



MIND & LIFE

## Mind & Life Podcast Transcript Systems Change – The Work That Reconnects

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*Intro – Jamie (00:00)*

*Hello and welcome to the Mind & Life podcast. I'm Jamie Bristow, your guest host for this episode. For the last 15 years, I've been working to bring contemplative practices and other inner transformation approaches into different areas of public life through innovation and policy development. During this time, I've seen a huge amount of change, with mainstream politicians, funders and decision makers really starting to see inner development as a credible or even crucial area to invest in for societal and ecological impact. But as they begin to accept the case for why inner work is important for outer change, other questions come into focus. How do we do it collectively? Which approaches are most effective? Do we know they work? Are they ready to implement at scale? And what is most needed now to unlock their future potential?*

*In this mini-series of the podcast, we've curated a series of panel discussions with leading experts to explore these urgent questions. To me, there's no better place to start this inquiry than with The Work That Reconnects and the huge contribution to this whole area by the late, great Joanna Macy. Joanna was a systems thinker way, way before it was cool, and an environmentalist and engaged Buddhist before we even had names for those things. Her doctoral thesis was titled Mutual Causality in Early Buddhist Teachings and General Systems Theory, and she combined these deep insights with her lifelong activism in more than 15 books and decades of innovation, facilitation and teaching. Even to call her work trailblazing is an understatement. It prefigures contemporary enthusiasm for reconnection to ourselves, each other and nature by several decades. But outside of sustainability, systems thinking or activist circles, it's still relatively unknown, at least until the last few years, and academic research on their flagship workshop, The Work That Reconnects, is only just getting going. So to help me explore the current status and potential of all this work, I have four excellent guests spanning 15 hours of time zones. So please welcome to the podcast Stephanie Kasa, Professor Emerita from the University of Vermont, UVM, and the author, editor of many books and articles on Buddhist environmental thought, including A Wild Love for the World: Joanna Macy and the Work of Our Time. And Chris Johnston, a resilience specialist involved with The Work That Reconnects for over 40 years and co-author of the book, Active Hope with Joanna. And Shayantoni Ghosh, a writer, theatre maker and facilitator who is on the staff team at the Work That Reconnects Network. And finally, Phoebe Tickell, a scientist and social entrepreneur whose mentorship by Joanna helped her to create Moral Imaginations, an organization that is building a movement of spiritual warriors through the training of moral imagination.*

*Okay, so to get us kicked off, I'd like to turn to you first, Stephanie, to tell me a little bit about Joanna herself, because her life story and the way that she was in the world in a way was part of her teaching, was it not?*

Stephanie (03:15)

Thank you so much, Jamie. It's a pleasure to be here with everybody. Let me just start with a couple of strong quotes from first Matt Fox: "Joanna Macy is a midwife of grace, a rare voice in our time, a prophet speaking out on behalf of those without a voice." David Abram said, "Joanna Macy is a woman of uncanny courage and ferocious compassion, a Bodhisattva, ablaze."

So you get a feeling immediately from these people that this is an unusual person with a strong background in a knowledge of the world as it stands, but a commitment, a deep bodhisattva commitment to reach out and take care of the planet. So Joanna was known for her teaching, her speaking, and her writing. And as a speaker, she came from a long line of ministers and it seemed to be in her bones or in her genes that she could stand up there as if in a pulpit and move her audiences with carefully chosen words designed to awaken people always aware of her theatre and delivery. As a writer, she shows her very clear mind, well-trained, but it was really as a teacher that most people know her, because she connected so strongly individually with so many around the world in so many different cultures through her own personal warmth and charisma, her sense of humor and playfulness, her great sense of adventure, her sense of pacing in her teaching. But she was really a master at holding the space for learning and even more for awakening.

So, I will just say there were three main foundations of her teaching: her intellectual grounding in systems theory, and then also her understanding as a scholar and a practitioner of Buddhism, and beyond that, the most important ingredient, a commitment to experiential knowing. She herself had a very secure trust in her own personal insights and revelations, a belief in learning by epiphany, and of listening to what is arising deep in the heart.

So, she really met people right where they were in their pain, despair, fear, rage, deep emotional caring for our planet. And it's her commitment to bring forward all of us as planetary citizens that really touched the world.

Jamie (05:49)

*Thank you, Stephanie. And Phoebe, turning to you, Joanna was your mentor and collaborator in developing moral imaginations. So did she foster epiphanies in you? Did she support you through the emotional journey of engaging with the challenges of the world? Tell us a little bit about your relationship and what inspired you most.*

Phoebe (06:11)

Jamie, it's a real pleasure to be here and to have the opportunity to share in this community of friends about Joanna. And I had the absolute privilege of spending time over the last nine years of her life, spending time with her in person and benefiting from not just her teachings and the huge, varied output that she had in the world, but also her presence and her being. When I think back to Joanna, what really comes alive in me was her sense of being almost on the edge of her seat with excitement at life. You felt

as if there could be nobody more present, like you were the only person that existed at the times that you would spend with her. And I guess on top of that, there was also this sense of, kind of, gumption that she brought to everything, like absolute, full commitment and energy and a permission to be unapologetically oneself.

It's through her decades of practice that she had this aura around her of just absolute compassion, kind of wild and fierce compassion, and just being absolutely besotted and in love with life, which she then transmitted to others through her teachings, but also her wicked sense of humor, her spontaneity, her kind of theatrical, as Stephanie was saying, a theatrical presence that would invite you into a kind of improv of life and help you see that every moment of life is a gift and we can absolutely make the most of every single second we have on earth. So, that's a little taste.

*Jamie (07:45)*

*And that gratitude was a core part of her framework and her thinking and The Spiral. Could you say a little bit about that as we go in to look at The Work That Reconnects itself?*

*Phoebe (07:56)*

Absolutely. So, The Work That Reconnects, which we'll be unpacking on this call, centers on The Spiral. The spiral has four sections: The first is 'coming from gratitude'. Just like in all major indigenous traditions and wisdom traditions, we start in gratitude as a place to ground ourselves and to remind us of the stability of being a part of life and also, kind of, inviting us to quiet our frantic minds and become more present. So, that's a really important first stage as we then move into the second stage of The Spiral: 'honoring our pain for the world'. And I'd say that was a really important part of Joanna's personality as well, I remember sitting at her breakfast table in Berkeley where she would read the news every single day. You know, even at the age of kind of 94, she would ask me to read the news, however horrific, and we would breathe through the, kind of, latest news of the day.

And so, by daring to experience that pain that we feel for the world, it allows us to discover our compassion, our ability to suffer with others, and also turn that compassion inwards to ourself. And the key part of that that then turns us into the 'seeing with new eyes' part of The Spiral, which is that through experiencing our grief, our pain, our despair, even our numbness, it allows us to actually feel experientially the reality of our inter-existence with all of life on earth, our ancient, ancient histories, our journeys from being bacteria to all sorts of creatures to being humans here on Earth. And it allows us to then come alive through that pain to our inherent capacities for creativity, for moral courage, and for inspiration, and finally for action.

*Jamie (09:41)*

*Thank you. Chris, what do you think is the main intention behind Joanna's work and particularly the workshop process of The Work That Reconnects? Or in other words, what kind of contribution is it trying to make?*

Chris (10:01)

I know Joanna really loved this phrase, The Work That Reconnects, because it does what it says on the tin. It's about plugging in, feeling yourself to be part of, rather than apart from, the rest of life on earth. And I guess that's the core intention. But I suppose what really drew me to it was one of the things that terrifies me sometimes is the sense that our world is falling apart around us, yet the dominant response is just to carry on with business as usual. That there's a shutting down, a closing off. And when I talk to people about this, the kinds of things I hear is, well, it's just too painful to look at. It's too depressing to look at. And if I really take in the full horror of our world, I'm scared about what that will do to me. So that's one block to looking: It's too painful.

And another is, well, even if we do look and we see the full horror, we can't do anything about it anyway. And so that's the second block of powerlessness. And then a third block, I sometimes hear—I've interviewed a lot of people about this, about what gets in the way of feeling we can really make a difference in the world—And I remember someone saying, well, if it's beyond my neighborhood, what's it got to do with me anyway? That sense of detachment that is sometimes around. I think many people do care, amazingly so, in this age of awareness of what's happening in the other side of the world. But, there's this fear of the pain and the sense of powerlessness. And what this Work That Reconnects does is it counters those three blocks in a way that draws out their opposite, starting with the gratitude that builds a stronger starting point from which to look at the horror, as well as also having so many benefits for emotional, physical, social wellbeing. That honoring our pain, I think of honoring our pain as like if someone came knocking on the door, a visitor, how would you honor them? You'd honor them by opening the door and welcoming them in. And that's not often what happens with pain for the world. People tell me, well, I keep the door firmly shut. I don't let it in.

And so to open the door to the pain, you need to have a sense of why, why do this? And this, I see, is a real key part of this work. As Phoebe said, that part of the seeing with new and ancient eyes is recognizing our inter-existence, that we feel the pain because we're connected.

I think of me feelings and us feelings, that there's me feelings are to do with my personal story, but we all have us feelings too, feelings that come out of our connection, whether it's our family or group or people close to us, but also for our world too. And it's as though the world is feeling through us. And when we really understand that, then that's part of how we plug in, part of how we connect. And when I've done surveys around this, one of the things I hear is how powerfully life changing this work can be because when people discover that actually when you stop blocking the pain, you open a source of energy, you open a source of vitality, of aliveness, then it makes sense of what I think of as this transformative dip going down into the difficulty facing the storm, but also coming out the other side transformed, strengthened by this, which is what the other parts of The Spiral do.

Jamie (13:41)

*Thank you. So, I'd like to go over to Shayontoni to give us a little bit of detail on the workshop format. Like what would it be like to turn up to one of these programs?*

Shayontoni (13:53)

Thank you, Jamie. Essentially, a Work That Reconnects workshop is an organic participant journey. And I would even say that the facilitator of the workshop goes through the same journey that the participants do, because it is very all encompassing. Everyone feels the change happening in the room. So, to answer your question, when somebody registers and shows up for a Work That Reconnects workshop, whether it is a two-hour workshop or even a weekend workshop, immediately what one can expect is a sense of connection that pervades the room. And this is very intentionally set by the facilitators and it is reinstated through every phase of The Spiral that we move through.

So as Chris, said we start with gratitude. We start with some space holding, some space setting where confidentiality is agreed upon, where we talk about the kind of conduct that we would expect from each other in the room. And then when we move into The Spiral, we start off with gratitude. So, we go through certain practices like open sentences or partner rounds or gratitude circles where we just dive all in. We really examine our own lives, whether it's on a very personal scale or an interpersonal scale. And we really try to see, yeah, what do I feel grateful for? What gets me out of bed? What gives me hope despite it all? And what you will find very interesting about the fact that we start with gratitude is that it is extremely grounding. It really sets us off on a great start to which we feel further resourced when we go into 'honoring our pain'. So as a group, then we move into a different sort of practice. And some practices in the 'honoring our pain' section are the Truth Mandala, for example, that is a super hit. People all around the world have cried a lot during a Truth Mandala. And it's because it's incredibly effective.

And there are some other exercises that we also do like journaling and dyads and other sorts of exercises. And because we started with gratitude and moving to honoring our pain, it creates more capacity within us to meet each other, to meet ourselves. And then we move into 'seeing with new and ancient eyes' where we are guided through an imagination exercise, essentially; through different kinds of practices where we sort of tap in to new perspectives, which me, Shayontoni, in this day and age, I might not be privy to that particular perspective. But when I am a hawk flying in the sky, I see things from a whole new angle. And all the exercises that we do under 'seeing with new and ancient eyes' really helps one to just broaden their horizons, which because we've gone through gratitude and 'honoring our pain', we are fairly open and receptive to having our horizons broadened. And I'll quickly wrap this up then, towards the end, we go into a going fourth round where it's all about action, whether it is deciding the smallest action that you can take in your community or in your personal life or professional life, whatever.

And then we make these intentions in a group and figure out exactly what we can do in this day and age to create the kind of heaven that we want to live in. What really helps is because we have been loosened up by the strict sequencing of the format that the workshop moves through. By the end of it, when we are at the 'going forth' stage, regardless of our personal context, I would say that all participants feel very empowered to make the change of whatever magnitude that they need to in their lives. And the format really allows for this kind of work to be possible, whether it's a two-hour workshop or a two-day workshop. And it really speaks to the efficacy of the work. And personally, as a facilitator, every time I wrap a workshop up, I am just saying, wow, this work works every time. There really is something here.

The beautiful thing about the work is that you can really go as deep or as shallow as you need to. And there is no judgment about it because it's all a matter of context and need. If I have a weekend and I

have a beautiful log cabin, then yes, we are going very deep. The work is essentially creative and it is all up to the facilitator what kind of creativity they want to incorporate in the workshop, what kind of practices they want to do. And this has led to what you said, many adaptations of the work in many different forms. And I feel like as time goes, people are going to get more and more creative with it because the work is really what the facilitator makes it.

*Jamie (19:33)*

*Chris has mentioned why the work is so important, societally, but what do individuals want when they come along?*

Shayontoni (19:41)

As somebody who looked for The Work That Reconnects workshops and as someone who offers them, I would say what I look for is a space to feel less alone, a space to be completely honest about things that nobody else is asking me, a space to talk about things that really make me feel very afraid on a level that my friends or my family cannot comfort me. And these are deep existential truths and which are best experienced in community.

*Jamie (20:22)*

*Yeah, thank you. We'll come back to The Work That Reconnects itself in a moment. But first, Stephanie, coming back to you, could you give us a sense of how influential Joanna's ideas are? Because I know that there are thousands of references in academic journals to her work, and most of that is to her ideas. And she brought together for the first time some very important elements, like systems thinking, Buddhism and activism. Could you say a little bit more about her life and where those ideas came from?*

Stephanie (21:01)

Joanna often told the story herself of her first awakening experience going to a Jacques Cousteau symposium and just being overwhelmed by pain in one exhibit after another. Luckily, she was with her two children and this at least gave her a small amount of community, but she was really in despair for like a year after that. It all flooded in on her at once. And I think many of us have had that kind of experience.

So, at one point she emerged to lead a workshop among academics and the whole thing had a flip in it where she was supposed to be following some script and she just asked people, what are you really feeling for the world? And out of that came her sense of kind of a birth in the middle of the night of this work that she called Despair Work. And she wrote it up in a little pamphlet. I feel very pleased to have one of the original copies from her. And it got in the hands of some activists in Europe. And they were so, let's see, they felt like someone was speaking to exactly what they were addressing. It was a time when Reagan was putting missiles on soil in Germany and Poland, and everyone was feeling quite threatened. And this went viral in a way that we can't imagine now, people were photocopying it and sending out, getting thousands of copies into their activist friend's hands.

So, the work was originally known as Despair Work. And then as facilitators trained, they formed an organization, a collective called Interhelp to spread those ideas. And her first book was Despair and Personal Empowerment in the Nuclear Age. And then it became known as D&E work or despair and empowerment work. Well, when I met Joanna, she had just become quite intrigued with the term 'deep ecology' and learned it from Arne Ness.

And it seemed to align well with the radical nature of what she wanted to teach. She didn't want to just stay with despair. She wanted us to fully understand our interbeing in the world. And she picked up that term from Thich Nhat Hanh. So, she taught many of these intensive deep ecologist trainings. And that's where I worked with her the most. They were two weeks long, a luxury today to spend that much time together. And it was not until the first substantial revision of the facilitator manual Coming Back to Life that she and Molly, kind of, almost whimsically renamed 'The Work'. And that's where the title, The Work That Reconnects came. Now, alongside that, fields of eco-philosophy and eco-psychology were developing. In the beginning, they were seen as complete sidelines to these very traditional academic disciplines of philosophy and psychology. And people that were working in this area trying to understand through an environmental perspective, through an ecological interbeing planetary perspective, they were actually almost laughed at. It was just so unusual. Psychology was about your own personal traumas and karma and family relations. It wasn't about how you felt about the world. So, Joanna's work actually came to support at an experiential level, a testimonial level, that these were viable ways to understand psychology. And this now is quite a well-developed field with number of academics, but Joanna's work took it to a personal awakening level, that one could have a sense of shift from the small self, the self-preoccupied self that thinks the world revolves around them, the self-absorbed self, to the self that cares, that is part of this much larger interconnected world. And that shift was a shift to a planetary identity. So, in a sense, it perfectly parallels the Buddhist understanding of waking up from our ego-bound false sense of self, our delusional sense, to much more of a sense of self as process, as being a part of call and response; Of being acted upon, of being called forth. So this naturally resonated with people who already had quiet personal relations with trees or birds, or now fungus is the common rage. And just a sense they already we're connected to these things, but nobody was validating that.

*Jamie (25:40)*

*So we've heard that grief and empowerment work became The Work That Reconnects, and then some further key innovation happened, didn't it, Chris, when you and Joanna got together to write the Active Hope book, which has more recently become a training format. Could you tell us a little bit about the relationship between The Work That Reconnects and Active Hope?*

*Chris (26:01)*

Yes, thank you. Well, I think first thing to say is that I'm so grateful for my experiences of many deep, powerful, transformative workshops. I think there's a kind of magic that can happen. And at the same time, Joanna came over to stay with me and my wife, Kirsty, in Bristol in 2008. And, at the time, I just had a sense that I wanted to interview her and I wasn't quite sure what it was for, but I just felt, you know, we've got to have a conversation around how do we take what's so valuable in the workshops to people who might never come to a workshop. And she was really up for this and we had a series of conversations and that's what turned into the book. And there's several levels of this really. And one of the things is workshops are one format, one channel for transformative processes. But another is story, that we live in stories and we can change the stories that we're part of. And so that became a central

focus in Active Hope through sharing a number of stories to carry messages to people who might not come to a workshop, or they might come to a workshop, but also to be more conscious of what's the story that we're living in.

And what's our choice points around what kind of story we belong to? And one of the terms right at the heart of The Work That Reconnects is this idea of 'The Great Turning' being a powerful story of transformation on all kinds of different areas, but you can, kind of, look back at it as a larger story and say that there's something bigger going on here. And we contrasted The Great Turning with also the dominant story of 'business as usual'.

just carrying on our business the way we usually do, which to us kind of brought up a sense of horror because we just see it's taking us over the edge of a cliff into this other story of 'The Great Unraveling', the sense that everything's falling apart in some way. And we wrote Active Hope twice, actually, because it came out in 2012. And then we had a sense that some of the tone and, the way we presented things in 2012, couldn't really stand up to the way things have got so much worse in the world. The way that each decade is warmer than the last. The increase in wildfires, extreme weather events, the sense of land becoming uninhabitable because it's too hot; Before we said, 'if we acted in time, maybe we can prevent some catastrophic collapse'. Whereas now we had a sense of, this is actually unfolding anyway.

Things are getting much worse. And so we brought out a new edition in 2022, 10 years on, and we rewrote the way we presented The Great Turning in more in process terms of what would it look like if The Great Turning was happening through you now?

Because when I was coming across a lot of people saying "this Great Turning thing, it all sounds like a fairy tale to me. I can't see it happening." And so that the whole term 'active hope' is like, well, do you hope it will happen? And if you do, how can you be active in making that more likely? And one thing all of us can do every day is a choice available to us is turning up, turning up with an intention to play our part. That's the first part of The Great Turning. And in that there's a turning away from what we know is leading us over the edge of a cliff, turning away from that which causes harm and turning towards the nurturing of life, the supporting of the flourishing of life. And so what we wanted in the book was practices that support our turning up. And so I think of the great turning, this great story, turning up, turning away from, turning towards, active hope is like a practice like Tai Chi is a practice for wellbeing, active hope we present as a practice for personal and collective wellbeing. It's something we do, it's changing the way we think about hope, not so much as a feeling you have, but a practice you do. And then The Work That Reconnects is this powerful system of insights and practices most often used in workshop form that grows and strengthens our capacity and desire to take part in the Great Turning.

*Jamie (30:50)*

*All right, well, let's turn now to where the work is today and try and get our heads around the reach of The Work That Reconnects and its influence. Shayantoni, do we know how many people are trained to facilitate the process? Do we know how many people have been through workshops? Is there some kind of centralized organization that tracks it? Could you perhaps introduce the Work That Reconnects Network in that context?*

Shayontoni (31:17)

The Work That Reconnects Network is one organization. We like to state that we are not the flagpole organization for the work, but it has sort of become that way because, just by default. There is no way to know how many facilitators of the work there are because there is no compulsion to be on any sort of list or any sort of registry like that.

We have a network. As a network, we have around 201 facilitator members and about 580 something community members. And among the 500 plus community members, we have people who have facilitated quite a few workshops, but maybe haven't reached the number of hours that they need to in order to match our eligibility criteria [for facilitators].

We have hundreds and hundreds of facilitators around the world and it is honestly so inspiring to see where all we keep popping up from. Recently we ran an initiative called the Emergence Fund. We started this initiative through which we are giving micro grants to facilitators around the world, but especially from underrepresented areas to facilitate workshops in their geographical context. We recently awarded a fund to a young woman in Pakistan, a young woman in Nepal. And it was wonderful for us to see these applications even come in. We received so many different applications from people. So it genuinely is a wonderful thing to see how far the work has spread.

Jamie (33:08)

*So although it's hard to know exactly how many people are delivering workshops, my sense is it's an awful lot just in my travels and the rate at which I come across people who, aren't mainly a facilitator, it isn't one of the main strings in their bow, as it were, but they do it sometimes in their professional settings or for activist friends or colleagues, et cetera. And so the reach is quite significant.*

*And yet academia hasn't quite yet caught up, has it Chris? There has been some empirical work looking at the impact of these programs and you've been involved in some of that. Could you give us a sense of what is available and what other ways of knowing have we got to assess the impact of these programs?*

Chris (33:54)

There's a really important question there of, well how do we know this works? How do we know that this brings benefits? And one of them is like, well, we're here, we've got our personal experience, we're in touch with other people and their experience. And just on the reach, just to come back to that, Active Hope is now in 19 languages. And we've developed an online course where we've had over 12,000 people engage in it. And we just did a check, I did a check this morning, we're having an ongoing survey there. And we've had people engage in it from 88 different countries around the world, which is just amazing. And that's a plus side of the digital age. In terms of this question, how do we know it works? I went through a sense of crisis years ago, back in the early 1990s, of doing these workshops and then thinking, do I know if this does any good? And so what I did was a survey I sent to people a year after having done an intensive workshop with me. And the results of that, even though there were small numbers, there only about 30 something people, what it showed though was that the majority of those people had described the workshop as life changing in some way. And about a third of the people saw it as very deeply life changing. And so I think there's such a need to have larger studies. And so one of the things that we've been doing more recently with this online course, we've had thousands of people

engage with it. We've been having an ongoing survey and we've got results of over 400 people who've been through this program, a seven week online course where videos are released each week. And of those people who've completed the course and filled in the survey, over 90 % report being significantly strengthened in their motivation to make a difference and also significantly strengthened in their belief that they can make a difference, feeling less overwhelmed, less defeated by their concerns and also experiencing this as nourishing and healing. And there was another interesting thing too, is that through engaging in this online course, they'd felt a significant strengthening in their feeling of connection with life and our world. And so it's different what you do in an online course, but it can still be impactful. Now, in terms of making this work more available to larger groups, I know also there's research being done at the University of Galway, University of Swansea, and also University of Ontario into looking particularly at how do we support young people feeling eco-anxiety, feeling more concern about a world that they understandably have concerns about the future that they're moving into. That work is happening and the results haven't really come fully through on much of that yet. There were some initial reports from the University of Swansea looking at how do we tackle the sense of silence is the norm about fears about the world by providing spaces where people can talk about their fears of what's happening.

*Jamie (37:17)*

*Thank you. Shayontoni, looking at the map that you have on the Work That Reconnects website, it's clear that you have facilitators spanning the globe. And presumably, the work shows up differently in different places, right? And facilitators have to adapt to be culturally sensitive to make it more accessible and appropriate for where they're working. And I hear, like many other inner outer change fields, there has been a narrative and lots of important work being done around decolonization and opening up diversity. Could you speak a little bit about how the work has evolved in that regard, in terms of cultural and contextual adaptation?*

*Shayontoni (37:58)*

Yes, I can start a little bit with my own example of it. In the Indian context, for example, whenever we are facilitating one of these workshops, primarily the change first comes through language. For us, it is impractical for a facilitator to take the theory of The Work That Reconnects in English to our participants. So we have to spend a lot of time on translation. And that is extremely hard, very, very hard, regardless of how familiar you are with both languages, simply because these are big ideas that we are trying to translate quickly. And that doesn't always go, and not everybody is a communicator in that sense. Beyond language, there are ways that we adapt practices in accordance to our cultural context.

For example, let's say a country where the government is particularly stringent on whistleblowers and people who say anything against the government. We cannot approach situations of dissent or aspiring situations of dissent from that angle. We have to go around it.

And that manifests right from workshops marketing material to how we communicate in the workshops. It's not for us to say, our local government is messing up, join so-and-so workshop to feel empowered to take steps against them. We can't say that, because the workshop is not going to happen. Police are going to come to your house and arrest you because you are saying that the local government is not doing something right.

So we can't do that. So what you have to do is you have to circumvent the situation in such a way that you create the most unassuming marketing material, which then is its own challenge because how do you advertise something accurately and at the same time, know, like stick to these parameters. And then when you're in the workshop, then again, you really have to adapt to the social climate of the place that you're in. A lot of places do not take well to, let's say, what is considered to be criticizing our elders, for example, or talking ill about anybody. Or there are places where the human nature connection is so integral to their day-to-day life that we don't even have to go over that part of the workshop because it's so integral that when you bring that to them, they're like, yeah, I mean, we know this. What is new?

*Jamie (40:58)*

*Why am I coming to a workshop to hear that? Yeah.*

Shayontoni (41:02)

Exactly.

So then every facilitator really has to study, has to be super deeply involved with their community, which is also why sometimes facilitators hesitate to, you know, like travel with their workshops, for example, because they might feel like, is it my place to do this somewhere else? Wouldn't it be better if I train somebody over there who knows the community well? And you know, there's no right or wrong answer.

I feel like if you have the right intentions, then you can create any sort of learning experience. I'm not sure if I'm answering your question.

*Jamie (41:40)*

*That's really interesting stuff. And has there been discussion of a need to decolonize The Work That Reconnects curriculum? And in what ways has that led to changes, do think?*

Shayontoni (41:51)

Absolutely.

I think from my limited understanding, what I'm hearing is that there have been attempts to decolonize the work since the 70s and 80s itself. Since the work was being formulated, there were already people who are like, hey, it's a bit... This can be interpreted as a lot of white nonsense. But the work is universal and the work is so right that most people who really want to see the truth of it will see it. To answer your question, the efforts have been made on the behalf of, well, first and foremost, the Anti-Oppression Resource Group. They are an independent study group who have been working for quite a few years to really get to the foundation of the work and make academic informed choices and opinions and suggestions to how we can change things in the work that's already there. And they come from a space of such respect for the work. And the Anti-Oppression Resource Group have done a lot of great

work. I can share these resources. They have created study groups. They recently released a book that we celebrated through the network called Coming Together in the Great Turning.

They have made webinars and training programs all about decolonizing the mind of the facilitator, the workshop formats, the different ways in which we even refer to, let's say, countries like mine called the global majority, for example. Just looking at every choice that we make in the work and asking, 'why are we making this choice? Who's made this choice?'

If this choice was made by a person of color or an under-resourced person, would they make the same choice? And I think it is very worthwhile, is necessary. It is absolutely essential because the work is so universal that we cannot afford to lose it to nicety politics by having people say, this is just for rich white people. It's not. It's for everybody. And it's for people from every sort of situation to make it that way.

And it's only us, people who are taking the work forward, who will be able to communicate it in the best way that we can.

*Jamie (44:21)*

*Mm-hmm. That's really good to hear. Yes, thanks, Shayontoni. And Phoebe, there are ways in which The Work That Reconnects has been adapted that might not be immediately obvious to people who come across those adaptations, right? And those adaptations are often done in order to bring it into radically new contexts and to increase its accessibility in places where The Work That Reconnects struggled to reach before. Could you tell us a little bit about your own journey of adaptation and really the reasons why you felt that adaptation was necessary and where you've gotten to now.*

*Phoebe (44:57)*

Thanks, Jamie. Yeah, so some of the background story to why and how I created Moral Imaginations was when I trained with Joanna in 2016, she introduced me to the term 'moral imagination'. And when I heard that term, had a bolt of almost like a bolt of electricity run through me like, OK, this is it. I'd been asking the question, how do we cultivate a sense of interconnected morality, a sense of responsibility and action? But also the creativity to respond to the great challenges that we're facing in The Great Unraveling. And so I heard this term, I spoke with Joanna about moral imagination. I was a scientist just leaving my career in science. And the other thing she introduced me to was the Shambhala Warrior Prophecy, which in a nutshell talks about a new kind of warrior that rises up in these moments of dark times and despair equipped by two weapons: She would talk about in the left hand the weapon of compassion and in the right hand the weapon of insight. And I thought there was a lot of thinking and discussion that went into it and that led to this desire to be cultivating and helping connect and amplify and support these Shambhala warriors, these people who go deep into the heart of the institutions. That's the key part of the prophecy. They go deep into the heart of the institutions where the mind made weapons of destruction are and they undo these with these two weapons of compassion and insight. And so I felt called from that also knowing that my own work to that date had been institutional and I was very passionate about governance and decision-making and changing the kinds of ways that we make decisions and the ways that institutions work. And so I wanted to take this work, or this sort of work, what it had brought alive in me into an institutional context.

And I was running a lot of Work That Reconnects workshops, but when I would take the work as it is framed, so deeply around grief and despair, I realized that it was not able to have the kind of effect that I was looking for. And also that the cultures within institutions are very, different to those in activists where the work was really developed. And so I started running pilots and prototypes with different groups of people working in local councils and organizations and companies and Joanna was thrilled at this. She was really excited. She wanted to hear about what worked, what didn't. And over time, I developed a curriculum and a methodology under the name of Moral Imaginations. And what I realized was we needed a framework that could be operationalized without losing the spiritual and relational depth of The Work That Reconnects. Something that people could actually kind of do in their workplace and also perhaps something that could be smaller than a full day or a half day of workshop. The question I was asking was, how can we equip leaders and people deep within these institutional contexts with the kinds of practices and tools and mindsets that could support them? And so from The Spiral, what the adaptation looks like now, so Moral Imaginations distills The Work That Reconnects into three buckets of practice: The first is 'Imagine Boldly', which really comes directly from Joanna's Seeing with New Eyes, but makes it generative rather than perceptual. So we're really helping train people to create the future and describe different futures and different possibilities of how things, how the organization and what the organization does, could be, and also ask 'what if?' and really challenge that sense of what's possible. And that's really crucial in the institutional context, because often people are so beaten down by what can't happen that they've lost that permission, perhaps, to flex the muscle of visioning what could be.

The second bucket is the 'widening the circle'. So this is really, again, a core translation of that shift of the interdependence. So instead of dwelling in grief, we channel it into radical empathy. And this is where one of the practices we developed called the Interspecies Council, which is a direct cousin of the Council of All Beings, but adapted into a decision-making format. So it's the Council of All Beings, which has gone through many iterations into a sort of citizens' assembly-like process, which has now been used by policymakers in the UK. It's being used right now in Norway as a way to gather local people to make a decision about the future of, kind of, how to build the built environment in a town called Oppdal. So it's sort of evolved into a deliberative democracy framework and structure. And then the last section of our framework is 'Act Wisely'. So again, it's holding the tension between The Spirals 'going forth' and institutional reality.

So asking people to act, to experiment, to see failure as learning, and to kind of counteract the risk averse bureaucracies and the stuckness of the institutional landscape. So I could say a little bit more about kind of tensions that we found in that work, but I think the key thing is that The Work That Reconnects is a whole universe of practices and stories and exercises and is kept in its integrity through The Spiral.

In a sense, Moral Imaginations has taken that operating system and developed a suite of new practices and exercises and workshops which are adapted to equip the Shambhala warrior to go deep into the institutional landscape and bring those weapons, you know, that I say in a kind of inverted comma, of compassion and insight and of moral imagination, which is essentially imagination that allows us to reconnect with all of life and then create and imagine and design.

*Jamie (50:44)*

*Hmm, yeah, wonderful. I wonder, are there any other innovators or innovations that you've come across through the network that's worth referencing and letting people know about?*

Phoebe (50:56)

I think there are many examples of people taking the work and the kind of ethos and principles of the work into different approaches or different contexts. So there is Lydia Violet, who has developed a curriculum that really centers her own musical practice and the practice of ancestors. There is Anne Symens-Bucher in the Bay Area, who's created an entire living intentional community based upon the principles of The Spiral, and they have a physical spiral in their garden that is used for kind of community action. But interestingly, they blend The Work That Reconnects with nonviolent communication. So I think we also see different people blending The Work That Reconnects with other practice as well. And then there's also Jo Del Amore, whose wonderful work bringing The Work That Reconnects to parents exists as well. Jen Myzel working with Lydia on really bringing it into music.

And then we've also got Mimous, you know, there are musicians who have actually created songs inspired by the curriculum. And Jess Serrante too, who created a six-part podcast series that introduces the kind of key concepts of The Work That Reconnects to a wider audience. And I think we'll see more and more of that. You know, the work lives on in all of these different contexts and also modalities, you know, using the technologies that are now available that weren't available when Joanna created the work in the seventies.

I feel very blessed to have had the chance to kind of innovate and co-create with Joanna because, in a sense, it was through being able to test ideas out and ask for her thoughts on ways that it can be adapted and shouldn't be. I felt very tentative of doing that and it was really going back to Joanna and saying, is it okay? And what do you think about this? And where is it that the integrity of the work needs to be kept intact and where is it okay to perhaps change parts of it?

And so I think that's really key. And obviously now we have a community of facilitators and we can be in that sort of dialogue together.

Jamie (52:59)

*Interesting, thank you. I'd like to take us now to the potential, the future potential for this work and where this could go if the conditions were right and what might need to be done to make those conditions right. In the first instance, I'm interested, given that the Mind and Life podcast has a particular interest in contemplative science, where we think the key research gaps are or rather what the biggest priorities are to fill those gaps and to develop our understanding. Stephanie, starting with you, given we probably have some researchers listening to us now, what could we inspire them to turn their attention to?*

Stephanie (53:42)

Well, as an advisor of graduate students, I always think, you know, what are the methods? What are your populations? What are your questions? What is the goal in the research? So one question area might be to get a better sense, quantify or using qualitative methods, which aspects of The Work That Reconnects of these various different formats resonate most strongly in individual populations. How do you compare the different approaches? Is it amount of exposure time that's important? Or is it the

facilitator that's important? Is it the written material that's important? Are the seminars? But first you would need to clarify what the goals in the research are. And I think they can't be as broad as how effective is this in changing the world? So I would imagine some beginning work could be in the field of eco-psychology where you have a population of people working with climate anxiety, working on one-on-one counseling sessions and group counseling sessions with populations that are already recognizing their planetary anguish. So somehow clarifying the questions and being able to develop what is it we're trying to measure here? As with mindfulness-based stress reduction, you could measure blood pressure and pulse rate and some other calming things.

But this work is not about calming, it's really about liberating and motivating. So the tools of psychology are going to be the most helpful for research, I think.

*Jamie (55:16)*

*Yes, I know from my synthesis of mindfulness literature it's difficult to find the right tools to track global impact and planetary health. But yeah, I agree it's a key ambition. Chris, what do we need to find out about Active Hope? What would be helpful to study at this time?*

*Chris (55:34)*

So building on what you've already said about mindfulness, I think the research evidence that mindfulness has positive impacts on mental health, as well as many other areas, is hugely impactful in terms of the degree to which people are open to it. That mindfulness was something that was kind of on the edge. And certainly my background working in mental health — we've already mentioned mindfulness as a parallel, as an example of where research findings have made a huge impact on people's willingness to be open to this. And my background working in mental health in the unit, I worked in a specialist mental health team, had mindfulness classes that we were able to do that because there was good research showing its impact. The research we've already done is already showing very significant impacts, but there hasn't been a tradition of doing research on this work and I think that it is really needed and so pleased that there are already some examples of research studies being done, particularly with young people. It's the funding that really helps something like that happen.

*Jamie (56:52)*

*So, Shayontoi, what do you think is really needed now to support the growth and integrity of the facilitator community around the world? What's going to help this get to the next level?*

*Shayontoni (57:05)*

More time spent with each other, more time spent with community, more time that facilitators can spend with other facilitators. I feel like this is a very lonely world and the work is, I mean, yes, it brings people together, but that is what happens at and after workshops. You you're planning it by yourself, you're hosting it by yourself. And it can feel very lonely when you are in this position of a certain authority. And I really feel like as the network, we are here as a support system for facilitators, for emerging facilitators, but also people who are just interested in the work. People who don't necessarily want to take on that role, but just want to participate. And I feel like for us, our focus has to be on creating more avenues for people to have these experiences of connection, whether it's like a big scale

online event, like the five day conference that we did called the Gaian Gathering that we are thinking about planning again, or the short-term educational experiences that we conduct, or even the one hour monthly calls that we do.

The more experiences for connection that there are, you never know which meeting or which workshop or which conversation can really change a life or can change somebody's perspective. And we increase the chances of these happening with the more events or gatherings or workshops or rituals that we do. So I really feel like the answer is time and quality time spent with each other.

The more belonging that we can sink ourselves into when we are with each other, the more resourced we are individually, and that's where the real liberation is.

*Jamie (59:12)*

*Hmm, beautifully put. And what is needed to support those connections, opportunities and that development? Is it a case of funding? Is it a case of other sorts of maturing of the field?*

*Shayontoni (59:27)*

I would say funding is one of the ways that we are going to keep going and that's going to help us keep going. But I think the answer again here as an organization is the same. It's partnerships. It's partnerships with organizations who can help us achieve certain goals. And not all of the goals are funding related. They can be opportunity related. They can be circumstance or like even geography related. So organizations who can help us achieve these goals or help us create new goals, I feel like that's what's required. Of course, if an organization brings money, amazing, truly amazing, but we don't like to think of that as the first thing to ask for because then the assumption can be that that is the only thing that we can ask for and that is not true.

That is not at all true. I would be a hypocrite if I said we need money as an organization, but time together as individuals. No, we need time together as an organization and more money as individuals also.

*Jamie (1:00:42)*

*The Work That Reconnects is ultimately about systems transformation at the deepest leverage points of mindset and culture. What, Phoebe, do you think is required for this approach and other similar approaches is to deliver on that deep potential - at the largest scale and in the longest timeframe?*

*Phoebe (1:01:04)*

That is a huge question and one that I know that many of us on this call, not least you, Jamie, spend a lot of time banging our heads against. So what I think needs to happen is a continuation of the work to bring essentially these qualities that thousands of year-old wisdom traditions have helped cultivate — And there are entire, a lifetime of practice that, especially within Buddhism, which is the practice most familiar to me and obviously to Joanna — continuing to translate and find ways to bring those practices, that awareness, the inner dimension, the cultivation and the appreciation of how much our inner states, not individually, but also our collective inner states, the kinds of practices that can help us expand our

perception, our awareness, our moral circle of concern — bringing those into a secular context in a way that doesn't strip it of the ethical dimension, as the danger of sort of creating wellbeing practices, but without the kind of moral fire to take action and protect our world and to stand up to the forces of an industrial growth society, as Joanna would talk about it. We can start talking about the kinds of communities and institutions that could do so well for more of this, obviously schools, the mental health establishment — so much of therapy and Western psychology is based on the individual, the human individual in a room alone with another human talking to them and doesn't bring in any of the natural world or the history of the patient ancestors, a sense of responsibility and belonging to a wider world that is inherently alive and magical.

There are so many institutions where it feels like the essence of this work could open up so much. Obviously funding is a huge issue, but also schools of training. The Work That Reconnects is taught in quite an informal and open-source way, which was also its strength. And I had many long conversations with Joanna about this on the kinds of decisions between whether to open source or to do a certified training and to keep it behind closed doors. These are the questions that are alive for me right now. It's like, how do you get such a training out and how does it go from being a grassroots open-source movement to something that gains the kind of institutional credibility that can then embed it into our operating systems, especially in the West? And I look to the mindfulness movement as an inspiration for that, know, for how the wonderful people at Oxford Mindfulness Centre and similar establishments have done that work to bring it into the modern context.

*Jamie (1:03:49)*

*Yeah, and we'll have to leave it there, I'm afraid. We've come to the end of our time. Before we go, I'd like to offer our esteemed panel the chance to offer any final thoughts. Phoebe?*

*Phoebe (1:04:03)*

My final thoughts are that we have incredible shoulders to stand on in the work that Joanna did and the 1200 year-old prophecy that she was stewarding and shepherding in the Shambhala warrior prophecy, which is really calling for us to go into the hearts of the institutions where decisions are made. And so find the others and find your way of igniting your Shambhala warrior heart. That's my final word.

*Jamie (1:04:29)*

*Beautiful. Shayontoni, any thoughts for us?*

*Shayontoni (1:04:33)*

Absolutely. I would say there is this sentence which is often ascribed to the Sufi poet Rumi, which goes, “the wound is the place where the light gets in”. I think that's what it is. The wound is the way. And it's not the end point, but it's the entryway. So for the wounded, for the oversensitive, for the people who feel like they just do not fit in. I would say that actually we do and we fit into the work and the work will show us where we belong and how we can belong.

*Jamie (1:05:13)*

*Hmm and how we can show up I guess yeah, yeah any thoughts from you Stephanie as we close our call today?*

*Stephanie (1:05:21)*

Well, I'm looking at Joanna's books on my desk and thinking just the titles themselves can lead us into new understanding. World as Lover, World as Self, A Wild Love for the World, Widening Circles. So to turn toward what widens the circles and to build on her sense of mutual belonging to the planet, to each other, and to the future. This is our work.

*Jamie (1:05:48)*

*This is our work. And Chris, final word.*

*Chris (1:05:54)*

So building on titles, the subtitle for the revised edition of Active of Hope was 'how to face the mess we're in with unexpected resilience and creative power'. And that term 'unexpected resilience', what I mean by that is that sense of maybe we can surprise ourselves. Maybe we can surprise ourselves by what we're able to do, what we're able to pull out of ourselves and support in each other.

And what this work is about is about, do you hope you can surprise yourself in a positive way? Do you hope that we can surprise ourselves by how we're able to respond to what's happening? And if you hope that, how can you be active in support of your hope? And that's what this work is about.

*Jamie (1:06:45)*

*Beautifully said. I'll say nothing more. Shayontoni, Phoebe, Stephanie, Chris, thanks you so much for your time and everyone who's listening, thank you for your attention.*

*As ever, we'll put links to everything that's been mentioned in this conversation in the podcast show notes, and we'll also provide helpful links to find out more about Joanna Macy, The Work That Reconnects Active Hope and Moral Imaginations. Thanks for listening and hope to see you soon on another episode of the Mind & Life podcast.*