

This seems to be the crux of the matter. Those of us who are aware of the importance of loving communication must find ways to reach out and change those who are aggressive, unaware or just frightened.

And if this can be done in mass demonstrations, so much the better. But these must be peaceful in the full sense of the word. To refrain from physically attacking people who uphold different strategies, while verbally attacking them and trying to make their lives as difficult as possible, is not enough. This is the "peace" of the cold war. Like charity, peace begins at home, in our own hearts. Only when we have achieved this may we presume to instruct other governments, our own government, other peace seeking groups in how to achieve world peace.

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## JOANNA MACEY interviewed by JOHN ROWAN

*J.R.:* I wonder if we could just go back to the beginning of this thing, when you discovered your own despair? I saw a very brief account of that, and it sounded like quite a key thing.

*J.M.:* Yes, it was. It was. It was exactly six years ago this Spring. I was on a train in Boston, crossing the Charles River, returning from an all-day symposium on the threats to our survival. There was a barrage of information and audio-visual representation about these threats, ranging from radio-active pollution to the extinction of animal species, to you name it - oil spills, deforestation, all of it. The cumulative weight of all this - none of which was news to me, because I'd been involved all my life in social concerns - but it was the cumulative effect, I think particularly of the final thing, a film about the baby seals, struggling . . . Where I - suddenly, my defences broke, against the knowledge that we could do ourselves in. And that possibility, even when it's only glimpsed as a possibility, but genuinely seems a possibility, pulls you into a new dimension of experience. Something is lost, some quality of innocence. And I experienced there, for those moments on that train, an inner abyss, a horror. And grief; tremendous grief.

As a matter of fact, I was looking - the tears were pouring down my face as I looked at the faces on the subway, over the Charles River to New England, and for weeks afterwards I was preoccupied with the question of how one manages - literally manages to live

- with that awareness. And it was - do I go crazy with that knowledge, or do I numb myself? Or is there a middle way? Is there an alternative between going numb and going berserk?

So, because of my long-time involvement with spiritual pursuits, my question became a religious question too. Can we be asked, if there is an order to the Universe, call it God, or Buddha-nature - can we be asked to experience something we don't have the power to sustain? There must be a way to sustain that experience if God doesn't play dice! If this is an intelligent Cosmos.

And it was during this time that I experienced the isolation that comes with this - a sense that this was not something that I could share with other people. On the one hand, I didn't want to inflict that horror on the people I loved. I didn't want to burden them, to make them experience what I was experiencing; and I didn't want them to know how ghastly it was, so that they wouldn't have to worry about me. So that taught me that we push this away or keep it under wraps not out of cowardice but out of compassion. And I've found this to be very true, increasingly so. I've done a lot of work with parents.

So what I did with it was to go to some colleagues in the religious department where I work - I tried to convey this experience to them. Even as a challenging question - What is it like to be asked to live on this planet having lost the certainty that there's a future? And I was feeling it! And I realised there that people resented it when I brought it up, and that they wanted to cheer me up. That was intolerable to me, because it trivialized the question - it seemed in a way to trivialize human life. To say "there, there now". Or even worse, to say - What are you **really** worried about? How is your relationship with your husband? How is your sex life? All that facile pop psychologisation of this kind of anguish. As if such concerns couldn't be genuine on their own account.

At any rate, it was over a year later when I chaired a week-long seminar at the University of Notre Dame on planetary survival. And it was attended by academics and university administrators, about half of them scientists and half of them humanists. They had prepared papers on various aspects of the planetary crisis, in terms of the threats to human survival. I started out the seminar by acknowledging in a very personal fashion that these issues were heavily charged emotionally. It would be inappropriate to address them without acknowledging that. So let us begin by introducing ourselves, and sharing our images of how in the past year the global crisis has impinged on our consciousness. This is something we do now in all our workshops. That had

a transformative effect on that seminar, and the people who took part in it. It broke some barrier. It radically changed the way people related to each other. We hardly broke up - we were meeting morning, noon and night! And there was a lot of hilarity - a **tremendous** release of energy. So it was one night there, late at night, that the name for whatever alchemy had occurred came to us. What we need is a name for something like grief work - the kind of thing that a bereaved person has to do in order to accept and react positively to the new situation they are in. But this is despair work - not to accept a loss, but to deal with the feelings so that we can release that.

Then the following week in the AHP Annual Meeting I was in a symposium on Systems Theory, and I just spent five minutes talking about despair work, because it was so fresh in my mind - and that was all that people wanted to talk about - it clearly touched a raw nerve. I then wrote an article about it, just as I was leaving for a year's work in South Asia.

By the time I returned, fourteen months later, that article had drawn so much response, and had been reprinted in so many different places, and had been circulating like some **samizdat** - xeroxes of xeroxes - that there was a demand for guidance on doing what I was talking about. So at that point I began doing some workshops. I had done workshops before, but never one on this specific thing. So for the past two and a half years those workshops have been going on, and a number of other people, some psychotherapists, some from other walks of life, have begun participating in the work, and we now call this loose network of people interhelp.

The term "despair" got appended to this work early on, but it is not an accurate term. For two reasons: one is because it denotes a loss of hope, and what we are talking about is a human response that can coexist with hope. The French, in translating an article on this work, called it **travailler avec l'angoisse planétaire**, and that term - planetary anguish - seems more appropriate. We have found ourselves, in the last year and a half, using increasingly the term **pain for the world** as being more accurate. The responses that come up when people view what is happening to the world, and the future, what they are experiencing includes a compound of - and this varies from one individual to another - anger, fear, sorrow, guilt and a sense of being overwhelmed. But we are accustomed to using these terms as expressive of an individual's concerns, and what is distinctive about this is that it is **on behalf of** something more than the self. The anger is anger on behalf of others; the fear is much more than fear of personal death - it is really categorically different. It is easier to face your

own death than to face the death of everything; people recognise this and know this. And the sorrow also is sorrow for other beings in addition to ourselves. So there is that collective dimension to this experience, which is why it increasingly seems to me that this work can be a portal, or a bridge towards the development of collective intelligence - collective consciousness.

The reason why we have on this book (**Despair and personal power in the nuclear age**) which summarises our work in about 47 different exercises and the theory, and all of that, which just came out last month - we have this web design on it, on the front cover, is that the web, or the net, has become increasingly the dominant image that arises in doing this work. As we experience pain for the world, we find our connection with each other. The pain is living proof of our interconnectedness. So that it is living proof of us being members of one body. In that sense it is the affirmation of the insights of many ancient spiritual paths. We are members of the body of Christ. We are jewels in the jewelled net of Indra. We are part of the great body of the Mahaparusha, and so forth. We are as interconnected as the cells of an organism, and the despair and anguish or pain for the world is our means of sensing the trauma afflicting the larger body. And as we acknowledge that we are experiencing that, and affirm it and validate it, then we can move to the source of that pain, which is our caring, which is our interconnectedness.

*J.R.: If you care, you must suffer.*

**J.M.:** Right, because what comes up is that people have this urgency to express all this **for once** without being accused of being antisocial or morbid or crazy. To say out loud, finally, their grief for the world without it being trivialised or turned aside. To have got it off, to have got relief - well, I have a friend who was telling me that the work is much more than catharsis. There is catharsis in it, of course, because we are expressing feelings **and knowings** that have been repressed, but it goes beyond catharsis because it changes your perspective on who and what you are. This is the experience of the interconnectedness, and the naming of that. What I'd like to say, too, is that I'm uncomfortable with definitions of this work that equate it with just with dealing with our feelings. It's much more than our feelings about the condition of our world today that are repressed - it's our knowledge, too. So that it gives people an opportunity to be able to discover insights and perceptions from a new angle.

The majority of people find that doing these workshops has increased their capacity to deal with the problems that have caused them pain for the world, in a number of ways. This could be as simple as the

ability to read the newspapers and watch the news. We do work on handling and how to live with pain for the world; we have some breathing exercises. We encourage people to keep registering it, and this is quite significant, because an increasing number of people report that they have given up reading the newspaper, because it is just too painful. So at one end it is just enabling people to cope with the information, and at the other it is enabling people to take action, sometimes very boldly, in terms of setting up new organizations or networks or projects, and becoming active. Giving directly of their time and energy to social change work, whether for the environment or for peace. Some people have said that it's permitted them to communicate on this subject with the people in their lives, which they weren't able to do before. Some have said that it had depolarized their communication with people they don't agree with. That is, they feel that it has enabled them to be more effective in communicating, because they listen more and try to persuade less.

One person did a project which just involved riding on trains and getting people to talk into a tape recorder about their feelings about the world situation. It didn't seem to matter whether there was any tape in the tape recorder - it was just the opportunity to really hear yourself talk about these things, without being interrupted and without being put down. Another woman went all over the world, including Russia, China, all kinds of places, and just sat on a bench in a public square, with a notice that said - "American willing to listen" - and hundreds of people came to talk to her. Sometimes they stood in line for an hour or more to get to talk to her! I don't think we realise the power of just listening.

**J.R.:** *Finally, what is your connection with the AHP?*

**J.M.:** My initial involvement with the AHP was when Willis Harman and some of the people at the Stanford Research Institute took an interest in something I had written on systems theory. They were organizing a systems track for the 1978 Annual Meeting, and invited me to speak. And then my husband had got some training in gestalt, and was very enthusiastic about that, and was in touch with the AHP himself. Then last year Jackie Doyle (AHP president) was living with us in Washington, and that made a further connection again. And now my husband is working as the AHP general administrator.

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## Reference

Joanna Rogers Macy (1983) **Despair and personal power in the nuclear age**. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.

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