Joanna Macy: A Wild Love for the World
by Krista Tippet

Transcript for A Wild Love For the World with Joanna Macy

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Krista Tippet, host: I first discovered the philosopher of ecology Joanna Macy as a translator, of the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. We'll take that exquisite poetry as a lens on Joanna Macy's wisdom on the great dramas of our time: ecological, political, personal.

Rilke sought the shape of meaning in a now-vanished central Europe at the turn of the last century. Joanna Macy's vision took shape in crucibles of the 20th century. I spoke with her in 2010 in a moment not wholly unlike this — after a man-made national ecological disaster: the Gulf Oil Spill. Now in her 80s, Joanna Macy says we're at a pivotal moment in history — with possibilities of unraveling, or of creating, a life-sustaining human society.

Joanna Macy: You're always asked to sort of stretch a little bit more, and actually we're made for that. But in any case, there's absolutely no excuse for 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. This moment, you're alive.

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett. This is On Being — from APM, American Public Media.

Joanna Macy has lived adventurously by any definition. She worked for the CIA in Cold War Germany. Then, as a young mother, she moved with her husband to post-colonial India, where he ran the newly minted Peace Corps. There, she cared for Tibetan refugees, joining the young, newly exiled Dalai Lama. Later, she became an environmental activist — but long before that term entered the global lexicon.

Joanna Macy is best known today as a Buddhist scholar and activist. Though over time, as she told me, her Buddhist imagination has merged with her earliest sense of the heart of Christianity. Her family tree was thick with Congregationalist ministers, including her own grandfather. But she became disenchanted with the church after studying theology as a young adult.

Ms. Macy: I walked out when I was 20, and it was a great hole in my life that opened up. And it was actually not until 15 years later when my young family and I were in the Peace

Corps in India and I began working with Tibetan refugees. That was the mid-'60s.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Macy: I found a way of looking at the world through — I became so curious about what made these people so calm and radiant and unstoppable in preserving their tradition and in enjoying life.

Ms. Tippett: I do want to ask you just — you mentioned that there was a lot of arguing in your family and you and your father was …

Ms. Macy: … tyrannical.

Ms. Tippett: … was tyrannical. And yet, at the same time, you talk about poetry being part of the …

Ms. Macy: Yes.

Ms. Tippett: … of your family and that was also something that — that he kept alive.

Ms. Macy: That's right, that's right.

Ms. Tippett: And it seems to me that that was part of, you know, what could be very broadly described as your spiritual sensibility also from an early age. Would you say that?

Ms. Macy: Yes, I would. And I would say also the summers that I spent at my paternal grandfather's farm in upstate New York — being in the fields, in the woods, around the barns — felt so real and gave me a sense of — that the world was very big and wise and intelligent and that I could had an appetite to disappear into it. And it was this streak of nature mysticism that made the summer months so much more vivid and real to me than the nine months I spent in New York City going to school. And I lived for that. There were hymns of St. Francis …

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Macy: … and others that, oh, yeah, yeah, this is my father's world. That was another hymn I loved that could lift me up. There was Jesus walking by the shores of Galilee. He was outdoors all the time too, you know.

Ms. Tippett: (laughter) It's true. Yeah.

Ms. Macy: You don't see him sitting in a pew or climbing up on a pulpit.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Macy: He'd climb up on a rock or walk along a sandy beach. And so …

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, so I — as I said a minute ago, I first discovered you and learned about you as a translator of Rilke. I wanted to try to take Rilke as a way into the life you've lived, your approach to it, your way of seeing the world and seeing change in the world.

Ms. Macy: What I'd like to speak then of when we were living in Germany.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah.

Ms. Macy: My second son was born there. This was the 1950s. One day I walked into a bookstore on Adalbertstrasse near the university, and there on a table was this little sort of clothbound book in sort of rag paper. It was exquisite. It was Das Stunden-Buch (The Book of Hours), and I picked it up and the poem that it opened to was the second poem of the first part: "Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen" — "I live my life in widening circles." And that something immediately rearranged in the furniture of my mind. I identified completely with it and I saw — it was just eight lines in that poem — that it could redefine that I was on a spiritual path.

Ms. Tippett: So this was the 1950s, right? Is that what you said when you discovered Rilke?

Ms. Macy: Yes.

Ms. Tippett: And at that time, you had a very interesting early adventure with the CIA. Were you doing that at that point?

Ms. Macy: That's right. See I had — when I dropped theology and Christianity, my impulse — I had a very strong impulse toward service, so I thought I would serve politically and I got a Fulbright scholarship to the Institut de Sciences Politiques, political science, in France, and there I studied the French Communist Party and that made me very interesting to CIA. I was all of 21, 22 at the time and still very wet behind the ears. So when CIA dangled a glamorous job in front of my nose, I fell for it and went and worked for them for about two years. But, you know, Krista, I want to read the poem I mentioned.

Ms. Tippett: Oh, good. I'd love for you to read it.

Ms. Macy: So as I stood there having an exciting life, but still wishing that I were on a spiritual path. And what was there for me if I couldn't stomach the church fathers in Christianity and the arcane theological arguments? And then I read this. So I'll say it in English.

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.

I have been circling around God, that primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and still I don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?

The constrictions that my culture had made around the sacred and — just fell away like dried crusts, and I felt an excitement about being alive now in a world that itself — yes, of course, it was — my world itself is sacred.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippett: And then when you went to India — had you had an encounter with Buddhism? Did you know much about Buddhism before you …

Ms. Macy: Not really.

Ms. Tippett: OK.

Ms. Macy: No, no, which was quite wonderful because it was before Buddhism was sweeping the West.

Ms. Tippett: Really came over to the West, right. And you came to Buddhism in India as opposed to discovering it over here.

Ms. Macy: That's right, that's right, and I was bent on — I fell in love with these Tibetans who were living in very harsh circumstances up in the foothills of the Himalayas after these incredibly strenuous and often with loss of life and great danger and sick-making escapes over the peaks and passes out of Tibet. The way they loved life and the way they loved their tradition in a very openhearted way, I wanted to know what helped them be like that. So that was a turning point in my life.

Ms. Tippett: It's interesting too that you were drawn to that tradition as a lived expression long before you actually got into the beliefs or the teachings behind it.

Ms. Macy: Yeah. And I was primed for it because I had read Heinrich Harrer's My Seven Years in Tibet, and I had read it in German, its original language. I had actually — I was going to interpreter's school in Munich my last year and I used that text for my simultaneous interpreting exercises that I would read it and render it in English without a pause. So that book really got into my brain cells, in my head and in my heart. So that when I was actually among the Tibetans and in the presence of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, a young man then, I certainly had a sense of déjà vu.

Ms. Tippett: And as you point out in some of your writing, there are real echoes and resonance between some of Rilke's poetry about God and Buddhist teachings and notions about reality that are very interesting.

Ms. Macy: Yes, yes. It's just amazing to me that he refers to, you know, early on in his Stunden-Buch, The Book of Hours, he said, "We must not portray you in King's robes, you drifting mist that brought forth the morning." Then he says, "You are like a web or you are like a tree or you are a forest through which I run, or you are a herd of luminous deer and I am forest and dark and you run through me." So he's using image after image from the natural world to convey that both the mystery and the beauty and the relationship that we find in the sacred.

And he addresses this sacred as God, but it's a God that is very different from the one he had been dragged into Catholic churches with his super-pious mother in Prague as a boy. He hated that. She had him touch the painted wounds on the crucifix to arouse his compassion, and he found all that too repulsive. But then when he went, interestingly enough, in his early 20s to Russia with his wonderful lover, Lou Andreas-Salomé, who was from St. Petersburg, he encountered Russian spirituality, which is very close to the earth. And that opened up to him a quality of spiritual experience that was very earth-related and vast and timeless.

Ms. Macy: (reading) God speaks to each of us as he makes us,

then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being — conversation about meaning, religion, ethics, and ideas. Today: Rilke translator and Buddhist philosopher of ecology Joanna Macy.

Ms. Tippett: You know, something that's very intriguing to me is that you were talking about the environment, and I think maybe — not sure if you called yourself an environmental activist, but being one.

Ms. Macy: That's true.

Ms. Tippett: Way before that was something that so many people are talking about. I mean, tell me about how that awakening came in your life.

Ms. Macy: Well, it came about very naturally. I was always responsive to issues when they arose. And then in the '70s, it became quite vivid for me and quite compelling as through my son — my second son — through a papery road in his environmental engineering course at college that I learned about what nuclear power generation was doing in even the thermal pollution, let alone the radioactive contamination. And so side by side with him, I stepped into direct activism, going together to occupy the Seabrook reactor before it could open and protesting down at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

I learned piles there. And that had a great spiritual teaching for me too, Krista, because it led me into fascination, if not obsession — I'll say obsession — with long-term radioactive contamination through our processes of making weapons and generating power that insisted that I open my mind to reaches of time that had stretched both my heart and my intellect. In other words, I realized that we were, through technology, having consequences with our decisions — our decisions had consequences or a karma, as we could say, that reached into geological time. And that what in industry and government choices that we make under pressure for profit or bureaucratic whatever, that we are making choices that will affect whether beings thousands of generations from now will be able to be born sound of mind and body.

Ms. Tippett: Something that's very present for me as I'm reading about you and the passion you've had for this for a long time is you — you also were always very, um, aware of a sense of grief as you realized …

Ms. Macy: Oh, yeah. Grief got me into it.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah. And I think that right now, say right now in this moment as we're speaking in 2010, the spectacle that's very present for people, maybe more in the forefront — certainly more in the forefront of peoples' minds than nuclear power or nuclear weapons were in the '70s — is the Gulf oil spill, right?

Ms. Macy: Oh, yes.

Ms. Tippett: Right. And there is this grief about that. And you really work with people to hold on to that, to take their grief seriously, right?

Ms. Macy: Or not to hold on to it so much as to not be afraid of it because that grief, if you are afraid of it and pave it over, clamp down, you shut down. And the kind of apathy and closed-down denial, our difficulty in looking at what we're doing to our world stems not from callous indifference or ignorance so much as it stems from fear of pain. That was a big learning for me as I was organizing around nuclear power and around at the time of Three Mile Island catastrophe and around Chernobyl.

Then as I saw it, it relates to everything. It relates to what's in our food and it relates to the clear-cuts of our forests. It relates to the contamination of our rivers and oceans. So that became actually perhaps the most pivotal point in, I don't know, the landscape of my life, that dance with despair, to see how we are called to not run from the discomfort and not run from the grief or the feelings of outrage or even fear and that, if we can be fearless, to be with our pain, it turns. It doesn't stay static. It only doesn't change if we refuse to look at it, but when we look at it, when we take it in our hands, when we can just be with it and keep breathing, then it turns. It turns to reveal its other face, and the other face of our pain for the world is our love for the world, our absolutely inseparable connectedness with all life.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippett: And I think again, you know, in even thinking that way, that a poetic mindset is more useful than the kind of fact-based, right, or argument-based way we tend to approach problems culturally, even precisely the same ecological problems?

Ms. Macy: Oh, yeah.

Ms. Tippett: Right?

Ms. Macy: Yeah, that keeps people from even mentioning how distressed they are because they think that they need to have all the facts and figures and statistics to show that they intellectually can master the problem instead of just …

Ms. Tippett: Mm-hmm. But — but we — yeah, but we get overwhelmed by the facts and the figures and the pictures. They are debilitating, they're paralyzing. As you say, it's also that we don't really know how to dwell with grief and turn it into something else. But I think about that a lot as a journalist, as somebody who works in media.

Ms. Macy: Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm. It's a double-edged sword, isn't it? Because you want to portray. I mean, say you're taking care of your mother and she's

dying of cancer and you can't — you won't — say I can't go in her house or in her room because I don't want to look at her. But if you love her, you want to be with her. If — if we love our world, we're able to see the scum of oil spreading across the Gulf. We're able to see what it's doing to the wetlands and the marshes, what it's doing to the dolphins and the gulls. When you love something, your love doesn't say, "Well, too bad my kid has leukemia, so I won't go near her." It's just the opposite.

Ms. Tippett: What is empowering on this? Like, I mean — and I wonder if Rilke comes to mind again, of how he was very clear about darkness as a part of life.

Ms. Macy: Yes. There's a poem that has been — it's a sonnet and the very last Sonnet to Orpheus that has entered my bloodstream that has helped me a great deal in this time. I will say it.

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. And as you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, this 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 shall cease to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
And to the rushing water speak, I am.

Ms. Tippett: I have been emailing this Rilke poem to friends ever since Joanna Macy recited it for me. And you can too — download this and others she read for us at onbeing.org.

There you can also download an MP3 of this show or our entire unedited conversation, and you can subscribe to our podcast. Again, all that at onbeing.org. You can also find us in all the predictable places like Facebook and twitter. Follow the show @Beingtweets. Follow me @KristaTippett.

Coming up, Joanna Macy's practical and poetic take on living in a historic moment of seismic change; also how Rilke's poetry accompanied her after the death of her husband of 56 years.

Ms. Macy: In that devastation and loss, I had to work on this book and I had to be with Rilke. And what a reward. It's as if I were being dipped in beauty.

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett. This program comes to you from APM, American Public Media.

[Announcements]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today: a conversation with philosopher of ecology and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy.

Now in her 80s, she worked with the CIA in Cold War Europe and the Peace Corps in post-colonial India. She was an environmental activist long before this term entered our cultural imagination in any mainstream way.

And she brings a poetic and spiritual sensibility to this; it's reflected in her translations, together with Anita Barrows, of the early-20th-century poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Joanna Macy believes that we are in a moment she calls "The Great Turning" — a transition from society shaped primarily by industrial growth to a society structured to be life-sustaining. She finds nourishment for this vision in Rilke. He also chronicled a turn-of-century, world-altering moment in time.

Ms. Macy: From the beginning, Rilke, in his first poems that he stayed loyal to in the Book of Hours, he foresaw — he had this strong inkling and he gave visions, you know, metaphors and images to it that this 20th century that was opening up would be very dark. He didn't know about the world wars. He didn't know about the concentration camps, the death camps, the nuclear bombings. He didn't know about the new diseases and epidemics, but he did sense that, and some of his poems are as if he's consoling God for his, you know, for what's happened to his creation. And there's a poem that — where he says God becomes the earth itself and he speaks to the earth: "Du dunkelnder Grund …"

Dear darkening ground,
you've endured so patiently the walls we built,
please give the cities one more hour

and the churches and cloisters two.
And those that labor — let their toils
still hold them for another five hours, or seven,

before that hour of inconceivable terror
when you take back your name
from all things.

Just give me a little more time!
I just need a little more time.
Because I am going to love the things
as no one has thought to love them,
until they're real and worthy of you.

So I feel like that.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Macy: I'm ready to see. 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.

Ms. Tippett: (laughter) That's good. Yes.

Ms. Macy: 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 was what is going to unleash our intelligence and our ingenuity and our solidarity for the healing of our world.

So that is what keeps me going, Krista. So the great turning is a revolution that is underway, the transition to a life-sustaining society, that this is sprouting up in countless ways, new ways of holding the land, new ways of generating energy, new ways of producing food, some of them very old ways that we are going back to, wisdom of the ancestors and of the indigenous people often, new ways of measuring prosperity and wealth, new ways of handling differences through nonviolent communication, through restorative circles instead of outside the dominant punitive penal system now. There's a tremendous energy …

Ms. Tippett: Right. Right. When you add all that up, you do see a picture or two.

Ms. Macy: Oh, yeah. Now something else is going on too, which is the great unraveling under the pressure of the destruction caused by the industrial growth society. And the awesome thing about the moment that you and I share is that we don't know which is going to win out.

Ms. Tippett: Right, right.

Ms. Macy: 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.

Ms. Tippett: (laughter) Is there any Rilke that comes to mind on these big ideas?

Ms. Macy: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Ms. Tippett: Tell me what comes to mind.

Ms. Macy: Oh, "All will come again into its strength." Let me see if I can find that, um …

Ms. Tippett: OK. Like I keep — I'm trying to — I've been reading my — pulling out my Rilkes I was planning to read you. There were a couple of lines that just were so haunting to me. I can't find them and it's something about — it's the end of a poem and it's something about in, like, in the ephemeral nature of things is they're very fragrance. Do you know what …

Ms. Macy: Yes, yes, yes.

Ms. Tippett: Which sounds so much like he was a Buddhist, but it was so beautiful, so beautiful.

Ms. Macy: Mm-hmm. Yeah, this runs through Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus. "Song itself cannot happen without time, without the voice rising and falling away" and I love it that

you remembered that line, "For is not impermanence the very fragrance of our days."

Ms. Tippett: "Is not impermanence the very fragrance of our days," right.

Ms. Macy: Yeah.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippett: I just want to kind of underline the connection that you repeatedly make that I think might be counterintuitive. You know, you talk about spirituality and you are also always equally talking about, you know, these are some phrases from your writing that echo things you said, Your wild love for the world or even an erotic connection with the world that those two things go together for you.

Ms. Macy: Yeah. That's right. World is lover, world is self and that it's OK for our hearts to be broken over the world. What else is a heart for? (laughter) There's a great intelligence there. We've been treating the earth as if it were a supply house and a sewer. We've been grabbing, extracting, resources from it for our cars and our hair dryers and our bombs, and we've been pouring the waste into it until it's overflowing, but our earth is not a supply house and a sewer. It is our larger body. We breathe it. We taste it. We are it, and it is time now that we venerate that incredible flowering of life that takes every aspect of our physicality.

So when I — I'm looking at my hand right now as we talk. It's got a lot of wrinkles because I'm 81 years old, but it's linked to hands like this back through the ages. This hand is directly linked to hands that learned to reach and grasp and climb and push up on dry land and weave reeds into baskets, and it has a fantastic history. Every particle and every atom in this hand goes back to the beginning of space-time. We're part of that story.

Ms. Tippett: That actually gets at something I wanted to ask you about your sense of time, but I was — I came at that with a much more narrow imagination. I was thinking about the history you've seen — the political history you've seen. You know, how that India you lived in in the 1960s is now transformed. In many ways, it's a rising star in a globalized economy. How that East Germany where you watched the uprising in Hungary, how the Berlin Wall fell …

Ms. Macy: So you have a globalized culture extending over all of it with a monoculture in a way that is wiping out ancient cultures and languages.

Ms. Tippett: Is that what you see?

Ms. Macy: Yeah, that's what I see. And at the same time, there's this incredible linking and there is right here in my neighborhood a group of young women who have created an organization where they work on appropriate technology with women in India and in Africa.

Ms. Tippett: Do you have the sense I have — I mean, you're 81; I'm 49. But I have a sense also that there's an intuition in the blood and bones of young people, of new generations coming up, that they really — that they inhabit this reality, right? That they know it in a way that I never will. (laughter) I wonder …

Ms. Macy: It's amazing.

Ms. Tippett: You have grandchildren. Maybe …

Ms. Macy: … and they're able to look into the face of some pretty awful political corrupt machinations or what have you that would get me frothing with righteous indignation and they smile and shrug and say, "What do you expect?" and then they go and do what needs to be done. (laughter)

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being — conversation about meaning, religion, ethics, and ideas. I'm with philosopher of ecology, Buddhist scholar, and Rilke translator Joanna Macy.

I was noticing one of your most recent books, I think, is more Rilke, which you titled In Praise of Mortality. You wrote: "Rilke invites us to experience what mortality makes possible. It links us with life and all time." And you went on, "Ours is the suffering and ours is the harvest." I wonder, at 81, is there wisdom you have about that?

Ms. Macy: Well, it's very — I'm very grateful for Rilke because I signed the contract to prepare with Anita the Year with Rilke just weeks before the sudden death of my husband of 56 years. In that devastation and loss, I had to work on this book and I had to be with Rilke and I couldn't say, oh, I'm too weak, oh, let me mourn, oh, it's too much. I just had to pull up my socks and do it. And what a reward. It was as if I were being dipped in beauty. And then one day, I found this quote and I put it in the book because he says a lot about death and the way he faced his death and he did not take solace in an afterlife. So he just saw death belongs to life and can make us more alive.

But, Krista, listen to this. I put it on February 27th.

"The great secret of death, and perhaps its deepest connection with us, is this: 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." Get a load of that.

Ms. Tippett: And they're beautiful words, and were you really able to inhabit those words after your husband had died?

Ms. Macy: Oh, oh, yes, oh, yes. Well, you know, neither of us thought we were immortal, and we knew one would go first. 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 there's — 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.

Ms. Tippett: Here, in closing, is a poem from Rilke's Book of Hours, which Joanna Macy translated with Anita Barrows and subtitled Love Poems to God.

Ms. Macy: (reading) You are not surprised at the force of the storm —
you have seen it growing.
The trees flee. Their flight
sets the boulevards streaming. And you know:
he whom they flee is the one
you move toward. All your senses
sing him, as you stand at the window.

The weeks stood still in summer.
The trees' blood rose. And now you feel
it wants to sink back
into the source of everything. You thought
you could trust that power
when you plucked the fruit;
now it becomes a riddle again,
and you again a stranger.

Summer was like your house: you knew
where each thing stood.
Now you must go out into your heart
as onto a vast plain. Now
the immense loneliness begins.

The days go numb, the wind
sucks the world from your senses like withered leaves.

Through the empty branches the sky remains.
It is what you have.
Be earth now, and evensong.
Be the ground lying under that sky.
Be modest now, like a thing
ripened until it is real,
so that he who began it all
can feel you when he reaches for you.

Ms. Tippett: Joanna Macy's books include Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy.

Her books of translation, with Anita Barrows, include Rilke's Book of Hours, Love Poems to God, and A Year with Rilke.

Ms. Macy: The poem for today in A Year with Rilke is "The Swan." When I opened it this morning and saw that, I was delighted because when I've seen swans, they always make me think of Fran. And it's also about death and about how not to be afraid of death.

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.

So as I read that sonnet this morning, I thought of Fran and I thought, "Oh, look at you getting to have some regal composure while I have to deal with a broken car, with books I have to cull out, with repairs to the heating system." (laughter) There he goes, regal composure.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippett: Hear, read, and download all the Rilke poems Joanna Macy recited this hour at onbeing.org. And you'll discover a few others there too: some favorite Rilke poems of mine that I asked her to read specially for us. I've loved attaching these poems in emails to friends. And you can listen to my original, unedited interview with her on our website too — that's all at onbeing.org.

While you're there, you can also find ways to follow us on Tumblr, a digital space where we learn as much as we give — discovering communities and people who are moved by beauty, both visually and in word.

Also on our website, you can listen back to our recent series of Civil Conversations. We took on divisive issues like abortion and gay marriage but in a countercultural way: avoiding the predictable dead-end debates, seeking out bridge people, reframing what is at stake and how we can begin to grapple together even amid our differences. Hear those conversations again at onbeing.org.