Radical Joy For Hard Times
by Trebbe Johnson

When I receive a gift, I am conscious of both the gift and the giver. Gratitude suffuses me. This gratitude often transforms into a wish to give something back to my generous giver. We are conscious of this desire to give back when it comes to people who are givers. Places are givers, too. And we can give back to them. When we do, we become more courageous, more creative—and certainly more grateful! ~ Trebbe Johnson

Here in our feature “Grateful Changemakers,” we celebrate programs and projects that serve as beacons of gratefulness. These efforts elevate the values of grateful living and illuminate their potential to transform both individuals and communities. Join us in appreciating the inspiring and catalyzing contribution these Changemakers offer to shaping a more grateful world.

Radical Joy for Hard Times

Radical Joy for Hard Times is a worldwide community of people dedicated to bringing meaning, beauty, and value to places that have been damaged by human or natural acts. Through its online community and annual Global Earth Exchange event, Radical Joy uplifts and inspires values of relationship, community, ARTivism, and presence. Anyone can do the Radical Joy practice, which at its core invites us to share our sorrow or gratitude for places that have fallen on hard times. Founder Trebbe Johnson is the author of Radical Joy for Hard Times: Finding Meaning and Making Beauty in Earth’s Broken Places and 101 Ways to Make Guerrilla Beauty. Here she shares more about how Radical Joy invites us to spend time in wounded places: exposing our hearts to difficult feelings of loss and guilt; listening to the land and to one another; and opening ourselves to possibilities for finding and creating beauty.

What sparked the founding/creation of Radical Joy?

David Powless does ceremony with a bird made with tobacco, crushed corn, and feathers from eagles, an owl and a hawk.

In 1987 I made a video about David Powless of the Oneida Nation. He had received a National Science Foundation grant a few years earlier to recycle steel waste, and as the first Native American to receive such a prestigious grant, he shared that he was feeling pretty cocky. He said that when he first approached the enormous mound of steel waste, his inclination was to think of it as something to be overcome, battled against. Then he told me, “I realized that the waste was not an enemy to be conquered. It was an orphan
that had gotten separated from the circle of life. My job was to bring it back to the circle of life.”

I was very touched by these words. This concept of waste seemed like a way to recycle damaged, toxic places in the mind as well as in the environment. I spent many years thinking about how I might put such an idea into practice. I was attracted to the work of Joanna Macy, the great writer and teacher of transforming grief to empowerment; to Daniel Dancer, an artist who makes creative sculptures at broken places; and to a man named Pete Maniscalco, who would meditate in front of a nuclear power plant. My question was: How could I create some kind of practice that would change a place that is ugly into a beautiful place, a place that is ignored or even despised into a place that is loved once again and tended lovingly?

I guided a week-long vigil at an old-growth clear-cut forest, did a ceremony near Ground Zero in New York after September 11, and led a program in a forest that had been burned by a massive fire. But I wanted to create some way of giving to hurt places that people could do at any time in any place—a handy, accessible tool that anybody could use. So I founded Radical Joy for Hard Times in 2009.

How does Radical Joy speak to the needs and hopes of people and communities around the world? What is the importance of your work at this time in particular?

When the places we love are hurt, we hurt too. Up to now there has been no way to respond to, or even admit, hurt and grief for loss of place, at least in the non-Indigenous cultures of the U.S. If you did confess that you were mourning the destruction of a place, chances are you would be made fun of—accused of loving owls or moss or trees more than people. Maybe you’d be dismissed as a “tree hugger.” RadJoy gives people simple, meaningful ways of honoring the places they care about that have fallen on hard times, and honoring their own relationship with these places as well. Our practice involves four simple steps, which, of course, are infinitely variable according to circumstances:

1. Go and visit a wounded place.
2. Sit awhile and share your stories of what the place means to you.
3. Get to know the place as it is now.
4. Make a gift of beauty for the place.

Offering and image by Claire Hayes. Oak leaves in the shape of a bird honors victims of violence in Ireland.

Every year in June we hold a Global Earth Exchange, a day when people all over the world go to wounded places and practice these steps, then send us their photos and stories of what happened. This practice is lovingly and conscientiously enacted in so many ways in so many places, from scientists in Antarctica commemorating the melting of glaciers, to farmers in Bali making beauty for the clove harvest spoiled by unseasonable rains, to sacred stone circles in England, to Superfund sites in America.

As climate change and other ecological challenges continue to rob us of the places we love, these simple steps will become increasingly meaningful. They will help keep us connected both to the places we care about and to the other people who also care about them.
How does Radical Joy inspire care for the Earth and each other?

Our practices affirm for people three important things: (1) that it is right and normal and wonderful to love your place, (2) that when the place is hurt, you hurt too, and (3) that, even though you can’t necessarily restore your place to what it was or what you wish it could be, you can nurture a meaningful and ongoing relationship with it by finding and making beauty there.

These practices also bring together people who might not ordinarily think they have much in common, for love of place transcends religious, political, gender, and ethnic differences. I myself held a Global Earth Exchange one year for the Susquehanna River, which had been named the Most Endangered River in America because of the gas fracking that was taking water from it and adding toxins to it. The event was attended by about a dozen people — Democrats and Republicans, men and women, young people and older people, Jews and Mormons and Baptists and atheists. We all came together and shared our stories about how much we love the Susquehanna River, and then we wove a wreath of flowers for it, which we gently placed in its flow. It was a beautiful experience.

How do you see Radical Joy embodying and cultivating gratefulness and related qualities (reverence, reciprocity, belonging, etc.) through its work?

When they do the RadJoy Practice, people are often surprised that they can find beauty in a place they imagined would be nothing but ugly or depressing. A story I tell in my most recent book (Radical Joy for Hard Times: Finding Meaning and Making Beauty in Earth’s Broken Places) is of a visit I made with friends to a deep and enormous clay pit at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. The pit had been used for artillery practice, and there were holes in the walls. It felt at first desolate and frightening to be there, even though we knew we were safe. But then I noticed the movement of swallows flitting around, and I realized that they were building nests in the holes!

This kind of thing happens all the time when we go to a wounded place and open up to what it has to offer. We see the resilience of the Earth, we learn that we can face things we didn’t want to face, we discover that there is the possibility of beauty in all kinds of situations. These experiences make us feel more connected to the whole of life, the Great Mystery. And we realize that we have the power to give back to the Earth, as she gives so much to us. Feeling part of this great whole ushers in an enormous feeling of gratitude for our connection with the Earth.

How does gratefulness inspire you to make change in the world?

RadJoy members in Zimbabwe, with a gift of beauty made during a Global Earth Exchange.

When I am open to gratefulness, I am open to possibility, to life, to beauty. If I were to be closed to gratitude, I would close in on myself, become self-centered and so preoccupied with my own world that I would be inclined to shut others out. In my own life I have found
that even in the saddest and most difficult times, I can always be open to finding and making beauty. These two entrances to the beauty threshold—finding and making—keep me grateful, keep me connected, keep me humble, and keep me striving! This is the essence of Radical Joy for Hard Times: no matter what we’re going through, we can always find and make beauty.

I would say this to your question: gratefulness doesn’t just inspire me to make change in the world; making change in the world inspires gratefulness. That’s why, no matter how people do their RadJoy Practice, the one essential element is to make a gift of beauty for that hurt place. The Earth gives so much to us, now we can give something back.

What is the lasting impact of Radical Joy’s work? What are the ripple effects?

A journal entry by a student from Jo Huxster’s Climate Communication Class, St. Petersburg, FL

The people who participate in our practice and programs come to realize their connection to the entire world in an entirely new way. They realize that they don’t have to shun that which is broken or sick, either in themselves, in other people, or in the world. That creates a tremendous sense of empowerment. You can go forth with the knowledge that, although you can’t always change your circumstances, you can always change how you deal with your circumstances. And not in big, newsworthy ways, but in small, simple ways that make a difference in the moment.

After our annual Global Earth Exchange, people often write to us to say something like, “I really thought going to a polluted river—or an abandoned factory, or the site of a violent act—was a weird idea. But after we had spent some time there and made our gift for the place, everything changed. I ended up falling in love with that wounded place.”

As the ramifications of climate change, combined with other ecological challenges, increase, finding and making beauty, and opening up to gratitude and compassion in the process, will become more and more important, more and more imperative.

What are some of the barriers and obstacles faced by Radical Joy as it works toward its vision?

Offering and image by Janet Keating. Dolly Sods Wilderness Area—a place once deeply wounded, but now transformed by loving intentions and nature’s resilience.

Things have changed a lot during the past year in the way the world at large has responded to our work, our vision. In the past, some environmentalists would dismiss the idea of finding and making beauty. They thought that protesting and resisting were so important (and they are) that there wasn’t room for anything else, like sharing what the place you’re working so hard to protect actually means to you emotionally.

Other people have not fully understood the value of admitting grief for loss of place and have predetermined that RadJoy would be “depressing.” Not so. To overlook sorrow in our haste to leap to gratefulness or more “positive” feelings would be inauthentic. And admitting grief does not diminish us, it strengthens us and makes us more
The hard times of the Coronavirus pandemic, with the added worry of so much hatred and violence in America, has made a lot of people look at our work in a new way. They see that coming together around love of place or shared grief unites people.

How does Radical Joy plan to grow and expand its work?

Our ultimate vision is that every place on Earth is loved, tended, and valued. One goal we have is to create an Urgent Beauty Network, a group of people from around the world, who will gather online after a particular crisis and develop a campaign of beauty and creativity that others can participate in wherever they are to offer support and compassion to those who are suffering. We also want to incorporate the practice of finding and making beauty into the curriculum of schools and the liturgies of spiritual services, so the practice becomes a habit for people. The most important thing, though, is to keep getting the message out: that no matter what is going on in our lives, we can always find and make beauty.

What core message do you hope to share with people who participate in Radical Joy?

See above! No matter what is going on in our lives, we can always find and make beauty.

If Radical Joy could share one message about living gratefully, what would it be?

When I receive a gift, I am conscious of both the gift and the giver. Gratitude suffuses me. This gratitude often transforms into a wish to give something back to my generous giver. We are conscious of this desire to give back when it comes to people who are givers. Places are givers, too. And we can give back to them. When we do, we become more courageous, more creative—and certainly more grateful!

What are some meaningful ways people can engage in and support your work?

They can participate in our 12th annual Global Earth Exchange in June and join others around the world in making beauty for a hurt place. We are already working on creating a special focus for this year’s event that will take into consideration not just the hurt of the place, but also the hurts that so many people are feeling themselves.

Meanwhile, people can sign up for our weekly blog, Radical Joy Revealed, which features a story of how people are finding and making beauty for hurt places in interesting and inspiring ways, as well as news of upcoming events. They can join RadJoy Community, our new online hub where people can get together to share stories, challenges, inspiration, poems, and news about their practices of finding and making beauty.

And we can all be a little bit more aware of the hurt and broken places in our midst, to pause for a moment before them instead of passing by, even if we just bow to them in consolation or gratitude.