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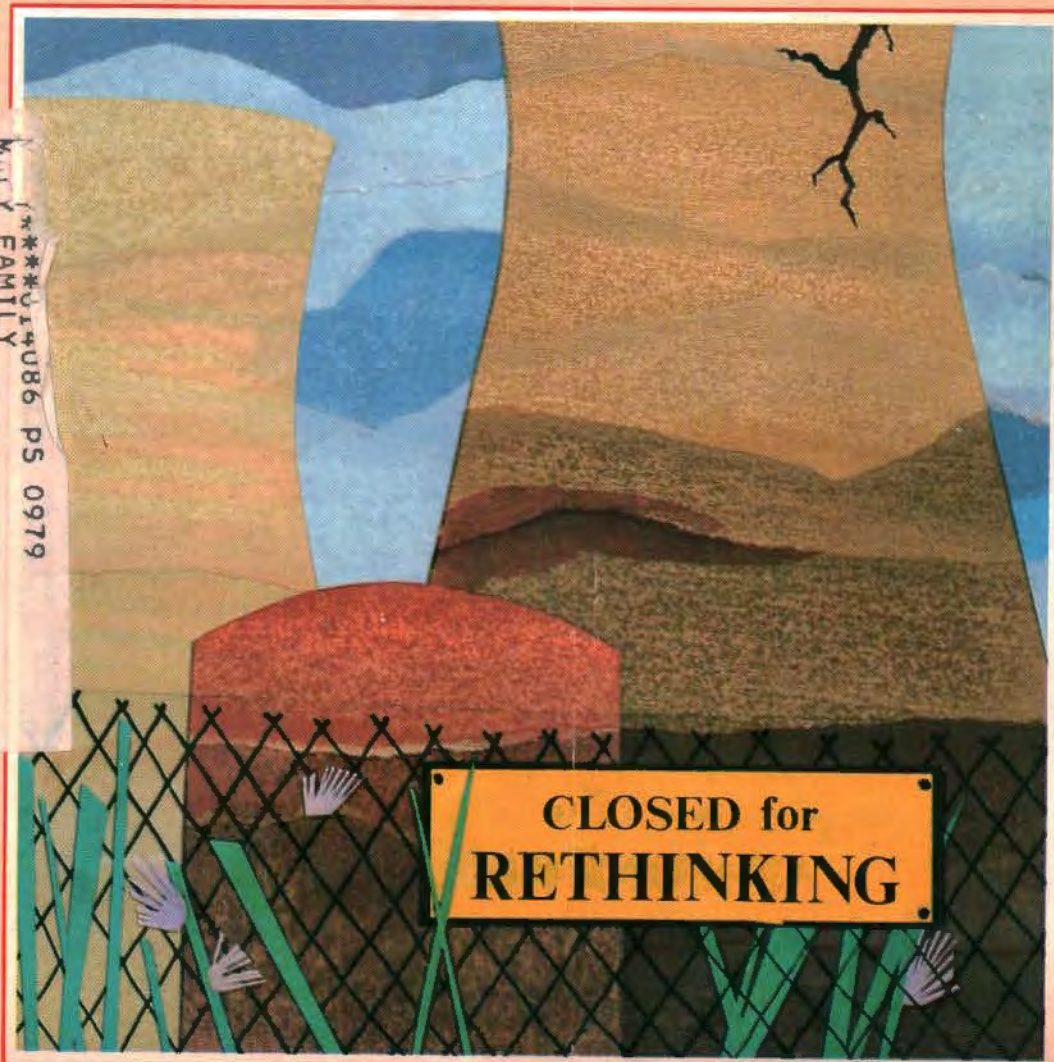
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# HOW TO DEAL WITH DESPAIR

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*"...As a society, we are caught between an impending sense of apocalypse and an inability to acknowledge it..."*

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**By Joanna Rogers Macy**

*I do not wish to seem overdramatic but I can only conclude from the information that is available to me as Secretary-General, that the Members of the United Nations have perhaps ten years left in which to subordinate their ancient quarrels and launch a global partnership to curb the arms race, to improve the human environment, to defuse the population explosion, and to supply the required momentum to development efforts. If such a global partnership is not forged within the next decade, then I very much fear that the problems I have mentioned will have reached such staggering proportions that they will be beyond our capacity to control.*

—U Thant (1969)

**O**ur time bombards us with signals of distress—of ecological destruction, waning resources, social breakdown, and uncontrolled nuclear proliferation. Not surprisingly, people are feeling despair—a despair well merited by the hair-trigger machinery of mass death that we have created and continue to serve. What is surprising is the extent to which we hide this despair from ourselves and one another. If we are, as Arthur Koestler suggested, undergoing an age of anxiety, we are also growing adept at sweeping this anxiety under the rug. As a society, we are caught between



a sense of impending apocalypse and an inability to acknowledge it.

Political activists, who would arouse us to the fact that our very survival is at stake, decry public apathy. The cause of

this apathy, however, is not mere indifference; it derives also from dread. It stems from a fear of confronting the despair that lurks subliminally beneath the tenor of life-as-usual. If anything, the

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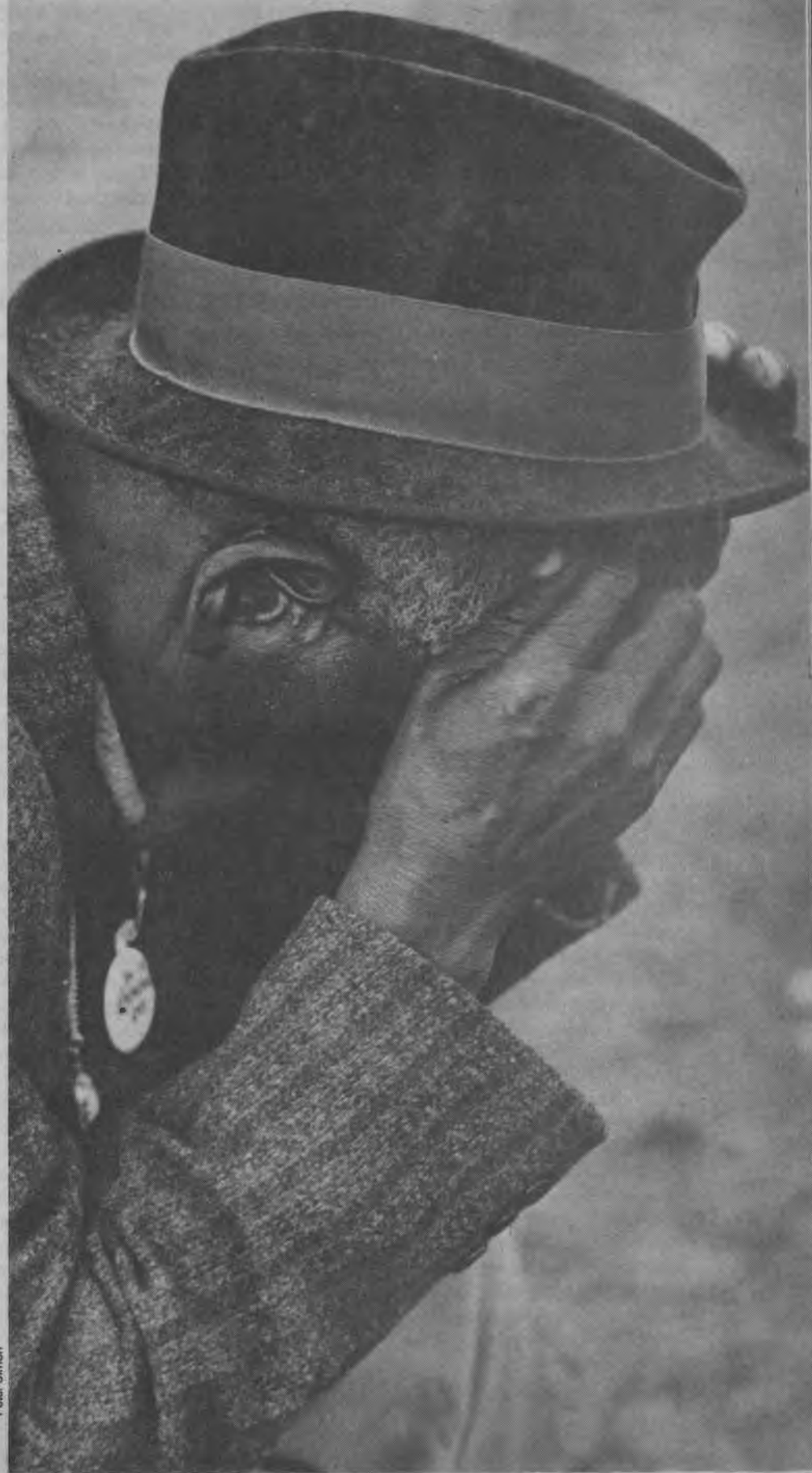
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alarms raised by protestors have an anesthetic effect, numbing us to our despair. Our dread of what is happening to our future is banished to the fringes of awareness, too deep for most of us to name, too fearsome to face. Sometimes it manifests in dreams of mass destruction—and is exorcised in the morning jog and shower, or in the public fantasies of disaster entertainment. But it is rarely acknowledged or expressed directly. Because of social taboos against despair and because of fear of pain, it is kept at bay.

The suppression of despair, like that of any deep recurrent response, produces a partial numbing of the psyche: expressions of anger or terror are muted, deadened as if a nerve had been cut. This refusal of feeling takes a heavy toll: not only an impoverishment of emotional and sensory life (the flowers dimmer and less fragrant, loves less ecstatic), but a lessened capacity to process and respond to information. The energy expended in pushing down despair is diverted from more creative uses, depleting resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies. Furthermore, the *fear* of despair can erect an invisible screen, selectively filtering out anxiety-provoking data. Since organisms require feedback in order to adapt and survive, such evasion is suicidal. Now, just when we most urgently need to measure the effects of our acts, attention and curiosity slacken—as if we were already preparing for the Big Sleep. Many of us, doggedly attending to business-as-usual, deny both our despair and our ability to cope with it.

Despair cannot be banished by sermons on “positive thinking” or injections of optimism. Like grief, it must be worked through. It must be named, and validated as a healthy, normal, human response to the planetary situation. Faced and experienced, despair can be *used*: as the psyche’s defenses drop away, new energies are released.

I am convinced that we can come to terms with apocalyptic anxieties in ways that are integrative and liberating, opening awareness not only to planetary distress, but also to the hope inherent in our own capacity to change. To do so, a process analogous to grief work is in order. “Despair work” is distinct in that its aim is not acceptance of loss (indeed, the “loss” has not yet occurred and is hardly to be “accepted”), but similar in the dynamics unleashed by the willingness to acknowledge, feel, and express



Peter Simon

inner pain.

## Ingredients of Despair

Regardless of whether we choose to accord them serious attention, we are daily barraged by data that render questionable, for the first time in recorded history, the survival of our culture and our species, and even of our planet as a viable home for conscious life. These warning signals prefigure, to those who do take them seriously, probabilities

## Symptoms and Suppressions

Years ago, at a leprosarium in India, I met a young woman, a mother of four. Her case was advanced, the doctor pointed out, because for so long she had hidden its signs. Fearing ostracism and banishment, she had covered her sores with her sari, pulled the shoulder drape around so that no one would see. In a similar fashion did I once hide despair for our world, cloaking it like a shame-

all."

In a culture committed to the American dream, it is hard to own up to despair. This is still the land of Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, where an unflagging optimism is taken as means and measure of success. As commercials for products and campaigns of politicians attest, the healthy, admirable person smiles a lot. Feelings of depression, loneliness, and anxiety—to which this thinking animal has always been heir—carry here an added burden: One feels bad about feeling bad. The failure to

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*"...Feelings of concern and compassion inhere in us by virtue of our nature as open systems interdependent with the rest of life..."*

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of apocalypse that are mind-boggling in scope. While varied, each scenario presents its own relentless logic. Poisoned by oilspills, sludge, and plutonium, the seas are dying; when the plankton disappear (in thirty years at present pollution rates, says Jean-Jacques Cousteau), we will suffocate from lack of oxygen. Or carbon dioxide from industrial and automotive combustion will saturate the atmosphere, creating a greenhouse effect that will melt the polar icecaps. Or radioactive poisoning from nuclear reactors and their wastes will not only induce plagues of cancer that will decimate populations, but cause fearful mutations in the survivors. Or deforestation and desertification of the planet, now rapidly advancing, will produce giant dustbowls, unimaginable famines. The probability of each of these perils is amply and soberly documented by scientific studies (many of which are summarized in Lester Brown's *The 29th Day*). The list of such scenarios could continue; the most immediate and likely stem from the use of nuclear bombs, by terrorists or superpowers. That eventually presents vistas of such horror that, as is said, "The survivors will envy the dead."

Despair, in this context, is not a macabre certainty of doom, nor a pathological condition of depression and futility. It is not a nihilism denying meaning or efficacy to human effort. Rather, as it is being experienced by increasing numbers across a broad spectrum of society, despair is the loss of the assumption that the species will inevitably pull through. It represents a genuine accession to the possibility that this planetary "experiment" may fail.

ful disease—and so, I have learned, do others.

When the sensations aroused by the serious contemplation of a likely, but avoidable end to human existence break through the censorship we tend to impose on them, they can be intense and physical. A friend, who left her career to work as a full-time antinuclear organizer, tells me her onslaughts of grief came as a cold, heavy weight on the chest and a sense of her body breaking. Mine, which began two years ago, after an all-day symposium on threats to our biosphere, were sudden and wrenching: I would be alone in my study, working, and the next moment would find me on the floor, curled like a fetus and shaking. In company I was more controlled, but even then in those early months, unused to despair, occasionally I would be caught off guard: a line from Shakespeare or a Bach phrase would pierce me with pain, as I found myself wondering how much longer it would be heard, before fading out forever in the galactic silences.

At the prospect of the extinction of our civilization, feelings of grief and horror are natural. We tend to hide them, though, from ourselves and each other. Why? The reasons are both social and psychological.

Despair is resisted so tenaciously because it represents a loss of control, an admission of powerlessness. Our culture dodges it by demanding instant solutions. "Don't come to me with a problem unless you have a solution": that tacit injunction, operative even in public policy-making, rings like my mother's words to me as a child, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at

hope, in a country built and nurtured on utopian expectations, can seem downright un-American, a betrayal.

In a religious context, despair can appear as a lapse of faith. Speaking at a vigil held in a church before a demonstration against nuclear weapons at the Pentagon last fall, Daniel Berrigan spoke of the necessity of hope to carry us through. Others chimed in, affirming their belief in the vision of a "New Jerusalem," and their gratitude for having that hope. After a pause, a young man who planned to participate in the week's civil disobedience actions spoke up falteringly: he questioned whether hope was really prerequisite, because—and he admitted this with difficulty—he was not feeling it. Even among friends committed to the same goal, it was clearly hard for him (and brave of him, I thought) to admit despair. Evidently, he feared he would be misunderstood, taken as cowardly or cynical—a fear validated by the response of some present.

"There is nothing more feared and less faced," writes Jesuit essayist William Lynch, "than the possibility of despair." This is one reason, he notes, why the mentally ill are so thoroughly isolated from the well—or why, one might add, expressions of anguish for the future are considered a breach of etiquette. Our culture discourages the acknowledgment of despair: this inhibition amounts to a social taboo. Those who break this taboo—to express their concern about nuclear holocaust, for example—are generally considered "crazy," or at least "depressed and depressing." No one wants a Cassandra around or welcomes a Banquo at the feast. Nor, indeed, are

such roles enjoyable to play.

When the prospect of collective suicide first hit me as a serious possibility—and I remember the day and hour my defenses against this despair suddenly collapsed—I felt there were no one to whom I could turn in my grief. If there were—and indeed there was, for I have loving, intelligent friends and family—what is there to say? Do I want them to feel this horror, too? What can be said without casting a pall, or without seeming to ask for unacceptable words of comfort and cheer?

To feel despair in such a cultural setting brings on a sense of isolation. The psychic dissonance can be so acute as to seem to border on madness. The distance between our inklings of apocalypse and the tenor of business-as-usual is so great that, though we may respect our own cognitive reading of the signs, our affective response is frequently the conclusion that it is we, not society, who are insane.

Psychotherapy, by and large, offers little help for coping with these feelings, and indeed compounds the problem by reducing social despair to private pathology. Practitioners have trouble crediting the notion that concerns for the general welfare might be genuine, and acute enough to cause distress. Assuming that all our drives are ego-centered, they tend to treat expressions of this distress reductionistically, as manifestations of private neurosis. (In my own case, which is far from unique, deep dismay over destruction of the wilderness was diagnosed as fear of my own libido—symbolized by bulldozers!—and my painful preoccupation with U.S. bombings of Vietnam was interpreted as an unwholesome hangover of Puritan guilt.) Such “therapy,” of course, only intensifies the sense of isolation and craziness that despair can bring, while inhibiting its recognition and expression.

Our culture makes it hard to get in touch with the genuine dimensions of our despair, and until we do, our power of creative response to planetary crisis will be crippled. Until we can grieve for our planet and its future inhabitants, we cannot fully feel or enact our love for them. Such grief is frequently suppressed, not only because it is socially awkward, but also because it is both hard to credit and very painful. At the root of both these inhibitions lies a dysfunctional notion of the self, as an isolated and fragile entity. Such a self has no reason to weep for the unseen and the unborn, and such a self, if

it did, might shatter with pain and futility.

So long as we see ourselves as essentially separate, competitive, and ego-identified beings, it is difficult to respect the validity of our social despair, deriving as it does from interconnectedness. As open systems, we are sustained by flows of energy and information that extend beyond the reach of conscious ego. Both our capacity to grieve for others and our power to cope with this grief spring from the great matrix of relationships in which we take our being. Just as our pain is more than private, so is our resilience.

## Validation

*You can hold yourself back from the suffering world: this is something you are free to do . . . but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering you might be able to avoid.*

—Elie Wiesel

The first step in despair work is to disabuse oneself of the notion that grief for our world is morbid. To experience anguish and anxiety in face of the perils threatening humanity is a healthy reaction. This pain, far from being crazy, is rather a testimony to the unity of life, to the deep interconnections that relate us to all beings.

Such pain for the world becomes masochistic only when one assumes personal guilt for its plight or personal responsibility for the solution. No individual is that powerful. True, by participating in society, each shares in a collective accountability, but acknowledging despair, like faith, means letting go of the manipulative assumption that conscious ego can or should control all events. Each of us is but one little nexus in a vast web. As the recognition of that interdependence breaches our sense of isolation, so also does it free our despair of self-recrimination.

Most world religions corroborate the goals of despair work, offering constructs and symbols attesting to the creative role of this kind of distress. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, for example, *bodhisattvas* vow to forswear Nirvana until all beings are enlightened. Their compassion is said to endow them with supranormal senses: they can hear not only the music of the spheres, but also all cries of distress. All griefs are registered and owned in the *bodhisattva's* deep

knowledge that we are not separate from one another.

## Positive Disintegration

The process of internalizing the possibility of planetary demise is bound to cause deep psychic disarray. How to confront what we scarcely dare think? How to think about it without going to pieces?

It is helpful in despair work to realize that going to pieces or falling apart is not such a bad thing. Indeed, it is as essential to evolutionary and psychic transformations as the cracking of outgrown shells. What Kazimierz Dabrowski calls “positive disintegration” has been operative in every global development of humankind, especially during periods of accelerated change; it permits, he argues, the emergence of “higher psychic structures and awareness.” Occurring when individuals internalize painful contradictions in human experience, positive disintegration can appear as a dark night of the soul, a time of spiritual void and turbulence. But the anxieties and doubts are, Dabrowski maintains, “essentially healthy and creative”—not only for the person but for society, because they permit new and original approaches to reality.

What “disintegrates” in periods of rapid transformation is not the self, of course, but its defenses and ideas. We are not objects that can break. As open systems, we are, as Norbert Wiener writes in *The Human Use of Human Beings* (Doubleday, 1954), “but whirlpools in a river of overflowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.” We do not need to protect ourselves from change, for our very nature is change. Defensive self-protection, restricting vision and movement like a suit of armor, makes it harder to adapt; it not only reduces flexibility, but blocks the flow of information we need to survive. Our “going to pieces,” however uncomfortable a process, can open us up to new perceptions, new data, new responses.

## Feeling

No matter how safe and comfortable our personal lives or engrossing our private concerns may be, grief for those who suffer now, and may suffer in the future, is

present in us all on some level. Given the flows of information circling our globe, our psyches, however inattentive or callous they may appear, have registered the signals of distress. We do not need to be exhorted or scolded into feelings of concern and compassion, for they inhere in us already, by virtue of our nature as open systems, interdependent with the rest of life. We need only to be encouraged and empowered to open our consciousness to the griefs and apprehensions that are within us.

We cannot experience these feelings

with it. She put away the record, never to play it again, and the "trouble" remained undigested. With her recollection of her experience with the song, the pain in her back moved into her chest. It intensified and hardened, piercing her heart. It seemed for a moment excruciating, but as she continued the exercise, accepting and breathing in the pain, it suddenly, inexplicably, felt right, felt even good. It turned into a golden cone or funnel, aimed point downwards into the depths of her heart. Through it poured the despair she had refused, griefs recon-

planet, I say. Innocent of terror, they try to reassure me, ready to be off. Removed, from a height in the sky, I watch them go—three small solitary figures trudging across that angry wasteland, holding one another by the hand and not stopping to look back. In spite of the widening distance, I see with a surrealist's precision the ulcerating of their flesh. I see how the skin bubbles and curls back to expose raw tissue, as they doggedly go forward, the boys helping the little sister across the rocks.

I woke up, brushed my teeth,

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*"... Opening to our despair opens us also to the love that is within us, for it is in deep caring that our anguish is rooted..."*

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without pain, but it is a healthy pain, like the kind felt as circulation is restored to a limb that has gone "to sleep": it gives evidence that the tissue is still alive. In dealing with these feelings, as with a cramped limb, exercises can help. I have found meditational exercises useful, particularly ones from the Buddhist tradition. Practices such as the *Brahma-viharas*, or "Abodes of the Buddha," designed to increase the capacity to experience such feelings as loving-kindness and compassion, can get us in touch with those concerns in us that extend beyond ego—and, in so doing, with our social despair.

In one workshop I led, entitled "Being Bodhisattvas," we did a meditation on compassion which involved giving oneself permission to experience the sufferings of others (imaginatively, but in as concrete a fashion as possible), and then taking these sufferings in with the breath, visualizing them as a dark stream drawn in with each inhalation, into and through the heart.

Afterwards, one participant, Marianna, described her experience in this meditation. She had been resistant, and her resistance had localized as a pain in her back. In encouraging the participants to open themselves to their inner awareness of the sufferings of others, I had primed the pump with some brief verbal cues, mentioning our fellow beings in hospitals and prisons, a mother with dried breasts holding a hungry infant . . . That image awoke in Marianna an episode she had buried. Three years earlier she had listened to a record by Harry Chapin with a song about a starving child; she had, as she put it, "trouble"

necting her with the rest of humanity.

Marianna emerged from this experience with a sense of release and empowerment. She felt empowered, she said, not to *do* so much as to *be*—open, ready to act. She also believed that she had allowed herself to open up because I had not asked her to "do" something about the griefs of others, or to come up with any answers, but only to experience them.

Sometimes the blocked emotions of despair become accessible through dreams. A very vivid dream came to me one night after I had spent hours perusing statistics on nuclear pollution; before going to bed, I had leafed through baby pictures of our three children to find a snapshot for my daughter's high-school yearbook.

In my dream I behold the three of them as they appeared in the old photos, and I am struck most by the sweet wholesomeness of their flesh. My husband and I are journeying with them across an unfamiliar landscape. The land is becoming dreary, treeless and strewn with rocks; Peggy, the youngest, can barely clamber over the boulders in the path. Just as the going is getting very difficult, even frightening, I suddenly realize that, by some thoughtless but unalterable prearrangement, their father and I must leave them. I can see the grimness of the way that lies ahead of them, bleak and craggy as a moonscape and with a flesh-burning, sickly tinge to the air. I am maddened with sorrow that my children must face this ordeal without me. I kiss them each and tell them we will meet again, but I know no place to name where we will meet. Perhaps another

showered, had an early breakfast meeting, took notes for a research proposal. Still the dream would not let me go. As I woke Peggy for school, I sank beside her bed. "Hold me," I said, "I had a bad dream." With my face in her warm nightie, inhaling her fragrance, I found myself sobbing. I sobbed against her body, against her seventeen-year old womb, as the knowledge of all that assails it surfaced in me. Statistical studies of the effects of ionizing radiation, columns of figures on cancers and genetic damage, their inutterable import turned into tears—speechless, wracking.

What good does it do to let go and allow ourselves to *feel* the possibilities we dread? For all the discomfort, there is healing in such openness, for ourselves and perhaps for our world. To drop our defenses and let grief surface brings not only release but connection. Opening to our despair opens us also to the love that is within us, for it is in deep caring that our anguish is rooted. The caring and connection are real, but we cut ourselves off from their power when we hide from the grief they bring.

## Imaging

To acknowledge and express our despair, we need images and symbols. Images, more than arguments, tap the springs of consciousness, the creative powers by which we make meaning of experience. In the challenge to survival that we now face, exercise of the imagination is especially necessary, because existing verbal constructs seem inadequate to what many of us are sensing.

Recognizing the creative powers of

imagery, many call upon us today to come up with visions of a benign future—visions that can beckon and inspire. Images of hope are potent, necessary: they can shape our goals and give us impetus for reaching them. Often they are invoked too soon, however, diverting us from painful, but fruitful confrontation with the causes of our crisis and our own deep feelings. Sometimes it takes a while, in the slow alchemy of the soul, for hope to signal, and longer still for it to take form in concrete plans and projects. Genuine visioning happens from the roots up, and right now, for many of us, those roots are shriveled by unacknowledged despair. This is an in-between time: we are groping in the dark, with shattered beliefs and faltering hopes, and we need images for this phase if we are to work through it.

Working together in groups is a good way to evoke powerful images to express—and thereby own—our despair. Quaker-style meetings, especially, in which a group sits and shares out of open silence, are an excellent way of letting images appear and interact.

In a workshop I once gave on planetary survival, I explored means by which we could share our apprehensions on an affective as well as cognitive level. I asked the participants to offer, as they introduced themselves, a personal experience or image of how, in the past year, the global crisis had impinged on their consciousness. Those brief introductions were potent. Some offered a vignette from work on world hunger or arms. A young physicist simply said, very quietly, "My child was born." A social worker recalled a day her small daughter talked about growing up and having babies; with dull shock she encountered her own doubt that the world would last that long. Some offered images: fishkill washed up at a summer cottage, strip mines leaching like open wounds. Most encompassing in its simplicity was John's image: the view from space of planet Earth, so small that it could be covered by the astronaut's raised thumb. That vision of our home, so finite that it can be blotted out by a single human gesture, functioned as a symbol in our week's work. It touched a raw nerve in us all—desperate concern.

In the sharing of despair that our imagery permitted, energy was released which vitalized our work. As pent-up feelings were expressed and compared, there came laughter, solidarity, and a resurgence of commitment to our com-

mon human project.

In that same workshop, John showed slides of a trek he took up Mount Katahdin with some of his students at Yale. Between two high peaks was a narrow, knife-edge trail that they had to cross: it was scary and dangerous because fog had rolled up, blanketing their destination and everything but the path itself. The picture of that trail, cutting through the clouds into the unknown, became a strong symbol for us, expressing the existential situation in which we find ourselves, and helping us to proceed patiently, even though we can see no more than a step at a time.

## Waiting

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait  
without hope,*

*For hope would be hope of the wrong  
thing.*

— T.S. Eliot

And so we wait; even as we work, we wait. Only out of that open expectancy can images and visions arise that strike deep enough to summon our faith in them. "The ability to wait," writes William Lynch, "is central to hope."

Waiting does not mean inaction, but staying in touch with our pain and confusion as we act, not banishing them to grab for sedatives, ideologies, or final solutions. Jacob Needleman suggests that part of the great danger in this time of crisis is that we may, in impatience and fear, short-circuit despair—and thereby lose the revelations that may open to us:

... For there is nothing to guarantee that we will be able to remain long enough or deeply enough in front of the unknown, a psychological state which the traditional paths have always recognized as sacred. In that fleeting state between dreams, which is called "despair" in some Western teachings and "self-questioning" in Eastern traditions, a man is said to be able to receive the truth, both about nature and his own possible role in the universal order.

In my own feelings of despair, I was haunted by the question, What do you substitute for hope? I had always assumed that a sanguine confidence in the future was as essential as oxygen. Without it, I had thought, one would collapse into apathy and nihilism. It puzzled me that in owning my despair, I found the hours I spent working for peace, environmental, and antinuclear

causes did not lessen, but rather increased.

One day I was talking with Jim Douglass, the theologian and writer who left his university post to devote all his efforts to resisting nuclear weapons; jailed repeatedly for civil disobedience, he is now involved in the citizens' campaign against the Trident submarine. He said, in passing, that he believed we had five years left before it was too late—too late to avert the use of our nuclear arsenal in a first-strike strategy. I reflected on the implications of that remark and watched his face as he squinted in the sun, with an air of presence and serenity I could not fathom. "What do you substitute for hope?," I asked. He looked at me and smiled. "Possibilities," he said. "Possibilities. You can't predict—just make space for them. There are so many." That, too, is a form of waiting, active waiting—moving out along the fog-bound trail, even though we cannot see the way ahead.

## Community

When we face the darkness of our time, openly and together, we tap deep reserves of strength within us. Many of us fear that confrontation with despair will bring loneliness and isolation, but—on the contrary—in the letting go of old defenses, truer community is found. In the synergy of sharing comes power.

Joanna Rogers Macy plans to put together a book on despair work. She urges readers to share their own experiences. Write her c/o New Age, 32 Station St., Brookline Village MA 02146.

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