

*Active Hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy*

by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone

A Map for Sustainability for Social Workers

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SOWK 697.03 – Winter 2017

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**Introduction: Lost, Searching for Hope**

As I write and edit this paper, the US has just been reported to have “dropped what has been described as the largest non-nuclear bomb in the country’s arsenal on an area of eastern Afghanistan known to be populated by Isis-affiliated militants” (Batchelor, Worley, & Sampathkamar, 2017). I read this news accidentally, as I scroll through entertaining Facebook posts about new babies, new cars, new degrees almost finished, all found on my shiny new MacBook Pro. According to UK Independent, numbers of civilian people killed have not yet been assessed (Batchelor et al., 2017).

My own privilege stings my eyes. I feel horror. I can hardly stand it. How do I move through my useless emotionality, powerlessness, fear, towards some sort of response? In this moment, pursuits and actions on behalf of social justice in a neo-liberal society which “sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations (and) redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency” (Monbiot, 2016) seem to be nothing more than acts of beautiful but futile resistance. Yet here I am, a brand new social worker nearing graduation trying to develop a greater understanding of ways to enact change in the world through my social work practice (Shaw, 2017).

**A Map to On-going Sustainability**

I believe that all social work professionals benefit from authentic sources of hope for positive change. As McCarter (2007) explains, “the code of ethics presents guidelines indicating that the well-being of client is the first and foremost important issue to social workers and the profession (NASW, 1999, 1.01). We cannot give to others what we don’t have within ourselves

(Elliott, 2005)” (p.111). My choice of title for this book review reflects a dire need for direction that will help me find my way towards sustaining hope for justice for all people.

As a social work student and a novice social work professional, I often experience a dull ache of disbelief in response to the immense challenges people face in their daily lives, in my immediate environments, in the society I reside in, and in the larger world community. My sense of powerlessness causes my body to tense up and my mind to start spouting out cynical commentary about the uselessness of my pursuits.

In Macy and Johnstone’s (2012) *Active Hope*, I have found something that was mostly missing from my social work education. Throughout my studies of the countless injustices, the many critiques of society, the issues and problems in existing social systems and the social work profession itself, I struggled to locate a hopeful vision for engagement in social change. Our learning objectives invite us to understand oppression, gain knowledge of strategies to address oppression and how to apply them (Shaw, 2017). Yet I found no directions as to how I can take steps to tackle significant issues without cynicism, without drowning in despair, and without facing the very real threat of burn-out as a social work (McCarter, 2007).

I have identified this missing piece as an important learning need I wanted to meet through this book review project (Shaw, 2017). Throughout this paper, I will focus on the applicability of these ideas towards the “inner experience” of social workers in our profession, and how we as social workers can draw from Macy and Johnstone’s work to promote our own sustainability in the profession. I believe that, to apply the “advanced knowledge of various forms of oppression and of the impact of oppression in the context of social justice work”, as well as to successfully make use of our “strategies and concepts related to anti-oppressive

practice in social work” (Shaw, 2017), social workers must receive direction on how to practice hope.

Joanna Macy’s and Chris Johnstone’s (2012) *Active Hope: How to face the mess we’re in without going crazy*, published by New World Library, became that much-needed map for me. I chose this book because I want to fully engage in the profession of social work, continually and actively contributing to the community of helping professions. I want to resist the narrative of despair and hopelessness, often referred to as ‘burn-out’, in the face of mounting problems in my professional life as a social worker.

### **Significance for Social Work Practice: The Path of Active Hope**

Joanna Macy is a renowned eco-philosopher, activist, educator, and scholar of Buddhism, deep ecology, and general systems theory; Chris Johnstone is a physician and a long-time student of Joanna’s work (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). Both authors are deeply committed to offering ways that “strengthen our capacity to face disturbing information and respond with unexpected resilience” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 6). Joanna Macy has been engaged in environmental activism, and in encouraging and supporting people in their own engagement in creating change, for many decades. Chris Johnstone became involved in Joanna Macy’s work as a physician who, having nearly died from a car accident caused by exhaustion, wanted to create change in the medical system in the UK.

The focus of Macy and Johnstone’s (2012) book is on how to grow and maintain an active hope for the possibility of environmental protection and the necessary societal and cultural changes to prevent further destruction of the planet. The authors’ emphasis is that it is in fact possible to “counter the voices that say we’re not up to the task, that we’re not good enough,

strong enough, or wise enough to make any difference” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 36). Macy and Johnstone propose that we can respond to these voices by becoming actively engaged in “bringing about what we hope for” by conceptualizing hope as an active practice: “it is something we do rather than have” (2012, p. 3).

I propose that Macy and Johnstone’s distinction of hope as active rather than passive, as something that can be learned and actively pursued, is deeply significant for the social work profession. The experience of hopelessness is a significant issue for social work professionals. According to McCarter (2007),

hopelessness has been shown to have detrimental effects on people ranging from increased physical problems to depression and psychological problems (Grossarth-Maticek, Kanazir, Vetter, & Schmidt, 1983; Itzhaky & Lipschitz-Elhawi, 2004). Increased incidence of cancer, depression and suicidal thoughts are just a few of the problems people with a low level of hope may deal with (...) a social service provider who is already experiencing a lack of hope can transfer that hopelessness to her/his clients. (p. 109)

Macy and Johnstone suggest that active hope is a “process we can apply to any situation, (...) doesn’t require our optimism, we can even apply it in areas where we feel hopeless” (2012, p. 3). This idea is especially useful and precious to me. I have been looking for something to help me address the very real worry that I simply do not know what to do with my own hopelessness now or in the future, and that cynicism is inevitable.

Macy and Johnstone write that “the guiding impetus is intention; we can *choose* what we aim to bring about, act for, or express” (2012, p. 3, authors’ emphasis). Most of us social workers choose our profession because we want to help others. We choose to be therapists, community organizers, activists. We choose amongst countless tools and strategies about how to bring about change in the troubled lives of individuals, and methods for changing policies and creating change on a larger scale. We are also all forewarned that this is a difficult profession, one in

which many do not last. We do not choose this narrative of inevitable burn-out. McCarter (2007) writes,

between 30% and 60% of social workers leave their jobs or change careers each year (Guerts, Shaufeli, & De Jonge, 1998; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). Turnover in social work has “grave implications for quality, consistency and stability of services” (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). Clients have reported that turnover or change of service providers causes personal disruption or prolonged crisis (Drake & Yadarma, 1996; Knapp, Harissis, & Missiakoulos, 1981). (...) Burnout and turnover rates are extremely high in the social service fields partly because of feelings of hopelessness (Walsh, 1987). (p. 108)

In addition to strategies for implementing change, social workers also need something(s) to assist us in maintaining our own sense of hope and conviction when we run up against significant barriers and limitations to social change, in addition to the suffering, pain, and hardships the people we work with experience in their lives. It is not always clear what these “somethings” are. Despair, hopelessness, and burn-out are not the only choice of narrative available. The purpose of *Active Hope* is “to strengthen our ability to give the best gift we can: our finest response to the multifaceted crisis of sustainability” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 4).

### **Crucial Narratives**

Macy and Johnstone propose that our society has three significant narratives that tell us “about how things are in our world”, stories through which “we make sense of the events we see happening” (2012, p. 14). These three narratives influence our thinking and understanding, serving as lenses through which we perceive the world, world events, values and ethics, and according to which we then structure our beliefs and eventually our actions. These narratives are entitled Business as usual, The Great Unravelling, and The Great Turning:

the first assumes that our society is on the right track and that we can carry on with business as usual. The second reveals the destructive unraveling of our biological, ecological, and social systems. The third is about the groundswell of response to danger

and the multifaceted transition to a life-sustaining civilization. (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 14).

Macy and Johnstone present the idea of narratives as influential in our understanding and perception of society and culture. When identified and named, awareness of a narrative creates distance between the thinker and his or her own ideas, creating the possibility of a different narrative (White & Epston, 1990). The identification of a significant narrative makes it possible to externalize the story, to use White's and Epston's (1990) terms.

Once we create distance between ourselves and the narrative, we can then choose a different story to enact (White & Epston, 1990). This a crucial first step for social work professionals as well: we must maintain a critical analysis of the many deeply influential narratives that run through our professional discourses, beliefs, and values as social workers, many of which prevent the social work profession from becoming a more authentic voice for social justice (Coates, 2003). Coates (2003) writes that "social work can be seen as a 'domesticated' profession, embedded in modernity, whose primary activities help people to fit in and adjust to the demands and expectations of modern life" (p. 38). The social work profession must distance itself from narratives that conform to modern expectations of its role in society, and to commit to a new vision (Coates, 2003; Reynolds, 2011, 2012).

### **The Narrative of The Great Turning**

The story of The Great Turning is where Macy and Johnstone spend the most time in *Active Hope*. It is through the narrative of The Great Turning that we begin to see the world in a hope-filled way. For the purposes of this review, which is centered on the links between the message of *Active Hope* and the work of doing justice in the context of social work practice, I too will focus my attention on the usefulness of this narrative for social workers.

Macy and Johnstone create a map for the journey towards a transformational perspective on large-scale change using the image of a spiral. This imagery originates in *The Work That Reconnects*, Joanna Macy's well-established "empowerment process" used to assist many people through her workshops "to develop our inner resources and our outer community" (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 5-6).

The spiral of *The Work That Reconnects* can be conceptualized as a map consisting of four progressive stages of the journey: "Coming from Gratitude", "Honouring Our Pain for the World", "Seeing with New Eyes", and "Going Forth". Each of these stages can be adapted to social justice work, and the spiral progression offers an alternative perspective on burn-out and hopelessness in the social work profession. My interest in studying and analyzing the stages of the spiral has been primarily to see if perhaps the spiral can be a social worker's map towards enacting the alternative narrative for sustainability in the profession as it is envisioned by Reynolds (2012).

### **The Great Turning in the Social Work Profession: Towards On-Going Sustainability**

I propose that the social work profession will benefit greatly from disengaging the dominant narrative of burn-out as an inevitable outcome of facing challenges in society. Using Macy and Johnstone's processes of *Active Hope*, we can adopt an alternative narrative where *justice-doing is life-giving and sustaining* (Reynolds, 2011, 2012). The concept of hope has an important role to play in our ability to adopt this alternative narrative. McCarter (2007) writes,

hope is the relationship between motivation and methods used in order to reach goals successfully. Hope provides the "stuff" that facilitates change in people. It provides the substance for making change and reaching goals. (...) On an organizational level, there is a need for assessment of social service provider's level of hope in order to better determine ways to consistently maintain social service providers in the field, thus decreasing risks to clients. (p. 111)

Vikki Reynolds (2012) presents an alternative narrative for sustainability for social justice workers in her speaking and writing on the principles that guide her own work in social justice, therapy, and supervision. Reynolds shared her ideas and work on doing justice with marginalized and oppressed people from a place of accountability, conscience, and ethics, with my cohort of Master of Social Work students at the University of Calgary in the Fall of 2016 (V. Reynolds, personal communication, September 2016). I was deeply moved by Reynolds' passionate voice for justice-doing in her presentations and in our subsequent conversations. I was also unable to gather the courage and guts I believe are required to take up such a powerful stance towards social justice.

Throughout the course of my year of studies, I wanted to understand where this kind of courage comes from; I could hear and read courageous words but I could not connect to the reservoir of strength that appeared to hold up social justice workers like Reynolds. It was through Macy and Johnstone's *Active Hope* and the map provided by the spiral of *The Work That Reconnects* that I found a source that supported a shift for me.

### **Coming from Gratitude**

Macy and Johnstone write that "when we come from gratitude, we become more present to the wonder of being alive in this amazing living world, to the gifts we receive, to the beauty we appreciate" (2012, p. 38). The authors cite research to support practicing gratitude in any shape or form as it increases well-being, builds trust and generosity, is an antidote to consumerism, and serves as a source of motivation for actions on behalf of our world (Macy & Johnstone, 2012).

Can the practice of gratitude be useful in sustaining ongoing engagement to social justice issues and social work practice in our profession, and the hope that is required to continue? My initial response to this was cynical: what good is being grateful when the troubles are so big?? Macy and Johnstone anticipate this response when they explore blocks to gratitude: “if you’re facing a tragedy in your life or in the world, searching for reasons to be grateful might initially feel uncomfortably close to denial” (2012, p. 49). At the same time, a cynical response of mocking a practice that has been shown to work for people is not useful. Reynolds (2011) writes,

cynicism works like a debilitating social dis-ease. Workers siding with cynicism can attack the slightest efforts of other workers to make change, ‘Nothing can change, nothing ever changes here, and nothing you are going to try to do will make a difference. Whatever you’re thinking of doing – we already know it, we’ve already tried it, and it doesn’t work. (p. 35)

I have observed this perspective in social work practice and educational settings, and I too have struggled against this way of thinking. Cynicism does not sustain life or change, and if gratitude can be practiced in a way that is not a Pollyannaish form of positive thinking, then it is worth our effort. Macy and Johnstone suggest that are not required to practice gratitude for everything, but rather that we recognize that “there’s always a larger picture, a bigger view, and that it contains both positive and negative aspects” (2012, p. 48). Reynolds (2011) quotes Paulo Freire: “the dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair, but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice” (p. 36).

Macy and Johnstone believe that gratitude can be practiced and learned as a response to what already supports me as a social worker, and that training myself to be grateful is part of the narrative of sustainability. I began my practice of gratitude by acknowledging Reynolds and Freire, and their incessant commitment to justice; by acknowledging and thanking my fellow social work students for their hard work and commitment to the causes they are passionate about;

by acknowledging and thanking the instructors, supervisors, and professors, who have dedicated their privilege and effort to supporting students and workers such as myself.

### **Honouring Our Pain for the World**

In this stage of the journey through the spiral, we are invited to face and spend time with the very despair and hopelessness we want to overcome. Macy and Johnstone write,

dedicating time and attention to honouring our pain for the world ensures that there is space to hear our sorrow, grief, courage, and any other feelings revealing themselves in response to what is happening in our world. Admitting the depths of our anguish, even to ourselves, takes us into culturally forbidden territory. (2012, p. 38)

How and when do we as social work professionals honour our pain for the people we work with, the communities and groups that are oppressed, marginalized, disadvantaged, abused, silenced, and shut out of society? When do we acknowledge and even feel the suffering that is in the therapy rooms? Do we talk about it amongst ourselves? What would happen if we did? If we believe strictly that “hope is an interaction of a person’s agency and pathways in relation to successful goal attainment (successful accomplishment)/obtainment (getting a desire object)” (McCarter, 2007, p. 112), and we simply cannot attain our goals for our clients due to barriers, how do we address the suffering that results both for our clients and our own selves?

I propose that honouring our pain for the people we are unable to truly help, and for ourselves as we struggle against these realities, contributes greatly to sustaining our engagement in social justice. Macy and Johnstone list some of the blocked responses we may experience when facing hopelessness, both in ourselves and our colleagues: minimization of the problems we encounter; withdrawing into individualism and drawing a line that says ‘it’s not my job’; giving into the “invisible pressure to conform” which stops us from speaking out and naming an issue we see unfolding (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 61-62); inability to listen to the troubles we

face because our privileged positions are threatened; numbing out with distractions, sarcasm, or simply ‘turning off the social worker’ role when we leave the office; feeling paralyzed by the sheer breadth of issues we learn about and the despair we feel; succumbing entirely to the cynicism defined by Reynolds (2011).

The point of reflecting on these responses is not to blame ourselves and each other, but rather to find and speak to the resistance enacted through these responses (Reynolds, 2012). Reynolds (2012) talks of spiritual pain as something that occurs when we as social justice workers are not able to live out our ethics: “this spiritual pain I’m talking about is the discrepancy between what feels respectful, humane, generative, and context which call on us to violate the very beliefs and ethics that brought us to therapy and counselling work” (p. 31).

I believe that this spiritual pain is a real experience we face in our profession. We are faced with harsh realities of injustice and our responses make sense. Each of the blocked responses can be easily placed “inside” each individual social worker, to be carried and dealt with individually, on our own, as our own personal trouble. Macy and Johnstone write that in the current dominant narrative, the suffering and pain we experience are often “viewed as symptoms to be treated or as markers of an underlying personal issue” (2012, p. 66).

Instead of sinking into isolation with our individualized experiences, Macy and Johnstone suggest that we can practice active hope by facing and naming these experiences of pain. We will then be able “to place our distress within a larger landscape that gives it a different meaning. Rather than feeling afraid of our pain for the world, we learn to feel strengthened by it” (p. 66).

Borrowing from systems theory, the Macy and Johnstone also suggest that we pay attention to the “negative” information we receive when we steer off course: it will guide us back to the path we need to follow. Reynolds (2011) recommends that social justice workers resist the

desire to ease spiritual pain: “instead of smoothing things over, I see this spiritual pain as a potential resource (Bird, 2006) to the community worker, a knowing-in-the-bones, whose immediacy calls out for an ethical investigation” (p. 31). Reynolds (2011) then invites the social justice worker to pay very close attention to the messages of this spiritual pain and use its information towards ongoing efforts for justice: “despite the discomfort, I encourage community workers to engage as fully as possible with spiritual pain, feel it and hold it near (and) get curious about the ways spiritual pain speaks to us of our ethics” (p. 32).

I am deeply moved by the messages of Macy and Johnstone, as well as Reynolds, regarding spiritual pain and its value for growth. This kind of accountability can sustain our hope for justice: when we honour our pain, listening to it as a teacher and a guide towards ethical action, and letting it go once we have heard the message, we will stay close to and live out our ethics (Reynolds, 2012).

### **Seeing with New Eyes**

Seeing with New Eyes includes four teachings that help us to see “the wider web of resources available to us through our rootedness within a deeper, ecological self” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 38). Macy and Johnstone offer insights and practices that encourage the reader to develop a “wider sense of self” (p. 85), discover “a different kind of power” (p. 105), contribute to and draw on “a richer experience of community” (p. 121), and “a larger view of time” (p. 139). These ideas fit beautifully with Reynolds’ concepts of “solidarity” and “collective ethics” amongst social justice workers, and addressing power in justice work (2011, 2012, 2014).

When we see through new eyes, we identify individualism as a dominating narrative that does not sustain and contribute to hope. We can externalize this narrative (White & Epston,

1990), and we can make room for a story in which all social workers are connected to “something larger than ourselves, whether that be our family, a circle of friends, a team, or a community, that becomes part of who we are” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 90) or our profession. We are reminded that we are “part of a much larger story”, and when we “experience (ourselves) as part of it, a different set of possibilities emerges” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 41). When we begin to see ourselves as part of something larger, we begin to understand power as “power-with”, “power arising out of cooperation with others” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 112).

I have begun practicing seeing myself as a member of the social work profession as a collective, and as such I started to enact the new narrative I have learned from Macy and Johnstone, and from Reynolds (2011, 2012). Reynolds (2011) argues that, when it comes to doing justice, groups are “more useful than even powerful individuals: more people, more better (*sic*) (...) solidarity speaks to an understanding that just ways of being are interconnected as are our struggles and sites of resistance” (p. 32). When I critically reflect, and ask myself, ‘am I standing with or against’ my fellow social workers, justice workers, community workers, therapists, supervisors, and instructors, I formulate an intention that leads to relationship instead of competition.

By expanding our notions of self to include others, we learn that we are not isolated or alone. Our solidarity with each other supports our collective efforts. According to Reynolds (2011) “the work of justice-doing is profoundly collaborative and there are many paths: ‘We do this work on the shoulders of others and we shoulder others up’ (Reynolds, 2010a)” (p. 32). When I ground myself in the web of the efforts of all social workers, social justice workers, activists, writers, and theorists, I gain an in-the-bones knowing (Reynolds, 2011) that I am not alone in my struggles against despair and cynicism. I believe that this learning will allow me to

engage in an ongoing effort to “promote human rights and social justice” in organizations and society as a social work professional (Shaw, 2017).

### **Conclusion: Going Forth**

In my pursuit of the missing piece in my social work education, I studied Macy and Johnstone’s (2012) book *Active Hope* to address the high likelihood of burn-out in my future as a social worker. Macy and Johnstone propose that hope can be an active process I can engage in because I choose to. Practicing gratitude allows me to acknowledge the efforts my community members contribute to our collective causes. Naming and speaking the spiritual pain, hopelessness, and despair, without shutting down or being shut down, strengthens and guides us. Widening my idea of my professional self as connected and embedded in solidarity with other social justice workers allows for collaboration, solidarity, and joining power with others.

Social workers, community workers, therapists, activists, and all others committed to shifting our momentum towards justice and sustainability for all people and the planet, will all benefit from finding ways to make Macy and Johnstone’s insights, practices, and ideas work to help us enact a narrative of justice doing that sustains itself. Reynolds (2011) states, “our struggles are rooted in the injustice of society, and so I respond collectively and relationally to our work, shored up with a spirit of solidarity, and connected by an ethic of justice-doing which embraces clients, workers, communities, and societies” (p. 28). Macy and Johnstone’s (2012) *Active Hope: How to face the mess we’re in without going crazy* has shown me a path towards living out this deeply enlivening response.

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