

Active Hope by Joanna Macy

Authors Joanna Macy and Chris Johnston suggest a life-sustaining civilization can be achieved with active hope.

The Great Turning [a shift of comparable scope and magnitude to the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution] involves the transition from a doomed economy of industrial growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the recovery of the world.... The Great Turning is a story of Active Hope.

To play our best part, we need to counter the voices that say we're not up to the task, that we're not good enough, strong enough, or wise enough to make any difference. If we fear that the mess we're in is too awful to look at or that we won't be able to cope with the distress it brings up, we need to find a way through that fear. This chapter describes three threads we can follow that help us stand tall and not shrink away when facing the immensity of what's happening to our world. These threads can be woven into any situation as a way of supporting and strengthening our capacity to respond. We shall therefore return to them often in the pages ahead. The first thread is the narrative structure of adventure stories.

Following the Thread of Adventure

Think of the Great Turning as an adventure story. Adventure stories often begin by introducing an ominous threat that seems way beyond what the main characters are capable of dealing with. If you ever feel the odds are stacked against you and doubt whether you're up to the challenge, then you join a time-honored tradition of protagonists in this genre. Heroes almost always start out seeming distinctly underpowered.

What makes the story is the way the central characters are not put off. Instead, their tale sets them on a quest in search of the allies, tools, and wisdom needed to improve their chances. We can think of ourselves as on a similar journey; part of the adventure of the Great Turning involves seeking the company, sources of support, tools, and insights that help us.

What starts us off is seeing what's at stake and feeling called to play our part. Then we just follow the thread of the adventure, developing capacities along the way and discovering hidden strengths that only reveal themselves when needed. When things are bumpy or bleak, we can remind ourselves that this is how these stories often go. There may be times when all feels lost. That too can be part of the story. Our choices at such moments can make a crucial difference.

The Thread of Active Hope

Any situation we face can resolve in a range of different ways — some much better, others much worse. Active Hope involves identifying the outcomes we hope for and then playing an active role in bringing them about. We don't wait until we are sure of success. We don't limit our choices to the outcomes that seem likely. Instead, we focus on what we truly, deeply long for, and then we proceed to take determined steps in that direction. This is the second thread we follow.

We can react to world crises in many different ways, with a spectrum of possible responses, from our best to our worst. We can rise to the occasion with wisdom, courage, and care, or we can shrink from the challenge, blot it out, or look away. With Active Hope we consciously choose to draw out our best responses, so that we might surprise even ourselves by what we bring forth. Can we train ourselves to become more courageous, inspired, and connected? This takes us to the next thread.

The Thread of the Spiral of the Work That Reconnects

The spiral of the Work That Reconnects is something we can come back to again and again as a source of strength and fresh insights. It reminds us that we are larger, stronger, deeper, and more creative than we have been brought up to believe. It maps out an empowerment process that journeys through four successive movements, or stations, described as Coming from Gratitude, Honoring Our Pain for the World, Seeing with New Eyes, and Going Forth.

When we come from gratitude, we become more present to the wonder of being alive in this amazing living world, to the many gifts we receive, to the beauty we appreciate. Yet the very act of looking at what we love and value in our world brings with it an awareness of the vast violation under way, the despoliation and unraveling. From gratitude we naturally flow to honoring our pain for the world.

Coming from gratitude helps build a context of trust and psychological buoyancy that supports us to face difficult realities in the second phase. Dedicating time and attention to honoring our pain for the world ensures that there is space to hear our sorrow, grief, outrage, and any other feelings revealing themselves in response to what is happening to our world. Admitting the depths of our anguish, even to ourselves, takes us into culturally forbidden territory. From an early age we've been told to pull ourselves together, to cheer up or shut up. By honoring our pain for the world, we break through the taboos that silence our distress. When the activating siren of inner alarm is no longer muffled or shut out, something gets switched on inside us. It is our survival response.

The term honoring implies a respectful welcoming, where we recognize the value of something. Our pain for the world not only alerts us to danger but also reveals our profound caring. And this caring derives from our interconnectedness with all life. We need not fear it.

In the third stage, we step further into the perceptual shift that recognizes our pain for the world as a healthy expression of our belonging to life. Seeing with new eyes reveals the wider web of resources available to us through our rootedness within a deeper, ecological self. This third stage draws on insights from holistic science and ancient spiritual wisdom, as well as from our creative imaginations. It opens us to a new view of what is possible and a new understanding of our power to make a difference.

To experience the benefits of these empowering perspectives, we want to apply them to the task of addressing the challenges we face. The final station, Going Forth, involves clarifying our vision of how we can act for the healing of our world, identifying practical steps that move our vision forward).

The spiral offers a transformational journey that deepens our capacity to act for the sake of life on Earth. We call it a spiral rather than a cycle because every time we move through the four stations we experience them differently. Each element reconnects us with our world, and each encounter can surprise us with hidden gems. As each station naturally unfolds into the next, a momentum and a flow build up, allowing the four elements to work together to form a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. As we allow ourselves to be guided by this spiral form, it isn't just us acting; we are letting the world act on us and through us.

The Work That Reconnects as a Personal Practice

The spiral provides a structure we can fall back on, and into, whenever we need to tap into the resilience and resourcefulness arising from the larger web of life. If you're feeling sickened by a disturbing news report, you can step into gratitude simply by focusing on your breath and taking a moment to give thanks for whatever may be sustaining you in that moment. As you feel the air entering your nostrils, give thanks for oxygen, for your lungs, for all that brings you to life. The question, "To whom am I grateful?" moves your attention beyond yourself to those you receive from, those who support you.

A moment of gratitude strengthens your capacity to look at, rather than turn away from, disturbing information. As you allow yourself to take in whatever you see, allow yourself also to feel whatever you feel. When you experience pain for something beyond your immediate self-interest, this reveals your caring, compassion, and connection — such precious things. By honoring your pain for the world, in whatever form it takes, you take it seriously and allow the signal it brings to rouse you.

When seeing with new eyes, you know that it isn't just you facing this. You are just one part of a much larger story, a continuing stream of life on Earth that has flowed for more than three and a half billion years and that has survived five mass extinctions. When you sink into this deeper, stronger flow and experience yourself as part of it, a different set of possibilities emerges. Widening your vision increases the resources available to you, since through the same channels of connectedness that pain for the world flows, so also do strength, courage, renewed determination, and the help of allies.

With the shift of perception that seeing with new eyes brings, you can let go of feeling you need to sort everything out. Instead you focus on finding and playing your part, offering your gift of Active Hope, your best contribution to the healing of our world. As you move into going forth, you consider what this might be, and what your next step will be. Then you take that step.

What we've described here is a short form of the spiral that might only take a few minutes to move round. Like a fractal that has the same characteristic shape whatever scale it is viewed at, the form of the spiral can be applied to a wide range of time frames, with rotations happening over minutes, hours, days, or weeks. We move through the four stations in a way that supports our intention to act for the sake of life on Earth. The more familiar you become with this strengthening journey, the more you can trust the spiral

structure process. Each of these stations contains hidden depths, rich meaning, and treasures to explore. It is to these that we turn in the chapters ahead.