

Sermon: "Coming Back to Life" c. Rev. Vail Weller
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Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, CA

Everywhere we look, we see evidence of environmental crisis. This generation may come to be defined by oil spills, nuclear accidents, the melting of glaciers, climate change, polluting of the oceans and air, extinction of species. In the face of all of this, how do we remain engaged?

I spoke a few weeks ago about the teachings of Joanna Macy. Joanna was a seminary professor of mine and became a very important mentor. I am shocked to realize that I haven't shared many of her teachings with you, and I want to introduce her to you if you don't yet know her work.

I want to remind you of some of the basic principles of Joanna's teachings. These are principles that I affirm and which guide my own life.

1. This world, in which we are born and take our being, is alive. It is not our supply house and sewer; it is our larger body. The intelligence that evolved us from star dust and interconnects us with all beings is sufficient for the healing of our Earth community, if we but align with that purpose.
2. Our true nature is far more ancient and encompassing than the separate self defined by habit and society. We are as intrinsic to our living world as the rivers and trees, woven of the same intricate flows of matter/energy and mind. Having evolved us into self-reflexive consciousness, the world can now know itself through us, behold its own majesty, tell its own stories--and also respond to its own suffering.
3. Our experience of pain for the world springs from our inter-connectedness with all beings, from which also arises our powers to act on their behalf. When we deny or repress our pain for the world, or treat it as a private pathology, our power to take part in the healing of our world is diminished. This apatheia need not become a terminal condition. Our capacity to respond to our own and others' suffering--that is, the feedback loops that weave us into life--can be unblocked.
4. Unblocking occurs when our pain for the world is not only intellectually validated, but experienced. Cognitive information about the crises we face, or even about our psychological responses to them, is insufficient. We can only free ourselves from our fears of the pain--including the fear of getting permanently mired in despair or shattered by grief--when we allow ourselves to experience these feelings. Only then can we discover their fluid, dynamic

- character. Only then can they reveal on a visceral level our mutual belonging to the web of life.
5. When we reconnect with life, by willingly enduring our pain for it, the mind retrieves its natural clarity.
Not only do we experience our interconnectedness in the community of Earth, but also mental eagerness arises to match this experience with new paradigm thinking. Concepts which bring relatedness into focus become vivid. Significant learnings occur, for the individual system is reorganizing and reorienting, grounding itself in wider reaches of identity and self-interest.
 6. The experience of reconnection with the Earth community arouses desire to act on its behalf. As Earth's self-healing powers take hold within us, we feel called to participate in the Great Turning. For these self-healing powers to operate effectively, they must be trusted and acted on. The steps we take can be modest undertakings, but they should involve some risk to our mental comfort, lest we remain caught in old, "safe" limits. Courage is a great teacher and bringer of joy.

The human body is a locus of information. It is not only a vehicle that our selves move around in; it *is* our Self. The mind/body dualism is disintegrating as more of the "hard sciences" recognize the body, mind and spirit as intertwined and connected. I have been personally trying to pay more attention to the wisdom of my body, and have been grateful for what I have been learning: I have learned that exercise is a healing activity, that I can trust the messages that I receive about when I need to rest, what and how much I need to eat, and that all of this dramatically affects how present I can be with myself and with others emotionally. I am learning that simply learning how to pay attention to my body provides me with information that can make me healthy. And I have learned how much I have been distanced from the wisdom of my body, to my own detriment.

The earth is our larger body. You have perhaps heard of the Gaia Principle, which posits that the earth is a living organism. (This always makes me think of *Horton Hears a Who* by Dr. Seuss – which tells the story of a whole planet of beings who make their home on a tiny clover flower. Horton, the special elephant, somehow is tuned into their frequency and hears their cries when they are about to be destroyed.) To understand the Gaia Principle, we have to know that the principle of evolution is at play. Everything, all of life on earth, has evolved over millennia, from the original explosion of star stuff. We are not separate from the land masses, creatures, natural cycles that surround us. We are that, too. *We are that, too*. When Michael Dowd, the evolutionary evangelist spoke here a few years ago, he said that we are the universe evolved to become conscious of itself. That thought continues to reverberate through my understanding.

Joanna Macy's work provides practices for reconnecting, with other people, with life on earth, with our own pain, and with Earth's self healing powers. In her book, *Coming Back to Life*¹, she writes about the aim of what she calls "the Work that Reconnects":

This is the aim of the Work That Reconnects: help us take part in the epochal shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization. This Great Turning is happening now on many fronts. Its three main dimensions--(1) holding actions, to save lives and species; (2) alternative structures for a livable future; and (3) shift in consciousness, cognitive, perceptual, and spiritual--are all essential and mutually reinforcing.

Given the widespread suffering of our time, as well as the dangers confronting us, sorrow arises, and fear and anger. "Pain for our world" is a normal, healthy response; but cultural, political, and psychological factors lead us to repress this pain--at enormous cost. This repression, or psychic numbing, [must be] dispelled.

Tremendous resources are at hand to guide and fuel our actions on behalf of life. These gifts of our time include the breakthroughs represented by living systems theory and deep ecology, as well as the resurgence of non-dualistic spirituality.

Each in its way helps us come to a new understanding of our power to take part in the self-healing of our world. These resources are the foundations of the Work That Reconnects.

The work is best done in groups, where people can support, inspire, and learn from each other. Community is key; it is not possible to get there on our own. We do not even exist as isolated beings: we "inter-are", as Macy says.

There are three aspects that Macy focuses most attention on, three things that we must be willing to experience fully. These three things are: gratitude, despair, and seeing with new eyes. In the time I have left with you this morning I want to talk about these three aspects. The Work That Reconnects deserves far more comprehensive coverage, but in one sermon, I am trying to give you an overall sense of the theory and then invite you to bring it into your own lives in some basic ways. It is the gratitude, despair, and seeing with new eyes that we can practice together as the foundation for our collective healing.

I believe that gratitude is the most authentic response to life. Yes, we suffer, yes, there is injustice and pain. And yet, we are surrounded by beauty and abundance everywhere we

¹ Macy, Joanna and Molly Young Brown. *Coming Back To Life* (New Society: 1998).

look. The miracle of drawing in a breath, when you stop to really be aware of it, is stunning. The blessings of nature which surround us, which nurture our very existence, are the ultimate expression of love. No matter what the conditions of our lives are, no matter how ill or alone or afraid we may find ourselves, there is at the very basic level the miracle of each breath that we can feel grateful for. As we allow ourselves to become aware of, and even oriented toward finding, things to be grateful for, we will find that we are lavishly, generously blessed, by our larger Self, the earth.

Despair is also a necessary and authentic response to life. The bumper sticker reads: “If you’re not angry, you’re not paying attention!” And it is true. There is so much to grieve. The loss of species, necessary to our own survival. The trashing of our home. The direct “cause-and-effect” of our society’s standard of living with the pillage and pollution of the earth. The new forms of disease. The climate change which may at this point be irreversible, or close to it. If we are not grieving, we are not paying attention. Yet, Joanna Macy points out that our pain for the world is our way of bowing to our interconnectedness. We mourn because we care.

I hope that you hear the connection between what I am about to say, and what I said a few moments ago. The feelings that arise within us are natural and require – REQUIRE – our attention. When someone apologizes to me for crying in worship, I say that I am so glad they can allow themselves to feel what they are feeling. Feelings that are repressed do not, contrary to popular opinion, simply disappear. They ferment. They change form. They become illness, perhaps, or serve to deaden our ability to be emotionally healthy and responsive. It is an illusion to think that once one starts crying one won’t be able to stop. You may have quite a bit of stored up grieving to attend to, but I assure you that you will find yourself cleansed, released, and healed by simply allowing yourself to feel what the feelings that naturally arise within you. It is important to pay attention to the information that our bodies give us.

It is the same thing when it comes to our connection with our larger Self, the earth. It may be tremendously painful to allow ourselves to actually feel the effect of some of the horrible things that I listed a moment ago. And yet it is necessary to pay attention to the information that our (larger) body is giving us. We believe we may dissolve into a non-functioning pile of tears, immobilized by our collective and individual grief. But that is not the stopping place on this journey. Together, joining with others who are allowing themselves to awaken and remain awake, there is a self-healing impulse that we are called to participate in. The earth is calling us to do so in these times. We need only to allow ourselves to naturally respond.

And the final element of the Work That Reconnects is our ability to see with new eyes. This is when we participate in the ongoing process of evolution. Psychologists such as Mary-Jayne Rust and David Key talk about resilience. They say:

A key concept in responding to challenges in ways that are positive and healthy – so that we can make better decisions and take action – is that of ‘resilience’. Resilience is derived from ecology (although it is a widely used term) and refers to the ability of a system (personal, social, ecological, political, cultural) to transform itself in order to adapt and survive.

[The] Transition Movement suggests that we need to create local community resilience to withstand the shocks of global social and ecological threats, as old institutional structures fail. This involves strengthening local resources so that we can rely, once again, on local food, energy supply, waste management, healthcare, recreation and livelihoods, for example. This transition process makes human communities more resilient and strengthens our relationship to ourselves, between each other – and to the rest of nature.

In psychology, becoming more resilient means we are equipped to act meaningfully when challenged by changes around us. From this healthy ability to ‘cope’ we find a solid psychological foundation from which to act. Finding resilience can be likened to finding the eye of the storm, the calm place inside ourselves that helps us think carefully when all around is chaotic.

Psychology and psychotherapy offer strategies, techniques and practices for building resilience. [They conclude:] This type of resilience is often also derived from many forms of spiritual practice, both within and beyond organized religion.

The religious community may be essential for the healing of the earth. Here, we find others willing to feel gratitude, despair, and to see things with fresh eyes. We find inspiration to keep on going on a path that is counter-cultural. We find local friends with whom to strengthen local resources as old institutional structures break down. And we find partners in spiritual practice, something that we each will need to be strong, centered, and connected to the wisdom of the earth.

There is much to be done to help the earth. The invitation to participate in the healing, rather than the destruction, is being offered to us again and again, each day, in ways both gentle and insistent. I hope that this community will be a place from which this healing can emanate.

In your daily life, I invite you to cultivate times when you are connecting with your larger body, that we call Earth. Make time to be in nature, seek connection with Earth in any setting. Open yourself to the expansiveness of it, and listen for what comes to you. Feel the gratitude for your part in the chain of life. And allow yourself to feel the despair, as well. Don't get stuck in either one of those two places: both are necessary. And then out of gratitude and despair, connect with others to identify the new paradigm that is seeking to be born, and help bring it to life.

May it be so.