

**The Work that Reconnects<sup>1</sup>**  
*Rev. Myke Johnson*  
*October 4, 2015*  
*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

*Opening Words*

Today is the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, one of my favorite saints from my childhood as a Catholic. Francis loved the earth, and all creatures of the earth, and felt human beings as part of a great sisterhood and brotherhood of all beings. Today's service will be an introduction to the Work that Reconnects, a system of practices created by Joanna Macy and her colleagues, to bring people into a deeper relationship with the natural world and to empower us to take part in turning toward a life-sustaining culture. Let us begin our service with a song of gratitude for the great beauty of this earth we call home.

*Our reading today is "Prayer for the Earth" by Barbara Deming<sup>2</sup>*

*Excerpt:*       ...Our own pulse beats in every stranger's throat,  
                          and also there within the flowered ground beneath our feet..

*Sermon*

Two weeks ago, I spoke about the beautiful and dangerous times we are living in, and the three ways people understand these times, the three stories we tell. The first story is Business as Usual in the industrial growth society, where the all-pervading principle is to increase profits, while corporations, elected leaders and the media collude to maintain the status quo. The second story has been called by David Korten, the Great Unraveling. Scientists and environmentalists are speaking about the devastation being caused by the industrial growth society, and warning us about a future planet that comes apart at the seams, leaving a world that is hot and unpredictable, with human society facing possible extinction.

The third story is called the Great Turning. In this story, human beings change our lives and our social structures to create a Life Sustaining Society. We don't know how the future will turn out, but we do have some choices to make. Each of us has a choice about where we want to put our energy—which story we want to support.

For many years, and more intensively in the last several months, I have been heartened by the work of eco-philosopher Joanna Macy. Now in her eighties, she has devoted her life to the Great Turning toward a Life Sustaining Society. In particular, she has developed practices for helping us to wake up to the times we are living in, to fully experience what is going on, and thus be able to make a choice about using our human energy toward the kind of world we hope our children might be able to live in. This work has come to be known as the Work that Reconnects. Its purpose is to bring people into a deeper relationship with our world, and to empower us to take part in the Great Turning toward a life-sustaining society.

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1 Copyright 2015 by Rev. Mykel Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use. This sermon draws extensively on the open source work of Joanna Macy and her colleagues in the Work That Reconnects. I am deeply grateful that they have shared this work. You can find out more in Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life* (New Society Publishers: 2014)

2 From *We Are All Part of One Another: A Barbara Deming Reader*, edited by Jane Meyerding, (New Society Publishers, 1984) p. 247.

For those who have heard me preach over the last several years, you will notice a resonance in what I preach with the Work that Reconnects. I have spoken to you about spirituality as our experience of connection to the larger whole of which we are a part. The Work that Reconnects is a collection of spiritual practices for our times, collective practices, yet deeply personal practices. Because the work is not just something to hear about or read about, but participatory, I will invite you to participate in some way in each area of practice, as I describe them. Since we are limited in time, we will experience a very small portion of these practices, but as the weeks go forward, I hope to bring more of them to our congregation.



Joanna describes the Work that Reconnects as taking the shape of a spiral. (This spiral art is by Dori Midnight.) The place we enter the spiral is in the practice of gratitude. In this part of the spiral, we consciously choose to notice and acknowledge all that we love about our world. Most religious traditions have forms for expressing gratitude. We entered the practice of gratitude when we sang our opening hymn... “for the earth, forever turning, ...” In an economic system that cultivates constant hunger for new products, to choose a practice of gratitude can be a revolutionary act.

I invite you now to close your eyes if you are comfortable with that. Just ponder for a moment this question. Right in this moment, for what am I grateful? Right in this moment, for what am I grateful? (*pause 30 seconds*)

Now, if you'd like to share your thought, I will come round with the microphone to several of you, so that we all can appreciate not only our own gratitude, but also the gratitude of others. (*go around*)

We live in an earth that is filled with beauty. Our human destiny is to notice and appreciate and find joy in the beauty of life all around us. We especially need this practice to refresh our spirits and renew our energies.

The second place on the spiral is to honor our pain for the world. Perhaps this came up for you even when we heard the question, “For what am I grateful?” Maybe the first thought you had was sadness about the loss of a loved one, or fear because something you love is in danger. We are often taught to ignore our painful feelings, or we are told to cheer up, to do something. But for me, the greatest gift of the Work that Reconnects is how it loosens up my tears for all of the painful things that are happening in our time.

Pain is meant to be feedback to let us know that something is wrong. A person who feels no pain in their body, can be injured in many ways. The living system of the earth is similar. When the climate is growing warmer, the intensity of storms increases, and we see wildfires destroying acres of forest in drought-ridden areas. There are signals that something is amiss. As human beings, it is natural for us to have feelings about what is going on. The Work that Reconnects helps us to honor and pay attention to our pain for the world.

I invite you to close your eyes once more and ponder this question: “When I see what is happening to the natural world, what breaks my heart?” *(pause 30 seconds)*

And now, I invite you to participate in a practice called “open sentences.” If you were here two weeks ago, you will be familiar with how it works. I invite everyone to turn to a person near you, or if you need to, you can move to another seat, and find a partner. Please do this as quietly as possible. If you feel in any way uncomfortable about this, it is fine to remain seated alone, and just reflect alone. Does everyone who wants one have a partner?

Okay. Whoever has the longest hair will be Partner A. I will invite Partner A to complete a sentence, just sharing in their own words whatever comes up for them. You can tell a story, or share a feeling or share in whatever way is most real for you. Partner B will listen silently. It doesn't matter if you catch every word. All that matters is that you give your full attention. After a couple minutes, I will ring the chime, and invite partner B to speak, while Partner A listens. So Partner A, please complete this sentence: “When I see what is happening to the natural world, what breaks my heart is...” *(2 minutes)*

*Ring chime.* Thank you. Now Partner A will listen silently, and Partner B will complete this sentence: “When I see what is happening to the natural world, what breaks my heart is...” *(2 minutes)*

*Ring chime.* Thank you. I invite you to thank your partner in whatever way feels comfortable to you, and bring your attention back to the larger group. *(pause 30 seconds)*

When you share what breaks your heart in the natural world, you are sharing about pain that you feel for something beyond your own individual self. You are feeling with other life, other beings—the very definition of compassion. We can feel with other beings because we are not merely isolated individual entities—we are all connected to each other. Have you ever had the experience when your partner or your child burns their hand, and a shiver of pain runs through your own body?

The third part of the great turning is seeing with new eyes. We awaken to the interconnections that exist between all of life, we begin to experience our profound unity, what Buddhists call inter-being. There are many ways to wake up to the unity of all life. One way that means a lot to me is the very process of breathing.

I invite you to notice your breathing now. Still your thoughts, close your eyes if you like, and notice the air going in and out of your nose or mouth... Notice as this air fills your throat and your lungs... You don't have to do anything in order to breath... It happens without our conscious thought... We breathe when we are pre-occupied with doing something else... We breathe when we are asleep...

It is almost as if life is breathing us... Let yourself imagine life breathing you right now, as you feel the air going in and out of your lungs... Life breathes all living beings as if it were a great symphony and we were all musical instruments... Life is breathing the whale as it rises from the deep sea... Life is breathing the chipmunk as it scampers over the lawn... Life is breathing the tree that gives shade to the chipmunk... Life is breathing the birds as they sing on a branch in the tree... The air is all one air, and we are being breathed by life in a vast web of inter-breathing... *(pause)*

Our culture has taught us that we are individuals. And we do hold some sort of individual pattern that gives us an identity that is unique, that we can call “me.” But we have never existed outside the flow of relationships with all other beings. To be alive means to be part of this great inter-breathing...

If you have closed your eyes, I invite you to open them again, seeing with new eyes our interconnected system. The fourth part of the spiral of the Work that Reconnects is called “Going Forth.” After seeing with new eyes, we are called to do our part to serve this great interconnected Life. We are called to do our part in the Great Turning toward a life-sustaining society.

As part of the Intensive workshop I attended this summer, Joanna Macy shared a prophecy from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, that was given to her by her friend Dugu Choegyal Rinpoche in 1980. She gave us permission to pass it along to others who would appreciate it.<sup>3</sup> In ancient Tibet, twelve centuries ago, this prophecy spoke about the coming of the kingdom of Shambhala. It has been interpreted in many ways—some see it as an external historical event, others, an inner personal event, but the version that Joanna received brings together the inner and outer, and speaks to the calling we may feel in our own time. Here is the version that I learned from Joanna.

There comes a time when all life on Earth is in danger. Great barbarian powers have arisen. Although these powers spend their wealth in preparations to annihilate each other, they have much in common: weapons of unfathomable devastation and technologies that lay waste our world. It is in this moment, when the future of all beings hangs by the frailest of threads, that the kingdom of Shambhala emerges.

You cannot go there, for it is not a place. It exists in the hearts and minds of the Shambhala warriors. You can't recognize a Shambhala warrior by looking at them, for they wear no uniforms or insignia, and they carry no banners to show which side they are on. They have no barricades on which to climb to threaten the enemy, or behind which they can rest or regroup. They don't even have a home turf. Always they must move across the terrain of the barbarians themselves.

Now the time has come when great courage—moral and physical courage—is required of the Shambhala warriors, for they must go into the heart of the barbarian powers, to dismantle the weapons—weapons in every sense of the word. They must go where the armaments are made and deployed, and also into the corridors of power where decisions are made.

The Shambhala warriors know that these weapons *can* be dismantled. That is because they are *manomaya* (which means mind-made). Made by the human mind, they can be unmade by the human mind. The dangers threatening life on Earth are not visited upon us by any extraterrestrial power, or satanic deities, or preordained fate. They arise from our own choices, our relationships, our habits of thought and behavior.

So this is the time when the Shambhala warriors go into training. How do they train? They train in the use of two weapons. What are they? One weapon is compassion; the other weapon is wisdom, or insight into the radical interdependence of all phenomena. Both are necessary.

Compassion gives you the fuel, the motivating force, to go where you need to go, to do what you need to do. It means, essentially, to not be afraid of the pain of the world. When you are not afraid of the pain of the world, nothing can stop you.

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<sup>3</sup> It can be found in *Coming Back to Life*, p. 69.

But by itself, that weapon is not enough; it can burn you out. So you need the other, the knowledge of our interbeing. With that wisdom you know that this is not a battle between good guys and bad guys; you know that the line between good and evil runs through the landscape of every human heart. You know that we are so interwoven in the fabric of life that even the smallest act with clear intention has repercussions beyond our capacity to measure or even see.

By itself, that insight might be abstract and cool, so to keep moving, we need the heat of compassion as well.

These two weapons of the Shambhala warrior correspond to two aspects of the Work that Reconnects. Compassion corresponds to a fearless experience of our pain for the world. Insight corresponds to seeing with new eyes the radical connectivity of all life.

If we are moved to act in our world in support of this interwoven life, we become the Shambhala warriors of the prophecy. Our going forth is a way to decide to make a difference, to be a part of the Great Turning toward a Life Sustaining Society. You may remember I mentioned a couple weeks ago that there are many ways to be a part of the Great Turning. We might be part of trying to stop the damage being done to the earth, by lobbying our elected officials, or by bringing reusable bags to our grocery store. The people who went in kayaks to stop a Shell Oil ship from going to the arctic to drill there were Shambhala warriors. Those actions have an effect, though it is not always immediate or visible. But in a bit of joyful news, this week we heard that Shell Oil has now abandoned its Arctic drilling program.

We might be a Shambhala warrior by creating new structures for our life together that honor our interbeing. Growing a permaculture garden, or participating in a food coop. Our church is doing this through our campaign this fall, to raise money for projects that will help our building and grounds be more life-sustaining. We also need Shambhala warriors to help others to open their eyes, to see our interconnected web of life. Those who teach our children are helping them to keep hold of the interbeing that they more naturally experience.

So the spiral of the Work that Reconnects has four parts, and we keep going round the spiral from one to the other—we don't finish it once for all. We begin again in gratitude, each day. We honor our pain for the world, each day. We see with new eyes our interconnected being, each day. We go forth to act with compassion and insight, each day. It is a way of living our lives with balance and hope and serenity, even in the midst of the challenges we face.

### *Closing Words*

As we go forth from our worship today,  
I invite you to think of one practice you can bring into your everyday life,  
one action you can take for the sake of serving and sustaining life...  
And I invite you to ground that intention,  
by telling one other person today about what you hope to do,  
someone you can check in with about how it is going.  
We are never meant to do this work alone.  
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,  
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.