**The Great Turning**  
*by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, January 8, 2017*

**Reading**

*The Shambhala Warrior* (a Tibetan Legend as told by Joanna Macy)

"There comes a time when all life on Earth is in danger. Barbarian powers have arisen. Although they waste their wealth in preparations to annihilate each other, they have much in common: weapons of unfathomable devastation and technologies that lay waste the world. It is now, when the future of all beings hangs by the frailest of threads, that the kingdom of Shambhala emerges.

"You cannot go there, for it is not a place. It exists in the hearts and minds of the Shambhala warriors. But you cannot recognize a Shambhala warrior by sight, for there is no uniform or insignia, there are no banners. And there are no barricades from which to threaten the enemy, for the Shambhala warriors have no land of their own. Always they move on the terrain of the barbarians themselves.

"Now comes the time when great courage is required of the Shambhala warriors, moral and physical courage. For they must go into the very heart of the barbarian power and dismantle the weapons. To remove these weapons, in every sense of the word, they must go into the corridors of power where the decisions are made."
"The Shambhala warriors know they can do this because the weapons are manomaya, mind-made. This is very important to remember, Joanna. These weapons are made by the human mind. So they can be unmade by the human mind! The Shambhala warriors know that the dangers that threaten life on Earth do not come from evil deities or extraterrestrial powers. They arise from our own choices and relationships. So, now, the Shambhala warriors must go into training.

"How do they train?" I asked.

"They train in the use of two weapons."

"The weapons are compassion and insight. Both are necessary. We need this first one," he said, lifting his right hand, "because it provides us the fuel, it moves us out to act on behalf of other beings. But by itself it can burn us out. So we need the second as well, which is insight into the dependent co-arising of all things. It lets us see that the battle is not between good people and bad people, for the line between good and evil runs through every human heart. We realize that we are interconnected, as in a web, and that each act with pure motivation affects the entire web, bringing consequences we cannot measure or even see."
"But insight alone," he said, "can seem too cool to keep us going. So we need as well the heat of compassion, our openness to the world's pain. Both weapons or tools are necessary to the Shambhala warrior."

**Sermon**

Every time I hear the story of the ancient Shambhala Warrior, it sounds like a prophecy that foretells the time in which we live. The prophecy tells of a time when the Earth is in great peril, a time when great powers have arisen with the wealth and weapons to annihilate each other. The future of sentient life hangs by a thread. It is a time that calls for people of good faith and courage to act with insight and compassion.

I first heard the Shambhala prophecy told by Joanna Macy. Though I can list several teachers who’ve had a profound effect on my life, Joanna Macy’s name always rises to the top of that list. It’s been nearly twenty years since I actually sat in a classroom with Joanna, taking in her wisdom as a scholar, her courage as an activist, and her compassionate heart as a spiritual guide. As a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology, she has more than five decades of experience interweaving her scholarship with activism and experiential workshops designed to bring about personal and social transformation.

The class met for three hours every Monday morning. One hour was spent in intellectual study of systems theories and Buddhist philosophies. One hour was
spent in experiential exercises, done together as a group. And one hour was spent in silent meditation, again, together as a group.

When the semester ended, I felt raw and exposed. Everything I thought I knew about myself and my place in the world had fallen away, like so much battle armor. From that tender and vulnerable emotional space, something new emerged. I had fallen deeply in love with this achingly beautiful world that is at once robust and fragile. I could no longer see myself as separate from the Earth and all her creatures. I could only see that I am a part of a dynamic, living system, one that is always growing and evolving, that I am both the changer and the changed. Though I had long ago left behind religious narratives centered on personal salvation and life decisions based only on what’s best for me and mine, I found myself moving what I knew in my head into my heart: the truth of interdependence, interconnection, and the embodied reality that salvation is for this life, not the next, and that we are all in this together. My fate is inextricably tied with yours, and yours, with mine, or as in the words attributed to Chief Seattle, “We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.”

Joanna Macy refers to the time in which we live as The Great Turning. In the course of human history there have been other turnings that have shaped the ways in which we live upon this planet. Our current time is one of a Great
Turning, not unlike the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the past. Joanna Macy says we are in a shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a life-sustaining civilization. She says the shift is happening whether we recognize it or not. The question is whether the turning will happen soon enough so that this planet will be livable for human and other complex life forms in the future.

The Industrial Growth Society in which we live is based in an economic system that is dependent on accelerating growth. Success is measured in terms of ever-increasing profits, which are in turn dependent on how fast materials can be extracted from the earth and turned into consumer products, weapons, and waste.

The revolution that is underway is a deep understanding that it doesn’t have to be this way. More and more people are realizing that our needs can be met without destroying our world if we are willing to engage the essential adventure of turning toward a life-sustaining civilization. There are three dimensions to the great turning. One dimension involves actions to slow the damage to Earth and its beings. A second dimension involves analysis of structural causes and the creation of structural alternatives. The third dimension involves a shift in consciousness.

What’s exciting about this great turning is that we’re all in it together and each of our individual actions, choices, and behaviors play a part in bringing about the next evolution of human society on this planet. The dimensions outlined by Joanna Macy align nicely with our Unitarian Universalist principles and values:
human worth and dignity, justice, equity and compassion in human relations, encouragement to spiritual growth, and respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, to name just a few. Our faith community and its rich traditions can be sources of nurture and sustenance as we become more conscious of the Great Turning and our part in it.

The first dimension of the great turning is action. For Unitarian Universalists action is the way we live out our faith in the world. Actions that slow the damage to Earth and its beings is the most visible dimension. It includes political, legislative, and legal work. It also includes direct action like boycotts, blockades, civil disobedience, and other means of refusal and resistance.

- Documenting and the ecological and health effects of the Industrial Growth Society;
- Lobbying or protesting against the World Trade Organization and the international trade agreements that endanger ecosystems and undermine social and economic justice;
- Blowing the whistle on illegal and unethical corporate practices;
- Blockading and conducting vigils at places of ecological destruction, such as old-growth forests under threat of clear-cutting or at nuclear dumping grounds.
These and similar actions will slow the destruction and buy us some time. They are necessary but they are not sufficient to bring about a life-sustaining civilization.

The second dimension of the great turning is analysis. We need a deep understanding of the dynamics and tacit agreements that allow the Industrial Growth Society to exist. To free our selves and our planet from the damage being inflicted by the Industrial Growth Society, we have to ask some hard questions. Joanna Macy would have us ask, “What are the tacit agreements that create obscene wealth for a few, while progressively impoverishing the rest of humanity? What interlocking causes indenture us to an insatiable economy that uses our Earth as supply house and sewer?” The picture isn’t pretty. It takes a good dose of courage to look at our current situation with a sense of realism without collapsing into either denial or despair. It can also be empowering to see our selves as part of a system rather than victims of the system. We are part of the system along with everyone else, which means there is no need to demonize corporate CEO’s and politicians who are in bondage to it. We can de-mystify the workings of the global economy and see how the Industrial Growth Society is dependent on our obedience to it and how ultimately the Industrial Growth Society is doomed to devour itself.

Understanding and dismantling the system isn’t enough. We need to build alternative structures and systems that are life-sustaining. This means not waiting
for state and national politicians, but banding together and taking action ourselves in our own communities. Through creativity and collaboration on behalf of life, seeds for the future are sown. Some initiatives that Joanna Macy suggests are:

- Teach-ins and study groups on the Industrial Growth Society;
- Strategies and programs for nonviolent, citizen-based defense;
- Reduction of reliance on fossil and nuclear fuels and conversion to renewable energy sources;
- Collaborative living arrangements such as co-housing and eco-villages;
- Community gardens, consumer cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, watershed restoration, local currencies

These second dimension actions are also necessary but not sufficient to bring about The Great Turning. The third dimension is to make a shift in consciousness. The structural alternatives being put in place can’t take root and flourish without deeply engrained values to sustain them. It’s a shift from rugged individualism to radical interdependence. It’s a shift in how we perceive reality, a shift that is happening now as both a cognitive revolution and spiritual awakening. It’s a shift from understanding the Earth as an inert planet spinning through space to understanding our home, the Earth, as a sacred living system -- God incarnate in rock and air and water and plant and animal – a sacred living system of which we
are a part. Joanna Macy suggests many ways to become engaged in the third dimension of The Great Turning:

- general living systems theory;
- deep ecology and the deep, long-range ecology movement;
- Creation Spirituality and Liberation Theology;
- Engaged Buddhism and similar currents in other traditions;
- the resurgence of shamanic traditions;
- ecofeminism;
- ecopsychology;
- the simple living movement.

I was delighted to learn that the city of Greensboro and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro are on the cutting edge of The Great Turning. The deep ecology movement, of which Joanna Macy is a part, is grounded in and informed by the work of Greensboro’s own Thomas Berry, who is widely known for his most renowned book, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*. Berry’s work was the impetus for formation of the groups Environmental Stewardship Greensboro and Emerging Ecology Inc. Members of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation were instrumental in bringing these groups into existence. There are a great many ways that this congregation embodies the work of The Great Turning, from participation in the recycling of Styrofoam, to the certification as a Green
Sanctuary, and to caring for the human community through support of the Urban Ministry, your Taking it to the Streets program, and your assistance in resettling refugee families from Africa.

The Shambhala prophecy foretold the time in which we live, a time when we are called to confront the powers of wealth and weapons that threaten the very fabric of life. The stakes are very high. The Shambhala prophecy also foretold the tools that we need if we are to make our way into what Joanna Macy calls the Life Sustaining Civilization and what Thomas Berry calls the Ecozoic Era.

Macy reminds us, “The realizations we make in the third dimension of the Great Turning save us from succumbing to either panic or paralysis. They help us resist the temptation to stick our heads in the sand, or to turn on each other, for scapegoats on whom to vent our fear and rage.”

As the prophecy tells us, to do this work we need insight and compassion. We need action and we need times of renewal and reflection, for these are what bring about changes in consciousness. We also need courage. We need the courage to be peaceful warriors, to be Shambhala Warriors.

The times in which we live call us to develop peaceful weapons of compassion and insight. The times in which we live call us to have our hearts broken open by the harsh realities of the suffering caused when we forget that we are intricately woven into the living, breathing system that is our home, the Earth.
We need the courage to confront powers that work to uphold systems of oppression and destruction. We need the courage to turn away from indifference, callousness, and greed. We need the will to turn toward each other in the spirit of love, cooperation, and interdependence.

In closing, I leave you with the words of The Rev. Wayne Arnason, words that have sustained me through many difficult times.

Take courage friends.
The way is often hard
the path is seldom clear
and the stakes are very high.
But take courage.
For deep down there is another truth.
You are not alone.
Amen and Blessed Be.