

Community in the Great Turning by Joanna Macy

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February 19, 2014

In our quest for sustainability, indeed survival, we are learning to see our lives within a larger context. For more and more of us, 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. The other is stronger felt 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.

For this the fostering of community is essential. 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.

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. Its capacity to self-organize and evolve is expressed in efforts to transition 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. Since we can't expect to hear about it through the corporate-controlled media, it is important to develop a lens or frame through which to see that the Great Turning is a reality, that's already underway. An excellent frame is to look at its three dimensions or arenas of activity.

One dimension consists of what we call Holding Actions, which slow down the destruction being wrought by 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 boycotts. Even though these efforts often fail, they are necessary work, because they save some lives, some species and ecosystems, and some of the gene pool..

A second dimension is that of alternative or Gaian structures and ways of organizing. These include permaculture, for example, and new ways of holding land and producing food, local currencies, new indices of wealth, and ways of teaching, and of healing, and of generating energy. Some of these technologies are ancient in origin; some are recent; 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 such new structures 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 of the Great Turning is a shift in consciousness. Staggering in scope, it amounts to a cognitive, scientific, perceptual, and spiritual revolution—and it is happening now, all around us.

In each of these dimensions, community is essential to the Great Turning. That is not only because we work side by side, shoulder to shoulder, but also because the outcome of our work is so uncertain. There is no way to know whether our efforts to preserve civilization or even complex life-forms will succeed. But together we realize that uncertainty brings forth our courage and creativity. Community nourishes these capacities, and helps us keep our minds and hearts and eyes open.

*(Presented at the Conference of the International Communal Studies Association (ICSA)
Findhorn Community, 26–28 June 2013)*