

## Book Review: Joanna Macy | Widening Circles - A Memoir |

Aryne Sheppard

- *Widening Circles - A Memoir*
- Joanna Macy
- New Society Publishers Gabriola Island, BC

Joanna Macy is one of today's most engaging environmental and spiritual leaders. In *Widening Circles*, she shares the story of her life. Born in southern California in 1929, Joanna Macy's life spans a time of incredible change in the world, most notably the advent of nuclear technology and the global environmental crisis. From the clothing drive she organized as a teenager to her participation in the 1999 Seattle protests, Joanna's love for the world has always been expressed through activism; it is a powerful theme running through *Widening Circles*. She divides her story into seven stages in which she traces the events and people that have shaped her life and her life's work.

Joanna Macy begins *Widening Circles* with memories of childhood summers spent at her grandparents' farm. During these summers she enjoyed her grandfather's church, the silence of an old maple tree and her love of nature. As a child, the farm felt like the "steadiest part" of her troubled life.

Joanna's father was a Presbyterian preacher's son who chose a vocation outside the church, that of a stockbroker. In 1934, the Rogers moved to New York State where Joanna, her mother, and two brothers lived apart from their father. Eventually the entire family moved in together, living in a series of apartments in New York City and later, a house Joanna and her mother named "Bleak House." Family life was filled with unspoken tension — her father isolated himself from his family and was often abusive. Joanna, her mother's confidante, lived with the fear that she would be destroyed by her father's control.

Joanna was educated at the Lycee Francais de New York and took solace in study. As she moved through her teenage years, Christianity became a central part of her life. God was a presence that felt to her "like a warm, enveloping mind." At seventeen, Joanna joined a Presbyterian youth program and found herself in the pulpit, teaching others what pain could reveal about their connection with God and others. She decided that missionary service was to be her life's vocation.

Despite her father's refusal to fund her education, Joanna was able to attend Wellesley College where she majored in Biblical History. After four years of study, Joanna had a crisis of faith. Christianity, for her, had been reduced to abstract theories and dichotomies — God was no longer a comforting presence to be found in the natural world. After a challenge from a favourite professor, Joanna left her Christian faith behind.

Fittingly, she terms the next stage of her life “The Hole in the Center.” The Church was a strong part of her heritage and had become the core of her identity. After graduation, Joanna traveled to France on a Fulbright scholarship where she studied the tactics of the French communist party and enjoyed a new freedom as an independent young woman.

On her return to America, she took a position with the CIA for two and a half years. It was during this time that she met her husband, Francis Macy. Despite their close bond, Joanna was not prepared for the depression and isolation she would experience as a young wife and mother in the mid-1950s. She studied Algebra and Greek between housework and childcare to give some structure to her days and to exercise her brain. By 1956, Joanna and her family were living in Germany where she received help caring for their two children and was able to become involved in her husband's work.

After returning from Germany, the Macys spent four years in Washington, DC where they welcomed a new daughter. Joanna's commitment to social action led her to work on behalf of Africans who came to America to set up embassies. Eventually she was given a salaried position in the State Department in which to continue her work.

In the five years between 1964 and 1969, Joanna and her family lived in Asia and Africa. It was during this tumultuous period that she was introduced to the Buddha Dharma that would become an integral part of her life. The first two years were spent in India where Fran Macy had taken a position heading up the Peace Corps Program. Joanna was equally involved in Peace Corps work supporting American volunteers and working with a group of refugees from Tibet. The meditative practice that she had begun in India not only gave her strength, it awakened an intellectual appetite and a new vision for her life. Although unsure of what her role would be, Joanna wanted to help build a bridge between Buddhist insight and Western thought.

Her family's life in India was followed by two years in Tunisia, and one year in Nigeria. These transitions became increasingly difficult. She openly describes the anguish and resulting depression she experienced as she was “yanked from one country to another without the connecting thread of professional engagement” labeling it “cultural miscarriage.”

The Macys returned briefly to their home in Washington before moving to New York State in 1972. Joanna began as a graduate student studying Buddhism and

Systems Theory in the Religion Department at Syracuse University. During the five years of her Ph.D. research, Joanna Macy truly came into her own. Through counseling, the questioning of cultural norms, and her family's decision to live communally, Joanna gained the freedom to make value choices that were truer to her own experience. After the completion of her dissertation, she was even able to spend a year in Buddhist Sri Lanka, studying a self-help movement committed to social change.

Joanna's environmental education began in the late 1970s and quickly led to anti-nuclear activism. She became involved in a lawsuit against the Virginia Electric Power Company to prevent unsafe storage of irradiated fuel rods. The knowledge she gained through this work led to a public meeting for workers at a Virginia nuclear plant and, later, to workshops involving government officials in Washington, DC and those affected by the Chernobyl disaster.

Joanna's career was not the result of a conscious decision she made, but was rather the culmination of a natural evolution. Following the publication of her article entitled "How to Deal with Despair," she began receiving invitations to conduct workshops on the theme. She discovered that when people opened up to the pain they felt for the world, they began to sense a deeper connection with life. As she recounts stories of people who have attended her workshops, one is struck by the similarity and depth of emotion expressed by humans around the world. It is difficult not share in Joanna's sense of kinship with those who share a common concern for the world.

Joanna Macy ends her memoir with a recent trip she and her husband took to Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment. It is a quiet ending as she gives thanks to her family and remembers those who have graced her life.

The most striking aspects of Joanna Macy are her desire for meaningful work in the world and her complete openness to life. Whether the world brought her despair or joy, she experienced (and presumably continues to experience) her life fully. *Widening Circles* is beautifully written. Her poetic descriptions of faces and landscapes give evidence of her love of the sensual world. Joanna's memories are vivid and so she is able to share with us a rich and complete picture of her own history.

For the deep ecology community, Joanna Macy's work is pivotal as it highlights the connection between personal suffering and love for the world. Her spiritual and intellectual life has always been linked to social action. Joanna's work is guided by her belief that "we have to find a way to live in this planet-time without closing our eyes to what we're doing." As both a body of thought and a philosophical movement, deep ecology becomes "deep" when there is congruency between theory and personal experience. It is easy, however, to have an intellectual belief in our connection with the earth, yet still fail to experience it in a meaningful way. What many activists fail to realize is that intellect is a poor motivator. A deep valuing of, and connection to, the Earth

is essential if we are to escape apathy, burnout, and misanthropy. Joanna aptly titles her work, “The Work that Reconnects,” as it offers the practical tools and inner resources needed to deal with the overwhelming environmental crisis we are facing by *helping us feel our connectedness*.

Joanna Macy’s story is not offered as a lesson, yet I found myself inspired by her courage and integrity. *Widening Circles* is full of exotic locations, adventure and even mystical experience, but somehow her life never seemed distant from my own. Joanna’s honesty and groundedness have allowed her to become an effective and compassionate leader. These same qualities come through in her writing allowing us to relate to her personally. Joanna Macy’s life story offers us the wisdom of a woman who has found her own unique path and who is fully engaged in living.

---

**Citation Format**

Sheppard, Aryne (2000) Book Review: Joanna Macy | Widening Circles - A Memoir | ICAAP. *The Trumpeter*: 16, 1. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.16.1.9>