

In just a few short weeks, the Trump administration has turned out to be far worse than most of us might have imagined, moving quickly to disable, dismantle, or defund as many federal programs and agencies as they can – or at least the ones they don't like, which seems to be almost all of them. From immigration to health care, Trump's executive orders have disrupted or endangered literally thousands of lives.

It's been brutal, and more than a little overwhelming.

Yet there have been some bright spots – the Women's march that turned out to be the biggest national demonstration our history; the demonstrations at our airports after the immigration ban; the cities and states standing up to the administration, the people across the country making their voices heard.

The resistance to the policies and actions of this administration is growing, and organizing, and that's heartening.

The struggle for the heart and soul of America is out in the open now, and it's going to go on for a long time, and the emotional toll is going to be high. There will be days when it feels like everything we've struggled for is lost. There will be times when even small victories will be few and far between.

I spoke a few weeks ago about turning into the skid, and facing the reality of the situation, and the reality is that the struggle is going to be a grind.

How will we get through it? How will we keep our spirits up when the going gets tough and the struggle seems never ending?

The good news is that people have been in these situations before, and developed techniques to help cope with them.

So let's take a moment here to acknowledge whatever feelings of overwhelm, or grief, or fear, or anger, that the past few weeks have given rise to. Let's recognize that these are perfectly natural and healthy responses.

I'm going to ask you to stay present with those feelings for a minute. Whatever they are. Don't step back from them, don't go numb to them. Embrace them. Really feel them in your body.

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Now think of something you are grateful for. It could be your partner or friends. It could be your children. It could be sunsets or chipmunks or ice cream. It could be that first cup of coffee in the morning. Whatever it is, savor your gratitude. Revel in it. Let it spread throughout your body in a warm glow. Stay with it.

Gratitude is the place we will start from and return to as we face what lies ahead.

Gratitude for being alive in this beautiful world, in this incredible time and place filled with miracles and life and love. A world we owe our lives to, a world we want to save because we love it.

I want to share with you the work of Joanna Macy. We've worked with it little bit already, staying present with our despair and hopelessness, and grounding ourselves in gratitude. Joanna Macy is well known activist, and a scholar of Buddhism, systems theory, and deep ecology. Over the years, she's created what she calls the Work That Reconnects. The latest iteration of that work is in this book: *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy* - coauthored with Chris Johnstone.

Active Hope is a process and a practice. It's about our ability to make choices about how we respond to crisis. To choose hope. Not blindly, but with the full knowledge of the danger and difficulty we face. There are four stages to the spiral of the Work that Reconnects: Coming from Gratitude, Honoring our Pain for the World, Seeing with New Eyes, and Going Forth. Let me quote Joanna here:

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 we appreciate. Yet the very act of looking at what we love and value in our world brings with it an awareness of the vast violation under way, the despoliation and unraveling. From gratitude we naturally flow to honoring our pain for the world.

Coming from gratitude helps build a context of trust and psychological buoyancy that supports us to face difficult realities in the second phase. Dedicating time and attention to honoring our pain for the world ensures that there is space to hear our sorrow, grief, outrage, and any other feelings revealing themselves in response 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 shutout, something special happens inside us. It is our survival response.

The term honoring implies a respectful welcoming, where we recognize the value of something. 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 as a healthy expression of our belonging to life. Seeing with new eyes reveals the wider web of resources through our rootedness within a deeper, ecological self. This third stage draws on insights from holistic science and ancient spiritual wisdom as well as from our creative imaginations. It opens us to a new view of what is possible and reminds of our power to make a difference.

To experience the benefits of these empowering perspectives, we want to apply them to the task of addressing the challenges we face. The final station, Going Forth, involves clarifying our vision of how we can act for the healing of our world, identifying practical steps that move our vision forward.

The spiral offers us a transformational journey that deepens our capacity to act for the sake of life on Earth. As we allow ourselves to be guided by this spiral form, it isn't just us acting – we are letting the world act on us and through us. End quote.

Active Hope always begins with, and returns to, gratitude.

And to that, I want to add two things, radical joy and sacred anger.

Anger gets a bad rap. Largely because it gets confused with its primary manifestation: aggression.

Melvin McLeod of Lions Roar magazine writes that in Buddhist thought, *aggression is one of the “three poisons” that drive our suffering. Even a brief moment of reflection on our own lives, our society, and human history will confirm that aggression is the greatest cause of destruction and suffering. As with the other two poisons—ignorance and passion—what defines aggression is ego.*

Aggression is the energy of anger in the service of our own ego and its needs, attacking anything we see as a threat. But when anger is released from its service to ego, it ceases to be aggression and simply becomes energy. The pure energy of anger has wisdom and power. It can even be enlightened.

When the energy of anger serves ego, it is aggression. When it serves to ease others' suffering and make the world a better place, it is wisdom. We have the freedom to choose which. We have the power to transform aggression into the wisdom of anger.

Traditionally, it is said that the enlightened energy of anger is the wisdom of clarity. It is sharp, accurate, and penetrating insight. It sees what is wholesome and unwholesome, what is just and unjust, what is enlightenment and what is ignorance. Seeing clearly, we lay the ground for action.

We all experience the wisdom of anger when we see how society mistreats people. When we have an honest insight into our own neuroses and vow to change. When we are inspired to say no to injustice and fight for something better. This wisdom is a source of strength, fearlessness, and solidarity. It can drive positive change.

Notice how this view of anger reinforces the third stage of Joanna Macy's Active Hope process: Seeing with new eyes.

This pure anger, this sacred anger, also energizes us. It gives us the strength and motivation to go forth into action.

Beyond gratitude there must also be joy. Deliberate joy in the face of despair and destruction is a radical act of defiance. A very human thing to do.

So in addition to gratitude, I invite you into radical joy with this poem by Jack Gilbert:

A Brief for the Defense

*Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, they are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
at the fountain are laughing together between
the suffering they have known and the awfulness
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
in the village is very sick. There is laughter
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
We must admit there will be music despite everything.
We stand at the prow again of a small ship
anchored late at night in the tiny port
looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront*

is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning.

To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat

comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth

all the years of sorrow that are to come.

The heart of this poem bears repeating, I think.

If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation.

We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must

have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make

injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.

If we allow others to take our delight away from us – to make our lives joyless – we allow them power over us, and to diminish us. We become grim shades instead of the vital living.

Radical joy means seeking and recognizing the beauty in us and around us. It means making beauty - creating music, and art, and good conversation, and all the other things that make life worth living. It means dancing and laughing in the face of oppression. As the great anarchist Emma Goldman once said, “A revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having.”

These things: active hope, sacred anger, radical joy – these things can help to see us through. But only if we work with them, make them a deliberate part of our lives. And if they’re done together.

Sure, we can practice these things on our own, and that’s useful to a point. It’s when we share our pain and grief, nurture our sacred anger, and laugh and sing and dance together that we become more powerful. It’s when we support each other in solidarity that we become more effective. I invite you to get Joanna’s book and work with it.

Active Hope, Sacred Anger, Radical Joy

Rev. Munro Sickafoose

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Our hope can no longer be passive, our anger diffuse, our joys unspoken. We must shape our hope into action and go forth into a world that needs us now more than ever.

May it be so.