

It is a remarkable miracle to be alive at all on this beautiful planet.

PHOTO: Irwin Barrett

# Honouring Our Pain for the World: WALKING THE SPIRAL PATH

by JOANNA BULL /// EAC Staff

I am looking out at the snow that is falling outside my cafe window. It will likely turn to rain later, as it so often does in our Mi'kma'ki winter, but for now the snow is absolutely beautiful. The sun peeking through the branches nearby makes everything glitter as though it is from another world. I take a deep breath and finally feel my feet beneath me.

Everyone I know has been on edge lately. We are living through a time of accelerated and converging crises. None of the crises are new, but they have intensified. Climate breakdown, fascist authoritarianism, oppressive inequality, the unimaginable tragedy of the loss of species: all of these bombard us every time we open our phones.

Joanna Macy describes living in these times like walking along a path with a deep ditch on either side. On one side is apathy, on the other is panic. When things are overwhelming, we often have the urge to check out: to hide under the covers, to numb ourselves. Or we freak out, burning ourselves out in cycles of unsustainable and sometimes misguided action, desperate to feel like we are doing something. As activists, many of us know these twin ditches all too well.

**Joanna** (she/her) is a queer settler woman who is grateful to live in Mi'kma'ki. She is also the EAC's associate director of community engagement. She is deeply indebted to Joanna Macy, as well as her mentor Lydia Violet Harutoonian, whose wisdom and words are the backbone and heart of this article.

In times like these, I return again and again to the Spiral of the Work that Reconnects. The Spiral is a methodology for collective resilience and action that was developed by Joanna Macy through hundreds of experiential group workshops all over the world. The Spiral takes us through four stages: Grounding in Gratitude, Honouring our Pain for the World, Seeing with New/Ancient Eyes and Going Forth.

The first step is **grounding in gratitude**. The wisdom of gratitude can be found in many ancient traditions around the world, perhaps most famously in the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address – the words that come before all else. The practice of gratitude reconnects us to the truth that it is a remarkable miracle to be alive at all on this beautiful planet – spinning in space with its vast and teeming oceans, blue whales, symbiotic lichens and soft mosses, wild strawberries in springtime, glittering ice crystals in the winter, endless cycles of renewal and growth and human beings with our complex and beautiful minds.

This is not an exercise in “good vibes only” toxic positivity – grounding ourselves in gratitude is a radical act. Our capitalist society tells us that scarcity is the basis of our existence and the only way to make ourselves feel better is to buy more things we don't need. What if, instead, we took stock of the incredible abundance of life? Remembering the basic miracle of our existence frees us from these oppressive narratives, energizes us and brings us joy.

Of course, when we start to open our hearts to what we love, we also become keenly aware of the anguish of all we are losing. We

become aware of the suffering of our beloved world. We may feel rage, sorrow, fear or numbness. All of these are expressions of pain for the world.

We have often been told that our pain for the world means there is something wrong with us. It is pathologized as a weakness or illness; the term “climate anxiety” seems to indicate a mental disorder to be corrected or calmed down. **Honouring our pain for the world** flips this view on its head. Being upset, angry, fearful or sad is actually an intelligent, sane and necessary response when faced with the atrocities that are happening in our world. In fact, these feelings are a call to action.

As Joanna Macy points out, we are part of the living system of our world. Just like our own cells are small, living systems within the larger system of our bodies, we can see ourselves as cells in the larger living body of Earth. When we feel pain in our own bodies, it is a signal of vital information telling the body that there is something wrong; there is a wound here. When our body receives that signal of pain, it mobilizes its natural healing response to address the wound.

When our hearts break in response to seeing our neighbours suffer or witnessing ecological devastation, our pain is telling us that something is wrong: there is a wound here. It awakens our love for the world and our desire for justice. It calls us to join in the response of the larger body of Earth to address the wound.

This experience can be like a portal that opens us up to the belonging that we have been seeking. It helps us to **see with new/ancient eyes**, to remember our place in the web of life. The truth is, we are not isolated individuals, marooned in time and making a go of it all alone. We are one thread in an infinite tapestry of living beings, connected to each other through space and time with every breath. Opening to our place in the larger body of Earth gives us access to wisdom, strength, power, different perspectives and joy. We are part of our world.

## LEARN MORE

Learn more about the Spiral and Joanna Macy's work: [joannamacy.net](http://joannamacy.net)

Read the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address: [danceforallpeople.com/haudenosaunee-thanksgiving-address](http://danceforallpeople.com/haudenosaunee-thanksgiving-address)

Take an online workshop with the School for the Great Turning: [schoolforthegreatturning.com](http://schoolforthegreatturning.com)

## TAKE ACTION

With a friend or with your journal, move through the Spiral using the following prompts for reflection:

- Some things I love about being alive on Planet Earth are...
- When I witness what is happening to our world, what really breaks my heart is...
- Some of the people or beings I draw strength from are...
- No matter what happens, I am committed to...

When we are grounded in this knowledge, we become fearless and grounded in our action. The last stage of the spiral is **going forth**. We each have a vital role to play in the struggle for a just and livable future. What is the flame in your own heart? Where is it pulling you to act, even though the outcomes of our struggles are uncertain? Listen for your calling and breathe in the courage you need to take it up.

There are so many humans and other beings all over the planet who are working in big and small ways every day on behalf of life. We are not doing this all alone. And if we hold each other close, we can walk this path together without falling into the ditches of panic and apathy. Our resilience and endurance come from our gratitude, our capacity for compassion, our interconnectedness, our resolve and from the living Earth themself.

This is lifetime work, and it will not end with us. As times continue to be hard and harder, let us stay grounded, stay connected and stay open to what the world is calling us to do in this moment. Let us fill up each other's cups, honour our hearts of compassion and rise to this time.

An illustration of the Spiral by artist Dori Midnight.

ILLUSTRATION:  
Dori Midnight

