

A Larger Hope
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When the environmental activist and spiritual educator Joanna Macy looks at the situation we're facing in the world today, the picture she sees is bleak. She uses social critic David Korten's expression "The Great Unravelling" to describe the results of centuries of "business as usual" in an industrial-growth economy that has simply failed to take into account the long-term consequences of our actions.

The "Great Unravelling" has multiple interlocking components: Economic decline, resource depletion, climate change, social divisions and unrest, war among nations, and the mass extinction of species. If things continue as they're going now, not only species but whole ecosystems will simply disappear, including this wonderful lacework of earth and ocean we're living on. Social systems that have stood for centuries could collapse as long-festering systemic inequalities and oppressions intersect with competition for increasingly scarce resources. The situation is dire, and it is beginning to appear that a cascading series of events may have already been set into motion that will have devastating effects for many years to come.

Now, I know how I want this story to go. In the hopeful narrative of my imagination, a series of global agreements like the Paris Accords will come together; the enlightened self-interest of entrepreneurial thinkers will lead us to fully develop renewable energy, clean manufacturing, and sustainable agriculture; movements for social change will finally crack the systems of dominance and privilege that have been baked into human relations for thousands of years. The catastrophe will be averted, and without too much disruption to my comfortable way of life, an age of global peace and prosperity will emerge. Our descendants seven generations from now will look back at us and say, "That turn-of-the-millennium generation in the early two thousands—they finally got it; they made all the difference. Bless them all."

Isn't that how we want it to be?

If I could be sure that the movements so many of us support, either intellectually, financially, or with our own labor and lives are going to be successful, it would be so easy to get up and go on every day, to pick myself up and pitch myself into the work of building the world we dream about. Wouldn't it? I could take up the task at hand with confidence and conviction and the joyful knowledge that I am part of a progress that will make all the difference in the world.

The hopeful picture I have in mind is *possible*; it could really happen.

But it may not turn out like that.

The truth is we don't really know what level of loss is already inevitable. We don't know how much we'll be able to save and restore, or whether the life of our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be easier than ours, or harder. And some of what has happened already—deforestation, damage from wildfires, species lost, lives afflicted by drought and famine, or

disfigured by the domination of oppressive forces—so much of what is already true just breaks our hearts to think about.

So where does our hope come from, the hope that keeps us engaged and committed even when things look bad, the hope strong enough to sustain even a broken heart, the hope that isn't just blindly believing that "everything's going to be all right?"

Joanna Macy says this: "The word *hope* has two different meanings. The first involves hopefulness, where our preferred outcome seems reasonably likely to happen. If we require this kind of hope before we commit ourselves to an action, our response gets blocked in areas where we don't rate our chances too high."

"The second meaning," she goes on to say, "is about desire. . . . knowing what we hope for and what we'd like, or love, to take place. It is what we do with this hope that really makes the difference."

Macy proposes what she calls "Active Hope." "Passive hope," she says, "is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for."

Macy's "active hope" is a practice, not a feeling. It starts with gratitude, with naming and giving thanks for what and who we love. Next we acknowledge the whole reality of whatever situation we're in, including its difficult aspects. And finally, we decide what it is we can actually do to serve, to nurture, to heal, or to defend what we love. Action becomes our hope: Committed action for what we love and value most. What we love and what we choose to do for it becomes our source of strength and inspiration, rather than any expectation or wish for how things will turn out in the end.

The open sentences on gratitude we shared a little while ago are an exercise from Joanna Macy's 2012 book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*. The book is both a theoretical exploration and a practical guide to the work Macy has been doing for many years with groups all over the world.

When I was fortunate enough to take part in one of those workshops along with UU clergy colleagues from around the country a couple of years ago, it seemed to me that there was a remarkable power in learning to practice hope that's not dependent on optimism. As I considered my own engagement, my "active hope" serving what I love most about this wonderful, suffering world of ours, I realized that I was becoming part of a larger hope, a global movement of hope for our world, that connected me with everyone else in the gathering, and with all the people who have experienced what Macy calls "the work that reconnects," and with others whose love for our world is expressed in ways I know nothing about.

The point of active hope isn't to succeed or to win, I realized. The point is to live my life more fully by being part of that larger hope.

Macy's work is all about the intersecting global crises of ecology, economics, and politics that are confronting us right now, and she outlines the practice of Active Hope in that context. But as I felt the movement of that larger hope in myself, I realized that this practice can be a lens for looking at life. The lens of active hope can help me see more clearly where hope might be found in any situation that tests my reserves of strength, courage, and resourcefulness. It's not only our hopes for making justice or saving the world that can get us locked into a vision of a particular outcome; it can happen with our hopes for the realities of everyday living, or for the seismic changes that life brings to every single one of us.

There is nothing in ministry more sacred to me than the opportunity to walk with people as they experience the simple and the very complex moments that make up the journey of their lives. So often when I've been entrusted with those holy moments, I've been struck by the way we commit ourselves to a desired outcome, making that the foundation of our hope. It's so easy to fall into. You know what it sounds like:

"That's it: I'm wasting too much time. From now on it's work only on that computer—I've played my last game of solitaire and I'll never log into Facebook again."

"My kids are going to grow up knowing that there's only one race, the human race, and that the color of their skin doesn't have any significance for their life."

"She's had two falls, she forgets things, and she isn't safe. I need you to help me convince her she needs to be in assisted living *now*."

"Yes, he does have a terrible temper, and I'm scared sometimes, but I don't believe in divorce. He's really all right as long as I keep him happy."

"We're going to lick this stupid disease."

Many of these are hopeful goals for people to have, and if naming this kind of hope helps someone living in a difficult situation, I would never just say "Listen, it may not turn out like that."

And yet, the truth is we really don't know what's going to happen. As Macy points out, if your hope requires you to believe without a moment's doubt that things will turn out in one particular way, then your hope is fragile; it may collapse into despair and paralysis if the desired outcome starts to look unlikely. For our own lives as well, and for those we love, we need a more resilient hope.

Of course, even as I recognize it in someone I'm accompanying, I realize how often I find myself anchoring my hope in optimism for a particular outcome. If we bring the practice of active hope into these moments, we might ask ourselves first to look more deeply toward what we're grateful for, toward what we love. Our hope, our active hope, is what we do for what—and who—we love most.

If I'm most grateful for my beloved's wit and loving spirit, then my active hope can be to help her hold onto that sense of herself in the midst of whatever rigors her medical treatment brings, whether it is successful or not. Every laugh we share is an act of hope.

If you're most grateful for your children's strong sense of joy, your active hope can be to support and celebrate that with them even as you accept the truth that they will encounter harsh realities in their lives, even as you let them know you will believe them when they tell you what they experience.

If we're most grateful for an aging loved one's fearless approach to life, then our active hope might just have to be to set aside our fear for them, and to understand that they may need to choose the amount of risk they live with.

This is the practice of active hope: Hold gratitude as your starting place. Let love—what you love, who you love, *how* you love—let love be your guide as you choose how you will take part in the story of your life and in the other stories your life touches.

Whether we are seeking to improve our own experience of life, or to engage more lovingly with our life's companions, or to make a more just and life-sustaining society, when we engage in this practice, we become part of a hope larger than our own immediate concern, larger than our wish for some particular outcome.

My acts of love are part of a larger love. My acts of care are part of a larger embrace. My acts to comfort the afflicted, to heal the sick, to bring relief to the poor and the oppressed, are part of a larger movement of compassion. My acts of justice-making are part of a larger movement to bring the beloved, undivided family of humankind, of all life, into being.

What do you love? Who do you love? What are you most grateful for? May these be the sources of your own active hope, and may they bring joy, richness, beauty, and courage into every moment of your life. May all our active hopes engage us in the healing and celebration of this one, precious world which is our home *and* our hope.