



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “The Great Turning: from Ego Self to Eco Self”

© by Kate Blane and Dan Everett

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### Centering Thoughts

*Nothing causes more people to deny God, misunderstand God, mistreat others, or abuse Nature more than the illusion of separateness. Nothing. No thing.*

Donald L. Hicks, *Look into the Stillness.*

*We need to realize that we are the universe in the form of a human.* Sister Miriam MacGillis

*Why struggle to open a door between us when the whole wall is an illusion?* Rumi

### Sermon

[**Kate**] For our Unitarian Universalist talk last June, Dan and I spoke about the importance of stories in our lives -- how they inform our belief systems. Is poverty solvable? Is global warming real? Can war be ended? The answers to these questions depend on the stories we tell about the world. Today, we will consider the biggest story of all: the story of the world and our place in it. The theme of this message is **How We Deal with the Pain and Passion That Comes Up in Our Heart While We Strive to Heal the World.**

[**Dan**] Today we take our inspiration from the work of Joanna Macy, an internationally known peace and justice activist, an environmentalist, Buddhist, and adjunct faculty member at the Starr King School for the Ministry, where many of our UU ministers are trained.

[**Kate**] Now at the age of 86, Macy continues to travel internationally giving lectures, trainings and workshops on the Great Turning which she defines as moving from an industrial growth society to a life enhancing civilization. As part of this transformation, we need to change our idea of the self, from ego self to eco self.

Which brings us to the story of our place in the world. According to Macy, many people who are on a consciously spiritual path, in any tradition, tend to adopt one of four versions of the world story, or a mixture of them:

[**Dan**] **First: The World as Battleground:** in this version of the story, our world is the arena for a great struggle between good and evil. “Whatever the score is at the moment,.. there is the sense that you are fighting God’s battle and that ultimately you will win.” In this world view it does not matter if the whole world is destroyed in this epic struggle, because the real battle is for our souls.

[Kate] The second version is **The World as Trap**: In this story, the goal of the spiritual path is to escape from this messy world and go someplace else. Macy calls this other experience “a higher, supra-phenomenal world.”

[Dan] Ah, supra phenomenal ... meaning beyond all phenomena? Like the Talking Heads song, “Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens.”

[Kate] Very funny. Escaping from this world to a better place has seemed ideal to many religions. Elements of the world as trap story have seeped into all major religions of the past 3,000 years. We are familiar with this in many schools of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam ... monasteries, chastity, hair shirts, puritanism, ... all of these are to escape the temptations of the world and find our purer self.

[Dan] Yes, and Macy’s critique of the World as Trap story is quite interesting. Most of our religious traditions assume a hierarchical reality, where the world of mind and spirit is superior to the world of the flesh. But, we are flesh and blood creatures after all. If we try to escape from our material world, we can develop a love-hate relationship with the things of this world.

[Kate] A more subtle form of the world as trap story comes into play when we feel the urge to help suffering beings, but decide that before getting involved in social action, we first have to get our own act together: cure our neuroses, learn to meditate, or whatever it takes to get us straight, and **only** then will we take action in the world.

But Dan and I don’t want to wait until we have heads on straight because this might never happen. We need a story that empowers us to engage with the world right now.

[Dan] Which brings us to the third version of the great story: the world as lover. Hey Kate, are we going off the deep end here?

[Kate] No, this is actually respectable theology. The Hindu stories of the milkmaids lining up to be beautiful blue sensual Krishna’s dance partner, or the transcendent love of the Sufi mystics and Rumi.

[Dan] I like this version of the story because we are getting past the body vs spirit duality here. Our affectionate, or erotic, feelings are part of the primal creativity of life. Our creative juices, the passion that makes us show up at a social justice rally, climate advocacy or food justice rally: these come from our bodies as well as our intellects. It just doesn’t make sense to separate the two.

[Kate] But, speaking of getting beyond separation, there is a fourth and final version of this story: the world as self. The idea that each one of us is the whole universe, is God, WE ARE ONE, shows up in mystical writings throughout the centuries.

[Dan] As the Dalai Lama said to the hotdog vendor:

[Kate & Dan] Make me one with everything.

[Dan] Yeah, but it seems so abstract and philosophical. Does this story of the world as self have any practical meaning? Anything we can make part of our personal spiritual practice, or use in our justice work?

[**Kate**] More than that. In fact, Joanna Macy argues that this expanded sense of self, the “**eco self**”, is the *only* self that enables us to take effective action.

[**Dan**] Wow, that’s pretty radical! We all grew up believing that the most certain thing in our world was ourselves. And by “self” we meant the **ego self**, the bundle of consciousness inside our head, that stops at our skin. So what has happened to that common sense idea of the self?

[**Kate**] Three developments are changing the traditional concepts of self, and these are all new to our time. The first is the threat of mass annihilation: not mystical or metaphorical as in the Book of Revelation, but horrifyingly factual with no spiritually redeeming meaning: we currently live under the threats of global thermonuclear war; global climate disruption; and uncontrollable artificial intelligences.

The assumption of the **ego self** is that whatever crazy things are going on out in the world, we can always live our own life. That no longer works. We are dragged, kicking and screaming, into looking at our lives as inextricably linked with the fate of the world.

Which brings us to the second new development which is your beloved general systems theory, Mr. Professor.

[**Dan**] General systems theory sees the world as made up of interacting loops and flows. What is this thing we call our self? Isn’t it the thoughts flowing around in our brains? But the flow doesn’t stop inside our brain. This idea we are talking about right now flowed from Joanna Macy’s mind, to a book, to our minds, and now out to you. Which means that the **ego self** is an arbitrary cultural construct, an artificial boundary that does not correspond to any reality.

[**Kate**] That’s pretty mind-blowing! And since our understanding of the world is based on a wrong idea of the self... it makes a lot of what we think about the world wrong. For instance, we have long felt that we can endlessly exploit other cultures and resources of the earth because it is separate from us. Same with the animals, same with the plants, same with insects, same with the soil and so forth.

[**Dan**] And the third development that is disrupting the **ego self**, in Western culture, is our new access to non-dualistic Eastern spiritualities, an alternative way of looking at the self.

Non-dualistic spiritualities do not divide existence into categories, such as us vs. the world, [**Kate**] good vs bad, [**Dan**] brain vs body, [**Kate**] past vs futures, [**Dan**] Dan vs. Kate.

[**Dan**] This may sound fanciful, but it is of great practical importance if we want to heal the world. Macy recounts a conversation with an environmental activist who is struggling to preserve the last remaining bits of Australian rain forest from timber interests and politicians. She asked this person, “How do you deal with the despair?” and he replied,

[**Kate**] I try to remember that it’s not me protecting the rainforest. I am part of the rainforest protecting itself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking.

Krishna Das sings, “My foolish heart, when will you learn, you are the eyes of the world, there is nowhere else to turn.” We are the part of creation that has evolved the ability to voice the

suffering and beauty. Who else will do this, who will speak for the oceans, the rainforests, the frogs? Who will bear witness? It is hard enough to feel empathy with all the people of the earth let alone those who are so different and without a voice.

Let's listen to Joanna Macy's voice:

**[Dan]** *When I wept about the napalming of Vietnamese villages, I was told that I was suffering from a hangover of Puritan guilt. When I protested against President Reagan, they said I had unresolved issues with my own father. But ... a compassionate response is neither craziness nor a dodge. It is the opposite; it is a signal of our own evolution, a measure of our humanity. We are capable of suffering with the world, and that is the true meaning of compassion. It allows us to feel our interconnection with other living beings. Don't ever apologize for crying for the trees burning in the Amazon or over the [polluted waters]. Don't apologize for the sorrow, grief and rage you feel. It is a measure of your humanity. It is a measure of your open heart, and as your heart breaks open there is room for the world to heal.*

**[Kate]** Krishna Das sings: My foolish heart, why do you weep, throw yourself away again, now you cry yourself to sleep. This is an evocative image. How often have we wanted to weep but muffled our feelings. And there is so very much to weep for .. not only for the wars, hunger and abuse inflicted on humans but for the destruction waged against our very own life support systems, 90% of large fish in the oceans gone, 97% of native forests gone, 98% of native grasslands gone, rampant extinction of species.

But if we muffle our feelings we can't experience the beauty and joy of being alive. We don't want to be a stone Buddha nor do we want to slip into despair.

**[Dan]** When Krishna Das calls his heart "foolish" for weeping, he seems to be contradicting Joanna Macy who says it is good to weep. It is foolish if we only weep, which would be despair, without realizing the purpose it serves. For the next part of the song says, "you are the eyes of the world, there is nowhere else to turn". We need to feel the suffering, to become witness to it and conscious that what happens to everything else in the world is happening to us. How will the world ever be healed, if we don't feel its pain, if our compassion doesn't grow? We are the eyes; we are the universe becoming conscious of itself. And we mean this in a very literal way. Gaia, the totality of all life on earth, has evolved many different capabilities over the eons. Now Gaia has evolved the capability to become conscious of itself through us.

**[Kate]** What do you think is the fundamental cause of these horrible environmental problems afflicting the world today? Just take a moment to think about this. What do you come up with? We have polled a number people and have gotten answers ranging from love of control, greed, sex contributing to overpopulation, intelligence itself.

Is it not the delusion that we are separate from the world, that damaging another part of the world does not affect us? As we shed our old, outgrown **ego** selves, and grow into our **eco** selves, we will realize that damaging any part of the world is like shooting ourselves in the foot.

**[Dan]** There is evidence that over historical time empathy and compassion are growing. Slavery is no longer acceptable, nor child abuse, nor subjugation of women. Now even compassion for the non-human world is growing. As our circles of compassion grow, each circle enhances the

previous. If not even a sparrow can fall without evoking our compassion, how much more a human life?

[**Dan**] You know, I always thought that “make me one with everything” would be comforting and peaceful. But this sounds scary and painful, to have so much compassion for the pain of the whole world.

[**Kate**] Perhaps so, but it’s what we **have** to do, and we are beginning to feel this compassion, whether we like it or not. Our 7th UU principle calls for respect of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. But respect seems too distant and aloof of a word; it doesn’t convey the full blooded passion with which we love the world. Our circles of compassion are expanding to include more and more of the world, and we celebrate that.

[**Dan**] Once we have experienced the **eco** self, we can’t go back. The old **ego** self seems so limiting and unsatisfying. To experience the eco self is like leaving a dark lonely room and entering a great sunny field teeming with life. A feeling of liberation.

[**Kate**] This would be our liberation song. If you want to be free, come with me, take my hand and we can see, a world beyond our dreams, come with me. We are not talking about some supra phenomenal astral plane, we are talking about this world. We need to thrive emotionally, mentally, physically, we need the world to thrive the same way, we need all parts and people to thrive for us to be completely healthy and happy ....to be truly liberated

[**Dan**] Well it might take 300 years to solve all these problems, so do we have to wait that long to be free?

[**Kate**] No, we can be free right now by living the story of world as self, and being part of the work that is healing the world, which is us.

[**Dan**] One final thought: we are not doing this alone. Buddhism emphasizes the importance of the sangha, the community of spiritual seekers. This Fellowship is a sangha where we come together to support one another’s spiritual growth. And our communities of practice can be sanghas.

So the next time you meet with your Fellowship committee or your justice group, whatever that may be, look around at the other people in the room. For they are not only your teammates on this particular project, but your fellow travelers on a great spiritual journey. Let’s be the eyes of the world and join together with everything for the world’s liberation. . Because we really are all one, whatever we do to heal the world is healing ourselves. Let’s sing our liberation song together as we heal.

[**Kate**] May it be so.

### *Offering words*

[**Dan**] A couple hundred years ago in Baghdad, a young theology student falls in love with the daughter of a wealthy merchant and goes to her father to ask for her hand. As is the custom of the time, the merchant’s wife listens in from the next room.

[**Kate**] When the young man comes in, the father does not even let him open his mouth.

[**Dan**] Young man, have you completely lost your mind? You can't even feed yourself! How could you possibly support a wife?

[**Kate**] And the young man replies, God will provide.

[**Dan**] But my daughter is used to the finest foods and clothing. How could she ever be happy as the wife of a poor mullah?

[**Kate**] And the young man replies, God will provide.

[**Dan**] But good lord, think of your children! How will you feed them? And educate them?

[**Kate**] And the young man replies, God will provide.

[**Dan**] Ah, away with you! You'll have my answer tomorrow.

[**Kate**] At this point the wife re-enters the room and asks, Abdul, what do you think of the nice young man?

[**Dan**] Well, it could be worse! He's a complete idiot, but he thinks I'm God!

[**Kate**] And we may be complete idiots, but we think you're God, and that you will provide for the needs of this Fellowship and [the cause of the month].

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Do you ever weep about the injustices of the world?
2. How do you overcome your sadness about the injustices?
3. If you truly believed that you were one with everything, how would it change your life?