

Extracts from: Learning to See in the Dark Amid Catastrophe -

An Interview With Deep Ecologist Joanna Macy

Dahr Jamail, *Truthout*, February 13, 2017¹

for the full article, see: <https://truthout.org/articles/learning-to-see-in-the-dark-amid-catastrophe-an-interview-with-deep-ecologist-joanna-macy/>

Introducing the article, the author and interviewer, Dahr Jamail, notes:

We are living in a time of the convergence of multiple cataclysmic forces: runaway anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD), chronic wars and the most grotesque economic inequality ever witnessed on Earth. And all are worsening by the day. Humans have changed the chemistry of the oceans and altered the very atmosphere of Earth. The planet's largest ecosystems are in free-fall collapse as ACD proceeds apace. Racism, sexism, xenophobia and myriad other structural forms of hate are amplifying around the globe as a fascist authoritarian has ascended to the US presidency [Trump 2017], the most powerful office in the world. This reality-television star, failed businessman, sexual predator, and hate-and-fear monger is clearly aiming for the fast track toward totalitarian rule.

“[The totalitarian leaders’] careers reproduce the features of earlier mob leaders: failure in professional and social life, perversion and disaster in private life,” Hannah Arendt, author of the essential *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, wrote. “The fact that their lives prior to their political careers had been failures, naïvely held against them by the more respectable leaders of the old parties, was the strongest factor in their mass appeal.” Sound familiar? *Origins*, published in 1951, should be mandatory reading for anyone concerned about what is happening in the US right now, and what may be to come. Arendt, a world-renowned and respected philosopher during her time, could have also been called a prophet. “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist,” Arendt also wrote. “But people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists.”

Many believe that Trump's chief strategist and senior counsel, Steve Bannon — the racist, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, misogynist former chief executive of Breitbart — is essentially the puppeteer pulling the strings. Bannon's goal? “I want to bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today's establishment,” he told the *Daily Beast* in 2013. More recently, just after Trump won the election, Bannon was quoted by The Hollywood Reporter as saying, “Darkness is good. Dick Cheney. Darth Vader. Satan. That's power.”

The news on all fronts is truly horrific. Yet as these malevolent forces charge ahead, equal and opposite reactions of resistance, awakening and love for humanity and the planet are emerging. Not even one month into the presidency, the Trump administration has spawned global demonstrations the likes of which are comparable to those that occurred in February 2003 in opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq. Clearly an awakening is well underway.

Hannah Arendt begins *Origins* with an epigram from her teacher Karl Jaspers that seems apt: “Give in neither to the past nor the future. What matters is to be entirely present.” That statement parallels what I was told by one of the great teachers of our time, Joanna Macy. “The most radical thing any of us can do at this time is to be fully present to what is happening in the world,” she told me in 2006.

1 for context: the article is based on an interview that was done when Trump had become U.S. president

Macy, an eco-philosopher and a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory and deep ecology, co-founded with her husband Fran Macy a method of grieving, healing and empowerment that evolved into what is now called the Work That Reconnects. I attended one of her workshops in 2006 in order to deal with the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder I was struggling with as a result of my reporting from the front lines in Iraq, and wrote about that experience here.

Yet now, in 2017, a new darkness is enveloping the world. After taking some time to herself in the wake of Trump's ascendancy to power, Macy emerged with an offering of a retreat in Abiqui, New Mexico, aptly titled, "In the Dark, the Eye Learns to See." The title, borrowed and melded from poet Theodore Roethke's "In a Dark Time," as well as Martin Luther King Jr.'s quote, "Only when it's dark enough can you see the stars," could not have been more appropriate.

[In the course of the interview, Macy makes the following comments (and of course, many others in the full version of the interview).]

[T]his has been a lot of my work: [t]o help people open to and become enamored of the idea that they'd really like to see what was going on. And to open the eyes and open the heart to discover, again and again, universally in the work, that acceptance of that discomfort and pain actually reflected the depths of your caring and commitment to life. When people find that they can, and want to, feel and know and tell what is happening to our world, that is so much sweeter and [more] liberating than the opposite. When people get integrated and find how good it feels, then they really want that more than the narcotic of ignorance and delusion, as painful as it is.

And you can't do it alone. Because alone you get overwhelmed, and it becomes traumatizing. But once people have tasted that they can, with each other, speak about what they see and feel is happening to our world, a number of things happen, in addition to the fact that they fall in love with each other. There is a trust and realization of, "Oh my god, I'm not alone." There is a return to your own self-respect. I think self-respect has not been realized as such a source of strength in the individual psyche. I think people would rather see themselves facing an overwhelming foe with conviction of their purpose, than to be comfortable.

[A]s people began to break through their reluctance to suffer with our world, once they took that on and spoke to it, then they found their unity with our world. Often, not only did a sense of bondedness come, but a lot of hilarity. There is laughter and joking, and a shaking off of a kind of spell or curse. A feeling comes, of, "I can be here." And that feels more liberating and true to you and brings you into the moment when you are less dependent on someone giving you a failsafe method to make everything fine, because no one can do that. People dare to be comfortable with uncertainty if they are in solidarity with each other.

The powers that momentarily have gained ascendance in our culture know how to manipulate our fears very well. They know how to try to turn us against each other. So a big challenge is to not buy into that, and to be able to look at each other with trust, saying, "Here is a brother or sister, brought by the intelligence of Earth, to be alive at this moment, then this person can also deep within them have a care that life can go on." So there you have something in common right away. Instead of contempt and judgment of them, and we practiced this recently in our work...moving that contempt into curiosity, which is very helpful. We've got to use our wits, and by grace re-knit and find our way into some solidarity with one another.

Another reason people don't wake up is because the culture and psychotherapy are both so reductionist, focused on making happy isolated individuals. And that has been very good for the pharmaceutical industry too, let alone other forms of addiction. So it's like waking from a kind of addiction. It is a noble thing. It is a choosing.

What is called of us now, from the planet? What are we being called to do at this time?

To wake up together. That is actually the name of the movement in Sri Lanka that I went over to do field work with. Sarvodaya. Taking the Gandhian term, but using it in a slightly different way, but the same Sanskrit, which is "everybody wakes up together."

It's hard to wake up alone now. It's scary to see even what is going on. But there is almost no limit, I've come to believe, to what we can do with the love and support of each other. There is almost no limit to what we can do for the sake of each other. This taps into the Bodhisattva heart. That's that hero figure of Mahayana Buddhism, "the one with the boundless heart." The one who realizes there is no private salvation. If you are going to wake up, you have to wake up together. Never has that been more true than now, at this stage of late stage corporate capitalism.

There is a huge force, through the media, through the banking system, through these people and corporations that are locked in runaway system that is very hard for them to stop now. Because once you create something, an economic system or being or contraption that has to keep making more money, it is forced to do that. It is forced into these extractive industries, and the mining. Even the nicest people are caught up in this. These are super-human forces and principalities, and so many are trapped in it. Those who appear to be our enemies, they are just flesh and blood who are also trapped by this economic system.

So that can give us compassion for each other. And we don't have to waste time being scared of each other. We can see each other as captives of a force that's got us all by the throat. But we can stop it. We have to help each other wake up to how we are destroying everything we love, before we are turned into robotic instruments of these inhuman systems. Just by their own logic, it is pretty simple to see.

People are starting to take radical actions — the resistance at Standing Rock, people chaining themselves to railroad tracks to block coal trains, etc. — valiant acts of resistance — yet much of mainstream society still has not joined with these movements. Talk about that disparity, and that phenomenon.

These people who take these valiant actions to help the Earth, they call to me at the center of my soul. They are the cutting edge of human evolution. They have broken free from being captives of the hyper-individualism of our culture. They are no longer held captive by their lonely ego winning out over other people. They are no longer held captive by a shrunken ego. And to me, there is nothing more beautiful. They are showing us what we can be. That we can spring free, and walk out of the prison cell of the separate ego and find our true nature in our inter-woven-ness in the web of life.

What should we each, individually, be doing? What is the most important thing for us to do, right here, right now?

To find our strength and our reason, in connection with each other. So that will be different with everybody. Each one will have a different path. People will find different ways.

The most important thing to do is find your gratitude for life. Take stock of your strengths and give thanks for what you have, and for the joys you've been given. Because that is the fuel. That love for life can act like grace for you to defend life.

So don't get too solemn. Don't just spend all your time gritting your teeth. Laugh out loud. Enjoy a kind of wild joy. Ah! Now I have time, to break free from what had stopped me before. Now I've time. This time. To realize my inter-being with all life.

So it'll be different for different individuals. But I think we should not make a move to do things alone. Find others. Even if it's one other person to begin with. Then others will come. Because everybody is lonely. And everybody is ready to find what they most want. And if it means that we have to be in such danger for us to find out how much we need each other, then let it be that.

So little study groups, and book groups, make a garden together. Keep your ear to the ground. Inform each other. We have to develop the skill of finding that it is more fun to be waking up together, Sarvodaya [Sanskrit term meaning "universal uplift" or "progress of all"], than a single lone star on the stage.

At the conclusion of the interview, thanks were shared, then Macy smiled and said, "I'm going to go walk in the sun now."

About Joanna Macy:

Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy, Ph.D., is a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory and deep ecology. A respected voice in the movements for peace, justice and ecology, she interweaves her scholarship with five decades of activism. As the root teacher of the Work That Reconnects, she has created a ground-breaking theoretical framework for personal and social change, as well as a powerful workshop methodology for its application. ...

Her wide-ranging work addresses psychological and spiritual issues of the nuclear age, the cultivation of ecological awareness, and the fruitful resonance between Buddhist thought and contemporary science. ... Many thousands of people around the world have participated in Macy's workshops and trainings. Her group methods, known as the Work That Reconnects, have been adopted and adapted yet more widely in classrooms, churches and grassroots organizing. Her work helps people transform despair and apathy, in the face of overwhelming social and ecological crises, into constructive, collaborative action.