WORKING THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL DESPAIR

Joanna Macy

Until the late twentieth century, every generation throughout history lived with the tacit certainty that there would be generations to follow. Each assumed, without questioning, that its children and children's children would walk the same Earth, under the same sky. Hardships, failures, and personal death were encompassed in that vaster assurance of continuity. That certainty is now lost to us, whatever our politics. That loss, unmeasured and immeasurable, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time.

The responses that arise from that reality are compounded by many feelings. There is terror at the thought of the suffering in store for our loved ones and others. There is rage that we live our lives under the threat of so avoidable and meaningless an end to the human enterprise. There is guilt; for as members of society we feel implicated in this catastrophe and haunted by the thought that we should be able to avert it. Above all, there is sorrow. Confronting so vast and final a loss as this brings sadness beyond the telling.

Even these terms, however—anger, fear, sorrow—are inadequate to convey the feelings we experience in this context. They connote emotions long familiar to our species as it has faced the inevitability of personal death. But the feelings that assail us now cannot be equated with dread of our own individual demise. Their source lies less in concerns for the personal self than in apprehensions of collective suffering—of what happens to others, to human life and fellow species, to the heritage we share, to the unborn generations to come, and to our blue-green planet itself, wheeling in space.

What we are really dealing with here is akin to the original meaning of compassion: "suffering with." It is the distress we feel in connection with the larger whole of which we are a part. It is our pain for the world.

No one is exempt from that pain, any more than one could exist alone and self-existent in empty space. It is inseparable from the currents of matter, energy, and information that flow through us and sustain us as interconnected open systems. We are not closed off from the world, but rather are integral components of it, like cells in a larger body. When part of that body is traumatized—in the sufferings of fellow beings, in the pillage of our planet, and even in the violation of future generations—we sense that trauma too. When the

from *Ecopsychology*, Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, eds., (Sierra Club 1995)

larger system sickens, as is happening in our present age of exploitation and nuclear technology, the disturbance we feel at a semiconscious level is acute. Like the impulses of pain in any ailing organism, they serve a positive purpose; these impulses of pain are warning signals.

Yet we tend to repress that pain. We block it out because it hurts, because it is frightening, and most of all because we do not understand it and consider it to be a dysfunction, an aberration, a sign of personal weakness. As a society we are caught between a sense of impending apocalypse and the fear of acknowledging it. In this "caught" place, our responses are blocked and confused.

The result is three widespread psychological strategies:

- disbelief,
- denial, and
- double life.

Disbelief

Although much of my life is taken up with the environmental movement, I often find it difficult to grasp the reality of the dangers facing us. The toxins in the air, food, and water are hard to taste or smell. The spreading acreage of clear-cuts and landfills are mostly screened from public view. The depletion of the great Ogallala Aquifer and the destruction of the protective ozone layer are matters of concern, but are maddeningly abstract. The things that disappear—the frogs or topsoil or bird song—are not as likely to catch my attention as what remains for me to perceive. And the more perceptible changes, like the smog layer over my city or the oil globs on the beach, accrue so gradually they seem to be come a normal part of life. Although ubiquitous, these changes are subtle, making it hard to believe the gravity and immediacy of the crisis we are in.

Denial

Such difficulties of perception tend to make the ecological crisis a matter of conjecture and debate; and this in turn renders it easy to slip into denial. We may then take refuge in rejection, dismissing the notion that things are as bad as the reports and rhetoric of the environmental movement suggest. We may choose to see the more radical environmentalists as "special interests," their prophecies of

doom to be ridiculed and their motives impugned. Denial is facilitated, furthermore, by the sheer multiplicity of factors at play in the planetary crisis. Conditions worsen in many dimensions simultaneously: water shortages, toxic dumping, loss of wetlands, deforestation, the greenhouse effect, and so forth. Although each issue is critical in its own right, it is their interplay that most threatens our biosphere, for they compound each other systemically. However, it is precisely these systemic interactions that are hard to see, especially for a culture untutored in the perception of relationships.

Double Life

And so we tend to live our lives as if nothing has changed, while knowing that everything has changed. This is what Robert Lifton has called leading a "double life." On one level we maintain a more or less upbeat capacity to carry on as usual, getting up in the morning and remembering which shoe goes on which foot, getting the kids off to school, meeting our appointments, cheering up our friends. All the while, there is an unformed awareness in the background that our world could be extensively damaged at any moment. Awesome and unprecedented in the history of humanity, the awareness lurks there, with an anguish beyond naming. Until we find ways of acknowledging and integrating that level of anguished awareness, we repress it; and with that repression we are drained of the energy we need for action and clear thinking.

Many of us have had the experience of responding to emergency. We may have rushed to douse a fire, or pulled a friend away from a moving truck, or raced to a child who fell into deep water. Each of us has the capacity to drop everything and act. That power to act is ours in the present situation of peril, all the more so since we are not alone. No outside authority is silencing us; no external force is keeping us from responding with all our might and courage to the present danger to life on Earth. It is something inside us that stifles our responses.

What is it that leads us to repress our awareness of danger, miring so many of us in disbelief, denial, and a double life? I believe finding an answer to that question is an essential part of environmental political action. Uncovering the deep roots of repression is part of what psychology can offer environmentalists in pursuing their work.

That will happen only if psychologists wake up to the importance of the environmental crisis in the lives of their clients. But because of the individualistic bias of mainstream psychotherapy, we have been conditioned to assume that we are essentially separate selves, driven by aggressive impulses, competing for a place in the sun. In the light of these assumptions, psychotherapists tend to view our affective responses to the plight of our world as dysfunctional and give them short shrift. As a result, we have trouble crediting the notion that concerns for the general welfare might be genuine enough and acute enough to cause distress. Assuming that all our drives are ego-generated, therapists tend to regard feelings of despair for our planet as manifestations of some private neurosis. Once, when I told a psychotherapist of my outrage over the destruction of old-growth forests, she informed me that the bulldozers represented my libido and that my distress sprang from fear of my own sexuality. A teacher has written to me, saying, "Even in my therapy group, I stopped mentioning my fears of contamination from the toxic dump near our town. Others kept saying, 'What are you running from in your life by creating these worries for yourself?'"

Many people, conditioned to take seriously only those feelings that pertain to our immediate welfare, find it strange to think that we can suffer on behalf of the larger society—and on behalf of our planet—and that such suffering is real, valid, and healthy.

The Fears That Hold Us Captive

- Fear of Pain
- Fear of Appearing Morbid
- Fear of Appearing Stupid
- Fear of Guilt
- Fear of Causing Distress
- Fear of Provoking Disaster
- Fear of Appearing Unpatriotic
- Fear of Religious Doubt
- Fear of Appearing Too Emotional
- Fear of Feeling Powerless

from *Ecopsychology*, Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, eds., (Sierra Club 1995)

• Note: Caddy: Add Fear of Shame

For the past several years, in leading workshops that seek to bring empowerment out of despair, I have found it useful to begin by enumerating the fears that hold us captive and inhibit action. Here are some of them:

Fear of Pain

Our culture conditions us to view pain as dysfunctional. There are pills for headaches, backaches, neuralgia, and premenstrual tension—but no pills, capsules, or tablets for this pain for our world. Not even a stiff drink helps much. As Kevin McVeigh says in his despair-and-empowerment workshops: "Instead of survival being the issue, it is the feelings aroused by possible destruction that loom as most fearful. And as they are judged to be too unpleasant to endure, they are turned off completely. This is the state of psychic numbing." To permit ourselves to entertain dread for the world is not only painful but frightening; it appears to threaten our capacity to cope. We are afraid that if we were to let ourselves fully experience our dread, we might fall apart, lose control, or be mired in it permanently.

Fear of Appearing Morbid

A sanguine confidence in the future has been a hallmark of the American character and a source of national pride. To judge by commercials and by the nation's political campaigns, the successful person brims with optimism. In such a cultural setting, feelings of anguish and despair for our world can appear to be a failure to maintain stamina or even competence.

Fear of Appearing Stupid

Our culture values competence. It conditions us to expect instant solutions. "Don't bring me a problem unless you have the answer," Lyndon Johnson used to say during the Vietnam War. Similarly today, many feel that we should not complain about a situation unless we have already devised a "solution" to it. It is hard to express dread of radioactive emissions from a nearby nuclear reactor, for example, without getting enmeshed in an argument over our society's needs for electricity and challenged to produce an alternative energy strategy. If we cannot then proceed to display an impressive

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command of facts and figures about the biological effects of low-level radiation, and about the immediate economic feasibility of nonpolluting energy paths, we can feel stupid and frustrated, as if our concerns were without grounds.

People are inhibited from expressing their anxieties because they feel that in order to do so they need to be walking data banks and skillful debaters. Taking action on behalf of our common world has unfortunately become confused with winning an argument.

Fear of Guilt

To acknowledge distress for our world opens us also to a sense of guilt. Few of us are exempt from the suspicion that as a society—through expedience, life-style, and dreams of power—we are accomplices to catastrophe How can we become informed about the spread of hunger, homelessness, or pollution without feeling somehow implicated? Each morning's fat and informative New York Times is produced by decimating acres of forest, as are the piles of paper I devote to my teaching, writing, and research. I suspect that both the shirt I am wearing and the word processor I am using were assembled in overseas factories by underpaid young Asian women, drawn from their village families to labor long hours without safety regulations or environmental protection.

Even the most "necessary" car trip I make adds pounds of carbon dioxide and heavy metals to the already saturated atmosphere. It is hard to function in our society without reinforcing the very conditions we decry, and the sense of guilt that ensues makes those conditions—and our outrage over them—harder to face.

Fear of Causing Distress

Pain for the world is repressed not only out of embarrassment and guilt, but out of compassion as well. We are often reluctant to express the depths of our concerns because we don't want to burden or alarm our loved ones. We try to protect them from the distress we feel, and even from the knowledge that we feel it. We don't want them to worry, either on their own account or on ours. And so, partly out of concern for them, we keep up the pretense of “life as usual." For parents, the psychological burden of living in a threatened world is especially poignant. Given the scenarios environmental scientists present to us, it is not surprising that, when we let ourselves think of what the future may hold for our children, the im-

ages that arise are of wastelands, deprivation, disease. Yet we usually bury those images, sealing them off behind walls of silence, so that our children can be carefree in the present moment. This burden is all the weightier for those of us who believe that a parent should be all-wise, all-protective, and in control.

The same kind of self-censorship occurs in children who often see quite clearly what is happening to our world. Aware of what their parents find too painful to confront, they learn not to voice their own dread. They play along with the fantasy that our present way of life can continue indefinitely.

Fear of Provoking Disaster

There is also the superstition that negative thoughts are self-fulfilling. This is of a piece with the notion, popular in New Age circles, that we create our own reality. I have had people tell me that "to speak of catastrophe will just make it more likely to happen." Actually, the contrary is nearer to the truth. Psychoanalytic theory and personal experience show us that it is precisely what we repress that eludes our conscious control and tends to erupt into behavior. As Carl Jung observed, "When an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside as fate." But ironically, in our current situation, the person who gives warning of a likely ecological holocaust is often made to feel guilty of contributing to that very fate.

Fear of Appearing Unpatriotic

Deep in many of us, deeper than our criticisms and disappointments about national policies, lies a love of country. It is woven of pride in our history and heroes, of gratitude for what they won for us. Particularly in America, built as it was on utopian expectations, this love of country seems to require of us a profound and almost religious sense of hope— a belief in our manifest destiny as a fulfillment of human dreams. To entertain feelings of despair over our country's present condition and future prospects seems un-American. If I allow these feelings to surface, am I lacking in allegiance? If I express them, an I peddling doom? Am I weakening our national will? In a time of crisis, some would have us silence our fears and doubts, lest they erode belief in the American dream.

Fear of Religious Doubt

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When images of a dying Earth do manage to break through our defenses, many religious people insist that "God won't let this happen." Simply entertaining these images seems to challenge our belief in a loving and omnipotent deity, and in the goodness of creation itself. Are feelings of despair over the growing possibilities of disaster a sign of inadequate faith?

Throughout history, human suffering has always tested our belief in a divine order. The issue is known as theodicy: how to square the existence of evil with the existence of a benign and powerful God. That question has brought us back again and again to a core truth in each major religious heritage: the deep, sacred power within each of us to open to the needs and suffering of humanity. That power—a wellspring of love, compassion, and service—is proclaimed in the psalms and prophets of Judaism, in the cross of Christ, in the path of the Buddhist bodhisattva, and in the brotherhood at the heart of Islam. Yet we tend to forget that those traditions summon us to take the travail of our world within ourselves. Assuming, perhaps, that our God is too fragile or too limited to encompass that pain, unsure whether God will meet us in the midst of such darkness, we hesitate to let ourselves experience it, lest our faith be shattered or revealed as inadequate.

Fear of Appearing Too Emotional

Many of us refrain from expressing our deep concerns for the world in order to avoid creating the impression that we are prey to our feelings. For centuries the dominant Western white-male culture has erected a dichotomy between reason and emotion. Assuming that reality can be apprehended in an "objective" fashion, it has accorded higher value to the analytical operations of intellect than to the "subjective" realm of feelings, sensations, and intuitions. Many of us, schooled in the separation of reason from feeling, discount our deepest responses to the condition of our world. Grief for expiring species? Horror for the millions in hunger? Fear of spreading nuclear contamination? Those are "only" feelings, frequently dismissed in ourselves and in others as self-indulgent.

Given the different ways the sexes are socialized in our culture, men suffer more than women from the fear of appearing emotional. Displays of feeling can cause men to be considered unstable, especially in work situations. Yet women experience this fear too. They

from *Ecopsychology*, Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, eds., (Sierra Club 1995)

often withhold their expressions of concern and anguish for the world lest these be treated condescendingly, as "just like a woman."

Fear of Feeling Powerless

A frequent response that people make to the mention of acid rain, world hunger, or other ominous developments is, "I don't think about that, because there is nothing I can do about it." Logically, this is a non sequitur: it confuses what can be thought with what can be done. When forces are seen as so vast that they cannot be consciously contemplated or seriously discussed, we are doubly victimized; we are impeded in thought as well as action.

Resistance to painful information on the grounds that we cannot "do anything about it" springs less from actual powerlessness—as a measure of our capacity to effect change—than from the fear of experiencing powerlessness. The model of the self that predominates in Western culture is, "I am the master of my fate and the captain of my soul." It makes us reluctant to engage in issues that remind us that we do not exert ultimate- t4 control over our lives. We feel somehow that we ought to be in charge of our existence and emotions, to have all the answers. And so we tend to shrink the sphere of our attention to those areas in which we feel we can be in charge.

The forms of repression I present here take a mammoth toll of our energies. A marked loss of feeling results, as if a nerve had been cut. As Barry Childers has said, "We immunize ourselves against the demands of the situation by narrowing our awareness." This anesthetization affects other aspects of our life as well—loves and losses are less intense, the sky is less vivid—for if we are not going to let ourselves feel pain, we will not feel much else either. "The mind pays for its deadening to the state of our world," observes Robert Murphy, "by giving up its capacity for joy and flexibility."

This state of absence, or at best this dulled human response to our world, is called "psychic numbing," a term coined by Robert Lifton in his noted study of Hiroshima survivors. After originally using the term to describe the psychological effect of witnessing massive annihilation, Lifton then later concluded that the phenomenon extends to all of us now, as we are confronted with vast forces laying waste to our world.

Breaking Through Despair

from *Ecopsychology*, Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, eds., (Sierra Club 1995)

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We urgently need to find better ways of dealing with this fear and repression. Can we sustain our gaze upon the prospects of ecological holocaust without becoming paralyzed with fear or grief? Can we acknowledge and live with our pain for the world in ways that affirm our existence and release our power to act? Such questions arose for me when I worked years ago in citizen efforts to stop radioactive contamination from nuclear reactors. The more I learned about the scope of the problem and its biological consequences, the greater grew my despair—a despair very difficult to express to my family and community. I felt like the sole victim of a unique and name less disease. Later I learned that I was far from alone, and that others carried in their different ways sorrow for our planet and its people.

In August 1978, at Notre Dame University, I chaired a week-long seminar on planetary survival issues. College professors and administrators had prepared papers to deliver on themes ranging from the water crisis to environmental effects of nuclear technology. As we convened, I took time to acknowledge that the topic we were addressing was different from any other, that it touched each of us in a profoundly personal way. I suggested that we introduce ourselves by sharing an incident or image of how it had touched us. The brief introductions that followed were potent, as those present dropped their professional manner and spoke simply and poignantly of what they saw and felt happening to their world; of their children; of their fears and discouragement. That brief sharing transformed the seminar. It changed the way we related to each other and to the material, and it unleashed energy and mutual caring. Sessions went overtime, laced with hilarity and punctuated with plans for future projects. Some kind of magic had happened. Late one night as a group of us talked, a name for that magic emerged: "despair work."

Just as grief work is a process by which bereaved persons unblock their numbed energies by acknowledging and grieving the loss of a loved one, so do we all need to unblock our feelings about our threatened planet and the possible demise of our species. Until we do, our power of creative response will be crippled.

In striking upon "despair work," we were not being rhetorical; we were groping for an explanation of what had just happened. We knew that it had to do with a willingness to acknowledge and experi-

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ence pain, and that this pain for our world, like pain for the loss of a loved one, is a measure of caring. We also knew that the joint journey into the dark had changed us, bonding us in a special way, relieving us of pretense and competition. Something akin to love had occurred, an alchemy that caused us to feel less alone and bolder to face the challenges ahead. This occasion led to the further development of despair work in groups, and to the spread in many countries of what we originally called "despair and empowerment workshops." In the course of the 1980s they became known as "Deep Ecology workshops," because they help people perceive more clearly not only the ecological crises confronting us, but also the dynamic web of life in which we all are held. Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who coined the term Deep Ecology, called for the development of forms of community therapy in order to heal our society's relationship with the Earth. These workshops can be seen as "community therapy."

Despair work has proliferated under a variety of names and forms, including popular rituals like the Council of All Beings, in which collective mourning plays a key role. Overcoming avoidance and numbing, this psychological and spiritual work sharpens awareness of our collective plight. At the same time, it brings us home to a sense of mutual belonging to the living body of Earth, as this work uses our very pain for the world to revitalize our connections and our capacities. In designing these workshops with a growing number of colleagues, I drew on years of exploring the interface between spiritual growth and social change, years of adapting meditative practices to empower people as agents for peace and justice. Yet the workshops themselves taught me more than I could have imagined. The thousands of people with whom I have worked in church basements, community centers, and classrooms have revealed to me, in ways I had not foreseen, the power, size, and beauty of the human heart. They have demonstrated that pain for our world touches each of us, and that this pain is rooted in caring. They have demonstrated that our apparent public apathy is but a fear of experiencing and expressing this pain, and that once it is acknowledged and shared it opens the way to our power.

Five Principles of Empowerment

- **Feelings of pain for our world are natural and healthy**

- **Pain is morbid only if denied**
- **Information alone is not enough**
- **Unblocking repressed feelings releases energy and clears the mind**
- **Unblocking our pain for the world reconnects us with the larger web of life**

As I meditated on the lessons I learned from these workshops, and on the connections between pain and power, five principles emerged to illumine the nature of despair work and encapsulate its assumptions.

Feelings of pain for our world are natural and healthy

Confronted with widespread suffering and threats of global disaster, responses of anguish—of fear, anger, grief, and even guilt are normal. They are a measure of our humanity. And these feelings are probably what we have most in common. Just by virtue of sharing this planet at this time, we know these feelings more than our own grandparents or any earlier generation could have known them. We are in grief together. And this grief for our world cannot be reduced to private pathology. We experience it in addition to whatever personal griefs, frustrations, and neuroses we bear. Not to experience it would be a sign of moral atrophy, but that is academic, for I have met no one who is immune to this pain.

Pain is morbid only if denied

It is when we disown our pain for the world that it becomes dysfunctional. We know now what it costs us to repress it, how that cost is measured in numbness and in feelings of isolation and impotence. It is measured as well in the hatreds and suspicions that divide us. For re pressed despair seeks scapegoats and turns, in anger, against other members of society. It also turns inward in depression and self-destruction, through drug abuse and sulcide. We tend to fear that if we consciously acknowledge our despair we may get mired in it, incapacitated. But despair, like any emotion, is dynamic—once experienced, it flows through us. It is only our refusal to acknowledge and feel it that keeps it in place.

Information alone is not enough

To deal with the distress we feel for our world, we need more than additional data about its plight. Terrifying information about the

from *Ecosychology*, Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, eds., (Sierra Club 1995)

effects of nuclear pollution or environmental destruction can drive us deeper into denial and feelings of futility, unless we can deal with the responses it arouses in us. We need to process this information on the psychological and emotional level in order to fully respond on the cognitive level. We already know we are in danger. The essential question is: can we free ourselves to respond?

Unblocking repressed feelings releases energy and clears the mind

This is known as catharsis. Repression is physically, mentally, and emotionally expensive; it drains the body, dulls the mind, and muffles emotional responses. When repressed material is brought to the surface and released, energy is released as well; life comes into clearer focus. Art, ritual, and play have always played a cathartic role in our history—just as, in our time, psychotherapy does. By this process the cognitive system appropriates elements of its experience, and by integrating them gains a measure of both control and freedom.

Unblocking our pain for the world reconnects us with the larger web of life

When the repressed material that we unblock is distress for our world, catharsis occurs, and also something more than catharsis. That is because this distress reflects concerns that extend beyond our separate selves, beyond our individual needs and wants. It is a testimony to our inter-connectedness. Therefore, as we let ourselves experience and move through this pain, we move through to its source and reach the underlying matrix of our lives. What occurs, then, is beyond catharsis.

The distinction here is important. To present despair work as just a matter of catharsis would suggest that, after owning and sharing our responses to mass suffering and danger, we could walk away purged of pain for our world. But that is neither possible nor adequate to our needs, since each day's news brings fresh cause for grief By recognizing our capacity to suffer with our world, we dawn to wider dimensions of being. In those dimensions there is still pain, but also a lot more. There is wonder, even joy, as we come home to our mutual belonging—and there is a new kind of power.

To understand why this should be so, and what this kind of power is, we need to look at the theoretical foundations of the work.

The principles just listed derive from some of the oldest and newest insights into the nature of reality and are rooted in a worldview that is essential to the understanding of despair work.

The Living Web of Natural Systems

What is it that allows us to feel pain for our world? And what do we discover as we move through that pain? To both these questions there is one answer: interconnectedness with life and all other beings. It is the living web out of which our individual, separate existences have risen, and in which we are interwoven. Our lives extend beyond our skins, in radical interdependence with the rest of the world.

Contemporary science, in what may be its greatest achievement, has broken through to a fresh discovery of this interrelatedness of all living phenomena. Until our century, classical Western science had proceeded on the assumption that the world could be understood and controlled by dissecting it. Breaking the world down into ever-smaller pieces, classical Western science divided mind from matter, organs from bodies, and plants from ecosystems, then analyzed each separate part. This mechanistic approach left some questions unanswered—such as, how do these separate parts interact to sustain life and evolve?

As a result of such questions, scientists in our century, starting with the biologists, have shifted their perspective. They began to look at wholes instead of parts, at processes instead of substances. What they discovered was that these wholes—be they cells, bodies, ecosystems, or the planet itself—are not just a heap of disjunct parts, but dynamic, intricately organized and balanced systems, interrelated and interdependent in every movement, function, and exchange of energy. They saw that each element is part of a vaster pattern, a pattern that connects and evolves by discernible principles. The discernment of these principles is what is known as "general-systems theory."

Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the father of general-systems theory, called it a "way of seeing." And while it has spawned many derivative theories relating to particular fields and phenomena, the systems perspective has remained just that—a way of seeing, one recognized by many thinkers as the greatest and farthest-reaching cognitive revolution of our time. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson

from *Ecopsychology*, Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, eds., (Sierra Club 1995)

called it "the biggest bite out of the Tree of Knowledge in two thousand years." For, as the systems view has spread into every domain of science from physics to psychology, it has turned the lens through which we see reality. Instead of beholding random separate entities, we become aware of interconnecting flows—of energy, matter, information—and see life forms as patterns in these flows.

Sustained by these currents, open systems evolve in complexity and responsiveness to their environment. Interacting, they weave relation ships that shape the environment itself. Every system, be it a cell, a tree, or a mind, is like a transformer, changing the very stuff that flows through it. Flows of matter and energy create physical bodies; flows of information make minds. Both kinds of flow generate interdependencies weaving each being into the larger ecology, the web of life.

The old mechanistic view of reality erected dichotomies, separating substance from process, self from other, and thought from feeling. But given the interweaving interactions of open systems, these dichotomies no longer hold. What had appeared to be separate self-existent entities are now seen to be so interdependent that their boundaries can be drawn only arbitrarily. What had appeared to be "other" can be equally construed as an extension of the same organism, like a fellow cell in a larger body. What we had been taught to dismiss as "only" feelings are re responses to input from our environment that are no less valid that rational constructs. Feelings and concepts condition "other"; both are ways of knowing our world.

As open systems we weave our world, though each individual consciousness illumines but a small section of it, a short arc in vaster loops of feeling and knowing. As our awareness grows, so does that of the web. It would seem that we are part of a larger coming to consciousness. The web of life both cradles us and calls us to weave it further.

Positive Disintegration

How, if we let ourselves feel despair, can we remember our collective body? How can our pain for the world make us whole again?

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Processes of growth and transformation are never pain free. They re quire a letting go of outmoded ways of being, of old assumptions and old defenses. As both science and religion confirm, this letting go can be a passage through darkness.

The living system learns, adapts, and evolves by reorganizing itself. This usually occurs when its previous ways of responding to the environment are no longer functional. To survive, it must then relinquish the codes and constructs by which it formerly interpreted experience. Systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo explains this as the exploratory self organization of open systems; and psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski, thinking along the same lines, calls it "positive disintegration."

This process can be highly uncomfortable. As we open like a wound to the travail of the world, we are susceptible to new sensations and con confusions. Bereft of self-confidence and hopefulness, we can feel as though we and our world are "falling apart." It can make some of us frantic; some of us, in desperation, become mean. That is because the system (i.e., each of us) is registering anomalies, new signals from the environment that don't match previously programmed codes and constructs. To survive, then, the system must change.

To experience pain as we register what is happening to our world is a measure of our evolution as open systems. This is true not only from the perspective of systems science but from that of religion as well. How many mystics in their spiritual journey have spoken of the "dark night of the soul"? Brave enough to let go of accustomed assurances, they let their old convictions and conformities dissolve into nothingness, and stood naked to the terror of the unknown. They let processes, which their minds could not encompass, work through them. It is in that darkness that birth takes place.

As our pain for the world is rooted in our interconnectedness with all life, so surely is our power. But the kind of power at work in the web, in and through open systems, is quite different from our customary notions of power.

The old concept of power, in which most of us have been socialized, originated in a particular worldview. This view saw reality as composed of discrete and separate entities: rocks, plants, atoms, people. Power came to be seen as a property of these separate en-

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tities, reflected in the way they could appear to push each other around. Power became identified with domination. Look it up in the dictionary; more often than not it is still defined as exerting your will upon other people: "power" means "power over." In such a view, power is a zero-sum game: "The more you have, the less I have," or "If you win, I lose." It fosters the notion, furthermore, that power involves invulnerability. To be strong, to keep from being pushed around, defenses, armor, and rigidity are needed in order not to let oneself be influenced or changed.

From the systems perspective, this patriarchal notion of power is both inaccurate and dysfunctional. That is because life processes are intrinsically self-organizing. Power, then, which is the ability to effect change, works from the bottom up more reliably and organically than from the top down. It is not power over, but power with; this is what systems scientists call "synergy."

Life systems evolve flexibility and intelligence, not by closing off from the environment and erecting walls of defense, but by opening ever wider to the currents of matter-energy and information. It is in this interaction that life systems grow, integrating and differentiating. Here power, far from being identified with invulnerability, requires just the opposite—openness, vulnerability, and readiness to change. This indeed is the direction of evolution. As life-forms evolve in intelligence, they shed their armor and reach outward to an ever-wider interplay with the environment. They grow sensitive, vulnerable protuberances—ears, noses, eyeballs, lips, tongues, fingertips—the better to feel and respond, the better to connect in the web and weave it further.

We may well wonder why the old kind of power, as we see it enacted around us and indeed above us, seems so effective. Many who wield it seem to get what they want: money, fame, control over others' lives; but they achieve this at a substantial cost both to themselves and to the larger system. Domination requires strong defenses and, like a suit of armor, restricts our vision and movement. Reducing flexibility and responsiveness, it cuts us off from fuller and freer participation in life. "Power over is dysfunctional to the larger system because it inhibits diversity and feedback; it obstructs systemic self-organization, fostering uniformity and entropy.

Power as Process

WORKING THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL DESPAIR

Joanna Macy

As open systems dependent upon larger, evolving systems, we must stay open to the wider flows of information, even when certain information seems inimical to our self-interest, where the needs of the whole, and other beings within that whole, are seen as commensurate with our own. Only then can we begin to think and act together. For this we need a "boundless heart." This I believe we have within us by virtue of our nature as open systems. If we can grieve with the griefs of others, so, by the same token, by the same openness, can we find strength in their strengths, bolstering our own individual supplies of courage, commitment, and endurance.

How does power as process—"power with" rather than "power over"—operate in our lives? We don't own it. We don't use it like a gun. We can't measure its quantity or size. We can't increase it at our neighbor's expense. Power is like a verb; it happens through us.

We experience it when we engage in interactions that produce value. We have such interactions with loved ones and fellow citizens; with God; with music, art and literature; with seeds we plant; or with materials we shape. Such synergistic exchanges generate something that was not there before and that enhances the capacities and well-being of all who are involved. "Power with" involves attentive openness to the surrounding physical or mental environment and alertness to our own and others' responses. It is the capacity to act in ways that increase the sum total of one's conscious participation in life.

This kind of power may be most familiar in relationship to a partner, spouse, or child. As you help them develop their strengths and skills, your own sense of well-being increases. This power, which enhances the power of others, does not originate in you, but you have been party to its unfolding. You are its channel, its midwife, its gardener.

We can recognize this power by the extent to which it promotes conscious participation in life. To deprive someone of his or her rights is an exercise of force, not power. It diminishes the vitality not just of that person, but of the larger system of which we all are a part, which is now deprived of their participation and resources. Therefore the exercise of power as process demands that we unmask and reject all exercises of force that obstruct our and others' participation in life. The concept of synergistic power summons us

from *Ecosychology*, Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, eds., (Sierra Club 1995)

to develop our capacities for nurturance and empathy, important lessons for those who have been socialized to be competitive, especially the men in our society. But it is equally true that this notion of power presents a challenge to those who have been conditioned to please, and who have been assigned by society the more passive and nurturing roles. I am referring, of course, to women. For them, "power with" can mean being assertive, taking responsibility to give feedback, and participating more fully in the body politic.

Through our pain for the world we can open ourselves to power. This power is not just our own, but belongs to others as well. It relates to the very evolution of our species. It is part of a general awakening or shift toward a new level of social consciousness.

We can see that our planetary crises are impelling us toward a shift in consciousness. Confronting us with our mortality as a species, they reveal the suicidal tendency inherent in our conception of ourselves as separate and competitive beings. Given the fragility and limited resources of our planet, given our needs for flexibility and sharing, we have to think together in an integrated, synergistic fashion, rather than in the old fragmented and competitive ways—and we are beginning to do that. Once we tune into our interconnectedness, responsibility toward self and other become indistinguishable, because each thought and act affects the doer as much as the one done to.

Where, then, does despair fit in? Why is our pain for the world so important? Because these responses manifest our interconnectedness. Our feelings of social and planetary distress serve as a doorway to systemic social consciousness. To use another metaphor, they are like a "shadow limb." Just as an amputee continues to feel twinges in the severed limb, so in a sense do we experience, in anguish for homeless people or hunted whales, pain that belongs to a separated part of our body—a larger body than we thought we had, unbounded by our skin.

Through the systemic currents of knowing that interweave our world, each of us can be the catalyst or "tipping point" by which new forms of behavior can spread. There are as many different ways of being responsive as there are different gifts we possess. For some of us it can be through study or conversation, for others theater or

public office, for still others civil disobedience and imprisonment. But the diversities of our gifts interweave richly when we recognize the larger web within which we act. We begin in this web and, at the same time, journey toward it. We are making it conscious.

JOANNA MACY HAS been active as a teacher, scholar, and activist in the civil rights and peace movements since the 1960s. Her approach to political issues has always emphasized the emotional and psychological dimensions of experience. In the mid-1980s she developed a set of introspective techniques that help people find a sense of empowerment through an honest confrontation with such paralyzing negative emotions as rage, guilt, and despair. The issue she invited her audiences to address was the threat of thermonuclear annihilation. For the past several years she has been drawing upon the same methods to conduct workshops on equally menacing environmental conditions. With John Seed, the Australian environmental activist, she has created the Council of All Beings, a collective mourning ritual that allows participants to work through their deeply repressed emotional responses to ecological disaster. In this paper, she explains how she created her workshop methods. She also analyzes the emotional obstacles that inhibit people from taking action on environmental problems and suggests ways to overcome them.