

Despair and Empowerment in Our Watershed Moment

Paula Green

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Each of us in different ways and measures is fearful and courageous, deluded and wise. We come together to strengthen and learn from each other. We are now exactly one month post-election. Many of us still struggle through a process of grief and bewilderment, with our anger, despair, and deep fears flowing in and out of consciousness. It is easy and strangely comforting to “awfulize.” We can compare notes on the latest Trumpian triumphs, groan at the appointment of right-wing billionaires to ever greater positions of power, and freeze over our terror about the Supreme Court and the evisceration of protections on every level.

We would be wise, however, not to indulge in habits of thought and speech that solidify rage, hatred, and alienation. We need to learn what we can from the catastrophe of this election. Our communities, our country, and our world need our concentrated determination to protect, resist, and follow what musician/activist Harry Belafonte calls our rebellious hearts. We have a long history of nonviolence to draw upon as we engage in acts of resistance in these next years. Nonviolent activists have stopped the machine throughout history and are doing so right now at Standing Rock, in a campaign that is yet to be fully secured.

I want to explore two topics tonight. The first is a framework to comprehend this historical moment of destabilization and turmoil. The second concerns the dangers of dehumanization and the necessity of expanding our own boundaries of inclusion and compassion. While my focus will be on our own country at this critical moment, I will also bring in experiences from other regions and contexts where social justice and human rights have been under threat.

To balance my daily doses of bad news, which I must confess I find impossible to resist, I have a cartoon on my wall that reads “My desire to be well-informed is currently at odds with my desire to stay sane.” When I am being sane, I remember the deep wisdom teachings available to us that can ground our perspective and help us find mental states that are not reactive or damaging to self and others.

The feminist writer Clarissa Estes spins these elegant 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.

Our Current Moment in History

What are these times that we are made ready for? Joanna Macy, a systems thinker and Buddhist scholar, offers three alternate narratives about our current moment in history. The first, the industrial growth society, is business as usual, the familiar world of competing nation states and corporations. It has no rational approach to addressing the fundamental threats of militarism, resource depletion, global population and migration, rising inequality, and environmental calamities, each problem feeding on and exacerbating the other to produce devastation and chaos. Business as usual spends our resources defending ourselves with extravagant military budgets and increasingly militarized policing. Perhaps it has taken the election of Trump for us to realize that the industrial growth society is bankrupt. Its tide does not raise all boats. Most of us sink.

Joanna calls her second story of the state of the world the Great Unraveling. Systems lose their coherence; institutions decline in legitimacy and fall apart; functioning organizations become erratic and disrupted; the climate behaves menacingly. Infrastructures collapse. Social norms crumble. People on the margins feel squeezed out. Borders close as fears multiply and compassion weakens. We watch overloaded rafts collapsing in the Mediterranean and children drowning on the shores of Europe. The European Union, a great project of the post- World War 2 realignment, begins to disintegrate. As Charles Eisenstein puts it, "The dissolution of the old world order is now officially in progress."

Cries of pain are heard everywhere in the Great Unraveling, from the Trump and Brexit voters whose lives feel unpromising to the ISIS fighters expressing their own experience of despair and hopelessness. Despite their horrifying methods, there are connections between ISIS fighters and our and Europe's discontented voters. In our country and theirs, unjust political and economic structures have marginalized large swaths of the population, leaving disempowered victims who then turn on each other. One of my former students from Pakistan devotes her life to dissuading and deprogramming current and potential ISIS fighters and their families. Despair and alienation drive their choices, she reports, just as they have determined our election outcomes.

The electoral data can tell us something. Exit polls, for example, tell us that one in five voters who pulled the lever for Trump don't believe he is qualified to be president. But why vote for someone so unsuitable? When people desire change so much that they will vote for someone they believe unqualified, they are desperate. The large numbers of white working-class people who cast their protest vote for Trump will experience crushing disappointments and predictable rage as they feel once again tossed under the bus. Using the age-old tools of pitting marginalized groups against each other, the incoming administration will maneuver and coax its supporters to vent their frustration at scapegoats, "the Mexicans, the Muslims, the immigrants, etc." (George Lakey, Nonviolence International).

I watched this play out so viciously in the former Yugoslavia during my years of intensive engagement in that region. Milosevic, an opportunist demagogue, rose up by cleverly appealing

to the grievances of one ethnic group in the region, promising them status, prosperity, and glory. Demonizing all the other ethnic and religious groups, especially the Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims, he slowly tightened the noose, inciting and baiting his followers to commit plunder, murder, and war crimes. The parallels are chilling, the lessons are clear.

We need to be prepared and present, ready to respond to escalating levels of divisiveness and race baiting. We, and our progressive politicians, must especially expand our reach to address the need for economic security and self-respect among those voters who will find themselves once again disappointed. We will have to cultivate allies in unlikely places within our own society as we turn from the Great Unraveling to the third story of our time, the Great Turning. As Joanna describes it:

The Great Turning is embodied by those who know that the first story, business as usual, is leading to catastrophe and who refuse to let the second story, the Great Unraveling, have the last word. Involving the emergence of new and creative human responses, the Great Turning is about the epochal transition from an industrial society committed to economic growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the healing and recovery of our world.

Three Approaches to Social Change

The Great Turning shows up in three approaches to social change that propel us into our life-sustaining era and limit backsliding into blame and divisiveness—holding actions, new structures, and shifts in consciousness.

In holding actions, we contribute to a sustainable future by slowing down the annihilation of our planetary environment, by blockading resource extraction, refusing to build walls, and resisting changes in legal regulations like gay marriage, voting protections, reproductive rights, and first amendment freedom of speech rights. We shout out our solidarity with our local colleges for their solid commitments to provide sanctuary and protection for all their members, including those who burn flags. We demonstrate with Black Lives Matter and for academic freedom, we help shut down Vermont Yankee and Kinder Morgan's local pipeline plans. Holding actions demonstrate our resistance to the further degradation of life and environment.

And as we disrupt and slow the pace of business as usual, we simultaneously actualize our vision by creating and supporting new structures and systems, well underway here in the Pioneer Valley: food co-ops and community agriculture, restorative justice and alternatives to prison programs, solar and wind farms, energy co-ops, co-housing, peace centers and nonviolence training, the Occupy movement, racial justice actions, women's leadership organizations, LGBTQ justice and safeguards, alternative health care, affordable housing, human rights movements, sanctuary programs, and immigrant protection. Blocking actions and acts of creation happen concurrently so that we have the new society to enter as we dismantle the old. Standing Rock is both a blocking action and the creation of a new society.

Twice I experienced contexts where participants in peacebuilding groups could not visualize an alternative future, which makes it much harder to bring it into existence. The first time was in the northern city of Jaffna in Sri Lanka, which had been isolated and destroyed during a 30-year ethnicity-based civil war. Group members, mostly under 40, simply could not imagine a just and peaceful society that they had never experienced.

Last year in a nonviolence training with Combatants for Peace, an Israeli-Palestinian joint group, we asked them in our final day together to meet in separate national groups and create a vision of a new, post-occupation society. Both groups came up empty. Being occupied or being an occupier for 50 or almost 70 years, depending on your starting date of 1967 or 1948, is the only political structure they know. Remember Proverbs 29:18: "Without a vision, the people perish." Apparently a more accurate translation is "Without a prophetic vision, the people abandon restraint." Either way, we are lost without a vision of a good and true society.

Fortunately, holding fast to our vision and values is not a problem in the Pioneer Valley, nor is lack of energy and opportunity. We are in the beginning phases of actualizing our vision and concurrently engaged in the third approach to social change.

The third of these overlapping circles, concurrent with holding actions and new structures, is shifting our consciousness toward a full understanding of our interconnectedness and interdependence with our biosphere and with each other. We understand that, like us, the earth is alive, a living and sacred system, in need of protection and respect. This living system of our air and water, wind and climate, will, amazingly like we humans, also erupt when disrespected. With shifting consciousness, we begin to act on the spiritual teaching that we are all part of one another, that we are profoundly and irrevocably connected, and that we live best in a world that Archbishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela called *ubuntu*, a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. A person is a person through other people. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other (Michael Onyebuchi Eze).

Enlarging Our Boundaries of Inclusion

I think part of the crush of this election is that it obliterates our faith that we were making slow, steady progress toward a multicultural, multiracial, cosmopolitan, affirming, climate-protected, open bordered, and just world. If we are honest and look back to just before the election, carbon levels were rising unchecked, black men were being shot in the streets, refugees had no refuge, and voting protection rights had already been gutted. The election outcome and all that ensues may be an enormous wake-up call to remake our individual and collective lives. I wish we had needed a less harsh wake-up that will not hurt so many people, but here we are.

One unexpected and visionary response to this harsh wake-up call is the formation of a new organization: the U.S. Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council. This group is a promising emblem of my second topic: the dangers of dehumanization and the absolute necessity of enlarging our own boundaries of respect, dignity, and inclusion.

In my work as a peacebuilder, one behavior I have discerned is that people who are excluded anywhere in the world will force their way in if necessary in order to meet their basic human needs. Those needs include esteem and dignity as much as they include the physical needs of sustenance and material security. 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, sometimes real, often imagined, and usually augmented by callous leaders and corrupt media. Hate and bigotry grow out of fear. "We hate what we fear, and we fear what (and who) we do not know" (Eisenstein).

So it is in our own country now. Families excluded from the general rise of prosperity or marginalized by new social norms that challenge their comfort zones have made their voices heard. Many feel dehumanized by the bicoastal elite and a postmodern world. We did not remember to walk in their shoes, to see the world as they encounter it, or to make bridges of common cause. We did not know how to counteract the scapegoating bigotry pouring forth daily and obstructing our motivation for finding common ground. Had we been able to reach across the divisions, we would have experienced a lot more mutuality and remembered that "we" and "they" live and suffer together. We allowed ourselves to be pulled apart at our own peril. Now, ironically, we are the ones marginalized and wounded, feeling that our values and worldview do not matter. I imagine many of us are going to feel "dissed" for quite some time.

"Dissed" has become a shorthand vocabulary word, which tells us how important it is. African Americans, white working class Americans, gay and lesbian sisters and brothers, Mexicans, women, Muslims, all minorities experience being dissed, disrespected and humiliated. It was an Arab fruit vendor in Tunisia who ignited the years of the Arab Spring by setting himself on fire out of his own desperation. The pain of being humiliated and excluded is unsustainable. Sooner or later, shame seeks a scapegoat, someone to blame in a misguided attempt to reduce the pain. The excluded demand their place at the table. This election and Brexit are cases in point. Their message is heard one way or another every night in screaming headlines: "Recognize me, acknowledge my existence, my reality, and my humanity."

In our peacebuilding work around the world, we often ask people to reflect on who is and who is not included in their community. Mother Teresa said our troubles arise because we draw our circles of inclusion too small. Ask yourself: Who is in your family, your community, and 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?

How are we going to end polarization while we ourselves are polarized? How do we unpolarize ourselves from the people we want to blame and hate for this electoral disaster? How do we disarm ourselves of our own attitudes and prejudices? How do we do the inner work of self-transformation and simultaneously extend ourselves outward to organize and resist, which we absolutely must do?

Eleanor Roosevelt, a role model from an earlier day, determined as first lady to keep humanization on the agenda during the most brutal war in history, reaching out to touch people in the most unlikely circumstances. A *New Yorker* cartoon shows two coal miners wearing headlamps in a dark tunnel. One turns to the other and exclaims, “For gosh sakes, here comes Mrs. Roosevelt.”

These coming years will offer us endless opportunities to stretch ourselves and expand our compassion, as the war years did for Eleanor Roosevelt. We must help each other develop the tools for consciousness to guide the Great Turning. Our Native brothers and sisters, whose history is one of our national disgraces, are still teaching us.

In the late 1800s the great Sioux tactician, Red Cloud, explained how the big emerging nation treated the diminished ones. “They made many promises,” he said, “but they kept but one. They promised to take our land, and they took it.”

“In the face of this history we pray,” a young Native leader at Standing Rock explained to a reporter the day after the blizzards blew in. “In the face of this history we love. In the face of this we forgive. The vast majority of water protectors know this is the greatest battle of all: to keep our hearts intact.”

If there is a silver lining in this high-stakes struggle of our lives, it is in the rapidly multiplying initiatives and coalitions emerging as millions of us rise up to defend each other and our fragile planet from harm. The almost unbelievable sight of vets on their knees apologizing to the Native Americans brought me to tears. Governments cannot last without the acquiescence of the governed. If we are determined not to acquiesce, give up, give in, normalize, or cooperate, and we are equally determined to become more inclusive and to remain nonviolent, our revolution will triumph over obstacles that otherwise will threaten and divide us.

I offer Clarissa Estes again for a bit of spiritual mystery to offset the pragmatics of social change and have the last word. She talks about soul. To me that means full consciousness, a great big dose of humility, and from that, the chance to scale up our visions and actions and take this soul force into the world for the next step in a life-affirming and more fully inclusive transformation. She writes:

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, are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity.

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Paula Green has 40 years' experience as a psychologist, peace educator, consultant, and mentor in intergroup relations and conflict resolution. In 1994 she founded the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, a nonprofit focused on international conflict transformation, intercommunal dialogue, and reconciliation. She is professor emerita at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, where she founded the Conflict Transformation Across Cultures Program (CONTACT), 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 Middle East, and Europe, as well as within the United States where she resides 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."