



**SUSTAINABILITY LEADERS NETWORK**  
Deepening Learning & Practice for People & Planet

## **Active Hope with Joanna Macy: A Workshop with Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows and Key Partners**

**14-18 October 2013  
Ralston White Retreat, Mill Valley, California**



*Back, left to right: Huma Beg, Edie Farwell, Nicole Betancourt, Dayna Baumeister, Rachel Bagby, Dominic Stucker; second row: Evelyn Arce, Mary Roscoe, Joanna Macy, Bryony Schwan, Toby Herzlich, Cynthia Pansing; third row: Paloma Pavel, Cynthia Pryor, Katherine Collins, Dawn McGee, Monti Aguirre, Diana Hammer; front row: Emelia White, Sudha Soni, Any Sulistyowati, Amalia Souza, Lydia Harutoonian, Karen Hirsch, Manasi Karthik; not pictured: Kristi Kimball.*

*Report by Dominic Stucker, Edie Farwell, and Joanna Macy; photos by Huma Beg.*

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## Overview

The seed for this year's Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Workshop with Joanna Macy was planted by Fellows attending our annual workshop two years ago at the Cobb Hill ecovillage in Vermont. In spite of increasing good work occurring in the world, participants pointed out that key trends show us racing toward seemingly irreversible tipping points, in terms, for example, of our climate system, marine ecosystems and biodiversity. In particular, Fellows asked for more guidance in navigating systems collapse - or, as Joanna calls it, the Great Unraveling - including ways to increase impact and maintain hope.

Inviting Joanna as guest facilitator was an easy fit; she has led our workshops twice before. Furthermore, she and Donella Meadows are considered two of the foremost systems thinkers of their time and were inspired by one another's work. Using different language, they both point toward the same need - the Great Turning, as Joanna calls it, or the Sustainability Revolution as Donella called it. Joanna was assisted by Lydia Harutoonian, and by Edie Farwell and Dominic Stucker of Sustainability Leaders Network.

We convened twenty-five Fellows and close partners in Mill Valley, California from the nonprofit, business, government, and philanthropy sectors. Participants came from ten states in the US and from Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan.

The 5-day event was entitled "*Active Hope: How to face the mess we are in without going crazy*" and was structured around the spiral of the Work that Reconnects, with a day each dedicated to Coming from Gratitude, Honoring our Pain for the World, Seeing with New Eyes, and Going Forth. The goals of the workshop were to:

- Sharpen perceptions of both the unraveling of the industrial growth society and the emergence of a life-sustaining society.
- Understand cognitively and integrate psychologically and spiritually the Work that Reconnects through conceptual learning, spiritual practices, and interactive processes.
- Build strong, lasting connections for life on Earth that can provide mutual support under conditions of political repression, economic breakdown, and ecological collapse.
- Clarify intentions for taking part in the Great Turning.

For more detail on the Work that Reconnects and related activities, see Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone's book "*Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*" and [www.workthatreconnects.org](http://www.workthatreconnects.org).



## Coming from Gratitude

Joanna opened with Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "I live my life in widening circles" and introduced us to the spiral of the Work that Reconnects. Joanna emphasized the idea that "gratitude puts ground under your feet," giving us a strong foundation. Through exercises inside and among the redwoods surrounding the Ralston White Retreat, participants explored what they appreciate about themselves, others, and the natural and social systems all around us.

Back inside, Joanna described the three parallel stories of our time: Business as Usual (the industrial growth society), the Great Unraveling (systems collapse), and the Great Turning (sustainability revolution). She emphasized that there is truth in all three stories and that it is up to each person to decide which one they espouse.



*Rachel, Paloma, Sudha, Huma, Joanna, Nicole, Edie, Amalia, and Monti*

Joanna also described three arenas for action within the Great Turning: holding actions, creating life-sustaining systems and practices, and shifting consciousness. Holding actions try to slow the rate of destruction, for example recycling programs, policies to limit air pollution, or a protest to protect a sacred indigenous site. Creating new systems includes, for example, developing local currencies, mainstreaming decentralized renewable energy, and instituting gay marriage laws. This approach relates to an idea from Buckminster Fuller:

*You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.*

And, finally, actions to shift consciousness occur at both the individual and societal levels, changing the paradigms upon which our socio-environmental systems are

founded. An example is how we view nature and the natural resources of land, water, forests, fisheries, plants, species, etc. Are they commodities to exploit for short-term human gain? Or interdependent resources that, in order to meet human needs, must be maintained sustainably. Or - drawing on the 3.8 billion years of evolution embedded in nature and natural principles - mentor and measure of all we do? Or a source of wellbeing, connectedness, and spiritual sustenance?

Joanna expressed the importance of all three arenas for action, saying that our lives and careers often move from one to the next over time.

### **Honoring our Pain for the World**

The pain we feel for others and the world is not a pathology, but an appropriate response to the hardships we see people and our environment increasingly experiencing. We practiced the idea of not being scared of the atrocities and challenges we see and experience by leaning into them, working with our emotions, and trusting that we can build new systems to replace those collapsing around us. We feel pain because we care about the future. We can draw on that concern as further empowerment for greater positive impact.



*Any*

Joanna led participants in an exercise to explore our feelings in this time of great transition: fear, grief, anger, and questioning. Speakers were both bold and vulnerable in sharing their stories and feelings with the group, making for a deeply cathartic experience. Joanna ended the exercise by pointing out the flip side of each emotion: the courage to speak our fears demonstrates trust in the group; we grieve because we love; we are angry because we are passionate about justice; and feeling empty represents unanswered questions and space for new pursuits. To give further voice to some of these underlying emotions, Lydia organized an evening of violin and guitar music, with singing, dancing and poetry.

### **Seeing with New Eyes**

Compassion and the recognition of connection help us expand our sphere of “bounded rationality” to embrace all life and the future generations. Systems thinking, discussed below, helps us see these connections and practice empathy. If we are all connected, then doing harm to another living being or place is tantamount to doing harm to ourselves. As well, acting compassionately to others can have positive benefits. Joanna emphasized that nothing can stop us when we do not fear our pain and that the clear, intentional decisions we make reverberate throughout the web of life.

Joanna then presented her Systems View lecture, reaching back to the ancient Greeks to discuss two fundamentally different perceptions of reality and power.

One, from Parmenides, is that reality is made up of discrete elements, which can lead to fear of people other than oneself and a hierarchical structure of ‘power over.’ The other view, from Heraclitus, holds that everything is in dynamic flux, which emphasizes the importance of relationships and ‘power with.’ An example of the latter is a whirlpool of water: if you try to enclose or separate it, it ceases to exist. The whirlpool keeps its shape through motion; it is made of change.



*Sudha, Manasi, and Dominic*

In this context, Joanna pointed out that activism need not be action against something, but rather as a means to activate people for the sake of something bigger than ourselves. She described the self as flow, as choice-maker. Our desire to suffer with and serve all beings is fed by our relationships with one another and the natural world.

We then discussed four systems properties: whole, self-stabilizing, self-adapting, and holonic. Joanna described wholeness as a system having the emergent property of being greater than the sum of its parts; self-stabilization tending toward homeostasis (balancing feedback), including viewing the Earth as a self-regulating system; self-adaptation as evolution based on new information (reinforcing feedback), with true learning changing the way we see; and the idea of holonic structures as systems being at once whole and nested in larger systems.

Going into more depth on self-adaptation, Joanna presented Erwin Laszlo’s model in which we collect data from environment, interpret that data based on our norms and values, and respond, altering our environment. A system responds based on how it is organized, both at the individual and cultural levels. While we sometimes block data that is not consistent with our norms (for example, climate change denial), what is called for is “exploratory self-reorganization” in order to try out new norms and adapt to new realities.

### **Going Forth**

Joanna started the day with a reminder to appreciate the many people around us in the Great Turning, those that share a similar impulse to serve the whole.

Lydia and Dominic asked participants to write a concrete need or question on one of a half dozen flipcharts around the room. Everyone was asked to read through those needs and then brainstorm and write resources, contacts, articles, books, etc. around relevant ones. A rich set of resources emerged matching requests and offers for further networking, collaboration and action.



That afternoon Dayna Baumeister and Toby Herzlich outlined the wisdom we can tap into through biomimicry and the attendant Life's Principles that we can apply to our leadership work. They emphasized that leading from the feminine has many parallels with principles we see in natural systems.



*Toby and Dayna*

Huma Beg presented her emerging work in Pakistan, focused on using an online social networking platform to connect local and international volunteers to ongoing development projects in her country. Inspired by her passion, work groups formed spontaneously and resources came forth to help Huma take her vision the next steps (*see more, below*).

### **Vision and Closure**

Referencing Carl Jung, Joanna said that our spiritual journey is not one of “going up” from an impure to a pure state, but of staying grounded and embracing wholeness here on Earth. She sees gratitude as central to this process, opening the senses in appreciative vision of what is around us. Our prayers would no longer be for perfection, but to fully see what is around us, even when people and the Earth are sick or degraded.

Joanna went on to describe the Four Abodes – loving kindness, compassion (grief with the grief of others), joy (joy in the joy of others), and equanimity (the great peace). A mix of Buddhist and Gandhian teachings, these practices are embedded in Sri Lankan culture and have been explicitly used to train community development practitioners active in some 15,000 villages across the island. Through a milling exercise we practiced and internalized each abode with different partners. Joanna encouraged us, in going forth, to draw on the abodes with family, friends, and strangers.

Edie then guided us in a visioning exercise to further shape a key aspiration or way of being as we set forth from the workshop. In a sentence each, participants spoke their visions to the group as a way to bring closure to our time together – and as their next step going forth.

Several workshop participants went on to speak, perform, and participate in the Bioneers Conference being held in nearby San Rafael. The event included honoring Joanna Macy with a Life Time Achievement Award. Learn more here:

[www.conference.bioneers.org](http://www.conference.bioneers.org)

## Featured Work Going Forward

Workshop participants are engaged in an inspiring range of projects. Three examples are:

*Huma Beg* is poised to launch her Ministry of Change platform, which seeks to bring development to the people in Pakistan. She has observed that development efforts are not well coordinated in her country and that young people are eager to get involved. Her platform would use a geo-coded map to connect national and international volunteers with ongoing projects in health, environment, disaster preparedness, livelihoods, etc.



*Sudha and Huma, accompanied by Amalia, singing Indo-Pakistani songs*

The social platform will serve as a place for young people to learn, get engaged, and celebrate. Volunteers can follow-up on reported outcomes of projects by posting photos and text to enhance verification on the ground. They can also map important real-time data in the event of disasters such as floods, earthquakes or blasts, making responses more focused and efficient. Finally, Huma envisions a national think tank for the development sector that would serve as an advisory group to the incoming political leadership. Workshop participants saw the potential in Huma's project and rallied to support her efforts to raise funds and hire talented staff. Learn more here: [www.ministryofchange.org](http://www.ministryofchange.org)

*Sudha Soni* of India used this and past workshops to articulate her visions and create systems maps to identify leverage points for change. She sent us this unsolicited testimonial after our week with Joanna: "Thank you for the wonderful manner [in which] the workshop was conducted. It was perfect. I feel great after the workshop and am back to work in the two main missions that I am on right now. One is my original vision of urban food gardens, which has already begun, and the second concerns the continuing support facilities for elders in Kerala." Sudha's experience at the retreat helped reaffirm her commitment to giving back to our elders. As well, Sudha is now in touch with Indians who have completed the Biomimicry 3.8's certificate program in an effort to expand awareness of biomimicry in India.

*Cynthia Pryor* has worked for over a decade with the Yellow Dog Watershed Preserve on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to protect the water and land from the impacts of a proposed sulfide mine. She has gone so far as to be unlawfully imprisoned for standing up to mine developers who wanted to operate bulldozers on state land. After a brief stay, fellow inmates were chanting "Power to the people!" when she was released. Cynthia works closely with local communities and Native American tribes for sustainable stewardship of the land and sacred sites. Learn

more about the campaign she leads against the mine here:

[www.yellowdogwatershed.org/blog/sulfide-mining-campaign](http://www.yellowdogwatershed.org/blog/sulfide-mining-campaign)

Read more about the ongoing work of our full network of Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows here: [www.sustainabilityleadersnetwork.org/fellows/](http://www.sustainabilityleadersnetwork.org/fellows/) and

about Biomimicry Professionals here:

[www.biomimicry.net/educating/professional-training/bprofessional/](http://www.biomimicry.net/educating/professional-training/bprofessional/)

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