

Here's a taster of what's to come,
with the introduction and first two chapters.
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For details please see <https://www.activehope.info/the-book>

ACTIVE HOPE

**How to Face the Mess We're in
with Unexpected Resilience
and Creative Power**

**JOANNA MACY &
CHRIS JOHNSTONE**

REVISED EDITION



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This book is dedicated
to the flourishing of life
on this rare and precious Earth
and to the role each of us can play
in responding to our planetary emergency.

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Introduction

The year 2020 began with dead birds falling from smoke-filled skies as wildfires raged in Australia. It ended with a global death toll of nearly two million people killed by a pandemic that was still on the rise. Looking back, this was the year the Great Unraveling went mainstream.

Do you have the feeling that our world is falling apart? Or that our human civilization and planetary ecosystem are in dangerous decline? That's what we mean by *the Great Unraveling*, a term suggested by visionary economist and author David Korten when considering how future generations might talk about our time.¹ The Great Unraveling is more than just a few isolated disasters. As we'll explore, there's a larger pattern at work.

Canaries were once used in coal mines to provide warning of toxic gas. When the birds died from breathing invisible poisons in the air, miners knew they were in danger and needed to act quickly. The massive decline in global bird populations tells us something similar. Since 1970, nearly three billion birds have died in North America alone. Scientists have commented that this staggering loss suggests the very fabric of North America's ecosystem is unraveling.² Happening throughout our whole world, it is not just ecosystems that are unraveling, but our social systems too.

Over the past fifty years, each decade has become warmer. Extreme weather events, such as record-breaking heat waves, wildfires,

droughts, floods, and storms, have become more common, a trend that will make future conditions much worse.³ As global heating continues, the proportion of land becoming too hot to live on is set to increase from 0.8 percent in 2020 to 19 percent in 2070.⁴ This could displace between one and three billion people.

Those who are younger will experience these changes most, with children born in 2020 between two and seven times more likely than their grandparents to suffer through floods, heat waves, droughts, wildfires, and crop failures.⁵ The term *climate justice* draws attention to both this intergenerational injustice and the ways climate disruption disproportionately harms people living in low-income communities and countries.

Climate change isn't the only problem we face. Human population and consumption are increasing at the same time as essential resources, such as fresh water, fish stocks, and topsoil, are in decline. Extreme inequality is on the rise, with more and richer billionaires accumulating wealth in a world where hundreds of millions of people still starve. While the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has left many feeling desperate about how they're going to manage, \$2 trillion is spent globally each year on preparing for and engaging in warfare.⁶

Hope is often thought of as the feeling that things are going to get better. When facing the mess we're in, it is difficult for most of us to have that. Looking into the future, we can no longer take it for granted that the resources we depend on — food, fuel, and drinkable water — will be available. We can no longer even be certain that our civilization will survive or that conditions on our planet will remain hospitable for complex forms of life.

We are starting out by naming this bleak uncertainty as a pivotal psychological reality of our time. We may wonder whether we — our families, our civilization, and even our species — will make it. Yet because fears for our collective future are usually considered

too uncomfortable to talk about, they tend to remain an unspoken presence at the back of our minds. We often hear comments such as “Don’t go there, it is too depressing” and “Don’t dwell on the negative.” The problem with this approach is that it closes down our conversations and our thinking. How can we even begin to tackle the mess we’re in if we consider it too depressing to think about or discuss? This blocked communication generates a peril even more deadly, for the greatest danger of our times is the deadening of our response.

Yet when we do face the mess — when we do let in the dreadful news of multiple tragedies unfolding in our world — we can feel overwhelmed. We may wonder whether we can do anything about it anyway.

So this is where we begin: by acknowledging that our times confront us with realities that are painful to face, difficult to take in, and confusing to live with. Don’t be surprised if you find yourself feeling anxious, defeated, or in despair.

There’s something else we’d like to bring in alongside this difficult starting point. It is a recognition that when we’re at our most exasperated, we can sometimes surprise ourselves. We might discover strengths we never knew we had or experience degrees of aliveness we’d not even suspected were available to us. This is a time to reach out and find new allies, as well as to discard forms of thinking and behavior that have led us astray. In a process known as *adversity activated development*, our very act of facing the mess we’re in can help us discover a more enlivening sense of what our lives are about, what we’re here to do, and what we’re truly capable of.

Do you hope this will happen for you? Or that you might play a role in helping this happen for others? If so, we invite you to join us in our journey. Together we will explore how we can access unexpected resilience and creative power, not just to face the mess we’re in, but also to play our part in doing something about it.

WHAT IS ACTIVE HOPE?

Whatever situation we encounter, we can choose our response. When facing overwhelming challenges, we might feel that our actions don't count for much. Yet the kind of responses we make and the degree to which we believe they count are shaped by the way we think and feel about hope. Here's an example.

Jane cared deeply about the world and was horrified by what she saw happening. She regarded human beings as a lost cause, as so stuck in our destructive ways that she believed the complete wrecking of our world was inevitable. "What's the point of doing anything if it won't change what we're heading for?" she asked.

The word *hope* has two different meanings. The first, which we've touched on already, involves hopefulness, where our preferred outcome seems reasonably likely to happen. But if we require this kind of hope before we commit ourselves to an action, our response gets blocked in areas where we don't rate our chances well. This is what happened for Jane — she felt so hopeless she didn't see the point of even trying to change things.

The second meaning is about desire. When Jane was asked what she'd like to have happen in our world, without hesitation she described the future she hoped for, the kind of world she longed for so much it hurt. It is this kind of hope that starts our journey — knowing what we hope for and what we'd like, or love, to have happen. It is what we do with this hope that really makes the difference. Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in the process of moving toward our hopes and, where we can, realizing them.

Active Hope is a practice. Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we *do* rather than *have*. It is a process we can apply to any situation, and it involves three key steps. First, we start from where we are by taking in a clear view of reality, acknowledging what we

see and how we feel. Second, we identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we'd like things to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed. And third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction.

Since Active Hope doesn't require our optimism, we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we *choose* what we aim to bring about, act for, or express. Rather than weighing our chances and proceeding only when we feel hopeful, we focus on our intention and let it be our guide.

BUILDING OUR CAPACITY AND COMMITMENT

Most books addressing global issues focus on describing either the problems we face or the solutions needed. While we touch on both of these, our focus is on how we can strengthen our commitment and capacity to act, so that we can best play our part, whatever that may be, in the healing of our world.

Since we each look out onto a different corner of the planet and bring with us our own particular portfolio of interests, skills, and experiences, we are touched by different concerns and called to respond in different ways. The purpose of this book is to help you address the issues you're most moved by, guided by what's heartfelt and rings true to you.

When we become aware of an emergency and rise to the occasion, something powerful gets switched on inside us. We activate our sense of purpose and discover strengths we didn't even know we had. Being able to make a difference is powerfully energizing; it makes our existence feel more worthwhile. When we practice Active Hope, it is not about being dutiful or worthy so much as it is about stepping into a state of aliveness that transforms our lives and our world.

THREE STORIES OF OUR TIME

In any great adventure, there are always obstacles in the way. The first hurdle is just to be aware that we, as a civilization and as a species, appear to be heading toward catastrophe. Even though there's more talk these days of the need to address our global crisis, most governments and mainstream businesses still pursue the same short-term priorities that have created the mess we face.

In chapter 1 we draw attention to the huge gap between the scale of the emergency and the size of the response, explaining this by exploring how our perceptions are shaped by the story we identify with. We describe three stories, or versions of reality, each serving as a lens through which we can see and understand what's going on.

We've already introduced our first story. We call it the Great Unraveling to name the progressive decline and collapse of countless interlocking elements in the social, ecological, hydrological, and atmospheric systems on which life depends. Climbing levels of hate crime, falling levels of trust, and increasing use of lies by political leaders all play a role.

When we step back and see this larger story as a whole, it is easier to recognize that our world isn't simply unraveling — it is being pulled apart. An active process is at work that's linked to a second story we call Business as Usual.

With Business as Usual, the defining assumption is that there is little need to change the way we live. Economic growth is regarded as essential for prosperity, and the central plot is about getting ahead, without any longer-range consideration about where this approach is taking us. Until 2020, this narrative so dominated mainstream culture that for many it seemed to be the only story on offer and accepted as just the way things are. Then came Covid-19. As disease, death, and disruption touched so many corners of our world, unraveling moved center stage. When there are years of upheaval, many people understandably yearn for a bounce

back to how things used to be. Yet a return to Business as Usual, as we'll explore, just speeds up the unraveling.

The third story is embraced by those who believe a different way forward is possible and already underway. It includes those who stand firm to defend the social and ecological fabric of our world, engaging in activism for justice and the preservation of life. It also features those reinventing the way we do things, developing systems and structures that support the flourishing of life, from local currencies to solar cooperatives, from ecovillages to regenerative agriculture. This story encompasses both inner and outer dimensions of change, with shifts in our sense of who we are, who we want to be, and how we relate to one another and our living Earth.

The different threads of this third story combine and interact in a larger narrative arc: that of the epochal transition from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society. This far-reaching change is comparable in scope and magnitude to both the Agricultural Revolution ten thousand years ago and the Industrial Revolution less than three centuries back. We call this story the Great Turning.

When we look for them in the world around us, we can see elements from each of these stories at play. While unevenly distributed, all three are happening. There are hot spots of unraveling, as well as disturbing trends that will push it into greater prominence. There are also contexts where Business as Usual so dominates the landscape that it seems the only story visible. Set against these two, the Great Turning is often squeezed out of sight or deliberately underreported by mainstream media. We're going to be exploring a process that more clearly brings it into view. A great question to start this process is: "What happens through you?"

Stories happen through people; our choices and actions shape how they happen through us. If we shift focus from outcome to process, rather than asking, "Will it happen?," we might ask instead, "What are the steps that will help it happen?" We help the

Great Turning happen by turning up with an intention to play our part. We invite you to consider some of the different ways you are already doing that. What are you turning away from because you know it causes harm? What are you turning toward because it aligns more strongly with your values and hopes for our future? Noticing and appreciating ways the Great Turning is already happening through us, both personally and collectively, is a starting point we can build on. By itself, though, that isn't enough. We also need to apply Active Hope.

As Business as Usual becomes more difficult to sustain and the Great Unraveling advances, we'll face more severe consequences of the societal and ecological process of collapse that is already underway. What we don't know is what specific form it will take and at what pace. Some of the possible versions of how this might go are far more disturbing than others. Taking in the reality of what's happening in our world, what's the best we can hope for? And how can we be active in making that more likely or even possible?

While the pandemic has brought tragedy and loss for so many, it has also given examples of what can happen when we rise to the occasion in an emergency. You may have witnessed or been part of spontaneous networks of mutual aid springing up around the globe. People stopped flying, factories spewed less smoke, the air became cleaner, and carbon emissions fell. Before these things happened, any of them might have been dismissed as unrealistic hopes. It raises the question of what might be possible if we, collectively, really set our hearts and minds to making the changes that are needed. To help this happen in the best possible way, we need to train ourselves.

THE SPIRAL OF THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS

The journey that begins in chapter 2 and that continues throughout the book is based on a transformative and strengthening process we have offered in workshops for decades. Initially developed by

Joanna in the late 1970s, it evolved and spread, with the vital contribution of a growing number of colleagues. It has been used on every continent (except Antarctica perhaps), has been conducted in many different languages, and has involved hundreds of thousands of people of different faiths, backgrounds, and age groups. Because this approach helps us restore our sense of connection with the web of life and with one another, it has come to be known as the Work That Reconnects.⁷ By helping us to develop our inner resources and our outer community, the Work That Reconnects strengthens our capacity to face disturbing information and respond with unexpected resilience. In our experience of this work, again and again we've seen energy and commitment mobilized as people rise to their role in the Great Turning.

We've written this book so that you can experience the transformative power of the Work That Reconnects and draw on it to expand your capacity to respond creatively to the crises of our time. The chapters ahead guide you through the four stages of the spiral this work moves through: coming from gratitude, honoring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes, and going forth (see figure 1). The journey through these stages has a strengthening effect that deepens with each fresh experience.

While rich rewards can be reaped when journeying alone, the benefits of the Work That Reconnects grow quickly with company. We encourage you to seek others with whom to read this book or share notes along the way. Some of the practices are also described in the free online course at ActiveHope.Training. Bringing our concerns into the open is a key part of facing the mess we are in, though for reasons we will explore, fear often prevents this type of sharing. We will examine what makes it so difficult to talk about our planetary crisis and provide tools that support us in having the empowering conversations our times call for.

We encourage you to gain familiarity with the tools we describe

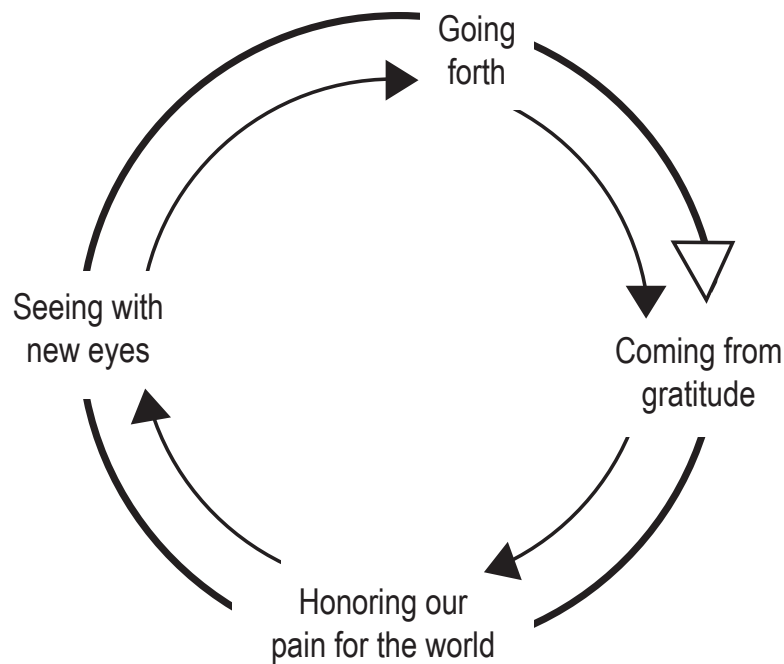


Figure 1. The spiral of the Work That Reconnects.

by trying them out. Scattered throughout the book are “Try This” exercises inviting you to experience practices we find valuable for personal use, in partnered conversations, and in groups.

WHAT WE BRING

At the heart of this book is a collaborative model of power based on appreciating how much more we can achieve working together than as separate individuals. The story of our coauthorship is a fine example. The seedling idea sprouted out of a conversation about lessons we, Joanna and Chris, had learned from our experience of the Work That Reconnects. What surprised and excited us both was how often, in the many hours of talking that followed, insights would surface that neither of us had received before. While the core framework, concepts, and practices of the Work That Reconnects are well tested, we have been able to enrich, hone, and add to them

in ways that bring together a great deal of material not published elsewhere.

There is an old saying that two eyes are better than one, since out of two different perspectives comes the depth of three-dimensional vision. As coauthors we come from different backgrounds, live on different continents, and draw from different sources, all of which has contributed to the rich synergy we have experienced and expressed through our writing.

Joanna, a practitioner of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology, is the root teacher of the *Work That Reconnects*. In her early nineties and an activist for more than six decades, she lives in Berkeley, California, close to her children and grandchildren. She has authored or coauthored eighteen books, including four cotranslations of the German lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

Chris is a medical doctor, coach, and trainer who has specialized in the psychology of resilience, behavior change, and recovery from addiction. Living in the United Kingdom, he offers online resilience courses that have engaged people from more than sixty countries. An activist since his teenage years and now entering his sixties, he has taught and written about the psychology of sustainability for more than thirty years.

The two of us met in 1989 at a weeklong training led by Joanna in Scotland. Called the *Power of Our Deep Ecology*, it was a life-changing event for Chris. We have worked together many times since. This book describes the work we share and cherish. It is offered, not as a blueprint solution to our problems, but as a set of practices and insights to draw strength from and as a mythic journey to be transformed by.

The author and activist Rebecca Solnit writes: “An emergency is a separation from the familiar, a sudden emergence into a new atmosphere, one that often demands we ourselves rise to the occasion.”⁸ When we face the mess we’re in, we realize that Business as

Usual can't go on. What helps us rise to the occasion is experiencing our rootedness in something much larger than ourselves. The poet Rabindranath Tagore expressed this idea in these words: "The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world."⁹ This is the stream we are following. It points us toward a way of life that enriches our world. Our foundation and our focus is the practice of Active Hope. When we face the mess we're in by engaging in this, our lives become enriched as well.

PART ONE

The Great Turning



CHAPTER ONE

Three Stories of Our Time

In the center of the room, three large pieces of paper lay on the floor. “That’s where I lived for most of my early adult life,” said Elly, pointing to the sheet nearest her. On it were the words “Business as Usual.” “Then I spent the next four years in that one, the Great Unraveling, as I became more aware of the mess we’re in and felt totally overwhelmed. It has only been in the last year or two that I’ve come to recognize this third story, the Great Turning, and find my place in it.” We were at a workshop exploring Active Hope (see figure 2). The circle of people around the room nodded as they too reflected on their journeys of becoming aware of what we face and activated to respond.



Figure 2. We can look at the world from different stories.

From what story, or stories, do you look at the world? How has that changed over the course of your life? We're using the term *story* here to refer to the way our minds make sense of our world by placing aspects of what's happening within a larger narrative. Psychologists might call this our *metanarrative* — it is the larger pattern we see expressed through many contributing elements and events. In this chapter, we look more deeply at the three stories mentioned in the introduction: the Great Unraveling, Business as Usual, and the Great Turning. Recognizing that we can choose the story we live from can be liberating; finding a good story to take part in adds to our sense of purpose and aliveness. We will explore how each of these stories shapes our response to global crises.

THE GREAT UNRAVELING

How serious do you think the problems are that we face as a human society? If you were to rate your response on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is no problem at all and 10 represents catastrophe (see figure 3), what number would you choose?

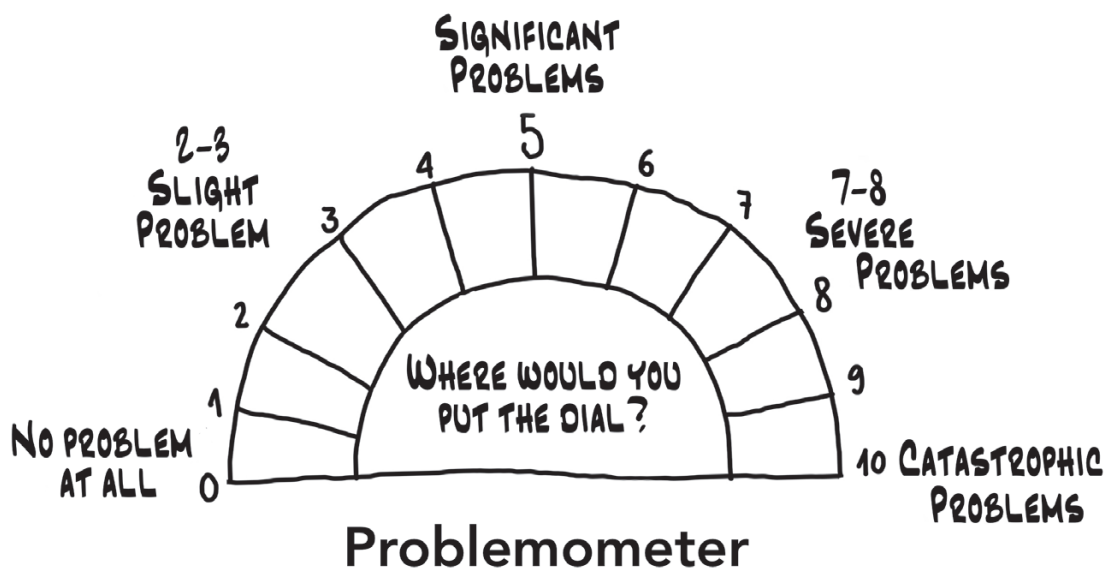


Figure 3. How severe are the problems we face?

If you've given any points at all, you're recognizing that something isn't right. If your score is more than 7, you're sensing we're in danger. What is it that concerns or alarms you? Naming your concerns brings them into focus. As the first step in addressing any issue is simply to notice it, this is the start of our journey.

TRY THIS: NAMING YOUR CONCERNS

What words seem to naturally follow these sentence starters for you? You can think them to yourself, or put them in writing, or try it with a partner, taking turns to speak and listen. Whenever you're not sure what to say, just speak out the beginning of the sentence and see what comes — it may be different each time you do this.

- When I consider our world situation, some concerns I have include ...
- What particularly troubles me is ...

When you begin mapping out the range of threats we face, what you're describing is the Great Unraveling. It is useful to give a name to this larger pattern of worsening conditions; though it is seldom talked about, it is something most people are aware of. For example, in 2017 an international poll of eighteen thousand people found that 67 percent thought the world was getting worse.¹ In 2021, an international poll of ten thousand young people revealed that 75 percent thought the future was frightening.² But what happens if you bring your concerns up in everyday conversation? Most likely you'll quickly receive strong messages that such open sharing of disturbing information is unwelcome. You might find yourself caught up in an argument. You risk being labeled as depressing company.

Even though there are cultural resistances in the way, bringing our fears into the open is a necessary step toward exploring how we can respond to them. Reviewing some of the conditions that concern us, the following stand out. Our naming them here is to acknowledge some of those we face rather than to attempt a more complete overview.

- The worsening climate crisis
- The threat of war and the cost of warfare
- Pollution and destruction of the natural world
- Widening of extreme inequality
- Dismantling of democracy
- Fears for how we'll meet our basic needs
- The prospect of societal collapse
- Misinformation and lies blocking awareness of what's really going on

The Great Unraveling is unevenly distributed and experienced differently, depending on where you are in the world and what conditions you face. You might start your own list with a different set of concerns, and you may have other issues you would add, as we do. Seeing a range of threats as connected elements within a larger story can help us identify ways they influence one another.

The term *unraveling* describes a process rather than an event. For some communities, the experience of having their world torn apart isn't a new thing: indigenous peoples have had their ancestral lands stolen; invading colonizers, through wealth grabs over centuries, have set in place a vastly unequal world order designed to serve the interests of a privileged minority. Nearly half the world's population lives on less than \$5.50 a day,³ and more than nine hundred million people were so short of food in 2021 they suffered from undernutrition.⁴ One of the biggest contributors to unraveling

worldwide is injustice; this interacts with, and amplifies, the harmful impacts of climate change, war, habitat decline, and pandemics.

Set against this background, the Great Unraveling is a process that is ongoing and, disturbingly, still gathering momentum. We can see this in the vicious cycles of worsening climate change. For example, forests play a protective role by absorbing carbon dioxide, but as woodlands are chopped down, we lose that crucial process. Large tropical trees are at additional risk because when warmer air dries out the soil, the ground can no longer support them. A global temperature increase of more than 7.2°F (4°C) could be enough to kill much of the Amazon rain forest, the “lungs of the planet.”⁵ If this happened, not only would we lose the rain forest’s cooling effect, but the greenhouse gases released from rotting or burning trees would further increase warming. The term *runaway climate change* describes this dangerous situation, in which the consequences of warming cause more warming to occur (see figure 4).

As land and sea surfaces absorb more of the sun’s warmth than ice cover does, the melting of ice sheets forms part of another vicious cycle. The more the ice melts, the less it reflects the sun’s heat, and the warmer temperatures get, leading to further ice melting. Most of the world’s major cities developed as ports bordering the sea or major rivers, and more than 630 million people live less than thirty-three feet above sea level. As the ice sheets in Greenland and West Antarctica continue melting, rising water levels will flood London, New York, Miami, Mumbai, Calcutta, Sydney, Shanghai, Jakarta, Tokyo, and many other major cities.⁶

When we recognize the Great Unraveling, we’re not just acknowledging disasters that have already happened — we’re bringing into awareness trends already firmly established that will make future conditions worse.

A central mechanism driving the unraveling process is the system dynamic of *overshoot and collapse*. Whether with individual

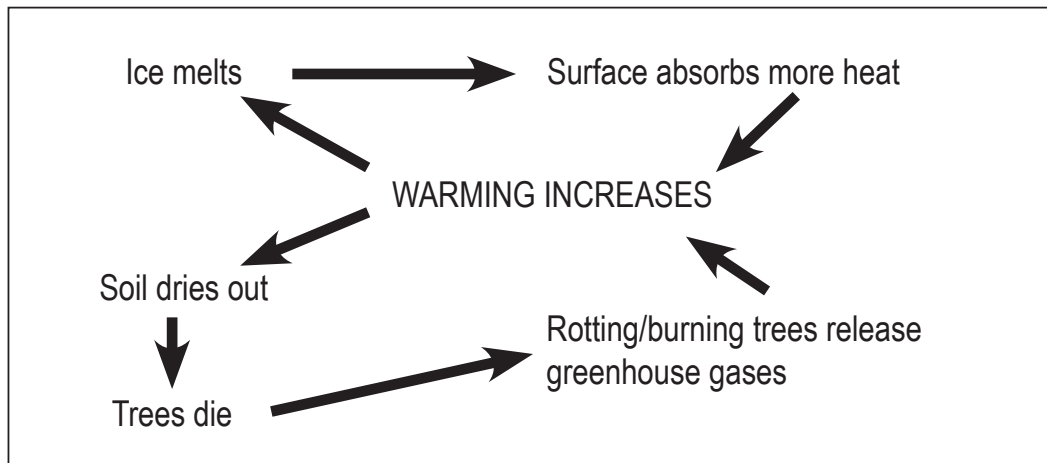


Figure 4. Amplifying loops in runaway climate change.

people, organizations, or ecosystems, pushing something too far beyond its coping limit takes it toward a state of breakdown. For example, when someone experiences severe stress for prolonged periods, their inner reserves can get so depleted that they reach a point of collapse. Something similar happens in agricultural systems when overfarming of land causes the collapse of soil fertility. As a result, each year, an area of once-fertile land the size of England gets turned into desert.⁷

Unraveling is a useful term because it implies a process that progressively lessens and loosens a system's coherence, memory, and functionality until it falls apart. There are different stages along this route of decline. At first there might be warning signs, as edges become frayed. Then capacities begin to disappear as significant elements and functions are lost. Eventually a breaking point is reached when the system, no longer able to hold itself together, collapses. We can see this sequence being played out with so many aspects of our world — agricultural systems, fisheries, natural habitats, communities living in degraded landscapes, organizations struggling with worsening conditions, and even whole countries.

In an interconnected world, collapse in one area has ripple effects that influence other systems. In the *Future Earth Risks*

Perceptions Report 2020, a group of more than two hundred scientists from fifty-four countries warned that the colliding impacts of climate change, extreme weather events, ecosystem decline, food crises, and freshwater shortages act together and amplify one another, setting us on a course toward a global systemic collapse.⁸ Recognizing the psychological impact of living with the prospect of such catastrophic collapse, Jem Bendell and Rupert Read, in their book *Deep Adaptation*, write:

Not only is it difficult to allow this outlook into one's awareness, it is difficult to live with it because to anticipate societal collapse means we feel personally vulnerable as well as afraid for the future of people dear to us.⁹

Acknowledging the scale of the crisis we face, you might hope for a mass mobilization that draws together governments, organizations, communities, and people everywhere to rise to the occasion of our planetary emergency. Yet do we see that? We can have a second assessment scale that this time asks how well developed you think our collective response is to these problems (see figure 5). In

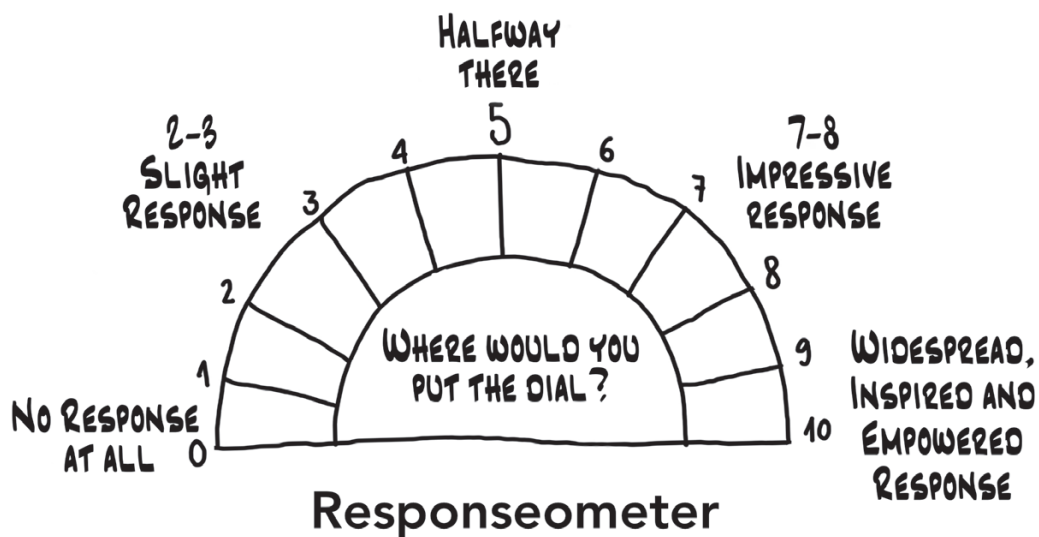


Figure 5. How well developed is our collective response?

this case, 0 is no response at all, and 10 is as good as it could possibly get, with a widespread, well-developed, and inspiring international response. How would you rate our current collective response?

BUSINESS AS USUAL

Did your ratings on the two scales show a mismatch between the severity of our problems and the size of our collective response? If you, like us, gave the problems a much higher score, you'll likely recognize the power of our second story, Business as Usual. The core assumption here is that things aren't too bad and that we can carry on our business the way we usually do. When looking at the world from this perspective, periodic disasters are seen as only temporary interruptions.

With Business as Usual, we're referring to the mainstream mode of industrialized countries and the ways of doing things considered normal within them. For example, it is common for people today to consume much higher levels of energy and materials than previous generations and to produce vastly more waste. The rubbish generated each year in the United States could fill a convoy of garbage trucks long enough to go round the world nine times.¹⁰ The less visible but more harmful waste includes the greenhouse gases pumped into the atmosphere each year and microplastics poisoning our oceans. Yet in spite of its destructiveness, the Business as Usual view of reality lacks any commitment to or urgency toward changing our approach.

Each story of how we see the world carries within it assumptions about what we mean by "doing well" and "doing harm." Within Business as Usual, a country is doing well if its economy is growing. A business is doing well if it is expanding. A person is doing well if their income is increasing. With this emphasis on growth, another term we use to describe the mainstream mode is "the industrial growth society." For industry to grow, more sales

are needed. That means encouraging us to buy and consume more than we already do. This drives the dynamic of overshoot and collapse, as the constant pressure to produce more things requires the extraction of resources, which gobbles up landscapes and then poisons our world with the waste generated.

The harmful norms of Business as Usual are held in place by a set of assumptions about how the world operates. These core assumptions include:

- Economic growth is essential for prosperity.
- Nature is a resource to be used for human purposes.
- Promoting consumption is good for the economy.
- Life is unequal, and some lives matter more than others.
- The problems of other peoples, nations, and species are not our concern.
- There's no point in worrying about the distant future, as we'll be dead by then.
- What we do doesn't make any difference; we can't change the world.

THE DILEMMA OF THE DOUBLE REALITY

The stories of Business as Usual and the Great Unraveling offer starkly contrasting accounts of the state of our world. They are two different realities coexisting in the same time and space. You probably know people who live a different story than you. You may also be moving between stories yourself. It's possible to spend part of a day in our own Business as Usual mode, making plans for a future we assume will be much like today. Then something triggers an awareness of the mess we're in, and we recognize in our hearts and minds the crash that lies ahead or that is being experienced already.

When people first become aware of the extent of the unraveling, it comes as quite a shock. The mainstream mode has been to avoid

looking at issues if they're too disturbing, so when we fully open our eyes to the horror, we can feel unprepared, overwhelmed, and defeated. Many people we've spoken with have described flip-flopping between these different stories, as though caught in a double reality. Living with these two opposing versions of how things are going presents us with an agonizing dilemma: to face the mess we're in is scary and depressing, yet to turn away and not face it can leave us feeling that we're living a lie, being complicit with a social order that is destroying our world. When we look at the worst, we may also experience a collapse in our belief that we can make any difference. When we avoid looking, we don't see the need to even try.

In the depths of a crisis, there can be moments when something that wasn't so easy to see becomes clearer. We live at a unique time in human history, when our collective experience of one traumatic process — in this case, the Covid-19 pandemic — can play a role in helping us recognize and see a way out of this dilemma of the double reality.

A TEACHABLE MOMENT IN RECENT HISTORY

In health psychology, one of the most productive times for a conversation about change is just after someone has experienced the harmful consequences of their behavior. For a heavy smoker, when the distress of a chest infection serves as a wake-up call to address their habit, we can think of this as a teachable moment. At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres suggested that the shared global tragedy of the pandemic might offer something similar for our civilization:

The pandemic is a crisis unlike any we have ever seen. But it is also the kind of crisis that we will see in different forms again and again. COVID-19 is not only a wake-up call, it is a dress rehearsal for the world of challenges to come.¹¹

For a teachable moment to happen, we need to draw out the lessons a situation, even a tragic one, might offer. If the pandemic can act as a wake-up call for anything, perhaps at the top of the list is the danger of continuing with Business as Usual when that makes the current tragedy so very much worse.

With less than 7 percent of the world's population between them, Brazil and the United States suffered nearly a third of the global death toll from Covid-19 in 2020.¹² Both countries were led by presidents who approached the pandemic and climate change in similar ways, by downplaying concerns and delaying any departure from Business as Usual. We don't have to continue making the same mistake.

When disasters happen, we can easily feel powerless. A second learning point is how personal change and policy change can act together in complementary ways to bring about rapid transformation. As the pandemic spread to all corners of the globe, it required both personal and policy shifts to flatten the curve of rising infections and bring down the death rate. If we hadn't acted together, with huge shifts at the level of individuals, families, communities, organizations, governments, and international bodies, it is estimated that there would have been twenty times as many deaths worldwide in 2020 and many more after that.¹³ By putting the brakes on Business as Usual, we stopped a disaster from developing into a catastrophe. Similarly, in the realm of climate change, we have another curve to flatten and then bring down with our greenhouse gas emissions. As with the pandemic, by acting sooner and more sharply, we can reduce the chances of the very worst outcomes.

Never before have we experienced a threat that touched the lives of such a high proportion of our world's population in such a short period of time. It has exposed our shared vulnerability. António Guterres named a third lesson so relevant to this when he said: "In an

interconnected world, it is time to recognize a simple truth: solidarity is self-interest. If we fail to grasp that fact, everyone loses.”¹⁴

These three learning points — that continuing with Business as Usual takes us toward catastrophe, that we need to make rapid shifts at every level to avert this, and that solidarity is self-interest — form the core elements of our third story.

THE THIRD STORY: THE GREAT TURNING

While the responseometer of our collective mobilization doesn’t yet show the high degree of universal engagement needed to address our planetary emergency, if you look for them, you can see examples of impressive steps toward what is required. In every country, in all walks of life, people are turning up with an intention to play their part. They are turning away from behaviors and ways of doing things that cause harm. They are turning toward ways of doing and thinking and being that support the flourishing of life. This is the Great Turning — and you are likely part of it.

TRY THIS: REFLECT ON HOW THE GREAT TURNING IS ALREADY HAPPENING THROUGH YOU

We invite you to contemplate these questions:

- Where and how are you turning up?
- What are you turning away from?
- What are you turning toward?

Just as giving a name to the larger story of unraveling helps us recognize its horrific proportions, so too does viewing actions on behalf of life as central to a larger story help us see their power.

Each time you take a step, rather than dismissing it with the thought “That won’t achieve much,” consider instead how a grander narrative might express itself through the actions we take. It is not the first time that radical transformations have happened in our culture.

In the Agricultural Revolution of ten thousand years ago, the domestication of plants and animals led to a profound shift in the way people lived. In the Industrial Revolution that began just a few hundred years ago, a similar dramatic transition took place. These weren’t just changes in the small details of people’s lives. The whole basis of society was transformed each time, including people’s relationships with one another and with the Earth.

Right now a shift of comparable scope and magnitude is occurring. It’s been called the Ecological Revolution, the Sustainability Revolution, even the Necessary Revolution. This is our third story: we call it the Great Turning and see it as the essential adventure of our time. It involves the transition from a doomed economy of industrial growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the recovery of our world. In the early stages of major transitions, the initial activity might seem to exist only at the fringes. Yet we’ve already moved far beyond that, with many aspects of this transition already well underway. When their time comes, ideas and behaviors become contagious: the more people pass on inspiring perspectives, the more these perspectives catch on. At a certain point, the balance tips, and we reach critical mass. Viewpoints and practices that were once on the margins become the new mainstream.

In the story of the Great Turning, what’s catching on is commitment to act for the sake of life on Earth as well as the vision, courage, and solidarity to do so. Social and technical innovations converge, mobilizing people’s energy, attention, creativity, and determination, in what Paul Hawken describes as “the largest social movement in history.” In his book *Blessed Unrest*, he writes, “I soon realized that my initial estimate of 100,000 organizations was off by

at least a factor of ten, and I now believe there are over one — and maybe even two — million organizations working towards ecological sustainability and social justice.”¹⁵

Don't be surprised if you haven't read about this epic transition in major newspapers or seen it reported in other mainstream media. Their focus is usually trained on sudden, discrete events they can point their cameras at. Cultural shifts happen on a different level; they come into view only when we step back far enough to see a bigger picture changing over time. If we look too close up when enlarging a digital image, we lose sight of the picture and just see pixels. Similarly, a newspaper photograph viewed through a magnifying glass appears only as tiny dots. When it seems as if our lives and choices are like those dots or pixels, it can be difficult to recognize their contribution to a bigger picture of change. We might need to train ourselves to see the larger pattern and recognize how the story of the Great Turning is happening in our time. Once seen, it becomes easier to notice it. As we name it and live it, this story becomes more real and familiar to us.

As an aid to appreciating the ways you may already be part of this story, we identify three dimensions of the Great Turning. They are mutually reinforcing and equally necessary. For convenience, we've labeled them as first, second, and third dimensions, but that is not to suggest any order of sequence or importance. We can start at any point and see its natural relevance to the others. It is for each of us to follow our own sense of rightness about where and how we act.

THE FIRST DIMENSION: HOLDING ACTIONS

Holding actions aim to hold back and slow down the damage being caused by the political economy of Business as Usual. The goal is to protect what is left of our natural life-support systems, rescuing what we can of our biodiversity, clean air and water, forests,

and topsoil. Holding actions also counter the unraveling of our social fabric, involving caring for those who have been damaged and safeguarding communities against exploitation, war, starvation, and injustice. Holding actions defend our shared existence and the integrity of life on this, our planet home.

This dimension includes raising awareness of the damage being done by gathering evidence of and documenting the environmental, social, and health impacts of industrial growth. We need the work of scientists, campaigners, and journalists to reveal the links between pollution and rising childhood cancers; fossil fuel consumption and climate chaos; and the availability of cheap products and sweatshop working conditions. Unless we see these connections clearly made, it is too easy to go on unconsciously contributing to the unraveling of our world. We become part of the story of the Great Turning when we increase our awareness, seek to learn more, and alert others to the issues we all face.

There are many ways we can act. We can choose to remove our support for behaviors and products we know to be part of the problem. Joining with others, we can add to the strength of campaigns, petitions, boycotts, rallies, legal proceedings, direct actions, and other forms of protest against practices that threaten our world. While holding actions can be frustrating when met with slow progress or defeat, they have also led to important victories. Through determined and sustained activism, acid rain is much reduced as a threat to forests and lakes, while the hole in the ozone layer has shrunk.¹⁶ In the United Kingdom, fracking has been brought to a halt, while in Canada, the United States, Poland, Australia, and the Ukraine, areas of old-growth forests have been protected.

Holding actions are essential: they save lives, they save species and ecosystems, and they save some of the gene pool for future generations. But by themselves, they are not enough to create the Great Turning. For every acre of forest protected, many others are lost to logging or clearance. For every species brought back from the

brink, many others are lost to extinction. Vital as protest is, relying on it as a sole avenue of change can leave us battle weary or disillusioned. Along with stopping the damage, we need to replace or transform the systems that cause the harm. This is the work of the second dimension.

THE SECOND DIMENSION: LIFE-SUSTAINING SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES

If you look for it, you can find evidence that our civilization is being reinvented all around us. Previously accepted approaches to health-care, business, education, agriculture, transportation, communication, psychology, economics, and so many other areas are being questioned and transformed. This is the second strand of the Great Turning, and it involves a rethinking of the way we do things, as well as creative redesigning of the structures and systems of our society.

In September 2021, Harvard University announced it would no longer invest its considerable endowment fund (of more than \$41 billion) in the fossil fuel industry. Harvard's move to "decarbonize" its funds followed the example of 1,337 other institutions divesting more than \$14 trillion of assets.¹⁷ By steering investment away from industries that cause harm, the divestment movement is rewriting the rules of finance. Looking also at what we might turn toward, new types of banks, like Triodos Bank, operate on the principle of *triple return*. In this model, investments bring not only financial return but also social and environmental benefits. The more people put their savings into this kind of investment, the more funds become available for enterprises that aim for greater benefits than just making money. This in turn fuels the development of a new economic sector based on the triple bottom line. These investments have proved to be remarkably stable at a time of economic turbulence, putting ethical banking in a strong financial position.

One area benefiting from such investment is the agricultural

sector, which has seen a swing to environmentally and socially responsible practices. Concerned about the toxic effects of pesticides and other chemicals used in industrial farming, large numbers of people have switched to buying and eating organic produce. Fair-trade initiatives improve the working conditions of producers, while community-supported agriculture (CSA) and farmers markets cut food miles by increasing the availability of local produce. In some sectors, like green building, design principles that were considered to be on the fringe a few years ago are now finding widespread acceptance. In these and other areas, strong green shoots are sprouting, as new organizational systems grow out of the visionary question “Is there a better way to do things — one that brings benefits rather than causing harm?”

When we support and participate in these emerging strands of a life-sustaining culture, we become part of the Great Turning. Through our choices about how to travel, where to shop, what to buy, and how to save, we shape the development of this new economy. Social enterprises, microenergy projects, community teach-ins, regenerative agriculture, and ethical financial systems all contribute to the emerging ecosystem of a life-sustaining society. By themselves, however, they are not enough. These new structures won’t take root and survive without deeply ingrained values to sustain them. This is the work of the third dimension of the Great Turning.

THE THIRD DIMENSION: SHIFT IN CONSCIOUSNESS

What inspires people to embark on projects or support campaigns that are not of immediate personal benefit? At the core of our consciousness is a wellspring of caring and compassion. This aspect of ourselves — which we might think of as our *connected self* — can be nurtured and developed. We can deepen our sense of belonging to the world. Like trees extending their root system, we can grow in connection, thus allowing ourselves to draw from a deeper pool of

strength, accessing the courage and intelligence we so greatly need right now.

*If we surrendered
to Earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.*

— RAINER MARIA RILKE

This dimension of the Great Turning arises from shifts taking place in our hearts, our minds, and our views of reality. It involves utilizing insights and practices that resonate with venerable spiritual traditions, while in alignment with revolutionary new understandings from science.

A significant event in this part of the story is the Apollo 8 spaceflight of December 1968. Because of this mission to the moon and the photos it produced, humanity had its first sighting of Earth as a whole. Twenty years earlier, the astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle had said, “Once a photograph of the Earth taken from the outside is available, a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose.”¹⁸ Bill Anders, the astronaut who took those first photos, commented, “We came all this way to explore the moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth.”¹⁹

We are among the first in human history to have had this remarkable view. It came at the same time as the development in science of a radical new understanding of how our world works. Looking at our planet as a whole, the central insight in Gaia theory is that the Earth functions as a self-regulating living system.

During the past fifty-plus years, those first Earth photos, along with Gaia theory and environmental challenges, have provoked the emergence of a new way of thinking about ourselves. No longer just citizens of this country or that, there is a shift in consciousness toward a deeper collective identity. As many indigenous traditions have taught for millennia, we are all part of the Earth.

With this evolutionary jump comes a beautiful convergence of two areas previously thought to clash: science and spirituality. The awareness of a deeper unity connecting us lies at the heart of almost all spiritual traditions; insights from modern science point in a similar direction. We live at a time when a new view of reality is emerging, where spiritual insight and scientific discovery both contribute to our understanding of ourselves as intimately interwoven with our world.

Recognizing ourselves as a planet people, we cast aside the false hierarchy of value that sets one group above another, whether based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or other division. At the same time, if we've grown up in a society that allocates privilege according to a ladder of importance that has rich White men at the top, some of that type of thinking may still have a grip on us, even if we're not aware of it. A key aspect of the shift in consciousness is decolonization, where we're on the lookout for internalized expressions of a colonial mindset that we can acknowledge and address.

We take part in this third dimension of the Great Turning when we pay attention to the inner frontier of change, to the personal and spiritual development that enhances our capacity and desire to act for our world. By strengthening our compassion, we give fuel to our courage and determination. By refreshing our sense of belonging in the world, we widen the web of relationships that nourish us and protect us from burnout. In the past, changing the self and changing the world were often regarded as separate endeavors and viewed in either-or terms. But in the story of the Great Turning, they are recognized as mutually reinforcing and essential to each other (see figure 6).

ACTIVE HOPE AND THE STORY OF OUR LIVES

Future generations will look back at the time we are living in now. The kind of future they look from and the story they tell about our

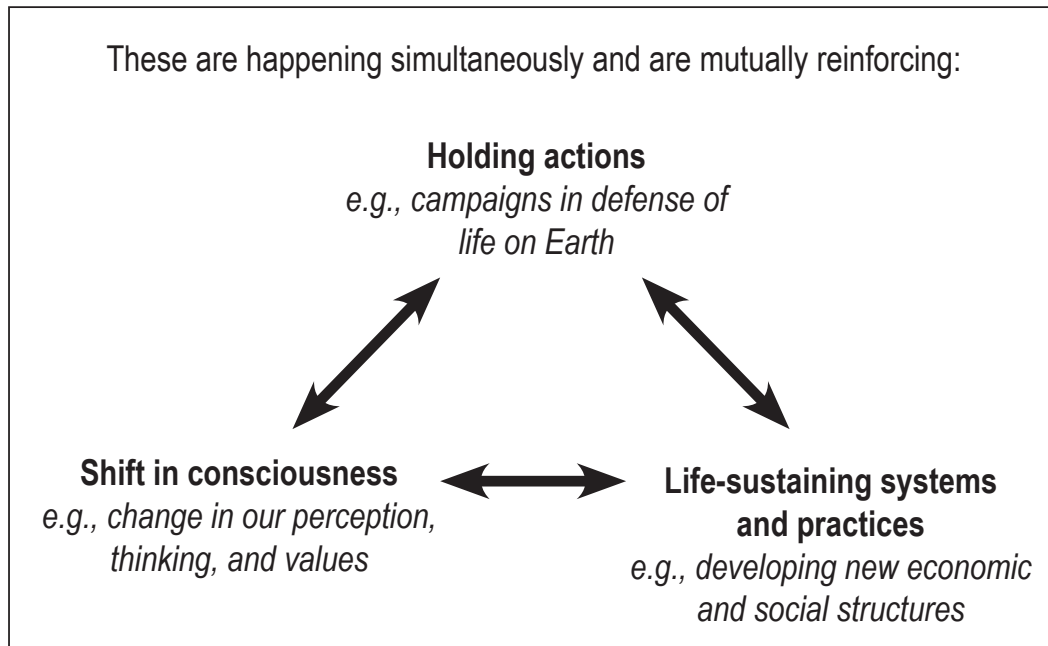


Figure 6. The three dimensions of the Great Turning.

period will be shaped by choices we make in our lifetimes. The most telling choice of all may well be the story we live from and see ourselves participating in. It sets the context of our lives in a way that influences all our other decisions.

In choosing our story, not only do we cast our vote of influence over the kind of world that future generations will inherit, but we also affect our own lives in the here and now. When we find a good story and fully give ourselves to it, that story can act through us, breathing new life into everything we do. Then a sense of deeper purpose adds to the meaning and momentum of our lives. A great story and a satisfying life share a vital element: a compelling plot that moves toward meaningful goals, where what is at stake is far larger than our personal gains and losses. The Great Turning is such a story.

CHAPTER TWO

Trusting the Spiral

Active Hope is not wishful thinking.
Active Hope is not waiting to be rescued
by the Lone Ranger or some savior.
Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life
on whose behalf we can act.
We belong to this world.
The web of life is calling us forth at this time.
We've come a long way and are here to play our part.
With Active Hope we realize that there are adventures in store,
strengths to discover, and comrades to link arms with.
Active Hope is a readiness to engage.
Active Hope is a readiness to discover the strengths
in ourselves and in others,
a readiness to discover the reasons for hope
and the occasions for love.
A readiness to discover the size and strength of our hearts,
our quickness of mind, our steadiness of purpose,
our own authority, our love for life,
the liveliness of our curiosity,
the unsuspected deep well of patience and diligence,
the keenness of our senses, and our capacity to lead.
None of these can be discovered in an armchair or without risk.

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 to reinforce and strengthen our capacity to respond. We shall therefore return to them often in the pages ahead.

THE THREAD OF ADVENTURE

The first thread is the narrative structure of adventure stories. These 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, it can be useful to cast yourself as a character in the story of the Great Turning. The time-honored tradition of protagonists in this genre is that heroes and heroines almost always start out seeming distinctly underpowered.

What makes the story an adventure is that the central characters are not put off by the challenge they face. Instead, their tale sets them off on a quest in search of the allies, tools, and wisdom they need to improve their chances of success. We can think of ourselves as being on a similar journey; part of the adventure of the Great Turning involves seeking the company, sources of support, tools, and insights that can 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 *reveal themselves only 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 develop in a range of different ways — some much better, others much worse. Active Hope involves identifying the outcomes we hope for and then playing a role in moving toward them. *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 apply this same principle when looking at ourselves and the different ways we might respond to world issues. We can react to world crises in many 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. When we engage 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 maps out an empowerment process that journeys through four successive movements, or stations: *coming from gratitude, honoring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes, and going forth* (see figure 7). This spiral is a source we can come back to again and again for strength and fresh insights. It reminds us that we are larger, stronger, deeper, and more creative than we've grown accustomed to believing. 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 and mystery it offers. Yet the very act of looking at what we love and value in our world brings with it an awareness of the vast violation underway, the despoliation and unraveling.

Coming from gratitude grounds us in trust and psychological buoyancy, which supports us in facing harsh realities in the second station. From gratitude we naturally flow to honoring our pain for the world. Dedicating time and attention to honoring this pain opens up space to hear our sorrow, fear, outrage, and other felt responses 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 attentive respect and recognition of value. 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 arises from our love for life. Seeing with new eyes reveals the wider web of resources available to us through our rootedness within a deeper, wider ecological self. This third station draws on insights from holistic science and indigenous wisdom, as well as from our creative imaginations. It opens us to a new view of what is possible and a new grasp of our power to act.

The final station, going forth, involves clarifying our vision of how we can act for the healing of our world and 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,

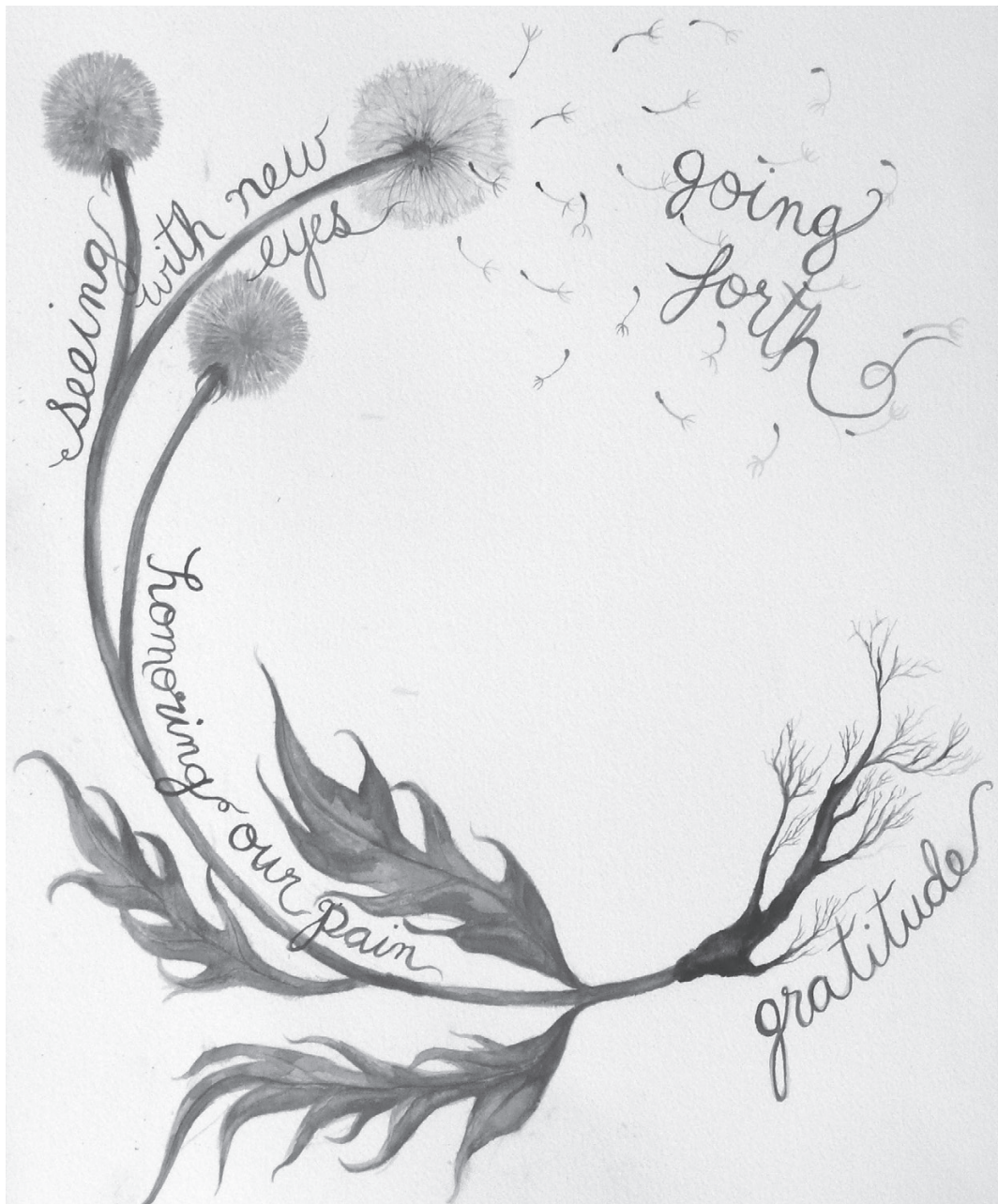


Figure 7. The spiral of the Work That Reconnects as painted by Dori Midnight.

we experience them differently or more fully. Each station reconnects us with our world and can surprise us with hidden gems. As each naturally unfolds into the next, fresh insights and revelations create a flow and build up a momentum. We are letting our 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 who support you.

A moment of gratitude grounds us, strengthening our 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 connection, caring, compassion — your interbeing with all life. By honoring your pain for the world, in whatever form, you take it seriously and allow it to rouse you.

When seeing with new eyes, you know that it isn't just you facing this challenge. 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 brings your awareness to resources available to you, since through the very channels of connectedness that pain for the world flows, so too come 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 the need to plan every step; instead, trust your intention and the emerging sequence of events that springs from that. Focus on finding and playing your part, offering your own contribution, your

unique gift of Active Hope. As you move into going forth, you consider what this next step will be. Then you take that step.

What we've described here is a short form of the spiral that might take only a few minutes to complete. Like a fractal that has the same characteristic shape at whatever scale it is viewed, 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 will trust it. Each of these stations contains hidden depths, rich meaning, and treasures to explore. It is to these that we turn in the chapters ahead.

TRY THIS: SEVEN SENTENCE STARTERS
IN SUPPORT OF ACTIVE HOPE

Here is a way of journeying round the spiral using a series of seven sentence starters (see figure 8). You can do this as a personal practice — seeing what words come naturally when prompted by each starter, perhaps writing them in a notebook or speaking them to yourself. This practice also works well as a structured conversation in pairs. You might ask a friend, “Hey, would you like to do a spiral together?,” then take turns completing the following sentences. The starting point is to look out at what’s happening in the world, then see what comes with each of these prompts.

1. I love...
2. I'd like to thank...
3. Looking at the future we're heading into, my concerns include...
4. Facing these concerns, what inspires me is...

5. Looking at the future we're heading into, what I deeply hope for is...
6. A part I'd like to play in support of this is...
7. A step I'll take toward this in the next week is...

When doing this exercise in pairs, we've found that setting a timer for just a minute or two for each sentence adds to the sense of momentum in moving round the spiral. With a minute spent on each part, the conversation takes about half an hour. It also works well to group the last three sentences together, with one partner completing sentences 5, 6, and 7 and then swapping. We have a video demonstrating this practice in pairs at activehope.info/videos.

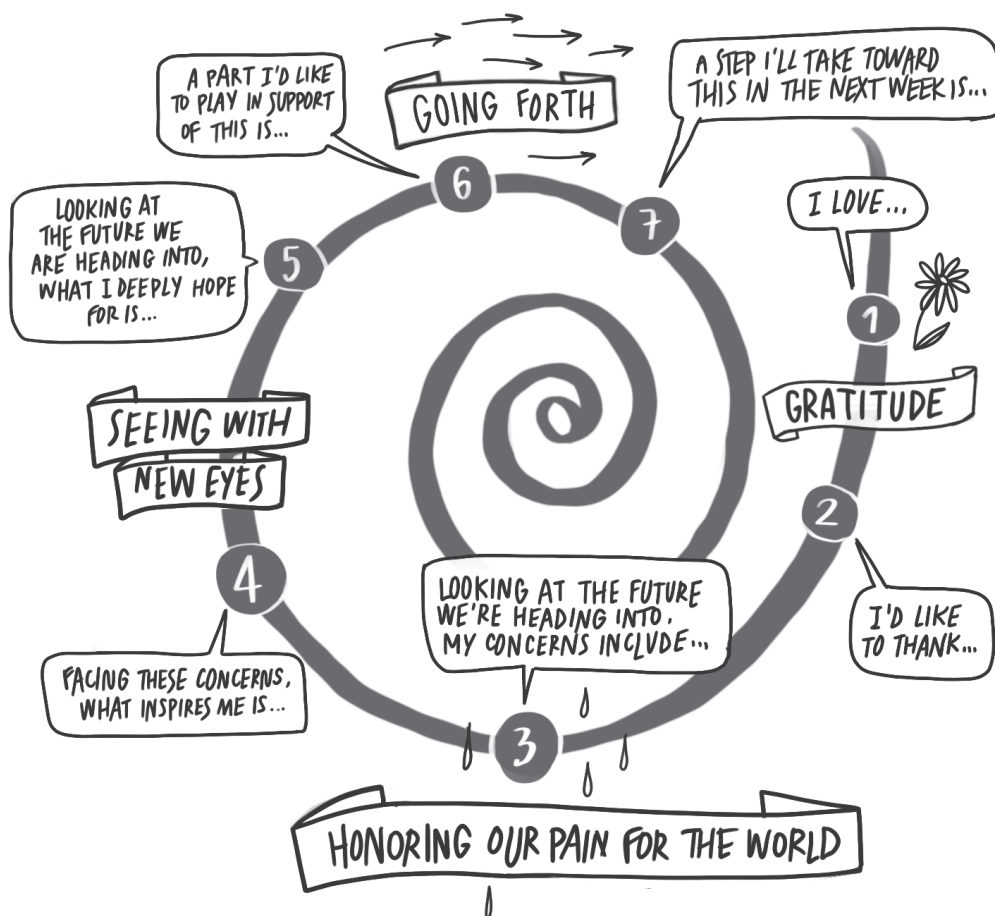


Figure 8. Seven sentence starters in support of Active Hope.