

Reading from **“Active Hope: How to Face This Mess We’re in
Without Going Crazy”**

-Joanna Macy

Active Hope is not wishful thinking.
Active Hope is not waiting to be rescued
By the Lone Ranger or by some savior.
Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life
On whose behalf we can act.
We belong to this world.
The web of life is calling us forth at this time.
We’ve come a long way and are here to play our part.
With Active Hope we realize that there are adventures in store,
Strengths to discover, and comrades to link arms with.
Active Hope is a readiness to engage.
Active Hope is a readiness to discover the strengths
In ourselves and in others;
A readiness to discover the reasons for hope
And the occasions for love.
A readiness to discover the size and strength of our hearts,
Our quickness of mind, our steadiness of purpose
Our own authority, our love for life,
The liveliness of our curiosity,
The unsuspected deep well of patience and diligence,
The keenness of our senses, our capacity to lead.
None of these can be discovered in an armchair or without risk.

“Hope in an Age of Ecological Despair”

Rev. Heather Concannon

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I know I titled this sermon “Hope in an Age of Ecological Despair”, but this sermon is actually about time travel.

Specifically, it is about the time *I* time traveled. 200 years to be precise.

Now, how many here in this room have time traveled before?

Okay, well hang in there with me for a moment, and allow me to explain.

This past February I went to the Unitarian Universalist Minister’s Association Institute for Excellence in Ministry, and I had the opportunity to spend a week in a workshop with activist, eco-philosopher, writer, and spiritual elder Joanna Macy.

Joanna is well-known in spiritual and ecological activism circles, and her work focuses on Work that Reconnects, naming ways that we have been disconnected and how that feeds despair and apathy, and working to build community and connection in response to the reality of ecological devastation and destruction.

We know that our world is facing a climate crisis. And there is much that could be said about the science, the statistics and the rising temperatures and the extreme weather events and the NASA reports and parts per million. But I will leave that for other people to say: I’m not here to talk about any of that today. Because my own eyes start to glaze over at the numbers, and when I zoom out, I just feel my own helplessness and anxiety and overwhelm welling up inside me until I want to shut it all out and push it away, pretending I never heard any of it.

And because I know, intellectually, that this is the biggest collective challenge humanity has ever faced, and because I know, emotionally, that I feel overwhelmed and want to shut down, I decided to sign up for this workshop track in February, of the 10 or so options I had, at this minister’s conference. I was desperate for some good words. Some hope in the face of ecological destruction.

So here was Joanna Macy, 84-year-old spiritual elder, grounded in the Buddhist tradition, brilliant and effusive and leading this workshop alongside the young activists of Movement Generation, an environmental justice organization led by low-income young people of color committed to a Just Transition away from profit and pollution and towards healthy, resilient and life-affirming local economies.

Both Movement Generation and Joanna Macy frame this work by saying that we are in the time of the great unraveling, where we have begun to see more widespread the consequences—that have always been there, mind you—of an economy that

urges us to indefinitely extract natural resources more from this finite earth, an economy that ultimately chooses profit and industrial growth more than it rewards a focus on the consequences to people and the planet.

Yet Joanna Macy, this eco-philosopher who has been in this field for decades, also maintains hope that we have the option of making this great unraveling a time of the great turning, where we turn toward a life-sustaining society.

In her own words, she says: “The most remarkable feature of this historical moment on Earth is not that we are on the way to destroying the world—we’ve actually been on the way for quite a while. It is that we are beginning to wake up, as from a millennia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves, and to each other.”

Throughout the workshop, Joanna kept saying “what a wonderful time to be alive!” And I found myself thinking “yeah, right, Joanna, have you read the news lately?”. But there I was in the workshop, which, again, I had signed up for because I was needed some good news. And aren’t we all in need of some good news, in some way or another? And so I kept listening.

Joanna had us begin in her four-step process of the work that reconnects, which begins with gratitude. And let me tell you, I wasn’t feeling too much of that, so I thought it was a particularly annoying place to start. And instead of gratitude, what I was mostly feeling was anger.

That anger was mostly directed at my elders, my ancestors, my parent’s and my grandparent’s generation. A feeling of “how could you have left *this* as the world for me to become an adult in?” The generations immediately preceding me had not left things in better condition than they had found it. I felt a sort of “well what on earth are we supposed to *do* with all this mess?!”

Not, I should add, that I’m an environmental saint myself. I drive a car and I’m not as intentional about where my food comes from as I could be and I still love paper books and I flew across the country to this conference. But that knowledge of my own climate sins hasn’t quite seemed to mitigate the sense of anger I’ve felt toward my ancestors.

So gratitude wasn’t quite happening for me yet. Because remember, we ministers are human, right?

Then Joanna asked us to honor our pain for the world—and that I could do. Pain at the ways we see violence and oppression destroy families and communities, pain at the ways that we see suffering all around us, pain for the ways we are so disconnected from one another, from our natural world, from God, from our own deepest desires.

Joanna calls her experiential way of healing this disconnection “work that reconnects”, and it is all about seeing and really experiencing the world as more interconnected and using that as a starting place for future action. She begins this in her workshop with having us mill around, as though we were in Times Square—can you imagine it? Thousands of people walking around as though they are late, not bumping in to one another but moving quickly around each other, eyes cast down, never really seeing one another. Then she had us slow down, lift our eyes up, and continue walking around, making eye contact with those around us. Then she led us through a series of paired exercises and meditations, imagining that the person before us as having hopes and dreams, experiences to share, guided meditations of compassion for the “brother-sister being”, as she called them, in front of us.

And then, on the second to last day of this workshop, Joanna announced that we were going to time travel.

“Excuse me, what?”

Now, as an aside, if you had told me at the beginning of that week that I was going to time travel, and take it seriously, and come home and tell other people about my time travel, I would have laughed at you. But Joanna hadn’t failed me yet.

So I joined in self-consciously on the extended “aaaaaaahhh” sound Joanna instructed us to make in order to travel outside of the time continuum and talk to a descendent from seven generations into the future—which is estimated to be about 200 years. She assigned half of us to be present-day beings, our own selves—I was in this group—and the other half of us would be 7th generation beings—humans from around the year 2215. She then facilitated a conversation—imaginary ancestors and descendants, talking together about this time we live in now.

We present-day ancestors began. The future beings—our imaginary descendants, asked us a series of three questions about the time we, all of us, live in here and now. The questions were along the lines of “ancestor, I’ve heard stories about the critical time you live in—how much of a crisis your world was in. What was it like for you to live with that knowledge every day?” and “You must have felt confused and lonely at the beginning. How did you get started in helping our world to heal?” and “you must have felt scared and discouraged throughout it. Where did you find the strength to continue?”

Those of us embodying the role as present-day beings each answered these questions, and then we got to hear from these pretend future beings, reflecting back what they had heard about these hard times we live in.

This was when my moment of personal transformation happened. Because in my answering of these questions, I felt defensive, like it was me, my generation, young adults who won’t be young adults forever, trying to offer an explanation for the world we might leave to the future beings. And yet all of these people in the

workshop—the ones role-playing our descendants, in reality all of them were older than me—part of a generation of people I had just hours before felt that flare of anger toward. And then, all of a sudden, I had this rush of compassion, a flood of transformative understanding and patience and deep knowledge of the critical questions the next generation might hurl toward mine.

I had this deep and bizarre sense of time, talking to people who in this time are older than me, but also were embodying my descendants, who will someday be older than I am now—are you following?

My point is this: none of us alone created our climate crisis, and in part it was created by a very short view of time—a view that expects immediate profit or loss, a view that can't fully comprehend the consequences of our choices beyond our own lifetimes. And it wasn't until I was invited, albeit skeptically at first, to literally converse with our descendants that I had an emotional connection to the future that allowed my moral imagination to take root.

We need a moral imagination of the future if we are going to stop ourselves from exporting our problems to the future. We need this sense of deep time when we think about problems that span across generations, and when we are making choices that will affect future generations.

And we also need this moral imagination to respond to the catastrophic changes that are happening here and now, as a result of climate change that is already here. We know that the people who are already feeling the most devastating effects of climate change are the people who are marginalized, those people on the front lines of climate change—from Hurricane Katrina, which this congregation knows the effects of well—to Superstorm Sandy, from indigenous communities whose waters are poisoned to people across oceans who are displaced by drought and failing crops or by tsunamis and flooding homelands.

Given the amount of fossil fuels we have already burned, we have already committed ourselves to a certain amount of chaos and change when it comes to our climate—the question is not whether it will happen anymore, but how we will get through it. Will we get through it with more oppression and violence, as resources become scarce and the haves hoard what they have, while the have-nots become more destitute? Or will it be a turning toward cooperation, generosity, trust in the social nets that we build around ourselves, trust that when we work together we might not have as much as we want, but we can have what we need if we work together? What does our moral imagination ask of us in facing this global challenge?

Friends, this crisis our planet is facing is no longer about changing light bulbs and composting, though these are good and worthy things to do. At this point it is and it must be about movement building; about shifting away from an industrial growth-based economy and toward a society that can sustain life for the long term.

And yet, in all this, there is cause for hope. Joanna Macy again, “Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active hope is about becoming active participants in what we hope for. Active hope is a practice... it is something we *do*, rather than *have*.” Joanna makes very clear that active hope *does not* require optimism, but rather a clarity about the outcome we would like to see and letting our intentions and our values, rather than our calculations of likely success, be our guide—and active hope cannot be discovered in an armchair or without risk. In active hope, we choose our response and act on that choice.

And so where can active hope be found?

It can be found in those places where we are called to action— young adult activists inviting us to join in a larger divestment movement—divestment which, I recently learned, was chosen as one tactic of the larger climate justice movement, not as the end goal, because every major divestment campaign in the last 50 years from tobacco to South Africa has been wildly successful in shifting public opinion and eventual legislation. Active hope can be found in lobbying for more restrictive legislation that limits our collective carbon use and the use of carbon by corporations, because two-thirds of *all* carbon emissions are generated by only 90 corporations.¹

Active hope is joining with our Unitarian Universalist Association’s Commit2Respond campaign as individuals and as a congregation, the campaign that calls us as people of faith and conscience to shift to a low carbon future, to advance the human rights of affected communities, and to grow the climate justice movement. Commit2Respond which, by the way, just had a month-long “Climate Justice Month” to kick off campaign, that wrapped up the kickoff on Earth Day this past Wednesday. Active hope is the 400,000 people showing up at the People’s Climate March in September, the people from our congregation at UU Mass Action Advocacy Day lobbying for clean energy bills at our state house.

Active hope is consciously changing our own lifestyles and consumption habits to be more sustainable, more in line with our values—even though the reality of our world asks us to compromise our values in a thousand tiny ways every day, even though none of us will do it perfectly—because it’s not about doing it perfectly, because active hope calls us to return to our values, to “come, yet again, come, though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times.”

Of course, none of these are the end goals. None of these will get us there all the way on their own.

And then I find active hope in the construction of the world as we would like to see it. And this, my friends, is where I think congregations have a most critical role.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/nov/20/90-companies-man-made-global-warming-emissions-climate-change>

Because we know that climate change is happening, and that it will continue to happen. But we have a choice in how we will respond, and whether we respond with active hope as a community of faith. We can build local communities and economies, safety nets that will get us through the hardest of times, communities that will share resources and compassion and skills and grow food together and parent children cooperatively and take care of one another together. We can create communities of active hope and resilience through hard times, because we human beings are indeed resilient creatures, in body and in spirit—and we are stronger when we stick together.

Friends, we are in a time of global ecological crisis, there is no doubt about it. And that is hard to admit—there is grief and pain and regret and despair in there for many of us. And yet, as we face into our pain may we also find the courage to have active hope, to be led by our deepest values and our moral imagination, rather than our logical calculations, because as people of faith we are called to act *as if* our moral calculations are what matter the most.

Because active hope needs all that we have—from our ability to time travel and widen our moral imagination to our ability to do the patient and arduous work of reconnecting with people, reconnecting with our living earth, and reconnecting with ourselves. May we all find the strength and the hope to do that work, and extend it to one another as we bind this world back together. May it be so, and amen.