



The Great Turning or The Great Unravelling? Maddy Harland in conversation with Joanna Macy

Joanna Macy & Maddy Harland
Monday, 6th June 2011

Maddy Harland talks to celebrated activist and deep ecologist, Joanna Macy, about climate change, peak oil and her vision of The Great Turning - our opportunity to move away from self-destructive political and economics systems to those that respect the Earth and sustain all life.



In the 1970s, Joanna Macy was a lecturer in comparative religion when she became an anti-nuclear activist. It was her research into the health hazards at atomic power stations and her involvement in a citizen's law suit that led her to understand both the realities of radioactive contamination and the phenomenon of psychic numbing. This led Joanna to develop her despair and empowerment workshops, which spread worldwide helping people from all walks of life to shed apathy and awaken their power to act. Joanna is a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory and deep ecology. She is also a leading voice in movements for peace, justice and ecological sanity.

How do you help people to denumb and become present to the reality of the problems that face us?

Well, I don't preach at them or assault them with painful information, which has been a major strategy of social change organisations. Instead of terrifying or scolding people, we invite them in simple,



related articles



(</articles/pruning-raspberries-patrick-whitefield-0>).

PRUNING RASPBERRIES WITH PATRICK WHITEFIELD
(</ARTICLES/PRUNING-RASPBERRIES-PATRICK-WHITEFIELD-0>)

Patrick Whitefield



(</articles/how-build-gypsy-caravan-recycled-materials>).

HOW TO BUILD A GYPSY CARAVAN FROM RECYCLED MATERIALS
(</ARTICLES/HOW-BUILD-GYPSY-CARAVAN-RECYCLED-MATERIALS>)

Rachel Ross



(</articles/synergistic-growing>).

SYNERGISTIC GROWING
(</ARTICLES/SYNERGISTIC-GROWING>)

Juan Fran Lopez



(</articles/great-turning-or-great-unravelling-maddy-harland-conversation-joanna-macy>).

**THE GREAT TURNING OR THE GREAT UNRAVELLING?
MADDY HARLAND IN CONVERSATION WITH JOANNA MACY**
(</ARTICLES/GREAT-TURNING-OR-GREAT-UNRAVELLING-MADDY-HARLAND-CONVERSATION-JOANNA-MACY>)

structured ways to listen to themselves and hear their own deep, inner responses to what is happening to our world. Then we reframe these responses. We help people to see that the grief, anger, and fear they feel are actually healthy and necessary responses to a situation that is inimical to life.

This reframing is important because the industrial growth society would have us interpret our sorrow and anger over the suffering in the world in terms of some personal pathology. We live in a reductionistic society, which would persuade us that our pain for the world stems from some private neurosis. So it is crucial to see that our capacity to suffer with our world is nothing less than compassion, which is central to all spiritual traditions and which literally means to 'suffer with'. This realization itself is liberating. It frees us from those pop psychotherapeutic voices that would privatize our grief and say things like, "So you're upset about George Bush. Have you looked at your relationship with your father?" These internal and external voices lead us to repress our deep responses of solidarity with other beings. Furthermore they block the feedback which societies need for self-correction, and engender feelings of powerlessness. People tend to feel they don't have the right to speak about the pressing problems of our time unless they possess some fail-proof method for solving them.

Permaculturists usually take a problem and try to create a solution: excess sewage makes increased fertility etc...

This is precisely why in our quest for sustainability, indeed survival, we need to see our lives within a larger context. For me, that larger context is the story of life on Earth. When I enlarge the frame beyond my personal agendas, I glimpse the wonder and beauty of that story, and how amazing it is to be born in Earth at this time of such huge challenge. This wider context gives rise to a two-fold experience. One is sheer gratitude for the gift of life, and for the chance to be alive at a moment when each thought and action can matter greatly. And the other experience is one of connection with the generations who came before us and those who will come after. In our workshops we have 'deep time' exercises that help us feel our connections with the ancestors and the future beings. We rediscover that the past and the future are inside us, and can support us as we face the huge social, political and ecological dislocations in store for us all. They help us sustain the gaze and be more present to our world. That fullness of presence is, I believe, the greatest gift we can make.

As an environmentalist I am bombarded by devastating information. I have kinds of low impact tools and techniques at my fingertips but I cannot stop climate change. How do I deal with my despair and stay empowered?

It is easier in a group because a group working together creates a field of synergy, where intersecting relationships reinforce the intentions of our hearts and minds. Groups build courage to face the facts. They also help you see the Great Turning that is happening.

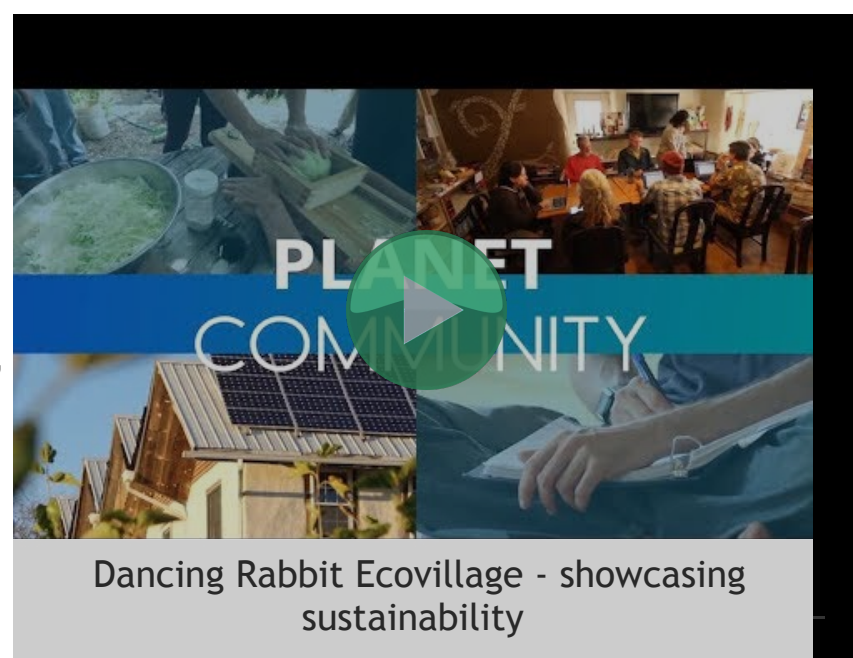
Would you like to describe the Great Turning?

The Great Turning is the essential revolution of our time. It is impelled by the fact that the industrial growth society is now out of control and destroying the bases of life itself. Our globalizing political economy, driven by its need to accelerate growth and measuring success by its rate of growth, is what systems theorists call a 'runaway' system. It is, in effect, a suicide economy. We're all part of it.

Life, however, wants to go on and continue to unfold its 14-billion year story of dazzling creativity. It is virtually inevitable that a

Joanna Macy & Maddy Harland

related videos



[\(videos/dancing-rabbit-ecovillage-showcasing-sustainability\)](#)

[THE NO DIG APPROACH TO DEALING WITH BINDWEED \(/VIDEOS/NO-DIG-APPROACH-DEALING-BINDWEED\)](#)

[THE SCHOOL ALLOTMENT PROJECT \(/VIDEOS/SCHOOL-ALLOTMENT-PROJECT\)](#)

[HUW VISITS CHARLES DOWDING'S PRODUCTIVE NO DIG GARDEN \(/VIDEOS/HUW-VISITS-CHARLES-DOWDINGS-PRODUCTIVE-NO-DIG-GARDEN\)](#)

related reviews

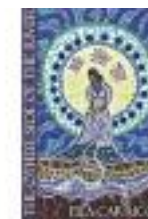


[\(/book-reviews/power-just-doing-stuff\)](#)

[THE POWER OF JUST DOING STUFF \(/BOOK-REVIEWS/POWER-JUST-DOING-STUFF\)](#)

Anni Kelsey reviews the latest book on Transition by Rob Hopkins, one of the co-founders of the Transition Movement. A small book packed with theories, advice and real examples, all to inspire change.

[\(/book-reviews/other-side-river-stories-women-water-and-world\)](#)



[THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER: STORIES OF WOMEN, WATER AND THE WORLD \(/BOOK-REVIEWS/OTHER-SIDE-RIVER-STORIES-WOMEN-WATER-AND-WORLD\)](#)

Maddy reviews a book that is a synthesis of personal journey, travel tales, mythology and a manifesto for the collective transition of our psyches.

transition is underway toward a life-sustaining civilisation. This shift is as great in scope and magnitude as the first revolution of our human journey: the agricultural revolution, which took centuries. And it is as epochal as the second revolution, the Industrial Revolution, which took generations. Now, right on the heels of that, comes this third massive change, the Great Turning – and it is to happen within a matter of years. This transition must not only be swifter, but also more thorough because it involves not only institutions and technologies, but the whole human mindset: Who we think we are, and what we assume we need, and how we're related to our living planet and to each other.

It is, of course, not in the interests of the industrial growth society for us to know about this revolution. Don't expect to hear about it through the corporate-controlled media. It is important, therefore, to develop a lens or frame through which to see that the Great Turning is a reality that's well underway. An excellent frame is to look at its three dimensions or arenas of activity. Note that these are not sequential stages, but arise simultaneously, reinforcing each other.

First we have the dimension we can call Holding Actions, because they slow down the destruction of the industrial growth society. Much of what we call activism is of this nature: political, legal, legislative, regulatory efforts, as well as direct actions, blockades and the boycotts. This is necessary work, because it saves some lives, some species and ecosystems, and some of the gene pool. But it is not enough for the Great Turning.

Second is the dimension of alternative or 'Gaian' structures and patterns of organizing. Permaculture is a prime example of this arena, which also includes different ways of holding the land and producing food, different kinds of currencies, new indices of wealth, and ways of schooling, forms of healing... Some of these technologies are ancient in origin; some are new; blended together they generate the structures required for a life-sustaining society. Though they may appear marginal now, they are the seeds for the future.

But new ways of organizing life are not enough for the Great Turning either. This is because institutions and methods will shrivel and die unless they are deep-rooted in our values, anchored in our assumptions about the nature of reality. So the third dimension is a shift in consciousness. It amounts to a cognitive, scientific, perceptual, and spiritual revolution--and it is happening now, all around us.

So time is critical... You talked about permaculture integrating tradition and the seeds of the future to transcend the temporal. So our perspective on time has to change. It seems that we do our healing by integrating the past and the future?

Yes, that is my experience, and it's wonderfully rewarding. The Great Turning serves to liberate us from narrow definitions of self-interest. We move into more spacious concepts, such as the 'ecological self', which help us see our interdependence with all beings and Earth as our own larger body.

So we have to let go of the small self, there is no choice. We have to grow. ...

And you don't have to drape it in moralities, like "I'm being so righteous and responsible."

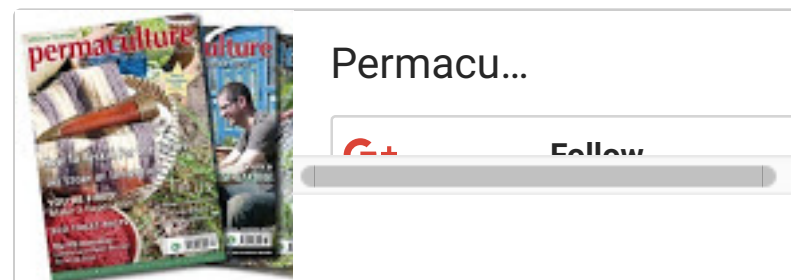
That's what's always worried me about social activism... It is all so worthy!



[\(/book-reviews/how-read-landscape\)](#)

[HOW TO READ THE LANDSCAPE \(/BOOK-REVIEWS/HOW-READ-LANDSCAPE\)](#)

The late Patrick Whitefield's exploration of our surrounding landscape. Learn how to read hedges, woodland, fields, animal tracks and more as your eyes really open to your environment.



Exactly. At the last workshop we had a lot of fun doing an exercise with open sentences. I would say half a sentence, "To be alive at this time of global crisis what I find hard is..." Then people would complete the sentence and go on talking; it felt good to them to be able to say how outraged they feel, how tired of hearing about children starving and whales beaching themselves. Then the next half-sentence was: "What I appreciate about being alive in this time of global crisis is..." They had a lot to say about that, too, such as the wonderful people they get to meet and work with, the new kinds of thinking they're drawn into, how it opens the heart and stretches the mind.

You said two very important things to me recently. First, do not be alone, make sure you are with people of your kind, your consciousness, and share you network and that this group consciousness is one of the roots...

This is critical.

Second, you said to follow your joy.

You can't respond to all the needs at once. Even trying to burns you out. In the Great Turning we begin to see that we're as interrelated as nerve cells in a neural net. A common impulse to serve our world can move through us all, putting us to work in different ways. It's best to work with what calls you most insistently. So follow your joy--or maybe bow to your obsession! It may not be something you like: I got obsessed with radioactive contamination and it is not very pleasurable to think about. But it caused me to think a lot about future generations; they became so real to me I began to sense their encouragement and guidance.

So you get support from the future as well as the past. Everyone needs support, and it doesn't have to come just from our peers.

Absolutely. What we can do on our own steam is limited, but the resources available to us are vaster than those we can claim as our own personal endowment. Surprising strengths arise as we work in tandem with the future ones. It is like grace.

We think of grace as a transcendental phenomenon. But grace as the future?

I grew up thinking that grace came only from God, but now I have learned how deeply empowered we can be by other beings. Look at Julia Butterfly Hill. She was held and taught by the tree she was protecting.

So grace is everywhere?

Yes. And that's a good thing, because I don't have enough smarts or compassion to do what must be done. But that's okay, others do. In working together, energy and creativity grow synergistically.

It really moved me when you recently spoke of John Seed 'becoming' the rainforest as he protected it from loggers. I had read about deep ecology and spirituality in action but I had to think deeply about what becoming one with the rainforest actually means. 'Thinking like a mountain' is hugely empowering – to become so vast and then direct that energy in activism.

What it says is that once you have made this shift, once you are working on behalf of the planet and all beings, then nothing can stop you. You are no longer dependent on how successful you think you're being.

So this is a practice without an outcome – it is a spiritual practice?

We do not know and we cannot know whether we're here to do death-bed attendance on our world or here as midwives to a new chapter of life on earth. In many ways they are similar. The process of being with someone who is dying and the process of attending a birth have many features in common. We can only be grateful for this moment, this breath, this incredible capacity to direct our attention. With our self-reflexive consciousness, we've been given that capacity. No need to get whiney and demanding about whether things are going to be just the way they always were. Well, just the way they always were wasn't actually that great, when you look at it.

Whatever happens this can be a moment of unparalleled awakening. We've seen what it means for an individual to wake up. For the collective to awaken, we cannot even imagine what it will be like. The evolutionary pressure that is on us now, and which can feel so ghastly, pushes us toward this awakening. Life-forms have gone through periods when it must have seemed totally hopeless. For example, when oxygen was a poison, who could have imagined that life would develop the breathing apparatus to use it.

Do you think it is because of the nature of the human mind, with its huge creative abilities but equally destructive impulses, that we have to be taken to this brink before we can focus our energies creatively?

It sure seems that way. But I am open to the possibility that this could be the end and that we will discover our capacity to love each other at the moment of our collective death. I don't think we have been given any guarantee that conscious life on Earth will continue. It might. It might not. In either case, this is a most extraordinary and beautiful moment. Because in this moment we can make a choice for loving life and taking care of each other. Right up to the end, we can make that choice and that's glorious. So we don't need to ask, "Will it go on forever?" This moment is forever. In this moment I can honour the ancestors, honour the future beings, honour you, Maddy and Tim, and the incredible work you are doing. And there is no end to that.

And that's enough for you?

Well, there isn't really room for much else.

Joanna Macy has made a detailed instructional DVD set that presents oral teachings and experiential methods of The Work That Reconnects: how to transform despair in the face of societal and ecological crises into positive, creative action.

(<http://www.green-shopping.co.uk/dvds/the-work-that-reconnects.html>)

To find out more about Joanna's work see her website

<http://www.joannamacy.net/> (<http://www.joannamacy.net/>)

The Great Turning Times (<http://www.greatturningtimes.org/>) is a website full of useful information, events, articles, even free eBooks. You can subscribe to a free newsletter there as well.

Please, do not despair – feel your pain, know it is part of your burgeoning connection to humanity and all living beings on this beautiful Planet Earth and act! Maddy

*This article originally appeared as
"The Great Turning: an interview with Joanna Macy"
in Permaculture Magazine issue 45.*

[Click here to find out more or to buy the issue...](https://www.permaculture.co.uk/issue/autumn-2005)
(<https://www.permaculture.co.uk/issue/autumn-2005>)

Help spread the permaculture word...

