

# Active Hope: Becoming An Active Participant in Creating the World We Desire

Written by Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone



“Dangerous,” “frightening,” “out of control” — as we go around the room, people are calling out the word or phrase that comes to mind as they complete this sentence: “When I consider the condition of our world, I think things are getting...” The responses we hear echo survey findings that show high levels of alarm about the future we’re heading into.

Such widespread anxiety is well-founded. As our world heats up, deserts expand and extreme weather events become more common. Human population and consumption are increasing at the same time as essential resources, such as freshwater, fish stocks, topsoil, and oil reserves, are in decline. While reversals in the economy have left many feeling desperate about how they’re going to manage, trillions of dollars are spent on the making of war. (*The Three Trillion Dollar War*) Given these adversities, it is no surprise if we experience a profound loss of confidence in the future. We no longer take it for granted that the resources we’re dependent on — food, fuel, and drinkable water — will be available. We no longer take it for granted even that our civilization will survive or that conditions on our planet will remain hospitable for complex forms of life.

## Apathy is the Greatest Danger of Our Times

We are starting out by naming this uncertainty as a pivotal psychological reality of our time. Yet because it is usually considered too depressing to talk about, it tends to remain an unspoken presence at the backs of our minds. This blocked communication generates a peril even more deadly, for the greatest danger of our times is the deadening of our response.

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?

## Can We Do Anything About It? Where Can We Begin?

Yet when we do face the mess, it can feel overwhelming. 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. Our approach is to see this as the starting point of an amazing journey that strengthens us and deepens our aliveness. The purpose of this journey is to find, offer, and receive the gift of Active Hope.

## **Choosing to Respond with Active Hope**

Whatever situation we face, 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 stuck in our destructive ways. "What's the point of doing anything if it won't change what we're heading for?" she asked.

## **Active Hope: Becoming An Active Participant in Bringing About What We Hope For**

The word *hope* has two different meanings. The first involves hopefulness, where our preferred outcome seems reasonably likely to happen. 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 too high. This is what happened for Jane — she felt so hopeless she didn't see the point of even trying to do anything.

The second meaning is about desire. When Jane was asked what she'd like to have happen in our world, she described the future she hoped for, the kind of world she longed for. It is this kind of hope that starts our journey — knowing what we hope for and what we'd like, or love, to take place. 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 bringing about what we hope for.

## **Active Hope is a Practice, It Is Something We *Do*, Not Something We *Have***

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 take a clear view of reality; 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.

## **Contributing to the Healing of the World is a Gift Both Given and Received**

Our focus is on how we strengthen and support our intention 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 experience, we are touched by different concerns and called to respond in different ways. The contribution each of us makes to the healing of our world is our gift of Active Hope.

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 enlivening; it makes our lives feel more worthwhile. So when we practice Active Hope, we not only give but we receive in so many ways as well. The approach is not about being dutiful or worthy so much as it is about stepping into a state of aliveness that makes our lives profoundly satisfying.

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**Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy  
by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone.**

The challenges we face can be difficult even to think about. Climate change, the depletion of oil, economic upheaval, and mass extinction together create a planetary emergency of overwhelming proportions. Active Hope shows us how to strengthen our capacity to face this crisis so that we can respond with unexpected resilience and creative power. This process equips us with tools to face the mess we're in and play our role in the collective transition, or Great Turning, to a life-sustaining society.

## **About the Authors**

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Session on Joanna Macy's "The Work that Reconnects" with Jeanne Mackey & Laura Smith  
Ann Arbor Summer ReSkilling Festival, July 2012 [a2reskilling.com](http://a2reskilling.com)

## The Work That Reconnects as a Personal Practice

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

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

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

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

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

Excerpted from the book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*.  
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