



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**“Widening Circles & Active Hope:  
Joanna Macy’s Work That Reconnects”**  
**The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg**  
8 November 2020  
[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Sometimes it helps to take the long view. Part of what that means here at UUCF is that at the beginning of each summer, we pause to plan our Sunday Service themes for the next twelve months. Planning a year in advance gives us a lot of lead time, so that week after week we can weave together words and music to construct the thematically integrated services that so many of you have let us know you are grateful for.

As you can imagine, advance planning is easier in some cases than others, and over the past few days, two particular examples have been at the forefront of my mind. Four years ago in June 2016, when we were deciding five months in advance about the topic for the Sunday after that year’s election, we chose “No Permanent Waves” in reference to the waves of feminism. Our thinking was that whether or not we elected our first female president, it was important to remember that the waves of progress never stay at a permanent crest. All waves eventually crash, and have to rebuild to rise again. Four years later, we still have not elected a female president, but Kamala Harris has now become the first woman, the first South Asian American, and the first Black American to be elected vice president.

Similarly, this past June when we were selecting the theme five months in advance for today, for this Sunday morning after Election Day, we again needed to select a topic that would work either way. In this case, our Intern Minister Jen had preached a sermon last year that referred to the work of the environmental activist

Joanna Macy, and I told you at that time that Jen's words had inspired me to schedule a future sermon going more in depth about Macy. Upon further reflection I realized that Macy's work would be relevant on this post-election Sunday regardless of the outcome.

Joanna Macy has spent decades developing a framework and set of practices called The Work That Reconnects, and one of the core questions at the heart of that perspective is whether at any given moment we are choosing to be part of "business as usual" which contributes to the "Great Unraveling," or whether we are choosing to be part of co-creating a more sustainable future for ourselves, other species, and life on this planet which creates the possibility of a 'Great Turning' (Macy 2014: 5-6).

Macy was born in 1929, and is currently ninety-one years old. She is one of those wonderful examples of people who remain energizing, engaged, and inspiring in their ninth decade of life. Because I want to be sure to save time to talk about her work, I'll give you just a few broad strokes about her life.

She graduated from Wellesley College in 1950, went to France on a Fulbright Scholarship, then was recruited by the CIA, where she worked for two and a half years (Macy 2000: 65). But keep in mind that this was the early 1950s. Betty Friedan did not publish *The Feminine Mystique* (helping launch second-wave feminism) until 1963. And after Macy's whirlwind of post-collegiate opportunities, she found herself following a more traditional societal script. She got married, gave birth to her first child, and in her words, "Nothing prepared me for the isolation and exhaustion in which I found myself as a young mother" (71).

But in the 1960s her world began to shift again when she, her husband, and their three children spent five years in the Peace Corps, with significant time in both India and Africa (124). One of my favorite pictures of Macy is a Christmas photo from 1963 when she was thirty-four years old, just before they left for India on their first Peace Corps assignment. They look so *Ozzie & Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver*—so "business as usual."

In retrospect, it's clear that the seeds were already present that over time would bloom into the radical activist and eco-philosopher she became. After the Peace Corps work in the 60s, she spent the better part of the 1970s earning a Ph.D. in Religion at

Syracuse University, where she wrote a trailblazing dissertation on the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and general systems theory (132, 144), which was eventually revised and published by the State University of New York Press. Unless you are really feeling nerdy, I wouldn't start there with reading her work.

And so it was in the 1980s—amidst the Reagan Revolution and the threat of nuclear armageddon—that she began leading workshops outside of the academy. Part of what she found—and part of why her work continues to be meaningful to so many activists—is how important it is to be honest about how difficult and painful it can be to try and build a better world (213).

These experiences led to her first book, published in 1983, titled *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*. Now, that may not sound particularly like good news, but so much can grow from being honest about where we really are and what we're really feeling. And over time, her perspectives grew into a spiral with four stages

1. Gratitude;
2. Honoring our pain;
3. Seeing with new eyes; and
4. Going forth.

Importantly, there is no permanent progression; rather, one's perspectives keep spiraling,, and we just keep moving through them, both individually and collectively (Macy 2014: 67).

In the wake of a historic election, I want to invite us to spend a few minutes peering through the lens of Macy's *work that reconnects*.

Macy's spiral of reconnection starts with *gratitude*. If gratitude is accessible to us, it is often helpful—even in the most difficult times—to remember what we remain grateful for. But sometimes, when we just find ourselves in the thick of it, all we can do is *honor our pain*. In that spirit, it feels important to acknowledge that many of us found ourselves in that place at points over this past week—and certainly at various points over the past four years: times of deep anguish, pain, and grief.

At the same time, let me hasten to emphasize (as I often have) that Unitarian Universalism is a big tent. As I've detailed at length previously, it is certainly possible to be both a religious liberal and a political conservative, what I've sometimes referred to

as conservative in the best sense of the word: caring about conservation of nature, upholding the beauty of traditions and rituals that have accrued deep meaning through the passage of time, that remind us of the importance not only of individual rights and equality, but also of community, authority, sanctity, and loyalty.

But, as I have also detailed at some length previously, these kinds of conservations do not describe the presidency of Donald Trump. To quote two political scientists from Harvard University from their book *How Democracies Die*: “No other major presidential candidate in modern U.S. history, including Nixon, has demonstrated such a weak public commitment to constitutional rights and democratic norms” (65). And for many people, it has been incredibly painful to witness huge numbers of people continuing to support someone with a strong track record of cruelty, lying, and authoritarian impulses—who continues to be anti-reason and anti-science amidst new spikes in COVID cases.

In the face of these realities, there can be a temptation at times to dissociate and shut down, but Joanna Macy’s work challenges us that, “the greatest danger [is] deadening our hearts and minds” (2014: 19). As James Baldwin wrote powerfully in *The Fire Next Time*: **“I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”** So Macy’s invitation is to *honor our pain*.

As the saying goes, “The only way out is through.” “What we resist—persists, but what we feel—we can heal.” If we keep our hearts open, then we keep the possibility alive for shifting to the next of Macy’s spiral—*seeing with new eyes*. And as I have opened my heart to feeling the pain of so many of my fellow citizens supporting the politics of hate and division, what I have felt within me is a renewed commitment to *love* instead of hate.

Now don’t get me wrong. That doesn’t mean I’m not angry. I remain intensely angry at the injustices of the world. And I will continue to channel that anger to motivate my work for justice. But underneath that anger is a deep love. It’s why I’m so grateful for the Universalist side of our UU heritage. Deep down I really am committed to trying to create a world in which all beings are well and at peace, in which everyone is safe and protected, in which everyone lives with an open heart.

From the Buddhist perspective that so deeply informs Joanna Macy's *work that reconnects*, hate is known as one of the three *kleshas*, the three poisonous roots (along with greed and delusion) that are toxic to even our best intentions. As The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used to say, "**I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.**" I really do believe that the three poisons of hatred, greed, and delusion are so much a part of what got us in the mess we're in. And ever more hatred, greed, and delusion will only contribute further to the Great Unraveling. It is their antidotes—love, generosity, and wisdom—that give us our best chance at the Great Turning that we dream about.

And from that sense of possibility, we reach the final revolution of Joanna Macy's spiral, *going forth*. And as we reflect on what it means to "go forth" into this post-election period, I urge you to be cautious about interpretations of the recent election that are too quick and simplistic.

I'll share two examples about what I mean. The first is from *The New York Times*, "Shift in Margin in Counties from 2016 to 2020," which demonstrates that shifts are happening all over the country. Relatedly, a book published back in January that seems even more relevant to me on this side of the election is Ezra Klein's *Why We Are Polarized*. I recommend it if you are seeking a more in-depth understanding of the moment in which we find ourselves.

Returning more fully to Joanna Macy's work, as we seek to *go forth* and build a diverse beloved community in such a time as this, a term most associated with this part of her work is *active hope*. Active hope references something much more than an inactive, inadequate, naive hope that sits around wishing for the world to change. Instead, our call is to be proactively a part of *turning our dreams into deeds* and *building the world we dream about*.

*Active Hope* is the title of one of Macy's best known books, and a new edition is being published early next month. But even more than that, I want to draw your attention to a book published a few months ago in honor of Macy's ninetieth birthday, written by many of the prominent scholars and activists who have been influenced by her.

It's an interesting question to ask: if people influenced by your life were to write a book on your ninetieth birthday, what would the title be?

For Macy, they chose the title *A Wild Love for the World*. And as I've reflected on what it means to cultivate a wild love for the world for such a time as this, the phrase that keeps coming to mind is a mantra from another Buddhist teacher (Joan Halifax) as expanded by Brené Brown: "**Strong back, soft front, wild heart.**" In short, that means that all this talk about love doesn't mean being a pushover. Maintain a strong back, but don't armor up. Keep a soft front that is open to change and to being surprised.

This map is surprising. There's a lot of shift and change in all directions happening across the map. And that's where the wild heart comes in: a heart that is vulnerable to heartbreak, but that is also open to love, connection, and transformation.

Looking back from the perspective of her ninth decade, Macy has said that the central question of her life has been "**How can I be fully present to my world—present enough to rejoice and be useful—when we as a species are destroying it?**" (358). There is no guarantee that we will collectively choose the Great Turning over the Great Unraveling. But there remains so much to be grateful for on this beautiful planet on which we find ourselves. There remains the possibility of continuing to respond with active hope. And I am so grateful to be on this journey with all of you.

As Jen and I have both said multiple times recently, anytime you are feeling overwhelmed, one of the best strategies is to "stop being one person." We are stronger together. Along those lines, over the past few months "More than 4,500 Unitarian Universalists from over eight hundred congregations (including many members and friends of UUCF) participated in the [#UUtheVote](#) campaign. Through postcards, letters, phone calls and texts, we contacted over **2.79 million voters!**" This election was close, and without significant get-out-the-vote efforts such as [#UUtheVote](#), we would likely have found ourselves much more entrenched in "business as usual."

So as we continue to reflect on all that has been—and on what part we feel called to play in what may yet be—I want to invite us in a few moments to sing together one of the central anthems of the [#UUtheVote](#) campaign 'We Shall Be Known.' The lyrics are directly inspired by Joanna Macy's ecological vision of a "Great Turning" grounded in love:

We shall be known by the company we keep  
By the ones who circle round to tend these fires  
We shall be known by the ones who sow and reap  
The seeds of change, alive from deep within the earth  
It is time now, it is time now that we thrive  
It is time we lead ourselves into the well  
It is time now, and what a time to be alive  
In this Great Turning we shall learn to lead in love

### **For Further Study**

- *Widening Circles: A Memoir* (2007)
- Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (2012/2020)
- Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects* (2014)
- Joanna Macy and Stephanie Kaza, *A Wild Love for the World* (2020)