

Life As It Is

“We Are the Great Turning”

Episode #47 with Jess Serrante

October 15, 2025



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Jess Serrante: You know, Joanna would say time and again that even if I had the smallest, tiniest little glimmer of possibility that I could change something, of course I would give myself to it. What else would I do with this precious life that I have on this extraordinary planet but give myself to the tiniest possibility that we might change something? And so I found through this that I agree with her. I'm less interested in the conversation about whether or not we should have hope. There's so many things that that could mean. But I am interested in acting courageously. I'm interested in acting with devotion to what I love, and those things are actually bigger and more of a renewable fuel than playing the game within myself as to whether or not I think will be successful in the efforts that we're taking on to try to change things.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg and you just heard Jess Serrante. Jess is a climate activist, organizer and longtime facilitator of the Work That Reconnects, a global movement and community created by the late environmental activist Joanna Macy, who passed away this past July. Last year, Jess and Joanna produced a podcast together called *We Are The Great Turning*, that explored Joanna's teachings on cultivating courage and connection as we face the many crises of our time. Today, Sharon and I sit down with Jess to talk about Joanna's life and legacy, why Joanna believed that we should always begin with gratitude, how we can work productively with anger and despair, what it means to bow to our pain, and how the Work That Reconnects can break us open and break us free. Plus, Jess leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Jess Serrante.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with Jess Serrante and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi Jess. Hi Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

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Jess Serrante: Good to be with you.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

James Shaheen: OK, so Jess, we wanted to have you on the podcast to talk about the life and legacy of the great climate activist Joanna Macy, who passed away this past summer. You and Joanna collaborated closely on a number of projects, including a podcast you produced called *We Are The Great Turning*. So before we get started, I'd like to ask you a bit about your own background. How did you come to the climate movement, and how did you first meet Joanna?

Jess Serrante: So in 2007, I was in a freshman environmental studies seminar and I learned about the climate crisis for the first time. And it's one of those moments when I look back where it was like there was before and then there was after, because the moment that I came to begin to understand what's happening on our planet, my entire life pivoted. I changed my major, I became a climate activist, and my whole life since that time has been about climate action and climate justice.

So for many years after that I was working in the corporate accountability space. So I worked for Greenpeace and an organization called Rainforest Action Network, pushing against these big corporations and their destructive practices, and I had an experience that a lot of activists have at some point in their journey of burnout, about seven or eight years into that path. And it was at that point that I met Joanna. So I was at a conference that I had gotten a ticket to through Rainforest Action Network, and Joanna was a keynote speaker and we just happened to pass each other in the hallway. We were like the only ones in this bathroom hallway, and I thankfully had the enthusiasm and didn't hesitate in the moment to just call her name and run after her and be like, “Hi, you're amazing. I loved your talk this morning. My name is Jess, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” And that was the beginning of our friendship.

James Shaheen: That's great.

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Jess Serrante: That was eleven years ago. Mmhmm.

James Shaheen: Great. And could you give us some background on Joanna Macy's biography as well? What drew her to the climate movement, and how did she go on to create what is now known as the Work That Reconnects?

Jess Serrante: So one of the stories that Joanna told me is this moment in I think it was 1977, she was at a Cousteau Society Symposium in Boston with her kids, and it was very similar in a way when we told these stories to each other to my environmental studies class, where we were both looking at all these different assaults on life, you know, what was happening in the oceans, to the air, to our food systems, to different species, and just the assault from many directions.

And for Joanna, that moment of that symposium was a breaking point for her, and it led her into a chapter of really deep despair, and about a year and change afterwards, she merged from that despair with the clarity of the necessity for despair work and for us to talk to each other about our experience of what's happening in our world. And that was the birth, the beginning of the Work That Reconnects, her lifelong body of work.

Sharon Salzberg: You say that when you first experienced the Work That Reconnects, you felt like you came alive, which is a really pretty incredible comment. Can you describe that?

Jess Serrante: Yes. I mean, there are so many different moments, but I can say, so here's one example is that the summer after I met Joanna, a couple months later, I did a ten-day retreat with her. She used to do these Work That Reconnects deep dives in Mendocino County every summer. And I came out of my first truth mandala, which is a ritual that we do in the Work That Reconnects that is a group practice of honoring our pain for the world. So we put these objects in the middle where we pick up a stone to speak anger and dry leaves to speak grief and an empty bowl to speak our emptiness and our numbness, and a stick, or stick is anger. Anyway. So I came out of that ritual, fifty people or more speaking our heartbreak, our outrage, our fear, our grief.

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And I had a revelation. I realized that all the way up until that point, there was a part of me that had been sort of numbed out, that I wasn't all in in my work for what we call the Great Turning. There was a part of me that didn't totally believe that we could do that, that we could change things, that change was possible.

And that's kind of what the Work That Reconnects does is that these practices chip away at the hardening and the defenses in us that separate us from one another and from the world and from ourselves, and in the Work That Reconnects, a huge piece of that is through the gateway of our pain for the world.

Sharon Salzberg: And how did you go on to become a facilitator of this work, and how did you and Joanna decide to record a podcast together?

Jess Serrante: So those two things happened pretty far apart in time. I was pretty enamored of the work quite immediately, and I wanted to find ways to bring it into the organization that I was working at and with my friends. And so pretty quickly I think the first thing I did was I hosted a book club with a group of friends where we read through Joanna and Chris Johnstone's book, *Active Hope*, and we practiced some of the rituals and group practices from the Work That Reconnects.

About ten years later, from that point, I had continued on at that point, for the most of the last decade my work has been coaching. So when I found the Work That Reconnects, I also became a coach. And my work really transformed into coaching and facilitation for leaders in the movement for climate justice, and about three years ago now I was in yet another one of those sort of lost moments where I had been coaching for many years, and I realized that even that wasn't necessarily the truest calling for me, which, those moments are so hard, you know, and you dedicate years and years of life onto a single path and you think this is the way that I'm going to offer myself to the world, right? And that was the deepest yearning in me: to be as much in service of life on Earth as I can be. And so it was a heartbreaking moment where I realized

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that the coaching work that I had been doing may not actually be my long-term path, and I had let go of a lot of the structures of my life. I ended a relationship, I packed up my life in New York City, and I was sort of on the move, and it was in this sort of surrender to mystery, trusting that life would show me what's next, that, in short, I had a dream about a wave in which this wave came, and it was too big for me. I tried to paddle and surf it, and when I went to go push up on the board, when the wave came underneath me, I was on a boogie board, and all I could do was hold on. And so Joanna knew about this dream, and she was tracking me through this whole process in which we decided that I should listen to the dream and go learn how to surf. And so I was in Costa Rica and I was on the beach every day facing these little waves, but facing this enormous fear that would come up every day when I would go onto the beach to get out into the water. And every day Joanna would call me and be like, “All right, how was your lesson today? Now go out and see what happens and call me tomorrow.”

And so we were on the phone every day for about a week and doing what we do, which is really weaving the metaphor and the physicality and the metaphor of these waves that were changing in my life and the literal waves and listening to what the land had to teach us and had to teach me and talking about what was unfolding in the world. This was the week that Roe v Wade was overturned in the US, and so there was a lot of grief and pain emerging in me as that was happening. And it was through that process that Joanna and I decided that we wanted to make a podcast together, that we wanted to record our conversations and invite people to the sweetness and the familiarity and the depth of the kinds of conversations that we'd been having for years. And so that was sort of the long story for the seed of what we wound up creating together.

James Shaheen: Jess, the podcast that the two of you did traces out some of the key teachings that Joanna developed over the course of her life, including the three stories of our time. So could you tell us about these three stories? We can start with the first, Business as Usual.

Jess Serrante: Mmhmm. Yeah. So it's important when we're talking about the three stories to note that all three of these stories are happening right now, that all three are as real as one another

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in this particular moment. So we live in a time that straddles multiple paradigms, and the story of Business as Usual is the story of what we might call global corporate capitalism, right? It's a paradigm of domination and extraction. It's a story in which this moment that we're in, we could say we have advanced through a primitive human history to a pinnacle of human existence, in which we live in this global corporate paradigm. And it's a story that we hear from a lot of our mainstream media, we hear it from business schools, we hear it from politicians, right? It's a defense of the paradigms of white supremacy and patriarchy and extraction and capitalism.

In that story, the identity as consumer is central, right? We see this in a lot of the ways that we tend to respond to the second story, which we'll get to in a second, but we can buy our way out of our problems. We can consume our way out of our problems. And also comfort and convenience is not only available to all through this story, but if we don't have it, it's a personal failing, right? We have somehow failed to play the game correctly.

James Shaheen: Right. Yeah. So you mentioned the second story, and that's the Great Unraveling, which certainly sounds like an apt description of our time. So tell us about this story.

Jess Serrante: Yeah, so the Great Unraveling is a story that is getting louder and louder, and it's a story told by many of us who see what's happening with Business as Usual and see the destruction that it's wreaking on life. So in the Great Unraveling story, everything that is sacred is being destroyed. Everything that we love is under threat. It's the story of rising sea levels and rising authoritarianism and genocide and increased war and inequality, poverty, conflict, separation, right? Everything that matters to us is under threat. And one of the things about this story too is that as actors in this story we're sort of like, it's the powerful versus the powerless. And in a way, this story is a dead end.

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James Shaheen: But of course, you know, it's a dead end, but it doesn't stop there. The third story is the Great Turning, which Joanna described as the great adventure of our time. So what exactly is the Great Turning?

Jess Serrante: Yeah. So the Great Turning is fortunately, basically anywhere that you see the Great Unraveling happening, you can see the Great Turning. It's always there, even if it's small, even if it's not necessarily the thing that's being reported on in the news. And the Great Turning is, it's a story that's told by those of us who see the threats and from Business as Usual and see the Great Unraveling and refuse to let global corporate capitalism have the last word about who we are as human beings on planet Earth.

So the Great Turning is an emergence of a just and life-sustaining society, and we also see this everywhere. We see this in the movements of resistance against authoritarianism, in efforts to clean up our air and our water and our land and our food systems. We see it in mutual aid and solidarity work and co-ops and spiritual practices and communities.

So the Great Turning also is everywhere. And this story is an open door of immense possibility and, like you said, great adventure. We don't get to know how it'll turn out, but we do get to give ourselves through this story to the possibility that something more just and life-affirming will emerge.

Sharon Salzberg: So Joanna often structured the work of the Great Turning in a spiral, which is really a pretty fabulous visual if you just stop and start to visualize it. And the first stage of the spiral is gratitude. I wonder if you can say more about the role of gratitude here and how it can open up a space of possibility.

Jess Serrante: Yeah. So in the work, we always begin with gratitude because, you know, one way I've heard Joanna say it is like, can you think of another better place to start than with our joy and our gratitude for what it is that we are alive on planet Earth in this moment? And what an

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extraordinary gift it is that we get to be here, especially in this time of great need, in this time where so much of life is under attack.

And another thing about gratitude is that by really going into it, rooting into what we love, it buoys us because the second stage of the spiral is honoring our pain for the world, right? And there's a sort of alchemical process that happens when we begin to acknowledge how grateful we are to be here and how we love this world because of the moment that we're in. What sort of naturally will often happen is that grief comes right on its tail, like, “Oh, I love the tree outside my window,” or “I love the waters that I get to swim in. Oh, but the chemicals that are being dumped into the bay that make this water less safe,” right? They sync right up. They're incredibly connected, and the gratitude gives us the strength that we need to be able to turn and face the pain that often comes right on its heels.

James Shaheen: Jess, you mentioned the next stage of honoring our pain for the world, so can you tell us a little bit more about this stage?

Jess Serrante: Yeah. So honoring our pain is about turning to face the fear, grief, anger, numbness, or there's many other words we could use to describe these feelings that emerge for us when we look out and we see what's happening in our world, and honoring our pain ultimately is about trusting those feelings.

Joanna would often say that our pain and our love are two sides of the same coin. Our hearts only break at what's happening in our world because of how much we love it. When we can lean into that pain, we can express it to another person who is deeply listening, who cares, who feels perhaps not exactly the same but their own version of what we are feeling. There is a coming alive that can happen, right? Like part of my journey I was referencing, you asked me earlier about how the Work That Reconnects brought me alive, a huge piece of it was that I was so heartbroken from years of climate activism. Like how is it possible that I live in a world where this is happening to life, where the power holders and the people in charge, so to speak, are

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consistently making decisions that violate the sanctity of life that I was so overwhelmed with grief and anger about it. And I didn't have a place to put it, and I cut myself off from it, right? And that, as Joanna later taught me, deadened and cut off my response to all of life. If we cut off our pain, we also cut off our joy. So that's a part of that emergence and that coming alive, that by leaning into the pain, acknowledging it, honoring it, speaking it with one another, expressing it so much more vibrancy can move through us. And I've seen this happen time and time again as a facilitator of the work.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it seems almost ironic that leaning into the pain can help us to work toward a better world, which is something that Joanna pointed out. You know, one example of honoring our pain is learning how to work with anger, and in the podcast series there was a particularly powerful example of Joanna's working through her own anger after a law was passed opening public land to an oil drilling project. So can you say more about what Joanna taught you about how to harness the power of outrage and use it productively in working toward justice? Because so often it trips us up and burns us out.

Jess Serrante: Yeah. One of the things that I learned from Joanna, and that scene that you're talking about in our show, that was a transformative experience in and of itself for me to be sitting with Joanna at the microphones when she learned that Biden had opened up drilling in the Arctic. And the raw outrage, the “How dare you” that came through her was so potent. And if I'm being totally honest, it was really uncomfortable for me in the moment. I didn't totally know how to stay with her in it, but she gave me a gift in trusting me that I could. And so getting the opportunity to accompany my friend and my teacher in this big embodied “no,” “no, I will not stand for this. This is not OK,” the force of that that came through her. One of the gifts in that moment was that it woke me up to get another layer of my own numbness, because of course I feel that too. Of course I also experience outrage at pristine lands being destroyed, but I was jaded—“Oh, you know, we're going to lose yet another piece of sacred land; you know, more life will be destroyed.” And I think one of the lessons that Joanna taught me in that process is that I'll

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say that I come from a family lineage where anger runs strong, and I was very afraid. I've always been very afraid. I've been on a long journey to be in right relationship with that anger that is very true in me and that runs through my family. And I've learned that it's destructive when we hold it in and when it's not honored, and that being safely expressed to a trusted friend who is available and able to hear it and honor it with you alchemizes it into something entirely different, right? Then it becomes not a destructive or dangerous or violent force but actually a sacred fire that can stoke us and move us to action and to wake each other up, right? We should be angry about what's happening to life and to what we love.

Sharon Salzberg: So it's interesting that you use the word numbness because another form of honoring our pain seems to be actually learning to recognize and honor our numbness and despair. So it's so easy sometimes to feel overwhelmed and just shut down altogether, and I'm wondering what Joanna taught you about working through numbness.

Jess Serrante: Hmm. Well, numbness I'll say has been very familiar to me. Thankfully it's a little less so now, but for a long time, like I said, I felt so connected to our planet and felt so much outrage and fear and grief that I shut it all down and I couldn't feel any of it. And the title of one of our episodes is “There Is No Future If We Go Numb,” which are Joanna's words.

So Joanna taught me that waking up and being with and honoring all of these other feelings is essential for being able to respond, to show up and be with my neighborhood and my country and the land that I live on. And I'll say one more thing that I've learned just through practicing the Work That Reconnects is that numbness, I've never not stepped in to honor my numbness and had it not move. Like, when I step into a grief ritual, that truth mandala that I talked about earlier, I often will step right in and the first thing I have to do is pick up that empty bowl and say, like, “I just can't. I'm so heartbroken, and yet sometimes I feel like I can't feel any of it.” And oftentimes that's all it takes for it to shift, right? That there's so much love and grief and all those other feelings like hiding right underneath it.

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Sharon Salzberg: Well, you describe your own fear that if you were to actually open to the truth of environmental devastation and all the pain that you felt that you wouldn't be able to handle it, and so numbness is a form of armor or protection in a way. But Joanna described this pain as sacred pain. She even said that you can't wish it away, that you have to bow to it. So I wonder if you can say more about the sacred pain and what it means to honor and bow to it.

Jess Serrante: Yeah, there's a particular moment in the recording of our show. It was actually, I was working on the episodes on honoring our pain as the attacks on Gaza were beginning. And I was so overwhelmed with grief that I could barely sit at my computer and write, and I called Joanna one day and I was like, “How do I be with the excruciating heartbreak that this is happening?” And she said, as you referenced, that this is a sacred pain. You wouldn't want to not feel this. Like, the fact that you can feel this is an indicator that you are alive, that you are paying attention, that you have love and care and a desire to make a difference coursing through you. And that in and of itself, I think, makes the pain more tolerable, to remember that of all the ways I might learn in this life to cope with what is simultaneously turning and unraveling around me, that I want to always have the capacity to turn and face it, to keep my eyes open, to keep my heart open. And recognizing that that pain is the price of loving is one that makes it more tolerable, I think.

Sharon Salzberg: So she described the Work That Reconnects as designed to break us open and break us free. Do you have a comment on that?

Jess Serrante: Simply that that is what I have discovered this work to do. There is an alchemy. You know, we began talking about the spiral before of how gratitude feeds into honoring our pain, and the way that the spiral completes is that when we come through the honoring our pain, we move into the third stage of the spiral that we call seeing with new eyes. Some people call it seeing with new and ancient eyes. It's like from the tears, the tears sort of wash away, the grief sort of moves to the side, and we emerge into a deeper sense of connection and love and an embodied sense of our inextricable connection with one another. And that is so potent to

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recognize that through the pain our aliveness can blossom and our sense of connection with one another and with the living world, and then through that, through feeling that and noticing and being in that connection, we're naturally driven to go forth, which is the fourth stage of the spiral, to act in service of life. So all of it is in service of this aliveness and emergence and finding and tapping into and mobilizing our passion for life so that we can offer ourselves again and again in new creative ways to what we love.

AD BREAK-IN: Coming up, Jess talks about the dangers of false certainty, how imaginative practice can help us experience a greater sense of interconnectedness, and how we can actually build the Great Turning in our everyday lives.

AD BREAK-OUT: Now let's get back to our conversation with Jess Serrante.

Sharon Salzberg: So you and Joanna also talked extensively about hope, which I think is just the most fascinating topic because it can be such a contentious or certainly often misunderstood term. Sometimes people think it's just a form of false positivity or wishful thinking. So how did Joanna think about hope in the context of the Great Turning?

Jess Serrante: Hmm. So I talked about this in our episode on hope. Joanna famously wrote a book called *Active Hope*, and active hope, as she defines it in that book, is about acting in service of the future that we want, right? It's simply giving ourselves again and again to the possibilities and outcomes that we want to see for the world.

But, you know, that episode that we did on hope was the hardest of the entire series for me personally. I had to write three different scripts for that episode, because I found that I just kept trying to convince myself or convince the listener of something about hope. And of course, the key to talking about it was in recognizing that Joanna wasn't that interested in the word “hope.” Whenever I would bring it up, the thing that she would want to talk about was courage. You know, Joanna would say time and again that even if I had the smallest, tiniest little glimmer of

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possibility that I could change something, of course I would give myself to it. What else would I do with this precious life that I have on this extraordinary planet but give myself to the tiniest possibility that we might change something? And so I found through this that I agree with her. I'm less interested in the conversation about whether or not we should have hope. There's so many things that that could mean. But I am interested in acting courageously, I'm interested in acting with devotion to what I love, and those things are actually bigger and more of a renewable fuel than playing the game within myself as to whether or not I think will be successful in the efforts that we're taking on to try to change things.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, it's interesting how the word hope almost requires a qualifier, like active hope, or sometimes I say “wise hope,” because it is so hard to understand, and it occurs to me that hope as we are now talking about it is actually fundamentally tied to uncertainty, and in some ways false positivity and despair or doomerism are almost like two sides of the same coin. They're both forms of false certainty. We feel like we know for certain what will happen. So I wonder if you can say more about the dangers of false certainty.

Jess Serrante: Hmm. I have learned over time that at least in my own journey, and I think this was a part of what I was working with when I was really struggling with writing about hope as we put together that episode, I really long for certainty, if I'm being totally honest, like it'd be really great to know that these efforts that we're pouring into trying to improve our world were going to create some change of some kind, you know? And I've found that I've both invested myself in different moments in a “Yes, for sure, it's definitely going to happen. As long as we give ourselves to it, the change that we want will come,” which is a false certainty, and also to another kind of false certainty, which is “Things are screwed. That's it. Why even bother? Things are so bad, they're spiraling out of control. We should just give up.” And it actually takes a lot of mindfulness and courage to walk that middle path of those two false certainties to recognize that we really don't know what will happen, and then from there, the opportunity, and this is a daily

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practice for me, is to then choose to say, OK, well then, I offer myself up to the possibilities that I love and to walking in the great uncertainty of this time.

James Shaheen: Jess, Joanna said that to have hope is to realize we don't know enough to be confident that it's a lost cause, which is a funny way of putting it. So how can we actually stay in this space of not knowing? As you said, it's so easy to say, “Oh, we're screwed, forget it,” or, “Oh, we're going to win,” and be attached to outcome and be easily knocked down when you meet with disappointment. But how do we just stay in that space of not knowing?

Jess Serrante: I don't know that I have a simple answer to that.

James Shaheen: Maybe Sharon knows.

Jess Serrante: Yeah. Sharon, can you help us with this?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I always hesitate with words like “stay” or “maintain” or “keep,” because it's a question of return, right? We lose it and we come back, we have resilience, we have capacity to begin again, as I say, endlessly, ad nauseum sometimes. So that's the real skill. And once we are thinking about staying, then we really go into despair, like, “I blew it, I failed.”

James Shaheen: I knew you'd have the answer, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah. Thank you.

James Shaheen: So you take the next question.

Sharon Salzberg: So one way of reframing hope, and it's something I've tried to do in terms of language is asking not what are you hopeful for, like what imagined outcome are you not only hoping for but almost insisting on sometimes, but what are you faithful to? So I wonder if you can say something about the role of faith here.

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Jess Serrante: Yeah. Well, this is what I was referring to before when I was talking about devotion. This is a question that Joanna asked in our episode about hope: What are you faithful to? What do you love? I have found that that is like yet another renewable resource that can keep me in action again and again when I remember what it is that I care about, the kind of future that my life is a vote in the direction of. It's a matter of bringing my attention back to it, to remembering.

I think one of the big challenges that so many of us face with this is that the world is really scary and we are bombarded every day with frightening news and heartbreaking news, and it's easy for that to pull our attention and become the lens through which we look at the world so then we all we're seeing is the Great Unraveling, which, as we said earlier is, is happening. And it's a matter of remembering that, yes, that is happening. And so is the Great Turning.

When I first learned these stories, I remember going to Joanna's house one day and being nervous to tell her that as much as I appreciated everything that she was teaching, I wasn't really buying this whole Great Turning thing, you know? And the thing that she said to me was that the way that we know the Great Turning is real is that you and I are a part of it. And there's something about that that's like, even if we were the only people in the world, which of course we're not, but even if that were true, the Great Turning would still be alive. It's interesting talking to the two of you about this because I'm just so aware in this moment of how so much of this is about awareness and coming and training our minds to come back again and again to the reality of the uncertainty, to the reality of our love, to the presence of the Great Turning, because there's so many forces that would steer us into despair.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, this emphasis on where we put our attention feels tied also to the next part of the spiral, which is seeing the world with new eyes, where we shift from seeing ourselves as individuals to experiencing our interconnectedness with all of life. So I wonder if you can say more about this stage of the spiral and what are some ways of actually experiencing this shift.

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Jess Serrante: Yeah. Well, I'll say first that it naturally emerges out of the work of honoring our pain. Anytime I really touch into pain, be it in a ritual or just in a conversation with a friend, and when I offer myself fully to acknowledging the depth of it, what comes up on its heels is this little spark of possibility, right? “Oh, I feel this because of how connected I am and my sense of the sacred and my sense of my devotion and interconnection.” And that's really what seeing with new eyes is about: We emerge into this view of interbeing, the reality of our interbeing. And in this part of the work, in the practices that we do in the Work That Reconnects, we will both recognize that interconnection with the what we might call the more-than-human world or the living world, the plants and animals and rocks and water, but also to deep time, to the ancestors and the long lineage of human history that is behind us and the future ones, the people and beings who will inherit this planet from us, right? In this seeing with new eyes part of the spiral, we locate ourselves amid all of that, which is so wildly enlivening and resourcing.

From recognizing this, from this practice over the years of studying with Joanna, I've developed a practice of whenever I'm going into something that I'm nervous about, or whenever I'm stepping into work that feels daunting, I'll locate myself between all of these things and I'll feel the living Earth beneath me and the ancestors behind me and the future ones in front of me, and there's something about recognizing that connection to all of these seen and unseen beings that gives me an experience of what Francis Weller calls becoming immense, like having a wider sense of self and being resourced in a bigger way.

And there's one more thing about seeing with new eyes that I want to share, which is I think often less talked about but also very important, that it's in this stage of the spiral, that in addition to coming into connection with interbeing, we're also laying down our attachments and our allegiances to the harmful dominant systems. So we're seeing the ways that the training that many of us receive of capitalist paradigm, of white supremacy, of patriarchy, that we begin to see those systems for the forces of danger and threat to life and what we love that they are, and let go of our any sense of security that we might consciously or unconsciously find in those systems.

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AD BREAK

James Shaheen: Jess, you mentioned deep time, and tapping into this sense of deep time often involves imaginative practices, including imagining ourselves many generations into the future, as you suggested, or imagining the perspective of other living beings. So how can playfulness and imagination help us in this work?

Jess Serrante: Mmm. It's so important. One of the things that I—there's just so many things that I so deeply love about Joanna and her playfulness is one of the things that has impacted and changed me the most. It's her willingness to stretch her awareness of who she was, to say, “Yeah, I'm going to channel the voice of an ancestor or of a future person and imagine that.” You know, one of the things she told me is that just by imagining a connection, we create one. And I think it's really important that we practice playfulness and trying on new perspectives and stepping into different modes of being and relating to one another. You know, sometimes the Work That Reconnects can be, well, yeah, very playful, and it can be a new experience, especially for folks who are used to thinking about our work, which is of course, very serious, the things that we're taking on, of what's happening in our world, but that are used to taking themselves very seriously and thinking that that's the only way that we make change. I think we often learn, and I have learned, that it's actually through imagination and playfulness that we access more of our strength and our resources, right? We think more creatively, we can respond in ways that we would've never thought to respond, we can make connections that we never thought we would when we tap into imagination and playfulness. And it's more fun.

James Shaheen: Yeah, absolutely.

Jess Serrante: It makes the work more fun, which is pretty important.

James Shaheen: You know, when we think about deep time or vast time, David Hinton said something that people didn't respond too well because I think they didn't quite get at what he was

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pointing out. But everything that we know and love, everything that we're connected to is only possible, is only here because of the fifth extinction. So as we face the sixth extinction, the point isn't that it doesn't matter, but it places it in a much vaster context. So not that everything I love and care about does not deserve to be protected, not that we shouldn't do everything that we can do, but it created a very different sense of historical time, of epics, of eras. And I don't really know how to say it, but it kind of relaxed me a little bit about going about the work. And I don't know why that is. And it doesn't mean at all that it doesn't matter. But does that vast sense of time at all, would you find that at all useful or simply too dismissive of the import of what we face?

Jess Serrante: Mm. I don't think it's dismissive. I think it's powerful for us to consider the reality. I mean, the scope of human history, let alone planetary history that we are a part of, is unfathomable. It's so big. I mean, and it's unfolding whether we feel like we have an understanding of how it's unfolding or not, but I'm with you. I find peace in recognizing that what is unfolding on the planet is a result of unfathomable complexity and that life finds a way. And you know, I think for me, I came into this work because I love humanity. You know, everybody has got their different entrypoint into environmental work, and for me, it's really about my love of our species. I think we're so extraordinary and so beautiful and have so much potential. I don't think that the civilizations that we've created right now are the pinnacle of what we're capable of, but that we really are capable of so much beauty. And so for me, that really is one of the bottom lines is that it's my love for us.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think in terms of this Buddhist notion of this precious human birth, so I don't at all mean to dismiss it. It is a very precious opportunity and an unlikely one.

Sharon Salzberg: Yes. Well, just in reference to that, that's why I think in the Buddhist tradition, reflecting on death and impermanence is not depressing. It's not considered depressing. You know, it leads us to the preciousness of life and the absence of clinging, grasping, holding onto a different state of connection. So I think it's kind of similar. And the final stage of the spiral is

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going forth and actually building the Great Turning. So what does this stage look like in practice and in action, and how can we use this spiral as a guide in our daily life?

Jess Serrante: Mmm. Well, there are as many ways to go forth as there are human beings. There's not one single way, that's for sure. I think part of the potency of going forth emerging after the first three stages of the spiral is that we are so resourced, we're so full, and we're so much more connected to our humanity from filling ourselves with gratitude, by making space for our outrage and our pain, by emerging into our sense of interconnection, that it's like the spark of what I might do, how I might offer myself to life today, is sort of like we were saying before about playfulness, right? Creative things can happen there, and the ways that we can be a part of the Great Turning can stretch from the smallest, most private actions to the biggest collective ones, and they all matter. And there was a second part of your question that I'm forgetting.

Sharon Salzberg: How can we use the spiral as a guide in our daily life?

Jess Serrante: Yeah, yeah. Well, an important thing to note about the spiral is it's a spiral, not a circle, right? Because we carry ourselves through it again and again and again. And so we can use this as a guide always, and in fact we can often practice it by just asking ourselves, “Where am I now?” We can drop in. Is pain present in this moment? OK, pain's present, how do I honor it? Am I feeling motivated to act? Am I feeling connected to gratitude? We can sort of drop into it and let it alchemize, and so much of letting it flow in our lives is simply about telling the truth about who and how we are in that moment and being real with another person about that truth of each moment.

James Shaheen: You know, what I've been thinking about as I've been listening to both you and Sharon is this delicate balance between acceptance and action. Both are so necessary, I think. Have you thought much about that?

Jess Serrante: What do you mean by acceptance?

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James Shaheen: Well, I think, you know, attachment to outcome. Sometimes things don't go the way we want them to go, so we have to practice a certain degree of acceptance. At the same time, we don't stop acting or taking action, I suppose. Well, I just thought about it because Joanna being angry, I've never seen Joanna angry, you know, but you had the privilege of seeing her really angry.

Jess Serrante: Yeah. Yeah. And that moment where I got to, it was such a gift she gave us in letting us see that anger. I mean, it was such a teaching, not that the anger itself could change the decision. It didn't change the decision; drilling was opened up. But you can hear in her in that conversation, especially after the initial outrage moved, the “I want to do something. What can we do? Who can we call? Who can we mobilize?”

So much of her work and so much of what she's taught me, ultimately, I think is about staying on the living thread of the present moment, like the potency of that anger being able to move us to a desire to act, even if it's incredibly unlikely or the decision's already been made, but that the anger is this tether to our love, not just anger, but all of these different emotions that we've been talking about are like the things that I am holding onto every single day as I wake up and ask the question, “How can I be of service today? What is mine to do?” And I hope that Joanna, I know that Joanna taught many people this, and I hope that our podcast can help inspire more and more people to lean into their aliveness and tell the truth about their fears and their despair, and their, like Joanna does in the podcast, she too had moments, and I too have moments where we're like, is there really any point? And that's not something to be ashamed of. That even that can be an entry point into pathways to be in service.

James Shaheen: You know, I interviewed Joanna several years ago. She was at that time only 91 and incredibly lucid, and I just want to quote her. She says, “In the buddhadharma, there's no word for hope, because it takes us out of the present moment. The present moment, brief as it is, is our gift. It's our choice point. It's where we breathe; it's where we love; it's where we taste; it's where we hear. Everything else removes us. To cultivate a friendliness with uncertainty, because

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that's the knife edge where all we know is the next step. It's a place of incredible freedom. Stay there. If people ask you, 'Will we make it?,' you say, 'Maybe.' 'Will we fail?' 'Maybe.' Maybe you can be a good friend too." That was a very nice thing she said on that podcast.

Jess Serrante: That's beautiful.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Jess Serrante, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining. For our listeners, be sure to check out Jess's podcast, *We Are the Great Turning*. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand it over to you, Jess.

Jess Serrante: All right. So you can close your eyes or lower your gaze, and we'll begin just by taking a deep breath in, feeling our lungs and our body expand as we fill with breath and letting it out. And again. And so begin in this moment to bring your awareness to the gratitude that you have, that you can do this, that you can breathe, that you have lungs that can receive oxygen that keep you alive, that you are alive in this moment, this precious moment on planet Earth.

And then begin to bring your awareness down to the Earth beneath you and feel her holding you. Feel Earth holding you as she has been for every moment of your entire life. She has provided all of the nourishment and stability and grounding the air, the food, the water that you have needed. So notice that gratitude. And if you'd like, take a moment and just spend that down. Imagine that you can shoot that gratitude down through your feet into the Earth and say thank you. What a gift it is to be here on Earth, in Earth, as Joanna would often say, in this time.

Now, call to mind one aspect of what it is about being alive on Earth that you love. Perhaps it's an experience like feeling the rain on your skin or swimming in the ocean, or maybe it's a person that you adore or an animal or a place that you feel so at home in. And just conjure up in as much detail that experience or that person or place and see if you can feel what it's like to be there or be with them. What are the smells, the feelings? What does it look like? Conjure up as much detail as you can and allow yourself to simply fill with gratitude for this experience, and send

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your gratitude out to that being or that place. What a gift it is to be alive. And may this gratitude, as it fills you, may it fuel you in your work for the Great Turning. May it be the buoying and the resourcing that you need to be with all of the gifts and the heartbreaks of this moment on Earth. I'll just close with a simple prayer that we come together in our collective work in service of life on Earth and build and offer ourselves together to a Great Turning. Thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you Jess, and thank you Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you so much.

Jess Serrante: Thank you both. What a gift to spend this time with you both. Thank you.

James Shaheen: Likewise.

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