

Essay for a book on Joanna Macy's influence edited by Stephanie Kaza for Shambala Publications. The book should be out in 2019 in honor of Joanna's 90th year.

"We Almost Didn't Make It: A Creative Practice Inspired by *The Work That Reconnects*"

Beverly Naidus 2019

The piercing on and off wail of the siren penetrated the walls of our elementary school classroom. Over the panic-inducing din came the harried voice of our teacher. We had time to head home to our family shelters. My ten-year old mind wrapped around the impossibility of surviving for very long in our basement, but I anxiously made my way home.

Next week the blast of the siren was incessant; this drill meant that the missiles had already been launched. The teacher had us line up in the hallway. She told us to sit down, face the wall, and put our head in our lap.

The fears that erupted from those drills, led me to read John Hersey's **Hiroshima**. A decade later, mushroom clouds began to appear in my nightmares.

Making art transformed my angst. I went to grad school and started constructing worlds that resembled those nightmares – a white, barren landscape, cleansed of all living material, memories of what had once been on the surface blinking on a small screen, and the bright white flash of the bomb, over and over again. Haunting, dissonant sounds filled the space; voices speaking in hushed despairing and cynical tones: "It didn't feel like we had much time left – *the world's gonna end someday ya'know.*" "We never bothered reading the news." "*Who believes that crap anyway?*" After a minute or two of this challenging back and forth, a radio announcer interrupts shouting, "THIS IS NOT A TEST; you are advised to proceed..." Then a teacher's robotic voice says, "Children line up, face the wall, sit still and put your heads down."

Visitors at the first exhibition came up to me wanting to share long held memories about the terror they had felt during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Others shared fears that they would not live past 30 because WW3 was around the corner. Hearing these stories gave me some odd comfort; I was not alone in my worries.

In another version of the piece, a few years later, I found messages from the audience hidden in the installation: "You hit the nail on the head. I wish more people were talking about these things." "I've been stewing with all of this, thinking I was alone." I was interviewed by a local television station, and the reporter questioned me earnestly, "why are you so worried about nuclear war?" I told him that what worried me was that most people were not concerned.

I joined with other activist artists to do street art and protests, and eventually joined 2 million others marching against nuclear weapons in the center of Manhattan. But even that did not feel like enough, and I was discouraged.

Thankfully, I was invited to be an artist resident at Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondack Mountains. As soon as I smelled the mountain air on that September day, I began to feel better. I hadn't been out of the city in years. I settled in quickly; all I wanted to do was soak up the autumn landscape and retreat from my worries about nuclear war.

In my room, above my bed, I discovered a powerful ink drawing of a tree by the German political artist, Georg Grosz. If Grosz, whose work often focused on the evil during the Weimar Republic, could draw such a life-affirming tree, I wanted to dive into drawing that kind of beauty as well.

A few days later, while resting on a rowboat on the lake, black fighter jets strafed the area. Their roar was deafening; only 200 yards above me. I was terrified. I soon learned that a Strategic Air Command base nearby sent their jets on practice missions above our retreat center on a regular basis.

I sought comfort in the retreat center's library, and as I pulled on a book on an upper shelf, another book literally fell down on my head. As soon as I read the title, "Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age," I knew it was no accident. I read the book eagerly, amazed to discover a series of exercises (and a community) addressing issues so close to my heart. I wrote to Joanna seeking guidance. I wanted to figure out how to move from my despair and cynicism into action. She wrote back and suggested that I work with two of her Interhelp colleagues who were leading a Despairwork intensive.

Meeting a cohort who were deep in the work of anti-nuclear consciousness raising was transformative. Sitting in small groups and expressing long held feelings of grief, pounding pillows in rage, and holding each other in gratitude, broke open my heart.

When I rebuilt my anti-nuclear installation, for THE END OF THE WORLD exhibit at the New Museum, I made a last survivor's shack out of scavenged wood, I placed a wooden box next to the entrance. Visitors who were moved to, could leave their own nightmares and dreams for the future, and drop them in the box. The audio track was revised to include the last lines: "We didn't realize that we had a choice," "*You don't give up, do you?*"

On the night of a blizzard, over 100 people made their ways through the subways and snow-padded streets to the museum. I tried to channel the Interhelp crew as we broke open the box, reading as many of the dreams and nightmares as we could manage. Activists, artists and others spoke powerful truths. We cried and we ranted. It was 1984; Reagan was making jokes about bombing Moscow.

Thanks to the encouragement of Joanna cohort's and their affirmation of my long-held anxiety, I was able to carry *THIS IS NOT A TEST* to seven exhibitions across the country, creating talking circles and workshops to help others move from angst to activism. I finally put the work to bed in 1991 with a quote from Helen Caldicott scrawled across the wall of the exhibition space: "Not one of the 62,000 nuclear weapons has been dismantled since the Berlin Wall came down. There is more danger of a nuclear war today than ever. War is obsolete."

When I met Joanna in person a few years later at an intensive workshop at the Ojai Foundation, it was a revelation. Her capacity for compassion and gratitude in the heart of the deep dark mess of the world was truly heartening. I had begun to experience enhanced versions of cognitive dissonance about the state of the world, and I needed her medicine.

I had moved across the country to step into my role as a teacher of art for social change at a state university. Southern Californian life offered a complicated despair, and I was finding it hard to see around it. The contradictions of people trying to live the good life while nuclear power plants sit on fault lines, caches of nuclear weapons offer multiple ground zeroes, toxic waste increases in the ocean and on the land, and the violence of racism percolates everywhere. On top of what I was witnessing, I had begun to dramatically take in the toxicity of it all. Breathing the smog and the aerial spraying of pesticides was damaging my immune system. I was embodying what Joanna would call, “the great unraveling” of our world. Making art about it wasn’t enough.

After **Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings** was published, Joanna came to town to offer workshops specifically dealing with environmental collapse and how to stay strong in the midst of it. As I tried to feel the experiences of mycelium or humpback whales, I occasionally felt my East Coast skepticism interrupt me, but an inner knowing loved speaking for various creatures and living forms, so I let the work teach me how to open to my pain and gratitude in new ways. When I met my life partner, Bob, a few months after working with Joanna, I learned that he had also trained with her. Both our faces lit up at this knowledge. We teased Joanna years later that she was partly responsible for our marriage.

Bob’s studies connected me to the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont where I was invited to be an artist-in-residence. My understanding of ecocide began to expand exponentially to include deeper thinking about systems of oppression like patriarchy and white supremacy. Despite the challenges some folks had merging the points of view of deep and social ecology, I found that weaving them together through my art was the only way to move forward. Joanna’s discussion of “the Great Turning” was totally harmonious with the “reconstructive visions” advocated by my social ecology peers. Even before encountering these ideas, I had intuitively begun a project that would take me and my audiences into “deep time.”

The Nightmare Quilt featured 54 nightmarish images of the future on one side: “The streets were empty. No one dared go out.” “Everyone became a scapegoat.” “New forms of torture were invented.” and on the opposite side, 54 positive dreams for the future: “Intentional communities flourished.” “Education and healthcare were free.” “Racism became obsolete.” Visitors were invited to write down their own nightmare or dream and place it under the quilt. Some people hesitated to do so, but after they lifted the quilt up, they would discover the dreams on the other side. They could ask for help to see the whole dream side; the message being that we don’t get those dreams unless we work collectively.

Soon after the quilt was exhibited for the first time, I was invited to a retreat for activist artists led by Thich Nhat Hanh. His dharma talks and our meditations together taught me new ways to inhabit the present moment with intention. My work with him over the next few years and the

support of loving sanghas informed by his mindfulness teachings, only reinforced what I'd begun to learn from Joanna. Seeing the beauty in the present moment gave me the courage to feel my pain, grief and rage, find solidarity with others, and move into action.

Many other audience-participatory projects followed, all with the goal of encouraging people to tell their stories, share their feelings in community, and step into their activism, but eventually my disabling environmental illness made it clear that we needed to relocate. A psychic healer told me that my antenna for the world's pain was too finely tuned, and I needed to pull it back in. I gave up tenure and took a leap of faith with my partner and infant son.

We moved 3000 miles to find our new rural village home. While slowly healing my body, I created a new body of work on the computer, *CANARY NOTES: The Personal Politics of Environmental Illness*. "Canaries" filled the clinics I went to, so their portraits and their painful stories became digital images in the project. The last component of the project, *The Healing Deities*, which featured digital paintings of healing buddhas and bodhisattvas, was influenced by my work with both Joanna and Thich Nhat Hanh and our 4-year old son's comment, "why are you always painting sick people?" Once that series was done, I began to truly heal.

This experience of self-remediation has deeply informed the art projects that have emerged since I moved back to the West Coast to teach at the University of Washington, Tacoma. I renewed my connection with Joanna when she spoke at the Puget Sound Zen Center on Vashon Island. I gave Joanna a print of my first *Healing Buddha* and told her about my challenging, but powerful journey to wellness, and she spoke about her own struggles with health and her desire to slow down.

As my focus on remediation in the wider world began to grow, I studied permaculture design and developed an eco-art project, *Eden Reframed*, to demonstrate how to heal toxic soil with plants and mushrooms and create community through a "story hive." I created a series of sculptural works, *Curtain Call: Portable Altars for Grief and Gratitude*, that explored the devastating feelings many of us have about extinction and gave people a space to process them.

At a recent training for people who facilitate "The Work that Reconnects," I was invited to share a mini-version of my workshop, *We Almost Didn't Make It*. I asked participants to imagine themselves as ancestors by thinking of something precious to them that might not exist in 150 years. They were invited draw a representation of that precious thing with a partner, morphing their precious things together in one image. Then I asked them to write down on their drawing a commitment to an action that might help future generations thrive, not just survive. Joanna participated enthusiastically in this workshop and her praise once again affirmed my direction.

A few months later, I created the installation to accompany the workshops. Visitors entered the gallery space, navigating their way through a gauntlet of hand-sewn plastic curtains. Words were scrawled across them: "monsters in power with fingers on buttons," "hurricanes, one after another," "gun massacres, again and again and again" naming many of the challenges we experience in our current world.

Once people emerged from the trauma curtains, they saw a bright red sign that said, *“We almost didn’t make it, but you did not give up and we are alive in your future. What choices you make, and what actions you take, may make it possible for us to not only exist, but thrive.”*

At one end of the space, there was a work table where people could create an object representing their precious thing. Into that object, they inserted a commitment to an action. Fifteen doormats that said things like, ‘TOO TIRED,’ ‘OVERWHELMED,’ ‘WHEN WILL THIS NIGHTMARE BE OVER?’ and ‘WE SHOULD JUST GO EXTINCT.’ surrounded a “portal of possibilities,” a large white disk on the floor. After wiping their feet on the door mats to remove the energy might hinder action, visitors could place their artifact into the portal.

The experience of watching and talking to visitors who came to the exhibits offered the opportunity to learn how people were moving through daily crises. They were eager to step into deep time and imagine themselves as ancestors. They were willing to speak about their grief and recognized that it was a collective issue. The courage to just step through the door and share feelings needed acknowledgment.

In this very chaotic time, I try to sit with Joanna’s words, and hold my despair with compassion. “We as a planet people are sick in our souls. We need pain to alert us to what needs attention.” I take comfort in the fact that many people around the world are provoking others to wake up, and others are taking on the vision of healing traumas and building the world we want.