

## Book Review

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*Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy.* Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone. New World Library, 2012.

This book is a collaboration between the well-known American Buddhist Ecophilosopher, Joanna Macy [b. 1929] and Chris Johnstone, a former medical doctor who was personally inspired by Macy in 1989 and now runs UK-based workshops dealing with issues such as the psychology of happiness and sustainability. Together, they tackle the thorny problem of how to respond adequately to the ecological crisis on a personal, communal and cultural level without succumbing to despair. Their unifying concept for such a response is active hope. According to a distinction Macy and Johnstone emphasize such hope is not something we have but rather something we do. Hope conceived in this manner, they continue, requires only our participation, not an optimistic worldview.

In this case, the “doing” qualifier revisits Macy’s earlier reflections on the “the work that reconnects”. Her argument, as brought forward in this volume, is that any effort that adequately responds to the current planetary mess will necessarily reconnect humanity with the natural world. As a result, we come to remember ourselves as part of an interconnected whole within a larger Earth community. In this volume, Macy and Johnstone emphasize how the practice of the work that reconnects brings with it both a certain energy and momentum. As such, people working for a sustainable future can connect amongst themselves and with the natural world in a positive energy spiral driven by the formation of constructive intra-human and human-Earth relationships. In this way, the individual, the community and human cultures can be strengthened at the same time that the work that reconnects heals and allows for the flourishing of the natural world. For the two authors, the work that reconnects is part of a necessary and emerging Great Turning, a meta-level green shift that has already begun, and as described in the work of David Korten, through which human economies, political systems, education and culture are transformed to support a vital and sustainable future.

Throughout *Active Hope*, Macy and Johnstone consider a number of theoretical foundations through which this positive transformative spiral can be nourished. As an example, they write poignantly about the importance of honouring our pain for the world. Rather than proceeding with business as usual, as per their reference to the crew of the *Titanic* who did not reduce speed when faced with reports of icebergs, they emphasize the importance of mourning, with regards to events such as species extinction, climate change, deforestation, displacement by floods and the depletion of the Atlantic codfish stocks. Further, the authors argue that these are symptoms of an unravelling of dominant economics,

consumerism, education and politics that have not yet made sufficient space for sustainability within their worldviews. As an alternative, they recommend a great story, a narrative in which each person finds his or her unique individual role in contributing to a dream that drives the action of hope. In this narrative the most desirable endpoint is the substantive goal of a more sustainable and just society, in which an ever-increasing number of humans beings are able to reconnect with the natural world. Such an approach stands in direct contrast to the North American model of the accumulation and consumption of goods, a model that, as the authors note cannot be maintained on a planet heading towards a population of 8 billion people.

If all this appears overly utopian, Macy and Johnstone remind us that many of the equity and citizenship rights that we now take for granted in places like the US and Canada were once decried as impossible dreams by their detractors who supported the practicality of the status quo. Specific examples mentioned by the authors in this regard include women's suffrage and the end of the officially sanctioned slave trade. They also implicitly respond to the charge of being overly utopian by referencing a number of specific initiatives in accord with the ongoing Great Turning. These initiatives seek to respond to the manifestation of the present Earth crisis by transforming our institutions and cultures in manner reflective of eco-justice and by nourishing the values that would support such transformed expressions of the human being in the world. On this point, they draw not only on activist stories but also on empirical research from an eclectic group of researchers. In addition, narratives from religious and folkloric sources contribute to Macy and Johnstone's project, as does a discussion of the value of dreams and visions for driving positive cultural transformation.

The diverse subject matter in this book is presented clearly, accessibly and intelligently. As such, Macy and Johnstone give people who may have never deeply considered the connections between human injustice and ecological health a number of entry points into green issues. They introduce key concepts and present a number of practical paths that allow such people to participate in the Great Turning. There is also much in these pages for individuals who have worked in the area of ecological justice. The authors suggest a number of ways to re-imagine and re-vitalize this task, and thus also avoid crippling hopelessness, by tapping into the positive energy spirals that surround the work that reconnects. Eco-justice advocates will also find innovative ways to re-explain what already may be familiar concepts using the authors' aforementioned clear, accessible and intelligent style. Furthermore, as a result of the recombination and retelling of ideas emanating from dialogue between the authors, there will be undoubtedly something new in this monograph for even the keenest followers of Macy's work. As such, wherever you are in your journey of connecting with your (relational) ecological self, some time spent with *Active Hope* either as an individual reader or, as per one of the author's suggestions, read

with others in an action-study group, will be time well spent for those interested in being part of the Great Turning that Macy and Johnstone invoke in this book.