

A Wild Love for the World
Joanna Macey
and the Work of Our Time
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Foreword
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In the early 1980s I was driving along a poorly paved road in the outer suburbs of New York City, my right hand fiddling with the radio dial. As the sound skidded between the white fuzz of static and intermittent snatches of innocuous, overproduced music, I abruptly heard a clear and curious voice, not exactly singing but definitely singsong, lilting up and down. I stopped turning the dial and just listened. At a brief station break, the woman being interviewed was identified as Joanna Macy, a Buddhist scholar and activist. And then there was that unusual voice again, breathy, with a slightly nasal twang, saying something astonishingly simple:

“You know, the oxygen we need to breathe is precisely what all the green plants around us are breathing out. So what the plants breathe out, all of us are breathing in. And then what we breathe out is just what all those plants need to breathe in.” Wait a minute. I pulled the car off the road in order to think about this. Was this true? I knew well that the oxygen in our atmosphere is generated by the photosynthesis of plants. And I’d long understood that we and other animals breathe out carbon dioxide as a by-product of our own respiratory metabolism. But I had been taught about respiration and photosynthesis as two entirely separate, basically mechanical processes. Somehow I had never noticed how mutually entangled these two activities are. And I had surely never thought of plants as breathing. I stepped out of the car to gaze at the leafing trees near the road. Plants just “give off” oxygen automatically, don’t they? Yet the more I thought about it, the more I saw the perfectly analogous nature of these two processes, one zoological and one botanical. If we call our own uptake of oxygen from the air around us “breathing in” and the giving off of carbon dioxide from our lungs “breathing out,” then surely we could say that all these green and rooted beings inhale carbon dioxide, and that they exhale the oxygen we animals need to live. I mean, of course they are breathing! I looked around me, my nostrils flaring. The broad-leafed maples lining the road, a beech scarred with someone’s initials (the gray bark swollen with welts around the letters), even the clumped grasses underfoot—I remember how these all seemed oddly different, their foliage shimmering in the summer heat. They felt more present, somehow, more intensely alive. Or rather I was more present to them, my animal senses suddenly more open to these others as sensate beings in their own right, sensitive and sentient organisms vibrantly engaged in the same world as I.

Joanna’s simple articulation in that radio broadcast has never left me. It was so dumbfoundingly obvious—something I already knew, although the mechanical jargon of college biology had blocked me from noticing the utter wonder of the thing: What the plants are breathing out, all us animals are breathing in. And what we animals are breathing when teaching outdoors, the most ostensibly awake spiritual teachers commonly fail to notice—much less make explicit for their students—the seamless continuity between our breath and the enveloping atmosphere, roiling with birdsong and clouds of pollen from the trees.

How remarkable, then, that this is where Joanna Macy begins. Her understanding of spiritual wisdom carries us not inside ourselves but out into the depths of the earthly sensuous. In one of the life-changing epiphanies that she describes in this book, Joanna recounts the uncanny experience of turning “inside out,” a moment when her interior life became commingled with all she saw around her. For Joanna, the real “inner world” is the world we are in, the world in

which we are bodily immersed along with all these other bodies—black bears, earthworms, sea turtles tangled in plastic, owl-haunted forests, and clearcut slopes strewn with debris.

And so it is here, in the collective depths of this world, where we grapple and struggle and gather to dance, where we grieve harrowing losses and then stand, shoulder to shoulder, to protect children children and battered refugees and to safeguard the wild-flourishing beauty that remains. It is here, in the improvisational thick of the Real, that we must practice our spiritual work.

At the lustrous heart of Joanna's lifework and practice sits the Buddha's jewel-like insight into the truth of *pratityasamutpada*, a term that Joanna represents as "mutual causality" in her splendid doctoral dissertation on the dharma of natural systems. You will encounter many references to this principle in the pages that follow under a wide array of names—dependent co-arising, emergent co-arising, reciprocal causality, dependent co-origination, or even the deceptively simple notion that everything leans (that is, each apparently autonomous thing actually leans upon everything else).

Several decades ago, Joanna's spiritual brother, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, offered an eloquent translation of *pratityasamutpada* by coining the word *interbeing*. It is a luminous and indispensable term. Sometimes, when I'm unable to sleep—hounded by worries for my children, or for the whirling Earth at this teetering moment in its unfolding—I throw off the covers and slip naked out the back door to gaze up into the fathomless deep. Often the moon floats there, a slender crescent like a billowing sail, or a full round and radiant disk gliding in and out of the clouds. The moon's visage compels my gaze and reciprocates it; I cannot help but sense the moon gazing back at me, locating me just here, where I stand, gazing up. In Thich Nhat Hanh's sense, the moon and I *inter-are*.

As taught by many other Buddhist scholars and masters, however, the insight of emergent co-arising can seem a highly abstract concept, exceedingly difficult to grasp or perceive directly. Joanna's way, by contrast, is always to make such insights palpable, grounding them in our directly felt, bodily experience. What could be more visceral, more sensorially immediate, than breathing? Here is her pellucid translation (with Anita Barrows) of a stanza from one of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

Breath, you invisible poem!
Pure, continuous exchange
with all that is, flow and counterflow
where rhythmically I come to be.¹

The altered awareness of breathing as uttermost reciprocity—as a "pure, continuous exchange" between us furred or smooth-skinned animals and the numberless plants that surround us, each making possible the other—has become for me the most tangible, sensuous example of emergent co-arising. *Interbeing* as *interbreathing*.

Today, in late spring, I walk in the foothills near my home, allowing my footfalls to slow to the pace of my breath. All around me, mountains are conjuring clouds out of the fathomless blue. My ears drink in cricket rhythms and frog trills, while my nostrils inhale the scents of juniper and sagebrush. The fluted song of a hermit thrush quavers in the air. Drawn by a sweetness it can't resist, my nose nestles into the furrowed bark of one ponderosa pine after another, guzzling the scents of vanilla and butterscotch from the rising sap. This holy Earth is far too wondrous to be fathomed or figured out by us. The erotic richness of the more-than-human world invites us always deeper into vital intimacy and participation with the rest of the Real—drawing forth our tears at the compounding wounds while engendering an astonished exaltation at finding ourselves immersed and participant in so much mystery, willing to risk everything for its continued flourishing.

A few years after hearing her voice on the radio I met Joanna face to face, and since then I've had the gift to learn from her, to break bread with her, and to teach alongside her under the tall redwoods of California and on islands dense with red cedars and Sitka spruces in the Salish Sea. The last time we saw each other, there were hardly any trees around. In the winter of 2017, we met in the high desert of northern New Mexico and went walking for an afternoon in the multihued canyons there, surrounded by stratified layers of ocher and beige, yellow-gold, and rust-red rock.

As our voices glided in and out of the desert silence, we relaxed into the consummate pleasure of simply being oneself with a trusted other, sharing an almost drunken joy at the extravagant and shadowed beauty of the land. We soon found ourselves reciting poetry to each other, disparate verses echoing off the cliffs: Rilke, of course, and Tomas Tranströmer, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. But there was an inward trembling as well. For we knew that on the following day, a woefully callous and self-centered member of our species was to be inaugurated as the president of our country. And so, clasping hands and gazing into one another's eyes, we offered spoken spells of protection for the well-being of our bleeding world.

Which brings me to say a few words regarding why I think that Joanna's work will become ever more crucial in decades to come. I am writing in the late spring of 2019, almost two and a half years after our wander in those canyons. The damage wrought—not just within our nation but throughout the world—by the demagogue who was installed the next day is already immense. Still, many citizens are confident that within a couple years our battered country will return to normal. I am less sanguine. The multiple atrocities of the twentieth century provide abundant evidence of the human propensity—when economies falter for too long, when crops fail and famine spreads—for polarization and scapegoating, for ethnic cleansing and genocide. No matter how “civilized” the culture, whenever times get hard the most facile human response seems to be to locate some group to blame for all the troubles, and then try to eradicate that group or, failing that, to inflict upon them as much pain as possible.

It is now evident that things will be getting hard for a very long while. Due to our long forgetting of our human embedment within a much more-than-human biosphere, it now seems likely that never-before-seen hurricanes, smoke from runaway fires turning the midday sun blood red, surging floodwaters, and soil-cracking heat waves will be making things more and more difficult well beyond the foreseeable future, as our wombish world shivers into a bone-wrenching fever. In such a situation—wherein any of us may become refugees at any moment—should we not expect that the unconscious allurements toward demagoguery will swell and intensify? In such stressed-out times, those who wish to concentrate power have only to declare, with great certainty, whom the enemy is—have only to amp up fear and then escalate hatred—in order to swiftly amass countless followers. Such is the collective psychology at this moment in the world's unraveling, when the ecological strains on our civilization are poised to intensify by the year, by the month, and soon enough by the day. The polarizing rhetoric, the incitement to fits of rage, the bombast rattling so much of our current politics, may not at all be an aberration but an early glimpse of what is rolling toward us—not inevitably, no, yet a symptom, or sign, of what may soon show itself more fully as our most ready mass response to rapidly rising panic.

How can we short-circuit this reflexive recourse to scapegoating whenever adversity rolls like a great wave across numberless lives and fear rises like a tide within the populace? Surely this the broad life span of the planet! And yet we each partake of that whole. Indeed, there are those who give themselves so deeply to this world, who open their souls so fully to each chance encounter—who so thoroughly resolve not to shrink from any of the uncanny textures or flavors or feels that this life offers—that from these many encounters their hearts distill a mysterious elixir, an invisible tonic that streams out through their eyes to refresh all that they

look upon, waking a secret and long-slumbering sentience in things, quickening a pulse deep within the ground wherever they wander. Such a magical creature is Joanna Macy. When reading through the various chapters that follow, you may find yourself wondering how it is possible that a single human life can have touched and transformed so many others, and in so many different places. Yet this is hardly a mystery. By offering herself so unconditionally to each locale and situation wherein she finds herself, Joanna's life radiates out to touch and enliven every cell within our larger, spherical Body. By giving herself with such abandon to the very presence of the present moment, Joanna's tears and her joy—like those of any genuine bodhisattva—reverberate backward and forward through time to nourish all moments within the broad life of the breathing Earth.

NOTES 1. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, trans., *In Praise of Mortality: Selections from Rainer Maria Rilke's "Duino Elegies" and "Sonnets to Orpheus"* (Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Books, 2016), 107.