

The Great Turning and the Divine Desire for the Flourishing of Life **By Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde**

The great thinker and activist, Joanna Macy, is a scholar of Buddhism, systems theory and deep ecology. At 93 years old, she is still going strong. Last night, Rabbi Daria shared of the Shambala Warrior Prophecy that Macy has shared with the world. I'm going to go much deeper into some of Macy's other work, which I think is very helpful and important for us.

Macy describes how there are three primary stories we can tell ourselves about the state of the world in our time. She, and her coauthor Chris Johnstone call these stories: the Great Unraveling, Business as Usual, and the Great Turning.

The Great Unraveling is most clear regarding the climate crisis. This past summer was the 3rd hottest on record in the US. Two months after we came to Oseh in 2017, the Tubbs Fire in Northern California killed 22 people, came into the city of Santa Rosa right next to the Trader Joe's I used to shop at, and burned down the house of our son Shlomo's beloved 2nd grade teacher. But then compare that to the over a billion animals that are estimated to have died in the 2020 Australian bushfires. A couple days ago, Florida Gov. De Santis called the Hurricane Ian induced flooding a "once in 500 year event." That was, of course, just a few years after the once in 500 year flooding in Houston. The UN reports that "Current national climate plans – for all 193 parties to the Paris Agreement taken together – would lead to an increase of almost 14% in global greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, compared to 2010 levels."¹

Macy uses the term Great Unraveling to "name the progressive decline and collapse of countless interlocking elements in the social, ecological...and atmospheric systems on which life depends. Climbing levels of hate crime, falling levels of trust, [the dismantling of democracy] and increasing use of lies by political leaders all play a role."² You could also call this story "Doom and Gloom."

In the 2nd story, Business as Usual, "the core assumption...is that things aren't too bad and that we can carry on our business the way we usually do." We hope that things get back to "normal" after the pandemic, and that solid economic growth resumes. "When looking at the world from this perspective, periodic disasters are seen as only temporary interruptions... Within Business as Usual, our country is doing well if its economy is growing. A business is doing well if it is expanding. A person is doing well if their income is increasing." This is the "industrial growth society." For industry to grow, we need to buy and consume more than we already do. This drives the dynamic of overshoot and collapse, extracting more resources, destroying the land and poisoning our world with the waste generated."³ As you can surmise, Business as Usual speeds up the Great Unraveling.

¹ <https://www.unwater.org/news/un-climate-action-net-zero-commitments-are-falling-far-short>.

² *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We are in with Unexpected Resilience and Creative Power*, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, p.6.

³ *Active Hope*, p. 22-23.

Macy notes that each of us may move between these two stories. "It's possible to spend part of our day in our own Business as Usual mode, making plans for a future we assume will be much like today." For me, I enter this mode when think about our retirement accounts, or things I'd like to do with my kids when they're older. Then, "something triggers an awareness of the mess were in"—maybe we hear, like we did this summer, that the Arctic is melting four times faster than the rest of the world—"and we recognize in our hearts and minds the crash that lies ahead or that is being experienced already.

"The mainstream mode has been to avoid looking at issues if they are too disturbing... Living with these two opposing versions of how things are going presents us with an agonizing dilemma: to face the mess we're in is scary and depressing, yet to turn away and not face it can leave us feeling that were living a lie, being complicit with the social order that is destroying our world. When we look at the worst, we may also experience a collapse in our belief that we can make any difference. When we avoid looking, we don't see the need to even try."⁴ This is part of what we confront for ourselves on Yom Kippur.

So we begin by naming that we live within these two stories, that our times "confront us with realities that are painful to face, difficult to take in, and confusing to live with."

Macy describes the third story, the Great Turning, this way:

"In the Agricultural Revolution of ten thousand years ago, the domestication of plants and animals led to a radical shift in the way people lived. In the Industrial Revolution that began just a few hundred years ago, a similar dramatic transition took place. These weren't just changes in the small details of people's lives. The whole basis of society was transformed, including people's relationship with one another and with Earth. Right now a shift of comparable scope and magnitude is occurring... We call it the Great Turning and see it as the essential adventure of our time. It involves the transition from a doomed economy of industrial growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the recovery of our world. This transition is already well under way...

In the story of the Great Turning, what's catching on is commitment to act for the sake of life on Earth as well as the vision, courage, and solidarity to do so. Social and technical innovations converge, mobilizing people's energy, attention, creativity, and determination, in what Paul Hawken describes as "the largest social movement in history." In his book *Blessed Unrest*, [Hawken] writes: "I soon realized that my initial estimate of 100,000 organizations was off by at least a factor of ten, and I now believe there are over one — and maybe even two — million organizations working towards ecological sustainability and social justice."⁵ Let me repeat that: one — and maybe even two — million organizations working towards ecological sustainability and social justice.

⁴ Ibid., p. 23-24.

⁵ <https://gaiaeducation.medium.com/the-great-turning-977cbc7df74>.

Macy names three core dimensions of the Great Turning: the first is what she calls “holding actions [which] aim to hold back and slow down the damage being caused by the political economy of Business as Usual. The goal is to protect what is left of our natural life support systems and rescuing what we can of our biodiversity.”⁶ These are actions which primarily take the form of influencing legislation, protest, rallies, and other campaigns.

The second dimension of The Great Turning is imagining and creating a life-sustaining world, rethinking and redesigning the structures and systems of our society. This includes revolutions in things like clean energy, sustainable agriculture, fair trade, and ethical financial systems. “Through our choices about how to travel, where to shop, what to buy and how to save, we shape the development of this new economy.”⁷

By themselves, holding actions and new life-sustaining structures are not enough, Macy argues. And so a third dimension is necessary: a shift in our collective human consciousness. She writes: “At the core of our consciousness is a wellspring of caring and compassion; this aspect of ourselves — which we might think of as our *connected self* - can be nurtured and developed. We can deepen our sense of belonging in the world. Like trees extending their root systems, we can grow in connection, thus allowing ourselves to draw from a deeper pool of strength, accessing the courage and intelligence we so greatly need right now.

This dimension of the Great Turning arises from shifts taking place in our hearts, our minds, and our views of reality. It involves insights and practices that resonate with venerable spiritual traditions [including Judaism, I’d add], while in alignment with revolutionary new understandings from science.

We take part in this third dimension of the Great Turning when we pay attention to the *inner* frontier of change, to the personal and spiritual development that enhances our capacity and desire to act for our world.”⁸

I find Macy’s overall vision of the Great Turning incredibly inspiring and helpful. I passionately recommend her book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We are in with Unexpected Resilience and Creative Power*. There is also a free online course at <https://activehope.training/>.

Because the fundamental question for each of us is: which of these core stories do we want to give our precious life-energy to? The Great Unraveling a.k.a. Doom

⁶ Active Hope, p. 28-29.

⁷ <https://gaiaeducation.medium.com/the-great-turning-977cbc7df74>.

⁸ <https://gaiaeducation.medium.com/the-great-turning-977cbc7df74>.

and Gloom, Business as Usual, or the Great Turning? That is really the main point of everything I'm saying to you.

Joanna Macy is not Jewish, but she easily could have called the Great Turning the Great Teshuvah. The marketers might have said it's not a great idea. As many of you have heard me and probably other rabbis say multiple times, teshuvah, which is the central Jewish word of this time, comes from the root meaning to turn or return.

Our friends from [Interfaith Power and Light of the DMV](#) created a slogan: "turning from burning," to name the teshuvah that we are collectively doing to protect life, stop destroying our world and decarbonize our civilization.

I want to offer this idea of the Great Turning as a prime directive, in Star Trek's phrase, to orient our lives towards, something we can each play our part in. Because essentially, the entire point of these holidays, why we are here, is to take this time at the pregnant point of potential of the beginning of the year to clarify the orientation of our lives.

The wonderful thing is, you may not have realized it, but each person here is likely already playing a part in the Great Turning. Take a moment to consider: "What are you turning away from because you know it causes harm? What are you turning toward because it aligns more strongly with your values and hopes for our future?"⁹

In our prayers at this time, we say: *Zochreinu l'chayyim*, asking God to "remember us for life." There is a rabbinic tradition of saying "don't read a certain verse this way, rather this way (with a slight tweak). In our case, in Hebrew we'd say: "*al tikra zochreinu, ela zochreini*. Don't read it: "remember us for life, rather remember Me for life!" It's really God saying: Wake up! *Zochreini l'chayyim*! Remember Me for life! Orient your life around that idea! Act for the sake of Life on My planet!

The Divine desire for the flourishing of life becomes realized through conscious human beings who make that their prime directive, who don't continue on with Business as Usual.

It's actually really simple. It's about nurturing life, nurturing and supporting the creation we pray for and express wonder about multiple times a day through our liturgy. *U'vacharta b'chayyim*/choose life so that you may live, as it says in Deuteronomy 30:19 and in our words after the Shema.

The Great Turning is not a guarantee. In fact, if we actually take a clear-eyed look at what's happening in our world, certainly vis a vis the climate, things are going to likely get worse before they get better. Our weather systems are becoming more chaotic, scary, and extreme. So how do we find hope?

⁹ Active Hope, p. 8.

Again, Macy is very helpful. This is where her idea of Active Hope comes in: “when facing overwhelming challenges, we might feel that our actions don’t count for much. Yet the kind of responses we make and the degree to which we believe they count are shaped by the way we think and feel about hope. Here’s an example.

Jane cared deeply about the world and was horrified by what she saw happening. She regarded human beings as a lost cause, as so stuck in our destructive ways that she believed the complete wrecking of our world was inevitable. “What’s the point of doing anything if it won’t change what were headed for?” she asked.

The word hope has two different meanings. The first...involves hopefulness, where our preferred outcome seems reasonably likely to happen. But if we require this kind of hope before we commit ourselves to an action, our response gets blocked in areas where we don’t rate our chances well. This is what happened for Jane – she felt so hopeless she didn’t see the point of even trying to change things.

The second meaning is about desire. When Jane was asked what she’d like to have happen in our world, without hesitation she described the future she hoped for, the kind of world she longed for so much it hurt. It is this kind of hope that starts our journey – knowing what we’d like, or love, to have happen. It is what we do with this hope that really makes the difference. Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in the process of moving toward our hopes and, where we can, realizing them. Active Hope is a practice. Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we *do* rather than *have*.¹⁰

To engage with this idea a little more deeply, I’d like us to take a few moments to visualize a couple of elements of that world you long to see. You could project 20 or 30 years into the future, if that is helpful. What are two or three doable steps you could imagine taking toward that?

Remember Macy’s three dimensions of the Great Turning: Holding Actions, Creating New Life-Sustaining Societal Systems, and Shifting our Collective Consciousness. It’s not only demonstrating in the streets, or being a solar technician. Often times we get stuck and don’t realize there are many ways to be an active part of this.¹¹

The other key element of Active Hope I want to lift up is to think in terms of collective action. Part of the way we do this is simply by realizing that we are part of this Great Turning, this Great Teshuvah, and taking strength, hope and inspiration from playing our parts in that central story.

But of course, this also means actually joining with others to work together, because part of the way Business as Usual works is to keep us isolated and focused on individual action. There are infinite ways to do this, but I want to just name a couple of

¹⁰ Active Hope, p. 4.

¹¹ I am grateful to Rabbi Mordechai Liebling for this point.

areas of collective action on behalf of the flourishing of life we can give our energy to here at Oseh.

The first thing is our Sacred Grounds initiative around planting native plants here at Oseh, and educating our community about the importance of planting native plants. If you think about it in one way, were just planting a few plants here and there. But if you think about it from a different way, and understand this as a Great Turning effort, then what if we become a model community for Sacred Grounds? Sacred Grounds is a program for the National Wildlife Federation; it is scalable to every single house of worship in the United States. That is a huge amount of land. What if they all had vibrant native plant habitat, optimally supporting life around them?

I'm excited to announce for the first time publicly that on February 5, we are partnering with two other local Reconstructionist congregations, Adat Shalom and CJC, celebrate Tu B'shvat. The timing also works out well for climate advocacy in the Maryland Gen. Assembly, so learning about that will be part of our celebrations. There was some very important climate legislation that was passed by the Gen. assembly last term. Speak to me or Heidi Hess-Webber if you are interested in helping make this happen.

Hevre, we also need to restart our Green Committee. Last spring, our Religious School students did an eco-audit of our building. As Linda Bergofsky, one of our core Social Justice leaders at Oseh said to me the other day: our religious school students passed the baton to us, *I'dor vador*. They are offering us their insights, dreams and expectations. Would n't it be great to honor them, the work they did, to follow up on what they did? To say we we will act on your behalf, since we control the resources and you don't. We just need a couple of people—2-4—to step forward to do this. We will direct you to Green Team training; reach out to me or Linda Bergofsky.¹²

What is so powerful about the Great Turning vision is that it is inspiring, it is something we are *for*, instead of against. It is an Omega point vision that is attracting us, drawing us forward, like the idea of *mashiach*/the messianic age in Judaism. So much of the alarming climate news we take in fails to do much because it just plays into the doom and gloom story; there is no attractive vision to draw us forward into action and then to sustain us in what will likely be a multigenerational crisis.

On this day, we step back, together, to clarify our work in the world.

How fortunate are we to live at this Time of Challenge!

Remember Me for Life, says the *Mekor ha'Chayim*/the Source of all life.

For we are the expressers of the Intelligence that desires the flourishing of all Life.

¹² I am pleased to report that since I gave the sermon, several people have stepped forward and we are indeed restarting our Green Committee! Still, if you read this and you are interested in being a part of it, please contact Oseh Co-President Ray Wacks.

“When our central organizing priority becomes the well-being of all life, then what happens through us is the recovery of our world.¹³

Gmar chatimah tovah—a good sealing for all of us, and *halevai*, for all the beings of Creation.

¹³ Ibid., p. 95.