Coming Back To Life

Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World

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Foreword by Matthew Fox

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as a gateway into deep participation in the world's self-healing. The
group work of the last twenty years, which this book describes, is based
on this worldview.

More basic to the Great Turning than any ideas we have about it is the
act of courage and love we make when we dare to see our world as it is.

And I would travel with you
to the places of our shame
The hills stripped of trees, the marsh grasses
oil-slicked, steeped in sewage;

The blackened shoreline, the chemical-poisoned water;

I would stand with you in the desolate places, the charred places,
soil where nothing will ever grow, pitted desert;

fields that burn slowly for months; roots of cholla & chaparral
writhing with underground explosions

I would put my hand
there with yours, I would take your hand, I would walk with you

through carefully planted fields, rows of leafy vegetables
drifting with radioactive dust; through the dark
of uranium mines hidden in the sacred gold-red mountains;

I would listen with you in drafty hospital corridors
as the miner cried out in the first language

of pain; as he cried out
the forgotten names of his mother I would stand
next to you in the forest's

final hour, in the wind
of helicopter blades, police
sirens shrieking, the delicate
tremor of light between

leaves for the last
time Oh I would touch with this love each
wounded place

—Anita Barrows 7

Chapter 3

THE BASIC MIRACLE:
OUR TRUE NATURE AND POWER

Qum Qum Ya Habibi Kam Tanam
Arise, arise my beloved, how you sleep
The sun and the moon do not sleep
The stars and the trees do not sleep
The lover and the beloved do not sleep
Arise, my beloved, do not sleep.
—Sufi chant

To those of us who have grown up in the Industrial Growth Society,
the view of reality that breaks upon us now is breathtakingly new.
It comes from contemporary science and finds support in ancient
spiritual traditions. It helps us understand our relationship to the world
and awaken to powers within us for its healing. Liberating us from con-
stricted notions of who we are and what we need, it brings us home to
our true nature—in league with the stars and trees of our thrumming
universe. It is basic to the Great Turning—and fundamental to the work this
book presents.

We people of "Western Civilization" have struggled to master the
natural world around us. We have studied the Earth and the cosmos,
attempting to discover the essential building blocks of life that we might
manipulate them into more efficient mechanisms to provide for our
wants and needs. We have acted as if we could know and control the
world from the outside, as if we were separate from it. We came to think of ourselves as made of better stuff than the animals and plants and rocks and water around us. And our technologies of the last centuries amplified disastrously the ecological effects of that assumption.

Perhaps we made our biggest error in thinking of the world as made of “stuff” to begin with. Fortunately—and paradoxically—our very search for mastery and knowledge through science has itself brought us to the dawning realization that the world, indeed the universe, seems not to be composed of “stuff” at all. Each time we have grasped what appeared to be a “basic building block,” it has dissolved into a dance of energy and relationship, with no real substance at all! And so we awaken today to a new kind of knowledge, a developing comprehension of our radical interrelatedness to everything in the universe.

**LIVING SYSTEMS THEORY**

Modern science and the Industrial Growth Society grew up together. With the help of René Descartes and Francis Bacon, classical science veered away from a holistic, organic view of the world to an analytical and mechanical one. The machines we made, to extend our senses and capacities, became our model for the universe. Separating mechanism from operator, object from observer, this view of reality assumed that everything could be described objectively and controlled externally. It has permitted extraordinary technological gains and fueled the engines of industrial progress. But, as twentieth century biologists realized with increasing frustration, it cannot explain the self-renewing processes of life.

Instead of looking for basic building blocks, these life scientists took a new tack: they began to look at wholes instead of parts, at processes instead of substances. They discovered that these wholes—be they cells, bodies, ecosystems, or even the planet itself—are not just a heap of disjoint parts, but are dynamically organized and intricately balanced “systems,” interdependent in every movement, every function, every exchange of energy and information. They saw that each element is part of a vaster pattern, a pattern that connects and evolves by discernible principles. The discernment of these principles gave rise to general living systems theory.

Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, known as the father of general systems theory, called it a “way of seeing.” And while its insights have spread throughout the physical and social sciences, spawning groundbreaking derivative theories, the systems perspective has remained just that—a way of seeing. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson called it “the biggest bite out of the Tree of Knowledge in two thousand years.”

**How life self-organizes**

By shifting their focus to relationships instead of separate entities, scientists made an amazing discovery—amazing at least to the mainstream western mind. They discovered that nature is self-organizing. Or rather, assuming that to be the case, they set about discerning the principles by which this self-organizing occurs. They found these principles or system properties to be awesomely elegant in their simplicity and constancy throughout the observable universe, from suborganic to biological and ecological systems, and mental and social systems, as well. The properties of open systems which permit the variety and intelligence of life-forms to arise from interactive currents of matter and energy are four in number.

1. Each system, from atom to galaxy, is a whole. That means that it is not reducible to its components. Its distinctive nature and capacities derive from the interactive relationships between its parts. This interplay is synergistic, generating “emergent properties” and new possibilities, which are not predictable from the character of the separate parts—just as the wetness of water could not be predicted from oxygen and hydrogen before they combined, or just as the tensile strength of steel far exceeds the combined strengths of iron and nickel. This property of open systems challenges the universal applicability of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that cornerstone of classical science on which rest notions of entropy, the running down of all life.

2. Despite continual flow-through of matter-energy and information, and indeed thanks to that flow-through, open systems are able to maintain their balance; they self-stabilize. By virtue of this capacity, which von Bertalanffy called fließgleichgewicht (flux-equilibrium), systems can self-regulate to compensate for changing conditions in their environment. This homeostatic function is performed by registering / monitoring the effects of their own behavior and matching it with their norms, like a thermostat. It is understood as a function of feedback—negative or deviation-reducing feedback, to be precise (also called “cybernetics one”). This is how we maintain our body temperature, heal from a cut, or ride a bicycle.

3. Open systems not only maintain their balance amidst the flux, but also evolve in complexity. When challenges from their environment persist, they can fall apart or adapt by reorganizing themselves around new,
more responsive norms. This, too, is a function of feedback—positive or deviation-amplifying feedback (also called “cybernetics two”). It is how we learn and how we evolved from the amoeba. But if our changing behaviors are not compatible with the challenges we face, and do not achieve a new balance with them, the positive feedback loop gets out of control and goes into “runaway,” leading eventually to systems breakdown.

4. Every system is a “holon”—that is, it is both a whole in its own right, comprised of subsystems, and simultaneously an integral part of a larger system. Thus holons form “nested hierarchies,” systems within systems, circuits within circuits, fields within fields. Each new holonic level—say from atom to molecule, cell to organ, person to family—generates emergent properties that are nonreducible to the capacities of the separate components. Far different than the hierarchies of control familiar to societies where rule is imposed from above, in nested hierarchies (sometimes called holarchies) order tends to arise from the bottom up; the system self-generates from spontaneously adaptive cooperation between the parts, in mutual benefit. Order and differentiation go hand in hand, components diversifying as they coordinate roles and invent new responses.

Fire, water, and web

The mechanistic view of reality separated substance from process, self from other, thought from feeling. In the systems perspective, these dichotomies no longer hold. What appeared to be separate and self-existent entities are now seen to be interdependent. What had appeared to be “other” can be equally construed as a concomitant of “self,” like a fellow-cell in a larger body. What we had been taught to dismiss as mere feelings are responses to our world no less valid than rational constructs. Sensations, emotions, intuitions, concepts, all condition each other, each a way of apprehending the relationships which weave our world.

As systems we participate in the evolving web of life, giving and receiving the feedback necessary for its sustenance, and maintaining integrity and balance by virtue of constant flow-through. To convey this dynamic process, theorists have used a variety of images. Fire and water are prominent among them. “We are not stuff that abides,” says Norbert Wiener, “we are patterns that perpetuate themselves; we are whirlpools in a river of overflowing water.” Or we are like a flame, says Leon Brillouin; as a flame keeps its shape by transforming the stuff that flows through it, so do we in the constant processes of metabolism. To convey

the nature of the relationship between open systems, a frequent image is that of nerve cells in a neural net. Systems political scientist Karl Deutsch took it as a model for social as well as biological systems, arguing that free circulation of information is essential to health and survival. By their synergistic interactions neurons differentiate and enhance each other in their diversity. Weaving an ever more responsive and intricate net, they give rise to intelligence.

The holonic shift in consciousness

The image of the neural net conveys a major systems insight: mind is not separate from nature; it is in nature. Mind pervades the natural world as the subjective dimension within every open system, however primitive, says systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo. It is ubiquitous in the circuits of information, or feedback loops, guiding every relationship, says Gregory Bateson.

In humans, and some other big-brained mammals, mind is endowed with a remarkable feature: self-reflexive consciousness. It emerged by necessity, when the system’s internal complexity grew so great that it could no longer survive by instinct or trial and error. It needed to evolve another level of awareness in order to weigh different courses of action; it needed, in other words, to make choices. A new level of self-monitoring emerged—feedback about feedback, in ever-complexifying assemblies of loops. The self-observant “I” arose. It arose by virtue of decision-making.

Self-reflexive consciousness, which requires a high degree of integration and differentiation, does not characterize the next holonic level, the level of social systems. Though an “esprit de corps” can be sensed in organizations with strong allegiances, it is too diffuse to register and respond to all the feedback necessary for its survival. The locus of decision-making remains within the individual, susceptible to all the vagaries of what that individual considers to be of self-interest. And our present modes of decision-making seem simply too slow and too corruptible to respond adequately to the survival crisis produced by our Industrial Growth Society and its technologies.

Could this very crisis, confronting us as it does with destruction of the bases of complex life forms on Earth, engender a collective level of self-interest in choice-making—in other words, self-reflexivity on the next holonic level?

Fearful of fascism, we might well reject any idea of collective consciousness. It is important to remember that, genuine, systemic self-organizing requires diversity of parts in spontaneous, unconstricted
play. A monolith of uniformity has no internal intelligence.

The holonic shift in consciousness would not sacrifice, but instead require, the uniqueness of each part and its point of view. It would begin, almost imperceptibly, with a sense of common fate, and a shared intention to meet it together. It would start to emerge in unexpected behaviors, as individuals in countless settings meet to speak and reflect on what is happening to their lives, their world. It would manifest in an unpredictable array of spontaneous actions, as people step out from their private comforts, giving time and taking risks on behalf of Earth and their brother-sister beings. It would include all the hopes and changes that give reality to each dimension of the Great Turning. And given the dynamics of self-organizing systems, it is likely that as we reflect and act together, we will soon find ourselves responding to the present crisis with far greater confidence and precision than we imagined possible.

**Gaia theory**

Insights from systems theory soon revolutionized the way we saw our planet home. James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis studied the chemical balances of our atmosphere and discovered that they are maintained within the narrow limits necessary for life, by self-regulating processes. These are the hallmark of a living system.

Thankfully, Lovelock did not call this hypothesis, soon to become a theory, the “hypothesis of self-regulative processes of the biosphere” or something which would have made it much more respectable to his fellow scientists. Instead he listened to his friend, novelist William Golding, who suggested he call it Gaia for the early Greek goddess of the earth, thereby catching people’s poetic imagination. Like the Apollo photo of Earth from space, this image of Earth as a whole living being has transformed the way many of us now think of our planetary home. No longer a dead rock we live upon, the Earth is a living process in which we participate. Earth, as a home for life, is a being that we can both harm and help to heal. Earth takes on a presence in our consciousness, not unlike the presence of gods and goddesses in the lives of our early ancestors.

**Positive disintegration**

Dangers to their survival move living systems to evolve. When feedback tells them—and continues to tell them—that their old forms and behaviors have become dysfunctional, they respond by changing. They adapt to such challenges, as we saw in the third property of systems, by seeking and incorporating more appropriate norms. They search for values and goals which allow them to navigate in more varied conditions, with wider connections. Since its norms are the system’s internal code or organizing principle, this process—which Ervin Laszlo calls “exploratory self-reorganization”—is a kind of temporary limbo. To the mind it can be very disorienting. Psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski names it “positive disintegration.” It can feel like dying.

In periods of major cultural transition, the experience of positive disintegration is widespread. Such is the case now for us in this time of Great Turning. Everywhere anomalies appear: developments that don’t fit our expectations, or in systems terms, that don’t match previously programmed codes and constructs. Bereft of self-confidence and old coping strategies, we may feel that we and our world are falling apart. Sometimes we panic or shut down; sometimes in desperation we get mean and turn on each other.

It helps to recall that in the course of our planetary journey we have gone through positive disintegration countless times. The life living through us repeatedly died to old forms and old ways. We know this dying in the splitting of the stars, the cracking open of seeds in the soil, the relinquishment of gills and fins as we crawled onto dry land. Our evolution attests to this, and so does our present lifetime, as we learned to move beyond the safety and dependencies of childhood. It is never easy. Some of the uglier aspects of human behavior today arise from fear of the wholesale changes we must now undergo.

To let ourselves feel anguish and disorientation as we open our awareness to global suffering is a part of our spiritual ripening. Mystics speak of the “dark night of the soul.” Brave enough to let go of accustomed assurances and allow old mental comforts and conformities to fall away, they stand naked to the unknown. They let processes which their minds could not encompass work through them. Out of darkness, the new is born.

**Deep Ecology**

Our interdependence with all life of Earth has profound implications for our attitudes and actions. To clarify these implications and free us from behaviors based on outmoded notions of our separateness from nature, deep ecology arose, both as a philosophy and a movement. The term was coined in the 1970s by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, a mountain climber and scholar of Gandhi.

In contrast to reform environmentalism, which treats the symptoms of ecological degradation—clean up a river here or a dump there for human well-being—deep ecology questions fundamental premises of the
Industrial Growth Society. It challenges the assumptions, embedded in much Judeo-Christian and Marxist thought, that humans are the crown of creation and the ultimate measure of value. It offers us a broader and more sustainable sense of our own worth, as viable members of the great evolving community of Earth. It holds that we can break free from the species arrogance which threatens not only ourselves but all complex life-forms within reach.

**Beyond anthropocentrism**

We cannot genuinely experience our interrelatedness with all life if we are blind to our own human-centeredness, and how deeply embedded it is in our culture and consciousness. Deep ecologist John Seed, an Australian rainforest activist, describes both the ways it constrains us, and the rewards we find in moving beyond it.

Anthropocentrism means human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute “human race” for man and “all other species” for woman...

When humans investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric self-cherishing, a most profound change in consciousness begins to take place. Alienation subsides. The human is no longer a stranger, apart. Your humanness is then recognized as merely the most recent stage of your existence, and as you stop identifying exclusively with this chapter, you start to get in touch with yourself as mammal, as vertebrate, as a species only recently emerged from the rainforest. As the fog of amnesia disperses, there is a transformation in your relationship to other species, and in your commitment to them.

John Seed points out that this liberation is more than an intellectual process. For him, as for many other people, it has been engendered and deepened by taking part in actions on behalf of Earth.

“I am protecting the rainforest” develops to “I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking.” What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature. That is, the change is a spiritual one, sometimes referred to as deep ecology.  

**The ecological self**

Arne Naess has a term for the wider sense of identity that John Seed describes. He calls it the ecological self, and presents it as the fruit of a natural maturation process. We underestimate ourselves, he says, when we identify self with the narrow, competitive ego. “With sufficient all-sided maturity” we not only move on from ego to a social self and a metaphysical self, but an ecological self as well. Through widening circles of identification, we vastly extend the boundaries of our self-interest, and enhance our joy and meaning in life.

A welcome and significant feature of this concept is the way it transcends the need to sermonize about our moral responsibilities to other beings. When we assumed that we were essentially separate, we preached altruism—the Latin term alter being the opposite of ego. This is not only philosophically unsound, from the perspective of deep ecology and other nondualistic teachings, but also ineffective.

What humankind is capable of loving from mere duty or moral exhortation is, unfortunately, very limited... The extensive moralizing within the ecological movement has given the public the false impression that they are primarily asked to sacrifice, to show more responsibility, more concern, and better morals... [But] the requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves.  

**Asking deeper questions**

Naess and his activist colleagues called for a “deep, long-range ecology movement.” Whether or not it is yet discernible as a movement, certainly its ideas have circulated widely, providing a powerful impetus to both green activists and academic debates.

While these ideas have evolved into a deep ecology platform—including such principles as the recognition that life-forms have an intrinsic right to exist, and that human population is excessive in relation to the carrying capacity of Earth—deep ecology is neither an ideology nor a dogma. Of an essentially exploratory character, it seeks to motivate people to ask, as Naess puts it, “deeper questions” about their real wants and needs, about their relation to life on Earth and their vision for the future. As parts of a larger living whole—be it a society, an ecosystem, or a planet—our comprehension of it is necessarily partial; we cannot stand aloof, blueprints in hand, and deliver final answers. But the questions we ask of ourselves and each other act as a solvent, loosening up encrusted mental structures, and freeing us to think and see in fresh ways.

**Related movements: ecofeminism, ecojustice, ecopsychology**

This kind of basic inquiry has fostered movements and modes of thought that do not necessarily link themselves with deep ecology, though they
share many of its philosophical premises as well as much of its critique of the Industrial Growth Society. Many activists and thinkers (including the authors) identify themselves with more than one of these overlapping movements, each of which brings distinctive concerns and perspectives.

Obvious parallels exist between the ways that entrenched power structures treat nature and the ways they treat women. Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s, as scholars, writers, and organizers illuminated these parallels and explored their common cultural roots. Many incisive voices argue that the war against nature waged by the Industrial Growth Society arises from more ancient patterns of domination. They question deep ecologists' focus on anthropocentrism as the source of our pathology, and challenge them to discern the androcentricism (patriarchy) which underlies it. Their insights help us recognize the mindset bred by centuries of male rule—the dualism and objectification, the divide of mind from body, of logic from experience—and they offer more holistic ways of knowing. Defender of the redwoods, the late Judy Bari was an ecofeminist who personified the deepest values of the movement. Despite assaults that shortened her life, she persisted in her commitment to nonviolence, her compassionate concern for the loggers' future, and her penetrating analysis of the corporate forces destroying their livelihood and the land itself.

As ecofeminism brings the issue of gender to our understanding of the environmental crisis, the ecojustice movement brings issues of race, class, and poverty. The old divide between activists in defense of social and economic rights and those in defense of nature no longer holds. It is increasingly evident that their goals are inseparably linked and mutually reinforcing. The wreckage and contamination caused by the Industrial Growth Society degrade humans and habitats alike: polluting industries are located and toxic wastes are dumped where poor people and people of color live. The farm workers sprayed by pesticides, the miners poisoned by uranium, the forest dwellers whose homes are clearcut... all are largely people of color. Their race and poverty make them easier for a prejudiced society to overlook. The ecojustice movement has effectively challenged environmentalists to broaden their awareness to the suffering of humans as well as trees and dolphins. Through its outreach to larger sections of society, it holds promise for a vastly wider participation in the work of the Great Turning.

Western psychology has virtually ignored our relationship to the natural world. Our connection to the source of life does not figure in its definition of mental health, nor is our destruction of our life-support sys-

tem included in its list of pathologies. It has failed to ask Paul Shepard's rather obvious and haunting question: "Why does society persist in destroying its habitat?" Now the new discipline of ecopsychology addresses this failure and studies the human psyche within the larger systems of which it is a part. It explores how our cultural alienation from nature engenders not only careless and destructive behavior toward our environment, but also many common disorders such as depression and addiction. Psychotherapists within the movement recognize how their profession has blinded itself to the larger context of their clients' lives and pathologized their pain for the world. These pioneers break new ground as they help clients find strength and meaning through experiencing their interconnectedness with all life, and acting on its behalf.

Ecopsychology invites psychotherapy practice to expand its focus beyond the inner landscape, to explore and foster the development of community, contact with land and place, and ecological identity... It invites us to hear the Earth speaking through our pain and distress, and listen to ourselves as if we were listening to a message from the universe.  

ANCIENT TEACHINGS

The view of reality afforded us by systems science and ecological thought is remarkable in its convergence with ancient teachings of our planet's people. At the same time that we are discovering the process nature of our world as a dynamically interrelated whole, we rediscover this understanding in spiritual traditions from East and West, North and South. We find it not only in Taoist, Hindu, and Buddhist sages and scriptures, and not only among indigenous peoples who still know and live this truth. We also find this vision expressed in the most mystical teachings of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Perhaps only we, who are shaped and are shaped by the Industrial Growth Society—blinded as we have been by our prowess in manipulating tools and producing goods—have forgotten our embeddedness in a larger, living whole.

The meeting of these spiritual traditions with the Westernized, modern mind may well be, as Arnold Toynbee asserted in relation to Buddhism, the most significant occurrence of our planet-time. These traditions not only contribute to our philosophical understandings, but also serve to embody and enliven these understandings—so that they become real to our experience and efficacious in our lives. We do not live by conceptual abstractions. We are not brains on the end of a stick. We are vital, juicy, flesh-and-blood beings, and ideas become truly real for us through
our senses and imagination—through stories, images, rituals that enlist our capacity for devotion, our tears and laughter. Entertained solely by the intellect, ideas lack power to lift us into new perspectives and new meanings for our lives. Our ancestors knew this, hence their ritual celebrations to honor Earth and their yogas to open body and mind.

**The Abrahamic religions**

Spiritual lineages resurging today are helping us internalize the vision of reality offered by systems science and deep ecology. Each points beyond narrow confines of orthodoxy, as they present for our rejoicing the basic miracle of our existence.

From Islam comes a resurgence of mystical Sufism. The best-selling poetry of Rumi, the fables of Nasrudin, and the teachings of many contemporary emissaries offer a devotional response to the essential mystery at the source of our interdependent lives.

Within Christianity, clerics and theologians alike break through superstructures of dogma to find at the core of their faith a celebratory vision of our true nature and calling, consonant with the latest findings of science. This vision is not new: Nicholas da Cusa, a fifteenth century mathematician and cardinal, perceived God as “an infinite circle, whose circumference is nowhere, and whose center is everywhere.”

From Judaism, too, comes a plethora of fresh, arresting voices recalling their religion’s ancient reverence for the living body of Earth. They remind their brother-sister Jews that the call to justice includes all life-forms, and summon them to drink once again from the ecological currents of their faith.

**Earth-centered religions**

Meanwhile, yet more ancient wellsprings of Earth wisdom open. Shamanic traditions of the indigenous peoples of America, Africa, Australia, Old Europe, Siberia and Arctic regions resurface in our day with the same message. Their voices find a hearing because they tell us—as the natives we are of the late Industrial Growth Society—what we want to know once again: that as kin to the animals and plants, rocks and airs of this sacred world, we can tap its powers, take part in its healing.

Simultaneously, fresh archeological evidence brings us knowledge of the Goddess of pre-patriarchal cultures. Embodying not only the abundance of Earth, but also the reverence and fairness this abundance requires, she guided gathering and hunting societies, gave rise to agriculture and ancient arts over warless millennia. Despite persecutions and inquisitions, remnants of this earth-based wisdom still survive on the margins of the major religions, in practices of Wicca or witchcraft, and today’s neopaganism. Through a host of fine scholars and teachers, its subtle understanding of life’s interlinked processes now reemerges. As systems theory does in relation to classical science, goddess wisdom breaks down the mind-matter dichotomy erected by patriarchal structures of thought, and points to Earth’s self-organizing powers. Many see the women’s spirituality movement, spreading like leaven even within traditionally male-identified religions, calling to justice and serving to resacralize life, as a “return to the goddess.”

**Buddhist teachings**

Of the Asian traditions now breaking upon the Western mind, Buddhism especially helps us understand the new ecological paradigm, and work with it in the healing of our world. The core doctrine of the Buddha Dharma, basic to its psychology and ethics, is the “dependent co-arising” of all phenomena—arguably the clearest conceptualization of mutual causality prior to general systems theory. It comes not only from empirical observation and subtle nonlinear logic, but also from a resolve to relieve suffering. It is meant to free us from the prison cell of egocentricity and possessiveness, and usher us into the gladness of harmonious, responsible relationship with all that is.

In the Buddha Dharma we find practices and imageries to help us realize our profound interexistence. Mental disciplines based on a sophisticated understanding of the mind help us relate to reality in terms of process, or impermanence, rather than in terms of solid, self-existing objects to grasp or reject. They school us to confront in our own psyches the fears, greedes, hatreds at the root of human suffering; to experience how these “fetters” or “poisons” arise from fictive notions of a permanent, separate self; and to progressively let them go. Meditations—such as loving kindness, compassion, and joy in the joy of others—further decondition old patterns of fears and competitiveness and serve as ground and compass in a fluidly interdependent world. (Adaptations of some of these meditations appear in Chapter 12.)

The Buddha Dharma also provides images for the mind’s eye and models for a life of action. From Mahayana Buddhism comes the Jewel Net of Indra, a polycentric vision of reality that presents a total contrast to the hierarchical view. Each being occupying a node in the vast net of everything is a gem whose many facets reflect all the other gems and their reflections, too, back and forth infinitely. The world is interwoven in such a way that each node of its living net contains all mysteries; no need to climb to heaven to find the sacred, when at each spot is Buddha
nature—and there the intelligence and compassion at the core of life can ignite entire. As in the hologram of modern science, each part contains the whole.

The bodhisattva, the Buddhist hero figure, is one who knows and takes seriously the dependent co-arising of all things. That is why he also knows that there is no private salvation, and that is why she turns back from the gates of nirvana to reenter samsara, the world of suffering, again and again to minister to all beings until each, to every blade of grass, is enlightened. Here is revealed the compassion that blooms naturally when we open to our condition of profound mutuality. Since that condition pertains to us all, whether or not we acknowledge it yet, we are all, in a sense—the Scripture tells us—bodhisattvas.

These teachings, practices, and images have, like systems theory, inspired and shaped “the work that reconnects” presented in this book. For the Buddha’s core teaching of dependent co-arising, we sometimes use a new word, coined by a Vietnamese Zen master of today. It recalls the term “interexistence” used by some systems theorists to characterize the relationship of open systems, but is less of a mouthful. The word made popular and potent by Thich Nhat Hanh is “interbeing.”

THE NATURE OF OUR POWER
As our pain for the world arises from our systemic interexistence, so does our power. Yet the generative creativity operating in and through open systems is very different from our customary notions of power.

Power-over
The old concept of power, in which most of us have been socialized, originated in the worldview which assumed reality to be composed of discrete and separate entities—rocks, plants, atoms, people. An Aristotle classifying these entities into categories or a Newton or Galileo studying their vectors and velocities all worked with that assumption. Power came to be seen as a property of those separate substances, inferred from the way they could appear to push each other around. It became identified with domination. It was equated with the exertion of one’s will over others, limiting their choices. This is a linear, unidirectional view of causality, in which power is a zero-sum game: “the more of it you have, the less of it I have”; “if you win, I lose.” It fosters the idea, furthermore, that power correlates with invulnerability. To keep from being pushed around, defenses are needed. Armor and rigidity make one more powerful, less likely to be influenced or changed, i.e. dominated by the other.

From the systems perspective this notion of power is both inaccurate and dysfunctional. The exertion of greater force can certainly serve to defend oneself and others, but that function is one of protection, not to be confused with the generation of new forms, behaviors, and potentials. That capacity operates more organically and reliably from the bottom up, as “power-with.” Systems scientists call it synergy.

Power-with
Living systems evolve in variety, resilience, and intelligence; they do this not by erecting walls of defense and closing off from their environment, but by opening more widely to the currents of matter-energy and information. They integrate and differentiate through constant interaction, spinning more intricate connections and more flexible strategies. For this they require not invulnerability, but increasing responsiveness. Such is the direction of evolution. As life forms evolve in complexity and intelligence, they shed their armor, grow sensitive, vulnerable protuberances—like lips, tongues, ears, eyeballs, noses, fingertips—the better to sense and respond, the better to connect in the web of life and weave it further.

We may wonder why power as domination, which we see enacted around us and on top of us, seems so effective. Many who wield it seem to get what they want—money, fame, control over others’ lives. Yes, they do, but always at a cost to the larger system and to their own well-being within it. To the social system, power-over is dysfunctional because it inhibits diversity and feedback; by obstructing self-organizing processes, it fosters entropy—systemic disintegration. To the power holder himself, it is like a suit of armor: it restricts vision and movement. Narrowing awareness and maneuverability, it cuts him off from fuller and freer participation in life; he has far fewer options for response.

Power and feedback
Power-with or synergy is not a property one can own, but a process one engages in. Efficacy is transactional. Take the neuron in the neural net. If it were, hypothetically, to suppose that its powers were a personal property to be preserved and protected from other nerve cells, and isolated itself behind defensive walls, it would atrophy, or die. Its health and its power lie in opening itself to the charge, letting the signals through. Only then can the larger systems of which it is a part learn to respond and think.

The body-politic is much like a neural net, as Karl Deutsch asserts. Like the brain,

Something inside me has reached to the place where the world is breathing.

—Kabir 18
society is a cybernetic system which only functions well with unhamp- pered flows of information. That is how our mind-bodies work. When you put your hand on a hot stove, you rapidly withdraw it, because feedback tells you your fingers are burning. You wouldn't know that if you began censoring your body's reports.

Self-governance requires the free circulation of information necessary to public decision-making. In the present hypertrophied stage of the Industrial Growth Society, however, even governments that call themselves democracies suppress information unwelcome to corporate interests. We learn daily of high-level cover-ups, a scientific panel's findings officially rejected, a report censored. We have become accustomed to misinformation and deception about an enormous array of dangers, such as the relationship of cancer and other diseases to radioactive, food additives, or household products. We hear little about the effects and causes of thinning ozone and the greenhouse effect, even when we're awash in record-breaking floods and hurricanes, and global food reserves are at an all-time low. This institutionalized secrecy is understandable in terms of protecting vested interests, but it comes at a high price. For any system that consistently suppresses feedback—closing its perceptions to the results of its behavior—is suicidal.

The power of disclosure and refusal

While the concept of power-with summons us to develop empathy, it also calls for vigilance and assertiveness in responding to the self-organizing needs of the larger system. It is our systemic responsibility to give feedback to our body politic, and unblock that feedback which has been suppressed. This is essential to the Great Turning from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-sustaining Society. Many of its unsung heroes are women and men who, often at considerable personal risk, unearth and disclose important information held from the public.

Our interexistence with others in the web of life does not mean that we should tolerate destructive behavior. On the contrary, it means we should step in when our collective health and survival are at stake. That can involve lobbying for laws, or intervening in a more direct fashion, nonviolently, to remove authority from those who misuse it. This is not a struggle to "seize" power so much as to release it for efficient self-governance. Thus we act, not only for ourselves and our own group or party, but also on behalf of all the other "neurons in the net." Then we are sustained by the myriad resources of that net, which include all our differences and diversities.

Acting on behalf of the larger system, for the common good, is becoming alien to the mores of the Industrial Growth Society. Corporations, by their very financial structure, must maximize their own short-term profits, regardless of the impact. Within this increasingly competitive system, individuals perceive their own self-interest to be in conflict with the interests of others. Many are so deeply entrenched in this point of view that they assume activists must be similarly motivated, and label them as "special interest groups." To act on behalf of the common good can serve overlapping purposes: it brings needed feedback to the system about challenges it faces, and transforms the premises under which that system operates. It helps to change the norms from individual, competitive self-interest to collective, systemic self-interest.

Synergy and grace

When we make common cause on behalf of the Earth community, we open not only to the needs of others, but also to their abilities and gifts. It is a good thing that power-with is not a personal property, because frankly, none of us possesses all the courage and intelligence, strength and endurance required for the Great Turning. And none of us needs to possess them, or dredge them up out of some private storehouse. All the resources we will need arise out of our interactions, as we commit ourselves to a common intent for our common fate.

This is the nature of synergy, the first property of living systems. As parts self-organize into a larger whole, capacities emerge which could never have been predicted, and which the individual parts did not possess. The weaving of new connections brings new responses and new possibilities into play. In the process, one can feel sustained—and is sustained—by currents of power larger than one's own.

This phenomenon is similar to the religious concept of grace, but distinct from the traditional understanding of grace, as it does not require belief in a God. Whether restoring a garden or cooking in a soup kitchen, there is a sense sometimes of being supported by something beyond one's individual strength, a sense of being "acted through." This empowerment often seems to come through those for whose sake one acts. In the last unprotected groves of redwoods, young activists weather the cold rainy winter and police violence, as they perch in the trees to save them from illegal logging. Their valor and endurance is not their own, they say, but bestowed upon them by the great beings they seek to save. "They know we're here; they give us strength." This kind of empowerment is familiar to many today who work for their own threatened communities,
or for distant peasants ripped from land and livelihood, or for children imprisoned in sweatshops and brothels. Those who risk their lives to protect marine mammals, and those who risk jail to stop paying taxes for weapons, and those who risk their jobs to "blow the whistle" on corruption and deception—they also draw on vaster powers of life. These people, whose numbers are countless, show us what can happen through us when we break free of the old hierarchical notions of power. Grace happens when we act with others on behalf of our world.

Chapter 4

THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
—Rainer Maria Rilke

Insights into the basic miracle of our existence—be they from general living systems theory, Buddhist teachings, or other ancient voices—have broken upon us in the very century that has brought us to the brink of destroying our planet as a home for conscious life. They are fundamental and far-reaching enough to help us liberate ourselves from the Industrial Growth Society and create together a Life-sustaining Society. If we can let these insights shape our own life purposes, they can enable the Great Turning.

That is a big "if." For while the new paradigm is the stuff of countless lectures and books, it is purveyed mainly on the intellectual level. As a plaything of the mind, it is fascinating—even hopeful—but we urgently need ways to let it transform our lives for the healing of our world.

Over the last twenty years, since the late 1970s, a form of personal and group work has grown up to help us do just that. Arising first in North America, it spread to Eastern and Western Europe, Australia, and Japan through articles circulating from hand to hand, and through workshops that have engaged some hundreds of thousands of people, within and beyond movements for peace, justice, and a healthy environment. First it was called "Despair and Empowerment" work, then