Dial Up the Magic of This Moment
by Maria Popova

Few people have stood at the gates of hope — through world wars and environmental crises and personal loss — with more dignity, wisdom, and optimism than Joanna Macy during her six decades as a Buddhist scholar, environmental activist, and pioneering philosopher of ecology. Macy is also the world’s greatest translator-enchantress of Rainer Maria Rilke, in whose poetry she found refuge upon the sudden and devastating death of the love of her life after fifty-six years of marriage.

Indeed, our mortality, as well as our quintessential resistance to it, is a subject Rilke unravels frequently and with deeply comforting insight in Macy’s A Year with Rilke: Daily Readings from the Best of Rainer Maria Rilke (public library) — a sublime collection spanning from Rilke’s early poems to the last sonnet he wrote days before his death from leukemia, alongside fragments of his letters, diaries, and prose. The project is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s Calendar of Wisdom, but instead of an elevating thought for each day of the year culled from a different thinker, every day features a short Rilke reading.

Macy and her collaborator, Anita Barrows, explore Rilke’s singular consolations in the preface:

Rilke’s grasp of the transient nature of all things is critical to his capacity to praise and to cherish.

[...]

In the face of impermanence and death, it takes courage to love the things of this world and to believe that praising them is our noblest calling. Rilke’s is not a conditional courage, dependent on an afterlife. Nor is it a stoic courage, keeping a stiff upper lip when shattered by loss. It is courage born of the ever-unexpected discovery that acceptance of mortality yields an expansion of being. In naming what is doomed to disappear, naming the way it keeps streaming through our hands, we can hear the song that streaming makes.

[...]

His capacity to embrace the dark and to acknowledge loss brings comfort to the reader because nothing of life is left out. There is nothing that cannot be redeemed. No degree of hopelessness, such as that of prisoners, beggars, abandoned animals, or inmates of asylums, is outside the scope of the poet’s respectful attention. He allows us to see that the bestowal of such pure attention is in itself a triumph of the spirit.

[...]
Rilke would teach us to accept death as well as life, and in so doing to recognize that they belong together as two halves of the same circle.

In the book, Macy highlights one particularly poignant 1923 letter to the Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crouy, in which 48-year-old Rilke writes:

The great secret of death, and perhaps its deepest connection with us, is this: that, in taking from us a being we have loved and venerated, death does not wound us without, at the same time, lifting us toward a more perfect understanding of this being and of ourselves.

He adds:

I am not saying that we should love death, but rather that we should love life so generously, without picking and choosing, that we automatically include it (life’s other half) in our love. This is what actually happens in the great expansiveness of love, which cannot be stopped or constricted. It is only because we exclude it that death becomes more and more foreign to us and, ultimately, our enemy.

It is conceivable that death is infinitely closer to us than life itself... What do we know of it?

In the same letter, he admonishes against our crippling compulsion to deny death, which only impoverishes life:

Our effort, I suggest, can be dedicated to this: to assume the unity of Life and Death and let it be progressively demonstrated to us. So long as we stand in opposition to Death we will disfigure it. Believe me, my dear Countess, Death is our friend, our closest friend, perhaps the only friend who can never be misled by our ploys and vacillations. And I do not mean that in the sentimental, romantic sense of distrusting or renouncing life. Death is our friend precisely because it brings us into absolute and passionate presence with all that is here, that is natural, that is love... Life always says Yes and No simultaneously. Death (I implore you to believe) is the true Yea-sayer. It stands before eternity and says only: Yes.

Rilke captures this even more beautifully, at once with astonishing intellectual precision and astonishing spiritual expansiveness, in his poetry. In a recent conversation with Krista Tippett on the always soul-stretching On Being, Macy discusses Rilke’s emboldening views on mortality and reads some of his poems on death and consciousness. Here is Macy reading Rilke’s “The Swan” — coincidentally, the poem that appears as the day’s reading in A Year with Rilke on the date of this recording, July 13:

On Being Studios · "The Swan" by Rainer Maria Rilke (read by Joanna Macy)
THE SWAN

This laboring of ours with all that remains undone,  
as if still bound to it,  
is like the lumbering gait of the swan.

And then our dying — releasing ourselves  
from the very ground on which we stood —  
is like the way he hesitantly lowers himself  
into the water. It gently receives him,  
and, gladly yielding, flows back beneath him,  
as wave follows wave,  
while he, now wholly serene and sure,  
with regal composure,  
allows himself to glide.

In her book In Praise of Mortality, Macy writes:

Rilke invites us to experience what mortality makes possible. It links us with life and all time. Ours is the suffering and ours is the harvest.

(Perhaps no text of Rilke’s captures this essential osmosis between Life and Death, light and darkness, better than his famous line, “Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.”)

In another poem from Rilke’s “Sonnets to Orpheus,” found in Macy’s Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God, the poet casts his luminous gaze not directly at death but at the larger world of dark emotions and suffering, which he believed were essential to the creative spirit:

On Being Studios · “Let This Darkness be a Bell Tower” by Rainer Maria Rilke (read by Joanna Macy)

LET THIS DARKNESS BE A BELLTOWER

Quiet friend who has come so far,  
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.  
Let this darkness be a bell tower  
and you the bell. As you ring,  
what batters you becomes your strength.  
Move back and forth into the change.  
What is it like, such intensity of pain?  
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.
In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

But the most emboldening wisdom of all — the most sorely needed consolation amid the daily darknesses we encounter both as individuals and, increasingly, as a society — comes from Macy herself. She affirms the idea that spiritual survival isn’t a matter of sheepish optimism or of eradicating our dark emotions but of simply showing up. Macy, at 81, tells Tippett:

brainpicker · Joanna Macy on moral strength
I’m not insisting that we be brimming with hope — it’s OK not to be optimistic. Buddhist teachings say, you know, feeling that you have to maintain hope can wear you out, so just be present... The biggest gift you can give is to be absolutely present, and when you’re worrying about whether you’re hopeful or hopeless or pessimistic or optimistic, who cares? The main thing is that you’re showing up, that you’re here, and that you’re finding ever more capacity to love this world — because it will not be healed without that. That [is] what is going to unleash our intelligence and our ingenuity and our solidarity for the healing of our world. [...] How is the story going to end? And that seems almost orchestrated to bring forth from us the biggest moral strength, courage, and creativity. I feel because when things are this unstable, a person’s determination, how they choose to invest their energy and their heart and mind can have much more effect on the larger picture than we’re accustomed to think. So I find it a very exciting time to be alive, if somewhat wearing emotionally. Macy goes on to discuss what Rilke’s poignant 1923 letter taught her, in the wake of her husband’s death, about our shared tussle with mortality. Her words and the spirit from which they spring are nothing short of breathtaking:

brainpicker · Joanna Macy on life
I’m everlastingly grateful that we were in love and stayed in love. Particularly, it was like falling in love all over again in our later years, so there was a lot of cherishing. But I found that that quote that I just read you — and it’s really engraved in the inside of my head — is true. It’s true and that’s why we’re changing all the time. He’s part of my world now. You become what you love. Orpheus became the world that Rilke sang to, and my husband, Fran, is spread out in this world that he loved.

So ... you’re always asked to sort of stretch a little bit more — but actually we’re made for that. There’s a song that wants to sing itself through us. We just got to be available. Maybe the song that is to be sung through us is the most beautiful requiem for an irreplaceable planet or maybe it’s a song of joyous rebirth as we create a new culture that doesn’t destroy its world. But in any case, there’s absolutely no excuse for our making our passionate love for our world dependent on what we think of its degree of health, whether we think it’s going to go on forever. Those are just thoughts anyway. But this moment
you’re alive, so you can just dial up the magic of that at any time.

A Year with Rilke is a sublime read in its entirety, as is Macy’s In Praise of Mortality. Complement Macy and Rilke’s shared wisdom on death with John Updike’s memorable insight and an unusual children’s book that embodies Rilke’s inclusion of death into life’s embrace, then listen to the full On Being episode and subscribe here for a steady stream of soul-expansion.