

Despair and Empowerment in Our Watershed Moment

*A presentation by Dr. Paula Green at the November 15, 2016
'revisiting' of the Women's Pentagon Action of 1980*

Today, just a week after the election, many of us are struggling through a process of grief and bewilderment. I waited for days to start writing this talk so that I could begin to labor through the heaviness, anger, downright despondency, and deep fears that would float in and out of consciousness. We have to start here, with our own experience of rawness. But we cannot linger too long in the sadness and paralysis. Our communities, our country, and our world need us to learn what we can from the unfolding events, to plan how to resist, to protect, and to return to creating the inclusive world we have slowly been creating.

It is very easy and strangely comforting to “awfulize.” We can compare notes on the latest Trumpian triumphs, groan at the appointment of right wing white men to ever-greater positions of power, and freeze over our terror about the Supreme Court and the evisceration of protections on every level. I will spare us that litany. I imagine you have done your own awfulizing every day, as have I.

It will, however, be impossible to heal, repair, and transform our world from a heart filled with rage, fear, and hatred. We cannot work or love with a closed fist. For me that means keeping a lid on my “worst-case-scenario” mind and turning as best as I can to the task of discerning the lessons of this election that are relevant to rebuilding. I know that requires refusing to dehumanize the “other,” whoever that other is for us, and also to holding in our mind the rich history of nonviolent revolutions where people power has triumphed over guns, tanks, and bigotry.

At the same time, for balance with the news, I have been collecting the wise words of colleagues and spiritual teachers arriving on the wings of the Internet all week. With great courage, the Dalai Lama says *Be Compassionate, Work for Peace, and Never Give Up*. If he has not given up, with all that he has endured, neither can we.

Feminist writer Clarissa Pinkola Estes spins these words: *I urge you, ask you, gentle you, to please not spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times. Especially do not lose hope. Most particularly because the fact is that we were made for these times. Yes. For years, we have been learning, practicing, been in training for and just waiting to meet on this exact plain of engagement.*

Canadian friends noted that in their country and much of Europe, citizens agree on policies such as single payer health care, gun control, and reproductive rights that remain relatively constant over time, allowing them to move on to other complex national issues. In the US, because we are so profoundly divided, we

seem to return to the same issues of health and reproductive care, voting rights, racial justice, immigration and gun control over and over, never getting a national consensus and unable to move forward to address arising new issues. The boulder we push up the mountain rolls down on us every 4 or 8 election-cycle years. As the boulder has crashed to rock-bottom this time, let's look a little more deeply at what is transpiring nationally and globally in our unjust and ecocidal systems.

We are witnessing a rapid expansion of the Great Unraveling. Joanna Macy, who participated in the 1980 Surround the Pentagon action and who is still teaching at age 88, coined that phrase, the Great Unraveling. A systems thinker, Buddhist scholar, author, and workshop leader, Joanna offers 3 alternate views about our current moment in history:

1. The industrial growth society is fine, according to this view. If we double-down on growth and conduct our business as usual, everyone's boat will rise in prosperity. Pump the oil, use up the resources, feed the rich, exploit the poor, create new enemies so we can go to war, and deny climate change. Business as usual perpetuates the wealth/poverty division, shrinking privilege into an ever-narrowing cohort. The haves and have not divisions are now the highest since the Gilded Age of the 19th century, and we see this manifested at home and abroad, in capitalist and post-communist systems, with Chinese and Russian elite spending as lavishly as Fifth Avenue Americans.

Business as usual has no rational approach to addressing the fundamental threats of militarism, resource depletion, global population explosion, rising inequality, and climate change, each threat feeding on and exacerbating the other, all of them increasing wars and refugees. Business as usual allows our resources to go into defending ourselves with extravagant military budgets and newly militarized policing. The tide, unfortunately, does not raise all boats. Most of us sink.

2. The second view, the Great Unraveling, reflects the unintended consequences of industrialization. Systems begin to lose their coherence; institutions decline in legitimacy and fall apart; functions are erratic and disrupted; the climate behaves unpredictably. Social norms crumble, along with infrastructure. Borders close as fears multiply and compassion weakens. We watch overloaded rafts collapsing in the Mediterranean Sea and children drowning on the shores of Europe. People on the margins feel squeezed out. The European Union, a great project of the post WWII realignment, begins to disintegrate. Liberalism fails to address the multiple and interfaced crises. Trump is elected.

In the Great Unraveling, cries of pain are heard everywhere, from the Trump and Brexit voters whose lives feel unpromising to the ISIS fighters expressing their

own experiences of despair and hopelessness. Let yourself contemplate that there are connections between ISIS fighters and our discontented voters. Our political structures have built a wall of exclusion, domination, and victimization, marginalizing fellow inhabitants in each of our societies. Ironically, while those of us on the left valued and worked on including, we did a lot of our own unconscious and careless excluding at the same time. I am afraid we have to eat some humble pie.

Combing the electoral data can tell us something. Exit polls, for example, tell us that one in five voters who pulled the lever for Trump do not believe he is qualified to be president. Why vote for someone so unqualified? When people so desire change that they will vote for someone they believe unqualified, they are desperate. The alienated white working-class people who cast their protest vote for Trump remain without a political home, since neither party truly meets their needs. The incoming presidential administration will maneuver and coax them to vent their frustration at scapegoats (“the Mexicans”). We can and must address their needs for economic security and self-respect, and understand that their needs are no different than our own. (Lakey, nonviolenceinternational.org)

In my work as a peacebuilder, one behavior I have discerned is that the excluded anywhere in the world will push their way in if necessary in order to meet their basic human needs. Those needs include respect and dignity as much as they include the physical needs of sustenance and a paycheck. The felt sense of being respected, or its opposite of being ignored or humiliated, has a much more powerful influence on people’s opinions than rational arguments. Fear grows out of exclusion, whether real, imagined, or manipulated by callous leaders and corrupt media. Hate and bigotry grow out of fear.

Fearful feelings arise from an unarguable set of perceptions and internal interpretations of victimization. Nothing arises in a vacuum of no cause. Fears of exclusion can be projected in the mind to the core existential fear of non-existence of the self. Or the fears can be that of non-existence or reduced privilege of an identity group, be it national, religious, ethnic, linguistic, racial, or cultural. We see this played out on the world stage daily, and most recently, in our own election. We ignore this insight of the core human need for acknowledgement and pride at our peril.

We have seen marginalized populations fighting for their dignity and respect, their cultural recognition and visibility, for millennia around the world. How did we ignore those needs among our own working people in the rural areas, Rust Belt, and other regions here at home? “Dissed” has become a shorthand vocabulary word. African Americans, white working class Americans, Mexicans, women, Muslims, all minorities experience being “dissed,” or disrespected and humiliated. It was an Arab fruit vendor in Tunisia who set himself on fire out of his own desperation and whose action ignited the years of Arab Spring. Being humiliated and excluded is unsustainable. Sooner or later, the humiliation seeks a victim,

someone to blame. The excluded demand their place at the table. This election, again, is a case in point.

3. **Let's focus now on the Great Turning**, which is the third view of our stories of the world. It is a time of transition toward a life-sustaining society. It shows up in holding actions, creative endeavors, and shifts in consciousness. We have had other Great Turnings, one being the Agricultural Revolution and later the Industrial Revolution. Perhaps now we are inventing the Sustainability Revolution, globally, inclusively, and respectfully.

We build this new world through holding actions to prevent destruction, such as protesting pipelines, refusing to build walls, fighting for legal regulations like gay marriage, trans rights, voting protections, and immigration reforms. We organize efforts to slow down the annihilation of our planetary environment. We stand with Standing Rock and Keystone and we dismantle VT Yankee and Kinder Morgan's local pipeline plans. We absolutely cannot give way to special interests on climate change, which is already under attack. And as we dismantle the old, slowing down the degradation of life, we have to simultaneously build the world we want to live in.

We begin to actualize our vision by creating and supporting new structures and systems: food coops and community agriculture, restorative justice and alternatives to prison programs, solar and wind farms, negotiation and mediation processes, the Occupy movement, the Standing Rock encampment model as a way of resisting, Black Lives Matter actions, women's leadership organizations, alternative health care, global solidarity and human rights commitments, and institutional developments like the EU and UN. We need institutions and safety nets and communities of solidarity that include everyone, absolutely everyone, no one left outside the net to become the next spoiler.

The third of these intertwining circles, besides holding actions and new structures, is shifting our consciousness toward a full understanding of our interconnectedness and interdependence with our biosphere and each other. The earth is alive, a living and sacred system in need of protection and respect. We are part of, and not separate from, the earth. This living system of our air and water, wind and climate, will, like us humans, also erupt when disrespected. I think part of the crush of this election is that it indicates a shift of direction that is anathema to most of us who are longing for a more inclusive, tolerant, and progressive future. Our precious dreams of a multicultural, multi-racial, cosmopolitan, affirming, climate-protected, open bordered and just world has been attacked and rejected. I have heard from colleagues in Sri Lanka and Liberia that offensive racial and misogynist language has been let loose and justified by mimicking the new America. Right-wing Europe, we know, is counting

on electoral victories like ours. We were an imperfect role-model before last week, and we have just been demoted.

In rising up to respond how do we hold on to our values, to not hate or belittle when we are hated, to react as Martin Luther King inspired us to do, with nonviolence and love? So much progress seemed within reach that is now out of reach. But if we are honest and look back just before the election, black men were being shot in the streets, refugees had no place to go, climate crises were multiplying, and voting protection rights had already been withdrawn. We were needed last week and we are needed in solidarity and resolve evermore now. We lost faith, hope, and what we might call a national moral compass. Our views and values are left out and we are hurting.

However, others felt left out over the years of social and economic growth and are hurting too. President Obama tried from day one to create an inclusive society and preached the need for ethical interconnectedness to us for 8 years. I think Bernie Sanders tried to bridge the class and culture divides with his new revolution. But our moral compass was insufficiently inclusive in this election, partly out of political and media manipulation and partly out of our own collective dehumanization for those who we deemed “other.”

I would like to add the word “consciousness” to any new revolution, so that we can get ourselves beyond hate and blame to build bonds across our differences and to act on our common needs. How are we going to end polarization while we are polarized? How do we un-polarize from the people we want to blame and hate for this electoral disaster? How do we disarm ourselves from our own attitudes? How do we do the inner work of self-transformation and simultaneously extend ourselves outward to organize and resist, which we absolutely must do? There’s a set of questions to study, especially as President Obama tried so hard to re-order our national polarization. We cannot allow it be a bridge too far to span. This great national project of his to widen tolerance and empathy must be continued.

Mother Teresa said that our troubles arise because we draw our circles of inclusion too small. As yourself: who is in your family, your community, your span of concern? Take a moment right now and open your arms and enlarge your circle. Who else did you include? Who is still left out? Who are you still “dissing?” How wide can you stretch your respect and compassion?

We are given the tools for consciousness. Again, I offer Clarissa Pinkola Estes for a bit of spiritual mystery to offset the pragmatics of social change and have the last word. As you will hear, she talks about soul. We do not have to unpack the meaning of “soul” to catch the significance. Her connotation to me is full consciousness, a great big dose of humility, and from that, the chance to scale up our visions and actions to take this soul force, Gandhi’s *satyagraha*, into the world for the next step in a life-affirming and more fully inclusive revolution.

One of the most powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these –to be fierce and to show mercy toward others; both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity.

Dr. Paula Green has 40 years experience as a psychologist, peace educator, consultant, and mentor in the field of inter-group relations and conflict resolution. In 1994 she founded the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, a highly regarded US-based NGO focused on international conflict transformation, inter-communal dialogue and reconciliation. She is Professor Emerita at the School for International Training in the US, where she founded and directed CONTACT, the Conflict Transformation Across Cultures Program, with its two annual institutes and graduate certificate program for peacemakers from around the world. Her work has taken her to many regions of Africa, Asia, the Mid East, and Europe, as well as within the US where she resides, consults, and teaches.

In 2009, Paula received an award from the Dalai Lama as an “Unsung Hero of Compassion.” The Unsung Heroes award is presented to “*individuals who, through their loving kindness and service to others, have made their communities and our world a better place.*”

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