

Three Stories of Our Time¹
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Many centuries ago, the great Jewish leader, Moses, speaking for the divine, said to his people: "I've put before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life so you and your offspring will live."² Today we will reflect on our own times, and the choices we make, and what it means to choose life today.

Lesson For All Ages *In Your Hands* *A Traditional Story*

I want to tell you an old story. There are many different versions of this story, but it came originally from India.³ There was once a wise woman who lived by herself near a small village. Rumor had it that she could always accurately predict when the rains would come, or help heal a sick child with herbs, or calm angry neighbors and help them to resolve their fights and arguments. People came from all over the land to meet with her and seek her advice on matters both small and great. Her reputation was such that was said she was never wrong — not ever.

Some of the children of the village didn't believe that it was possible to always be right. Surely she could not know everything! They decided to test her knowledge. First they asked her to answer questions about the planets, the animals, and the world. No matter how hard the questions, she always answered correctly. The children were amazed at her knowledge and learning and most were ready to stop testing the wise woman. However, one boy was determined to prove that the old woman couldn't know everything. Hatching a devious scheme, he told all of his friends to meet him at the woman's home the following afternoon so he could prove she was a faker.

All through the next day he hunted for a bird. Finally he caught a small songbird in a net. Holding it behind his back so no one could see what was in his hands, he walked triumphantly to the wise woman's home.

"Old woman!" he called. "Come and show us how wise you are!"

The woman walked calmly to the door. "May I help you?" she simply asked.

"You say you know everything — prove it — what am I holding behind my back?" the young boy demanded.

The old woman thought for a moment. She could make out the faint sounds of a bird's wings rustling. "I do not say I know everything — for that would be impossible," she replied. "However, I do believe you are holding a bird in your hands."

The boy was furious. How could the woman have possibly known he had a bird? Thinking quickly he came up with a new scheme. He would ask the woman whether the bird was alive or dead. If the woman replied, "alive," he would crush it with his hands and prove her wrong. If she answered, "dead," on the other hand, he would pull the living bird from behind his back and allow it to fly away. Either way he would prove his point and the wise woman would be discredited.

1 The ideas in today's sermon are taken from workshops I attended with Joanna Macy, and from the book, Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects* (New Society Publishers: 2014). Joanna has given permission for her work to be shared freely, as long as it is attributed.

2 Deuteronomy 30:15

3 This version of story from UUA website <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/tales/session11/123548.shtml>

"Very good," he called. "It is a bird. But tell me, is the bird I am holding alive or dead?"

The wise woman paused for a long moment while the boy waited with anticipation for his opportunity to prove her wrong. Again the woman spoke calmly, "The answer, my young friend, is in your hands. The answer is in your hands."

The boy realized that the wise woman had once again spoken correctly and truthfully. The answer was indeed in his own hands. Feeling the bird feebly moving in his hands as it tried to escape his grasp, he felt suddenly very ashamed. The answer was in his hands — slowly and gently he brought his hands to the front of his body. Looking into the eyes of the delicate bird he apologized, "I am sorry little one," and he opened his hands to let her go free.

Conversation with Children: Why did the old woman answer the boy's question by saying, "The answer is in your hands?" What would you have done, if the bird was in your hands?

Every day we all make decisions that either might hurt someone or help someone, or other living beings, or even the Earth itself. Can you think of some other examples?

Unitarian Universalists believe we should be kind to everyone and care for all the beings of the earth. Sometimes when we're angry or upset it's tempting to do something hurtful to other people, or if we aren't thinking, we can forget. But if we remember our values, we can choose to do something peaceful that doesn't harm anything, but helps instead. The answer is in our hands.

Sermon

We are living in amazing and challenging times. We have witnessed great technological advances, but we also see great destruction and catastrophic changes in the natural world.

One way our modern society has been described is the "Industrial Growth Society." This means that our economic and political systems are dependent upon ever increasing extraction and consumption of resources. The industrial growth system requires the generation of ever more rapidly increasing profits. In this scenario, the Earth is seen as a resource bank for human use, and also the septic tank for human waste. Forests are cut down for lumber, oil is extracted from tar sands, natural gas is tapped using fracking, all for increasing energy demands of business and consumers.

Many voices are speaking up about the dangers of this system. We know that the burning of fossil fuels has increased the carbon in the air, which has resulted in unprecedented global climate change. Industrial farming has depleted the topsoil, and poisoned the land and water. Extraction of natural gas and oil has poisoned drinking water, and has been implicated in increased earthquakes. Nuclear weapons and energy production have left areas of radiation contamination that are uninhabitable for future generations. Entire species are dying, or in danger of dying, including the phytoplankton in the ocean that provides 70 percent of the oxygen in our atmosphere.⁴

In July, I was able to attend a ten day workshop with eco-philosopher Joanna Macy. In the workshop and in her book, *Coming Back to Life*, she speaks about three different stories of our time. By story she means a way of understanding the reality in which we live. These stories are all happening right now, so in that sense they are all true--many people live their lives based on these differing understandings of reality. But most importantly, each of us must make a choice about which story we want to get behind, into which version of reality we want to give our energy.

4 Percentage of oxygen is according to National Geographic Society.

The first story, Macy calls “Business as Usual.” This is the story of the Industrial Growth Society. We hear it from the media, from politicians, from corporate leaders. Its defining assumption is that we don't need to change the way we live. Our system is doing fine, and when we experience economic downturns or extreme weather, these are just temporary glitches. Our technology will fix any issues that come up, and we can just go back to normal, or keep getting bigger and better.

I am reminded of the story of “business as usual” when I hear news about how Maine will be able to profit from global warming, by becoming an important ocean port for an open Arctic Sea. This story is also behind almost every conversation that takes place in the public sphere, from presidential debates to Wall Street. Business and political leaders all assume that we must grow the economy, and they just offer different solutions toward that goal. No one talks about changing that basic assumption.

The second story, Macy calls “The Great Unraveling.” This story calls attention to the disasters that the Industrial Growth Society is causing. It lives in the message of melting ice caps, and shrinking glaciers, and links together the wildfires raging on the west coast with the hurricanes devastating coastal communities. It foretells a future of destruction, hunger, disease, and war, and the likely extinction of human society as we have known it, and perhaps humanity itself.

I am reminded of the story of “The Great Unraveling” when I hear about apocalyptic movies that imagine the collapse of civilization, with small ragged bands of humans fighting each other for food and water. I am reminded of this story in the very real stockpiling of weapons and food by survivalists. This story looks at the underside of the Industrial Growth Society, and names its outcome as suicidal.

But there is a third story. Macy calls it “The Great Turning.” In this story, people choose to create a transition away from the Industrial Growth Society toward a Life-Sustaining Society. In this story, people join together to make the changes that can heal and defend life on earth.

According to Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute, “A sustainable society is one that satisfies its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations.”⁵ Human beings have the capacity “to meet our needs without destroying our life-support system.” We could generate the energy we need through renewable forms such as solar, wind, tides and algae. We could grow food through organic permaculture methods in thousands of small gardens and farms. We have birth control methods that could bring human population under control. We have developed social structures to mediate conflict, and give people a voice in democracy.

Joanna Macy reminds us, “We can exercise our moral imagination to bring our lifestyles and consumption into harmony with the living systems of earth. All we need is the collective will.”⁶ The title of this third story, “The Great Turning”, emerged out of practices that people did imagining how future beings might look back on our own time. If humanity survives, those who helped to make the transition to a Life Sustaining Society will be seen as heroes to future generations. The Great Turning will be as significant to them as in our time we regard great transitions of the past, such as the invention of agriculture, or the industrial revolution.

The thing is, we don't know how the future will turn out. We don't know if the turning from an Industrial Growth Society to a Life-Sustaining Society will be successful. We can't see the outcome.

5 Macy & Brown, p. 4.

6 Macy & Brown, p. 4.

But that very uncertainty can be an occasion for hope and can energize us for this work. We are something like the boy with the bird in his hands—will it be alive or dead? It is in our hands.

I am reminded of the Great Turning when I hear our opening words, ancient words expressed by Moses, speaking for the divine, but so appropriate for our time too. “I have set before you life and death. Choose life, so that you and your offspring may live.” The story of the Great Turning is a story of all the ways that people choose life.

Macy outlines three different types of activities that are part of the Great Turning, and already happening in our time. The first type she calls “Holding Actions in Defense of Life.” This includes the protests against the Keystone XL pipeline, or the work that was done in South Portland to stop the reversal of the oil pipe that runs through southern Maine. It includes lobbying for the Clean Air Act, and writing letters to the editor or to our politicians. When religious institutions divest from fossil fuels in their endowment holdings, that is another holding action.

The work to preserve forests and wilderness in Maine. The work of Justice for the River that is being led by the Penobscot people to stop the pollution of the Penobscot River. Holding actions also include providing shelter to the homeless, and work for prisoner's rights, and work against racist violence—direct help to the people most victimized by the Industrial Growth Society. All these actions and many more seek to slow the damage to the earth and its beings.

The second type of actions that are part of the Great Turning are “Transforming the Foundations of Our Common Life.” We bring into use old and new structures that serve the common good and create a beneficial relationship with the earth. One workshop leader, Barbara Ford, called this “Creating Gaian Structures” using the reverential name for the earth, *Gaia*. This type of action includes studying about permaculture design, or developing local solar energy. It can include recycling and composting, and developing new systems for community economics such as the Portland Hour Exchange, or the tool-lending library at the Resilience Hub.

It includes study groups that explore restorative justice or cooperative business ventures. The Common Ground Fair has been a source of information and exchange of ideas in transforming our foundations for the common good. Using an old phrase from early twentieth century activists, this type of action seeks to build a new society within the shell of the old.

The third form of action for the Great Turning is a “Shift in Perception and Values. Macy says, “We awaken to what we once knew: we are alive in a living Earth, the source of all we are and can achieve.”⁷ This form of action includes workshops, books, movies, and rituals that help us to realize that we are all connected. It includes wilderness immersion experiences, and the encyclical of Pope Francis on climate change. It includes quantum physics and fractal geometry. This is teachers bringing their students a deeper awareness of ecology, or Native peoples offering wisdom for healing mother earth.

The change of consciousness we need is expressed well by the poet Robinson Jeffers.

7 Macy & Brown, p. 14.

He writes:

I entered the life of the brown forest
And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of
stone, I felt the
 changes in the veins
In the throat of the mountain, a grain in many centuries,
we have our own
 time, not yours; and, I was the stream
Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking; and
I was the stars
Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of
his own summit;
 and I was the darkness
Outside the stars, I included them, they were a part of me.
I was mankind
 also, a moving lichen
On the cheek of the round stone...
 ...they have not made words for it,
to go behind things, beyond hours and ages,
And be all things in all time, in their returns and passages,
in the motionless and timeless center,
In the white of the fire...how can I express the excellence
I have found, that has no color but clearness;
No honey but ecstasy; nothing wrought nor remembered;
no undertone nor silver second murmur
That rings in love's voice.

What does it mean to be a part of the Great Turning? “In the Great Turning, we perceive once again the interdependence of all things, and build a Life-Sustaining Society upon that understanding.”⁸ Since so much work is needed, we can choose the particular work we feel most inspired by, or that which makes our own heart glad.

I think about UU Tim DeChristopher, who as Bidder 70, tried to stop the sale of destructive mining rights on federal lands, by bidding for those rights with no intention of paying. He was sentenced to two years in prison for this powerful holding action. It was also a holding action when several members of our church took a bus to New York to be part of the People's Climate March one year ago.

I think about local permaculture design teacher Lisa Fernandes, who helped our church with our permaculture design for our church land. She started the Permaculture Meet-up group and brought people together to learn new sustainable ways of growing food. Hers has been a powerful action for creating Gaian structures. And it is also an action for creating Gaian structures each time someone puts their food waste into a compost bin or brings their own bags to the grocery store.

I think about the many workshops that Joanna Macy leads, and how she has helped thousands of people to shift their perception and values. And I also think about the book that I was working on

8 Macy & Brown, 138.

during my sabbatical, born in my hope to help people experience their connection to the earth and to each other and to the mystery within and between all. Writing the book has also been an action for shifting our perceptions and values.

Each one of us can be a part of the Great Turning. Macy says that many people working behind the scenes in quiet ways might not consider themselves activists, but they are. Anyone working for a purpose beyond personal gain is an activist.

The sad truth is that we are all a part of more than one story. We are part of business as usual, because we are embedded in the structures that currently exist, and must try to make a living in the Industrial Growth Society. But business as usual can't last forever.

So we are all also part of choosing the future that will unfold. Margaret Atwood has written, "It's not climate change—it's everything change."⁹ We can't guarantee what will happen through the personal choices we make, but our choices will have an influence on what will be most likely to be born—the Great Unraveling or the Great Turning. We are part of choosing the story of our times. It is in our hands.

Participation Open Sentences Joanna Macy

I want to offer an opportunity for everyone to participate in this conversation about these times of global crisis. "Open sentences" offer a structure for spontaneous expression. They can help people listen deeply, as well as speak their thoughts and feelings frankly. We haven't tried this practice in our church before, so I hope you will all experiment with me—but if anyone feels uncomfortable speaking, you can opt out, and just reflect quietly or write about the sentences. I invite people to find one other person and sit near each other. You can turn to your neighbor, or move about the room to find a partner. Please find a partner without a lot of speaking, except to tell each other your names if you don't know each other.

I will be saying an unfinished sentence, and then Partner A will repeat the sentence, and then complete it in their own words, addressing Partner B. They will keep on talking spontaneously until I ring a bell. You will have about one minute. You can keep repeating the initial sentence if that helps.

Partner B, the listening partner, will keep totally silent, saying absolutely nothing and listening as attentively as possible. If it is difficult to hear because of other voices, don't worry about that—there won't be a test. Just catch what you can.

After I ring the bell, we will keep a moment of silence, and then I will repeat the sentence again, and the partners will switch roles. We will keep switching roles for each sentence.

1. To be alive in this time of global crisis, what is painful for me is...
2. What I appreciate about living in this time of global crisis is..
3. As I look at my life, it seems that I am taking part in the Great Turning—and some of the ways are...

Finally—let us all take a moment of silence to reflect on the power we hold in our hands in our time.

Closing Words

To be hopeful means to be uncertain about the future, to be tender toward possibilities, to be dedicated to change all the way down to the bottom of your heart." --Rebecca Solnit

9 <https://medium.com/matter/it-s-not-climate-change-it-s-everything-change-8fd9aa671804>