

## Active Peace and the Courage to Not Look Away

By Katie V. Wilson

I would like to begin in Gratitude: first, by thanking Valerie and the fellowship committee that invited me here to speak, and thanking all those who helped organize today's service. Thank you, also, all of you gathered here today. Thank you for your presence, for your willingness to come together in community on a Sunday morning, and thank you for your dedication to a tradition that upholds an unceasing respect for the inherent dignity and worth of all beings—and for the interdependent web of life of which we are all a part. I am grateful to be here.

A month ago, when Valerie first contacted me about speaking today, and when I titled this sermon "Active Peace and the Courage to Not Look Away" I had no idea how appropriate, and difficult, this theme would be for me. The term "active peace" is a direct reference to Joanna Macy's most recent book, *Active Hope*, and the concept of "not looking away" from difficult emotions is a practice with roots in Buddhist insight meditation, a practice that has been much expanded upon and employed in the "Despair and Empowerment" work that Joanna has been developing for over 40 years. I am a longtime student and practitioner of Buddhist meditation; I've been a student of Joanna's for several years and am becoming a facilitator of this Despair and Empowerment work in my own right. I believe in this work, in its power to transform because I have witnessed what it is like to let tears break you open and yet sustain the gaze of grief until you are washed clean and made new. I have felt gratitude from the depths of a broken heart, and that may be the most beautiful thing I have ever seen or felt.

Yet in the last two weeks, while I can sense that glimmer of gratitude somewhere shining in the sewers of my sadness, I've been more devastated than I can even explain. The whole world can change in a moment; a violent illness, the sudden yet unavoidable end of a cherished relationship, a diagnosis, treatable yet terrifying, in someone I love. In the last two weeks I have put my head under the covers so

many times and done all I could to LOOK AWAY from this pain. I would remind myself of this upcoming sermon and the title I'd chosen and try to take my own advice, eventually concluding that if you can't stop crying and you can't eat then maybe it is appropriate to put your head back under the covers and go to sleep. "Not Looking Away" is a practice, a process, not a staring contest.

I say all this, in part, just to be honest with you about who I am and where I am right now: it will be easier for me if I'm not trying to hide this grief from you, even though it may be messy to show up in the full disarray of my emotion and tears. And while I've just told you how difficult it has been to stay present to my experience recently, and how I've failed at that again and again, in fact, even though I feel like I keep breaking, and failing, I do keep coming round again to the edges of that emotion, touching the raw power of my hearts capacity to feel, maybe running from it but circling back to it again. I think of a quote by Franz Kafka (and, yes, I do find him an ironic person to quote here):

"You can hold yourself back from the suffering of the world: this is something you are free to do... but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering you might be able to avoid."

Psychologists and counselors who have worked with trauma survivors are well aware of the dangers of *psychic numbing*, a term coined by Robert Lifton to describe the experience of Hiroshima survivors. Lifton now applies this term to ALL of us alive on earth—because the threats to the continuation of life on earth are so massively pervasive we are ALL implicated in this trauma. Just to take one singular issue threatening our world—the existence of Nuclear weapons, or radioactive waste from Nuclear power, or the rising ocean temperatures due to global climate change, deforestation, desertification of farmlands—just to take one of these issues and sit with it in deep contemplation can be so painful and terrifying it is easier to deaden our response and continue with "business as usual." But, as was observed by a doctor working with Vietnam veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:

“The mind pays for its deadening to the state of our world by giving up its capacity for joy and flexibility.” As some emotions are excluded, the heart-mind must counterbalance by shutting off other emotions, progressively shutting itself down so fully that very little is felt at all. To some, this may be a desirable alternative to feeling pain. But it will never be a sustainable one.

Pain, grief, fear, anger: these are natural responses to fact that we are conscious beings living in a threatened world. We are not isolated organisms living in a vacuum; we are integral components of our communities, the land we live on, and the planet as a whole. Each of us is like a cell in the larger body of the living earth, and allowing ourselves to feel pain—whether our own personal grief and losses and/or the myriad forms of distress assaulting our planet-body (and realizing that these two, the personal and the collective, are not actually separate but are constantly informing each other)—allowing ourselves to feel and face this pain is not only *natural*, it is your own intelligent consciousness receiving necessary feedback about the pain of the world itself. It is compassion, the ability to “suffer with.” As we learned from Kafka’s quote, and Lifton and other trauma counselors, the ability to feel pain and to “suffer with” others also increases our capacity to feel joy, to respond with flexibility and acuity to the ever-changing situations we are faced with.

So, if you will, let us breathe together. Inhale, Exhale. I want do this because it helps me remember where I am right now—this place on earth, here with YOU—and I believe it can help us foster a sense of ourselves as a collective. A conscious breath together creates a collective Spirit—and that word itself, Spirit, is connected to the word *respiration*, Breath. Let us join together in a collective spirit, and now turn our attention to the dynamic world around us of which we are a vital part.

I invite you, as you continue with your own inhales and exhales, to expand your awareness of where we are and who is gathered here today. Just outside the walls and windows of this beautiful space are the grasses, pushing up out of the soil, myriad insects buzzing and digging and doing their work, sparrows and robins swooping down and taking flight. The sun and the wind, pollinators dancing from flower to flower, the water that shape shifts from ocean to cloud to driving down hard on the mountaintops as rain, back to streams and rivers and sea—all are present. Each one of these processes and beings and interactions are vital to our very lives. We are not alone on this rock hurtling through space.

Feel the forest around us—knowing how incredibly blessed we are to inhabit a place still full of forest, one of the few places on earth where we can walk in the presence of old-growth trees, can you also allow yourself to feel the pain of the clear-cuts, to feel yourself as a little stream choking to death on the mud from an eroded hillside? Holding the knowledge of that destruction, doesn't it make the watersheds that we do have intact all the more precious, beautiful, and worthy of our protection?

Going beyond these these human and non-human species clustered here on this spot on earth, going back in time I invite you to imagine those who have come before us, all those who made our being here possible. Our actual ancestors are actually *right here*, still present in our genes, encoded in our DNA, shining out sometimes in the way we smile or gesture, showing up in the foods we love, the vices we're drawn to, the mistakes we make, the steps we take to make it better. But the past-beings that are present here are not our individual ancestors alone.

The history of this land is the history of the Wiyot people, and every time I open my imagination to that reality—imagining what life was like on this stretch of the north coast a thousand years ago, imagining the clash of cultures as my white ancestors came, and cut timber and roads through the forest, imagining the massacre at Woodley Island and the willingness of Uniontown's citizens to look away and leave that tragedy unpunished—every time I let myself move beyond “thinking” these facts

and let myself actually feel them I am *amazed* at the depth of grief I feel: Greif not just for the Wiyot, but grief for the perpetrators of violence as well.

The history that has been written up on this land is not only the unspeakable loss and horror visited upon the Native Americans and the community of earth species, we carry in us also the horror and pain of those who did violence, those who wielded hatchets in the night or who stood by, unable or unwilling to stop them. Both sides—all sides—of this story are written upon the land, and upon us who live here. We need to allow ourselves to feel to take this in.

At the same time as all our ancestors and forbearers are present here with us right now—if we let them in with our moral imagination—also, all the future beings are here as well. Maybe your children or grandchildren ARE, actually, present in the room or the building. Maybe you don't have children yet or perhaps you never plan to have them; still, picture a beloved niece or nephew or young friend. Buried like little points of light in their ovaries and gonads are the sparks of potential life—all the hope for the continuation of our species is speculation, is as precious and delicate and fragile as the internal organs in a baby. The future of life is that precarious, and tentative. The dreams we dream today, the choices we make in our own lives are the choices shaping the world our as-yet unborn great-grandchildren are stepping into.

Are any of us certain that there will be a habitable world for our great-great grandchildren? I am not. This is a time of great uncertainty. But that uncertainty, the very pain of not knowing what future we are stepping into can give us the sharp edge of clarity in our thinking. It gives the sharp edge of poignancy to our *feeling* for the world—these feelings matter. When I feel pain, I know I still care. When I know that I care, I know do have some shred of hope for the future of life on earth. It is a hope that I have to remake daily, circling round my grief again and again. It is a practice.

This is why Joanna Macy attaches the word “active” to the somewhat meaningless word “Hope” in the title of her book, and why I followed suit in calling for “Active Peace.” For peace to be “active” we have to embrace that it is a verb, not a noun. It is something you DO rather than something you have.

Contrary to an image of peace as pure stillness, silence, non-suffering and non-joy, I see peace as a process as active and dynamic as the Pacific Ocean along the north coast. The coastline here is formed by terrible raging forces of smashing waves, eroding cliffs, tectonic plates pushing upward from the fiery belly of the earth. Earthquakes, tsunamis, torrential rainstorms, the unstable slipperiness of the earth’s crust—all these forces are what give us the beauty of college cove or Houda Point at sunset, what gives us fertile soil for the vegetables growing next door at Redwood Roots. The same forces that preserve us and inspire us can potentially endanger us. This is life.

You have the capacity to face the suffering and dangers of our world without dodging, denying or numbing out. Your pain, your personal pain and your pain for the world can be reframed as compassion. Your pain is the intelligent response of a conscious earth-being awake in the world, and it is necessary feedback, increasing your capacity to feel joy and respond effectively to the conditions of your life on this planet. Your pain and your joy mean that you are awake. Take heart. Breathe. Don’t look away.