
Interhelp Newsletter, Winter 2010

Dear Interhelpers and Friends,

The 2009 Gathering of the Interhelp tribe in November attracted 29 adults and 6 children (yeah!) for a lively weekend. Thanks to Michael Rice for submitting his evocative account of “being chosen” for our Saturday afternoon Council of All Beings. Our “being chosen” exercise consisted of an internal journey, accompanied by the steady rhythm of a heartbeat drum.

Next year’s Gathering will be held on October 15-17, again at Woolman Hill in western Mass. Mark your calendars! Another bit of Interhelp news: Council member Judy Waldman from Maryland returns to active participation. Welcome back, Judy ☺

Joanna Macy returns to the Rowe Conference Center for the weekend of May 7-9, and for the following week (www.rowecenter.org).

Below you will find reviews of two exciting new books: *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* by Rebecca Solnit, and a personal favorite of mine entitled *Held in Love*. Also, links to good stuff!

Submissions to this newsletter are always welcome; deadline for the next issue is March first.

It’s a good year to be in community. I’m grateful that all of you comprise a visionary and caring community that holds me steadily. Let’s keep in touch.

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Links

Sarah Vesaki integrates Work that Reconnects processes into her eco-chaplaincy work on coal mining issues. For monthly reports of her work, see <http://www.ecochaplaincy.net/SVLetters.html>.

Beth Sawin of the Sustainability Institute in Vermont presented their new Climate Interactive computer modeling system in Copenhagen. See <http://climateinteractive.wordpress.com/>.

Joanna Macy spoke about “the gifts of uncertainty” at Bioneers 2009. Watch and be heartened at <http://vimeo.com/7914131>.

Once again, Chris Johnstone has written a fine editorial in the Great Turning Times (Dec. 2009 issue). <http://www.greatturningtimes.org/current.asp> .

Being Chosen (for the Council of All Beings)

by Michael Rice

I found myself uncharacteristically silent during Saturday morning's Elm Dance. But I do know that I was particularly grieving the destruction by Mountain Top Removal of Kentucky mountaintops, their trees, and the surrounding brooks. At some point during the ensuing Milling, I felt "chosen" by Appalachian Mountaintops – prematurely chosen, for the Council of All Beings. I felt quite dubious that I could enter a trance, going "down" through a "portal" for a formal Being Chosen, but was relieved that I could perhaps ratify the choice to which I had already submitted. And then I chose a portal, a very precise spot on a slope a house-width from the southeast corner of my house – the place where I in fact plan to dig a root cellar into that hillside. And then Joyce's drumming began and I went down. The trance came quickly. I slid past a mole (not chosen) and a daylily bulb (not chosen). I wondered whether I would see my mountaintop. And then, un-bidden, it came! A raven presented itself and volunteered to fly up and check on my mountaintop! Clearly, the raven was choosing me. It claimed to be visionary, that it could see the mountaintop, and that it could warn of predators, of impending doom. I was impatient, at this point, for the drumming to stop. Yet there were to be other experiences: I saw a fire, camp-fire style; I flew around with the raven and saw what was going on above ground; back below, I saw some trees; I saw a clear brook – all were appealing "beings" laying a claim to me, but none as definitively as Raven itself. The clarity with which it claimed me, chose me, could not be denied. I was waiting with some boredom for the drumming to stop, or change, to drum me back up through my portal; it finally did. My Raven had me!

Held in Love: Life Stories to Inspire Us Through Times of Change

Edited by Molly Young Brown and Carolyn Wilbur Treadway

Psychosynthesis Press, 2009

review by Paula Hendrick

For several weeks this fall for my morning reading (sitting up in bed with the down comforter wrapped around me) I turned to this lovely and powerful new book. Each morning my internal sense of connection and belonging was touched and I relaxed a bit into the gifts and challenges of the particular day, and of this particular moment on earth.

Over 100 stories, poems, and images tell of contributors' experiences of connection with a loving Source within and beyond themselves – in times of hardship or unexpected grace, alone, in nature, or with others. These writings and images offer examples of the ways Love can guide and sustain us through the challenges of The Great Turning. Many of the contributors (including editor Carolyn Treadway) were participants with me at Seeds of the Future II with Joanna and Fran Macy in 2007.

My favorite of the blurbs is from Bill Plotkin: “We are each uniquely who we are by virtue of our relationships to everything else, including to the mysterious totality that holds everything. Not only are we not alone, we are in an intimate dance with all things, a dance that defines us and supports us. In this wonderful collection, Molly and Carolyn have gathered from a host of colleagues poignant stories and poems describing how people discover, often unexpectedly and astonishingly, their full belonging to Earth, Universe, Mystery, Community, or Self.”

You can “look inside” *Held in Love* at Amazon.com. To order, contact Carolyn@GraceFullLife.com.

Disaster as a Social Change Agent

Book Review by Carol Harley

Ordinary people sometimes find themselves in dire circumstances affecting an entire community. As Rebecca Solnit points out in her wonderful new book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, such crises can provide openings for real political and social change.

I was held spellbound by Solnit’s thoughtful exploration of five major disasters, ranging from the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 to the flooding of New Orleans. She delves into human responses to catastrophe and finds a common thread among them: “an emotion graver than happiness, but deeply positive” often arises when people are confronted with an intensely challenging set of circumstances. This inner response can be life-changing, as in the case of young Dorothy Day. An earthquake survivor who noticed that “while the crisis lasted, people loved each other,” Day ended up devoting much of her life to tirelessly promoting the loving community she knew was possible – because she had experienced it firsthand when people’s most remarkable caring qualities manifested during the disaster’s immediate aftermath.

This book is so rich that it’s tricky to tease out just a few aspects to comment on in a brief review. One compelling thing Solnit reveals is also an aspect of the Work That Reconnects that excites me: the recognition that through our human response to severe crises, we can, and do, enable transformation that might be seen as catapulting us forward into our “highest and best” selves. I find myself wondering whether the biggest disaster of all – climate disruption – may elicit the kind of evolutionary leap (on the magnitude of a pole vault) necessary for the whole of humanity to experience the shift in consciousness needed for Earth healing. In this precarious time of apocalyptic popular culture such as the movie “2012,” I’d like to share a look at the seemingly implausible reality of *A Paradise Built in Hell*, in which Solnit unmask the “law of the jungle” for the imposter it represents.

People who initially step forward to provide help after a community-wide disaster occurs are not primarily the trained first responders, because there are simply not enough of them. Rather, it is the ordinary person who – temporarily liberated from her or his mundane life – is thrust into a new and vital role. Yes, this person makes a choice to act.

It is a choice born of unique circumstances as the situation calls forth hidden reserves of strength and confidence, and fosters cooperation.

I'm fascinated by the examples Solnit presents of ordinary people not simply showing compassion because the aftermath of disaster brings out people's altruistic tendencies, but coming together in a particular type of anarchy, "where the citizenry by and large organizes and care for themselves." Solnit investigates the kind of mutual aid that is evidence of self-organizing systems, and the profound effects on people's lives when they pitch in to become a part of something bigger than their nuclear family. Yet in focusing on these effects among "civil society" in a city or other community, she doesn't neglect the larger analysis.

As it turns out, many disasters open the way for change because during the time of immediate and vast needs the government "fails as if it were overthrown" while civil society succeeds as though a revolution has occurred. As we are reminded during Interhelp processes, our intentions are what make all the difference. A mix of people with diverse backgrounds can achieve loving success when a clear way is perceived.

For instance, because they cared about feeding hurricane victims and knew their primitive-living skills would be valuable, some Rainbow Gathering/Rainbow Family participants quickly made their way to the Gulf coast to work joyfully side by side with members of an evangelical Christian church group. They shared makeshift kitchen space, served as many as four thousand meals daily, and listened to survivors' stories while setting up a "wall-less mart" making basic supplies available to those who needed them. These hard-working helpers rose up together, organically, in the face of a situation where others (misled by public officials and the media to fear violence) closed their hearts and turned away.

"Beliefs matter," Solnit reminds us. They matter a lot. A question that is posed by this book is, "Which is more important – preserving property, or extending a hand to people?" The panic that occurs after a disaster is most often on the part of those who have much invested in the status quo, who fear the results of a broken-down system. In fact, looting and violence were quite rare in the emergencies that Solnit investigated. Most violence was the result of repressive measures put in place by authorities who perceived that if they were not in control, then the whole situation was out of control. Sadly, these repressive measures then became secondary disasters.

When I reached the end of this book, I found myself wishing for a second volume, covering yet another array of crises: the South Pacific tsunami, the China earthquake, the New England ice storm, the San Diego-area fires. I feel an insatiable desire to learn more about how ordinary people can rise up to be their best selves. Our best selves. Will we find our affinity with survivalists who hole up pioneer-style defending themselves by force, or with a more gregarious, generous, and open-hearted band of people from all walks of life?

For more information on Rebecca Solnit, check your library system and have a peek at this great *San Francisco Chronicle* article by Heidi Benson at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/06/13/CMGRE6NA5H1.DTL> in which Solnit is quoted as

saying:

“I have realized that the purpose of activism and art, or at least of mine, is to make a world in which people are producers of meaning, not consumers. And that is connected to the politics of hope.”

and:

“People don’t take stock of how much the world has changed.” They can become attached to their powerlessness and all too comfortable with despair. “If you tell people that they can’t change anything, then it’s safe for them to go home and watch sitcoms,” she says. “But if you tell people they’re responsible for what the world is like, they have to do something.”