

The Great Turning

by Joanna Macy

The following essay is taken from *Thinking Outside the Lunchbox*, an essay series of the Center for Ecoliteracy, www.ecoliteracy.org. ©Copyright 2007, Center for Ecoliteracy. All rights reserved. Printed with permission.

Joanna Macy is an internationally honored eco-philosopher and scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology.

The Great Turning is a name for the essential adventure of our time: the shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a life-sustaining civilization.

The ecological and social crises we face are caused by an economic system dependent on accelerating growth. This self-destructing political economy sets its goals and measures its performance in terms of ever-increasing corporate profits—in other words by how fast materials can be extracted from Earth and turned into consumer products, weapons, and waste.

A revolution is under way because people are realizing that our needs can be met without destroying our world. We have the technical knowledge, the communication tools, and material resources to grow enough food, ensure clean air and water, and meet rational energy needs. Future generations, if there is a livable world for them, will look back at the epochal transition we are making to a life-sustaining society. And they may well call this the time of the Great Turning. It is happening now.

Whether or not it is recognized by corporate-controlled media, the Great Turning is a reality. Although we cannot know yet if it will take hold in time for humans and other complex life forms to survive, we can know that it is under way. And it is gaining momentum, through the actions of countless individuals and groups around the world. To see this as the larger context of our lives clears our vision and summons our courage.

The Three Dimensions of the Great Turning:

1. Actions to slow the damage to Earth and its beings

Perhaps the most visible dimension of the Great Turning, these activities include all the political, legislative, and legal work required to reduce the destruction, as well as direct actions—blockades, boycotts, civil disobedience, and other forms of refusal. A few examples:

Documenting the ecological and health effects of the Industrial Growth Society;

Lobbying or protesting against the World Trade Organization and the international trade agreements that endanger ecosystems and undermine social and economic justice;

Blowing the whistle on illegal and unethical corporate practices;

Blockading and conducting vigils at places of ecological destruction, such as old-growth forests under threat of clear-cutting or at nuclear dumping grounds.

Work of this kind buys time. It saves some lives, and some ecosystems, species, and cultures, as well as some of the gene pool, for the sustainable society to come. But it is insufficient to bring that society about.

2. Analysis of structural causes and the creation of structural alternatives

The second dimension of the Great Turning is equally crucial. To free ourselves and our planet from the damage being inflicted by the Industrial Growth Society, we must understand its dynamics. What are the tacit agreements that create obscene wealth for a few, while progressively impoverishing the rest of humanity? What interlocking causes indenture us to an insatiable economy that uses our Earth as supply house and sewer? It is not a pretty picture, and it takes courage and confidence in our own common sense to look at it with realism; but we are demystifying the workings of the global economy. When we see how this system operates, we are less tempted to demonize the politicians and corporate CEOs who are in bondage to it. And for all the apparent might of the Industrial Growth Society, we can also see its fragility—how dependent it is on our obedience, and how doomed it is to devour itself. In addition to learning how the present system works, we are also creating structural alternatives. In countless localities, like green shoots pushing up through the rubble, new social and economic arrangements are sprouting. Not waiting for our national or state politicians to catch up with us, we are banding together, taking action in our own communities. Flowing from our creativity and collaboration on behalf of life, these actions may look marginal, but they hold the seeds for the future.

Some of the initiatives in this dimension:

Teach-ins and study groups on the Industrial Growth Society;
Strategies and programs for nonviolent, citizen-based defense;
Reduction of reliance on fossil and nuclear fuels and conversion to renewable energy sources;
Collaborative living arrangements such as co-housing and eco-villages;
Community gardens, consumer cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, watershed restoration, local currencies....

3. Shift in Consciousness

These structural alternatives cannot take root and survive without deeply ingrained values to sustain them. They must mirror what we want and how we relate to Earth and each other. They require, in other words, a profound shift in our perception of reality—and that shift is happening now, both as cognitive revolution and spiritual awakening.

The insights and experiences that enable us to make this shift are accelerating, and they take many forms. They arise as grief for our world, giving the lie to old paradigm notions of rugged individualism, the essential separateness of the self. They arise as glad response to breakthroughs in scientific thought, as reductionism and materialism give way to evidence of a living universe. And they arise in the resurgence of wisdom traditions, reminding us again that our world is a sacred whole, worthy of adoration and service.

The many forms and ingredients of this dimension include:

General living systems theory;
Deep ecology and the deep, long-range ecology movement;
Creation spirituality and liberation theology;
Engaged Buddhism and similar currents in other traditions;

The resurgence of shamanic traditions;
Ecofeminism;
Ecopsychology;
The simple living movement.

The realizations we make in the third dimension of the Great Turning save us from succumbing to either panic or paralysis. They help us resist the temptation to stick our heads in the sand, or to turn on each other, for scapegoats on whom to vent our fear and rage.

Joanna Macy is an internationally honored eco-philosopher and scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. Her work is directed toward promoting constructive, collaborative, action and freeing people from the assumptions and attitudes that threaten the continuity of life on Earth. Her books include Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World (1998, New Society Publishers); World as Lover, World as Self (2005, Parallax Press); and Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory (1991, State University of New York Press). She travels widely, giving lectures, workshops, and trainings in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Australia. She teaches in several graduate schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, including the California Institute of Integral Studies and Naropa Oakland.

No part of this article may be reproduced without permission. Please contact the Center for Ecoliteracy to obtain permission. Read other essays on education for sustainability at www.ecoliteracy.org