the door of the nuclear threat, and remains a ringing bell tower on climate change. At a time when the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists'* Doomsday Clock – a “universally recognized indicator of the world’s vulnerability to catastrophe” – is set to two minutes before midnight for precisely those two existential threats, the specter of not just our one world, but of oh-so-many worlds ending is as, or even more, acute than it was when Joanna first began facing them straight in the eye. Despite the Paris Agreement to keep climate change below 2 degrees C of warming and the rise of renewable energy, the clock has been perilously stuck at two minutes to twelve since 2018 and only once before – in 1953 – has it been this close to the apocalyptic nightmare it tries to warn us of.

But how limiting is the language with which we say such things. Even a symbol like the hands of a clock barely conveys the gravity of what it is saying. In some ways, only naming the real thing in its horrendous factuality will do. And maybe calling the unfolding grim reality by new names, as the New York Times Magazine journalist, David Wallace-Wells does in his book *The Uninhabitable Earth*, has a similar effect: he calls us to pay attention by introducing words invented for no other purpose than to describe a heretofore unfamiliar, climate-altered world, such as “hidden hunger” for food that has lost essential micronutrients due to too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, or “airpocalypse” for deadly air pollution in megacities around the world. Joanna insists – with a faith and clarity that only comes from lived wisdom – that our human hearts are indeed big enough and strong enough to bear witness to these endings.

As a daily consumer of science, I’ve had to consider that long before the end of our own species, we are causing the ending of so many other species to which we are brothers and sisters through fundamentally altering the climate system and thus the living conditions on our planet. I’ve had to confront the many endings in our environment in which we are embedded yet which we have taken for granted: already we hear so much less bird song than when we were born (Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is indeed unfolding).

Already, due to climatic shifts, habitat destruction and pesticide use, there is a drastic diminishment of insects, and I myself regularly shun the precarious closeness of their endings to the food on my table. How long has it been since last we paid attention to the list of critically endangered species, made longer every year by changed seasons, temperature extremes and too much or too little rain? How many cities can I bear being burned to the ground in less than two days? How ready am I really to imagine the end of water in Phoenix, or the end of meltwater from Himalayan glaciers for the 1 billion people downstream in China, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan?

In my work on the emotional responses to climate change but also as a conscientious consumer, I had to consider the ending of entire landscapes as mountains are flattened, as scars the size of small countries are carved into plains whose oil riches we extract. In my work on climate adaptation, I face a new story nearly every day of shorelines vanishing under the ocean, of homeowners realizing their life's biggest investment will soon be worthless, of ancestral burial grounds being lost as coastal erosion takes the bones and throws them into the rising sea. And all of us who believe ourselves protected at a safe distance, on higher ground, will come to learn what Joanna has taught all along: the radical interrelatedness of all beings and all things. We will find that whatever safety – real or imagined – we thought would guard us from the physics of reality, will fall away and leave us naked.

And as a communication expert attempting to support communities moving forward, I continue to struggle to find ways to say that the endings won't stop there because they are not only physical, visible, audible and tangible. A growing number of writers is doing so now, but it never sounds any different than this: the endings will also include the end of our sense of power over our fates; the end of our sense of control over much of anything. They will encompass the end of our heretofore unshaken belief that there will be a future, that lineages of family will go on unbroken into the future, forever. That women will be mothers, and men will be fathers, even good ones.

None of us are guaranteed to be spared any of these endings, and certainly none – ultimately – will be spared profoundly personal, even existential questions. For many years, the question I carried to be with these endings was: “What is meaningful work on the way down?” I have witnessed others struggle with whether to bring children into the world we are creating. While some have arrived at a solid “no” as they concluded that “it’s too late” to prevent abysmal changes on Earth, others have chosen to hold both – the enormous risks we’re facing along with the irreducible uncertainty about the ultimate outcomes of the changes we have set in motion – without jumping to conclusions. Regardless, I see them all, one way or another, ask the pan-ultimate moral question that award-winning American journalist (and Joanna friend) Dahr Jamail is but the latest to ask of us: “How then shall we live?” Eventually, he argues, this implies a great reckoning: “Questions about how we shall live going forward require honest confrontation with “How *have* we lived?”

Joanna Macy never pretended these endings – and the questions they raise – won’t break our hearts. Instead, she calls it the great wisdom of the heart to break under the weight of such knowing. In 2016, in an interview with *On Being* host Krista Tippett, she reassured us, “It is o.k. for our hearts to be broken over the world. What else are hearts for? There is great intelligence in that.”

### **The Intelligence of Grief**

*Flare up like a flame*, Rilke demands, because it creates a shadowed space big enough for God to move in. It creates a space big enough for all of us to move in – that is, to move again after the paralysis from suppressed emotions. At the most basic level, Joanna Macy’s insistence on and mastery of despair work can be seen as a contribution to “movement building” and movement sustenance in the literal and metaphorical sense. In responses to my own writing, to my speeches, and in the climate dialogues I have facilitated, I see it myself every time: truth-telling – and the honorable embrace of our emotional responses to this unfolding truth – helps individuals, groups and entire movements maintain their psychological well-being and energy for the three dimensions of the work of the Great Turning: it frees

our powers for *holding actions* that prevent further loss and destruction, for *dismantling old and building alternative structures*; and for the deep work of *changing consciousness*. From this perspective, the practices and rituals Joanna offers are instrumental: they help us release the internal energy pent up in avoidance and suppression and make it available to the external work that needs to be done. What's more, they help us reconnect with our love for the world. As Dahr Jarmail notes, "The depth of our grief is a measure of our love." As a researcher of the psychological responses to climate change, I am observing a rapidly rising interest among researchers and others in "climate grief" – i.e., the reactive and anticipatory mourning of what all we are losing due to the disruption of our climate. It is as if the losses directly or vicariously experienced from the growing number of devastating disasters are a terrible wake-up call, the gateway into the difficult process of reconnecting with the larger body of Earth from which we have become so estranged. Grief in this way brings us alive again; grief of our climate-driven losses returns us to the treasure of life itself. From this place, we "see with new eyes" and go forth to do what we can with renewed energy and appreciation for whatever time we have left.

Yet there is a deeper intelligence in grief and despair work that Joanna embodies in her own self. Over the years, I have come to view it as countercultural and as such as profoundly courageous. Courage is what it takes to honor psyche in a world – and not only in a world of science, but certainly there! – that diminishes, dismisses, silences, pathologizes or ignores earnest emotional responses to existential risk. After all, 300 years after the Enlightenment, which gave "reason" primacy over all forms of human expressions, we scientists still pride ourselves in distancing ourselves from our objects of study; we claim that our work is free of values and traits chauvinistically associated with the feminine (phrases like "mind over matter," from the Latin *mater* for mother, give it away). Feelings clearly do not belong in such an enterprise (even if such insistence ignores the findings of science itself, namely neuroscience, which shows us how cognition and emotion are *functionally* implicated in each other!). Even so, traditional positivist science insists that knowing can only come by way of frontal-cortex activity, and only by using

means such as tangible data, turned into meaning by logic, and logic alone. This science has declared itself the holder of Truth, even if that truth consists only of part – the smaller part – of the whole picture.

Joanna Macy – trained in systems science *and* the humanities – insists on the wholeness and indivisibility of reality and thus knows emotion to be a matter of concern to science and to the humans conducting that science – an outrageously irreverent insistence on a greater truth. This is remedial not just in an additive sense, but in a confrontational sense, demanding that we revisit the question how we know the world and what and whose knowledge counts. As such it is countercultural to the core of the Western mindset (and probably beyond), and we ignore it at our peril!

In my own work – in part dedicated to disturbing traditional science with these insights – I have brought the importance of emotions in response to climate change to the fore of social scientific debates and inquiry about why individuals and society fail to respond adequately to the overwhelming reality of human-caused climate change. In peer-reviewed publications, keynote addresses, communication trainings, and most recently in efforts to build psychosocial support for individuals working to serve climate-impacted communities, I have insisted on grief work because I see the need for it growing everywhere. Overwhelm, numbing, apathy and burn-out are spreading just at the moment when we most need people to be present to each other and take life-saving action. What some call an “irrational” response and thus relegate to the shadows of societally (and particularly professionally) acceptable experience is in fact an utterly rational, appropriate, and vital sign that we humans are aware of what is happening. We are afraid, in grief, and in despair. Underneath is our love for this planet, even if we have become estranged, and we do not want to lose it. Writers across the social sciences are finally now recognizing the mobilizing force of grief, and not a moment too soon.

In this way, Joanna’s work with grief and other dark emotions is, finally, and maybe most importantly, transformational. In my ear’s memory, I can hear her incantate the Rilke poem that begins with the quiet,

darkly spoken words, *Du dunkelnder Grund*, dear darkening ground. The poem is a plea for patience with us humans:

*Just give me a little more time!  
I want to love the things  
As no one has thought to love them,  
Until they're real and ripe and worthy of you.*

If grief is a measure of our love for life, then grief work at this late hour is the entry point into the deeper transformational work, the redemptive work we humans must undertake. Whether we will save much, or ourselves, is far from guaranteed, but grief work is inviting us into an intimacy with the world which we have forsaken for far too long. Whether this is a return to a bygone intimacy or an arrival at a heretofore unknown intimacy with each other, our planet, even the Cosmos – as Thomas Berry suggested – is not irrelevant, but may be unanswerable. More importantly, we must embrace this reckoning with the ways we have been, the pain we have inflicted, the harm we have caused to come into such intimacy. In that intimacy, we will have to confront our personal and collective past with all the traumas we have experienced and imposed on non-human nature and each other, including the collective “climate trauma” we are both victims and perpetrators of. This will force us to face our deepest fears, anger, shame, and despair; it will also make us grapple to find a hope and love strong enough for the times ahead. My own evolving work is dedicated to supporting this process. Through it, we may come to appreciate grief work as an opportunity for reconciliation and healing thousands of years overdue, and as such as a grace we scarcely deserve. As ancient cultures, mythologists and theologians, depth psychologists and, yes, Joanna Macy, have long known: it is through such a collective dark night of the soul that we may come to discover humanity’s truer purpose here on Earth.

### **Going to The Limits of Our Longing**

A year after that first Truth Mandala, I returned to Joanna to be trained in the Work that Reconnects. One evening, after a session I and two other trainees had co-led, she came up to me, looked me in the eyes, and said, more as a command than a question, “Promise me you will do this work!” Speaking to me in a



tongue my deeper self understood better than my conscious mind, I answered in the only way I knew how to honor her. It's taken me years to understand what my deeper self knew right away: doing grief and despair work – in whatever ways I have found to do – is love work, is the work of going to the limits of *my* longing.

There is no point in arguing over what Joanna Macy's greatest contribution to our time, to this *kairos*, has been. But putting her finger on the fact that we have – almost – lost it, and how unspeakably painful that is, must be among them. She would ask us not to stop here, but to keep going. To go to the limits of our longing.