

## Deep Time

By Joanna Macy

**T**he lens of deep ecology alters not only our perceived relation to the natural world and other life-forms. It also changes our perception of time. As we affirm our embeddedness in the living Earth, we become aware of other rhythms than the frenzied pace of industrialized, computerized society. We open, furthermore, to vaster reaches of time, to the vibrant reality of past and future generations, and the strengths their

presence can transmit.

Such an experience of time was familiar to our ancestors, and it can be ours as well. It is our birthright, as members of the living body of Earth. The thought of reclaiming this birthright is appealing to many of us, for in our speed-addicted society, time is an increasingly scarce commodity, demanding obedient alacrity and split-second maneuvers. As the pace accelerates, irritation, exhaustion, and burnout set in whether you're a corporate CEO or an anti-corporate activist. Yet, to reclaim a deeper, saner relation to time is more than a matter of personal ease and health. What's at stake, I believe, is our collective survival.

The relation to time engendered by our political economy is probably unique in human history. Unique, and perhaps suicidal. Reflecting upon it, one can come

and consequences of our actions, blinding us to the vast reaches of time. Both the company of our ancestors and the claims of our descendants become less and less real to us.

### THE CHOICE

As humans, as conscious members of the living Earth, we have the capacity and the birthright to experience time in a saner fashion. Throughout history, men and women labored at great personal cost to bequeath to future generations monuments of art and learning. And they honored through ritual and story those who came before them. The Great Turning to a life-sustaining society requires that we retrieve that ancestral capacity—in other words, act like ancestors.

"Deep Time" work has arisen for that express purpose: to help us experience our lives within their larger temporal context. Refreshing my spirit and inform-

to believe, as I have, that both the destruction we are wreaking upon our world, and our capacity to slow and stop that destruction, are a function of our experience of time. Let me explain.

#### **THE SHRINKING BOX**

The technologies and economic forces unleashed by the Industrial Growth Society radically alter our relation to time. They require decisions made at lightning speed for increasingly short-term objectives. They cut us off from nature's rhythms and from the past and future as well. Time becomes an ever-shrinking box in which we race on a treadmill without pausing for breath. It maroons us in the immediate present, obscuring the precedents

ing my mind, Deep Time work has been one of the great joys of my life. When done in groups, as part of a workshop or as the overall theme of a week-long retreat, it Brings tremendous rewards in both immediate gladness and lasting resilience.

#### **THE PAST INSIDE US**

We did not come yesterday into this world, nor are we passing visitors. Each atom in each molecule of our brains and bodies goes back to the beginning of space/time and is shaped by the unfolding adventure of life. It is quite wonderful that just when we most urgently need to recall our own cosmic story, it is being given to us afresh. Breakthroughs in science and cosmology open

new vistas, helping us to begin to comprehend our participation in the unfolding universe.

Body movement, sound, and breath help us open to the reality of this story. In January at a retreat center in Oregon, with steady drumbeat, we "remembered" our evolutionary journey. Memories are embedded in our neurological system, even if we only imagine that we recall them. They help us trust the vast intelligence that brought us forth, and the powers that can manifest through us as we act for the healing of our world. This kind of remembering can help us "act our age," instead of being frightened or cowed by today's challenges.

#### **THE FUTURE INSIDE US**

Sister Rosalie Bertell, a radiologist working on issues of nuclear contamination, inspires me greatly. She said once, "Every being who will ever live is present now on Earth." Where? Right here in our bodies, in our ovaries and gonads and in our DNA. Thanks to the ~ powers of our ~ technology and ~ the endurance of its toxins, the decisions we make now will affect whether future generations can be born sound of mind and body.

We can help each other experience this presence of the future ones, not just as a moral weight, but also, and even more so, as a source of inspiration and guidance. Some Deep Time exercises involve simple role plays, which invite us to address and speak on behalf of future beings, such as those of the seventh generation. Instead of guilt and moral judgment, what springs up spontaneously is, almost always, gratitude and love. What dawns on us is so unexpected, so deep, it changes how we relate to our own individual lives. It lifts us into wider dimensions of time where old fears and self-judgments give way to awe before the grandeur of our larger story.

The past, the future, all present to us now, at this cusp of time. We felt this in January, doing Deep Time work with staff and volunteers of the NWEI, and with folks from the Oregon Natural Step Network. We spoke of how it

changes our responses to the immediate challenges of our time. Someone said it is like being a child held and swung up by the hands of its parents as it runs into the waves. We are not meeting these challenges alone, we're being held by the ancestors, on the one hand, and on the other, by the future beings, on whose behalf we work. None of us is alone in this adventure. Each of us is supported by the web of life, whose power passes through us, from those who have gone before to those who will come.

—*Joanna Macy Ph.D., is a Buddhist scholar, deep ecologist, and author. For more information on deep time work, please refer to her book, Coming Back to Life, or visit her web site [www.joannamacy.net](http://www.joannamacy.net).*