

# The Despair and Empowerment Model

## Its Definition and How it Relates to Women

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### ABSTRACT

Despair and empowerment work is a process for expressing pain for the world and gaining power to grow and make change through this—whether relating to the issues of nuclear threat, environmental destruction or human oppression. It is a way of gaining a sense of power within. Women's empowerment tradition assists women to bring their own needs into focus and gain control of their lives, individually and collectively—a way of gaining a sense of power within.

We exist in a world where for the first time global destruction is a possibility; where for the first time, the survival of our species is far from assured. This horrible knowledge is too big to deal with all alone or without drawing on our deepest inner (spiritual) resources.

Despair and empowerment work is based on trust in people and their ability to get in touch with their inner knowing. It is based on the belief that people already know that something is terribly wrong with the world and on the belief that we have the wisdom and inner resources to do something about it. (Joanna Macy as quoted by Stephen Bodian)

### The Psychological Effects of Global Threat and Human Oppression

Because of the intensity and the overwhelming scope of the difficulties of our world today, many of us suffer from psychic numbing or apathy which, by its etymology means the inability or refusal to experience pain. Our reactions or lack of reactions to the perils of our time involve three widespread behaviours: disbelief, denial and the double life.

For example, disbelief manifests itself in regards to nuclear weapons with our inability to encompass the fact that there is enough destructive power ready to launch that could kill each one of us twenty times over. We do not see these weapons. The information is maddeningly abstract. Denial asserts itself in our rationalizing the need for defense or a "balance of power." As a result we tend to lead our lives as if nothing has

changed. This is the double life. On the one hand, we maintain normal daily life; on the other hand, there is the knowledge that our world could be destroyed at any moment.

We repress our awareness for a number of reasons: fear of pain, fear of appearing morbid, fear of appearing stupid, fear of guilt, fear of causing distress, fear of provoking disaster, fear of appearing unpatriotic, fear of sowing panic, fear of religious doubt, fear of appearing too emotional, a sense of separate existence and fear of feeling powerless. These fears, if not brought into awareness result in psychic numbing. This can take many forms: fragmentation and alienation, displacement activities, political passivity, destructive behaviours, psychological projection, resistance to painful information, diminished intellectual performance, burn-out, and a sense of powerlessness.

### The Genesis of Despair and Empowerment Work

Despair and empowerment work is an alternative to repression and its effects. Its genesis is described in the following passage from *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, in the words of Joanna Rogers Macy, one of the creators of despair and empowerment work:

We have seen and perhaps experienced how we all, to varying degrees, repress and numb our pain for the world. We have seen why we repress it and what that repression costs as individuals and as a society. We may find ourselves asking at this moment: Is there an alternative? Can we move beyond numbness without succumb-

ing to despair? Can we acknowledge and live with our pain for the world in ways that affirm our existence, that release our vitality and our powers to act?

These same questions hammered in my head as I sat on a Boston subway returning from a day's conference given by the Cousteau Society in the spring of 1977. This conference focused on the theme of planetary survival. Speeches, panels, workshops, and films delineated with horrifying precision the panoply of dangers facing us, from toxic wastes to nuclear proliferation.

I was glad that my teenage son and daughter, who had invited me to the conference, had stayed on for the evening concert; for it was then, as the subway surfaced to cross over the Charles River, that my mind-heart-body registered the effects of the barrage of information. Crumbling under the cumulative effect of the facts I had learned and the pictures I had seen, my defenses gave way, forcing me to face within myself the knowledge of our possible imminent extinction—as a species, as a planet. Tears flowed as I gazed mutely at the faces on the opposite bench and the glint of evening sun on the river beyond. How do I live with the horror of this knowledge? Do I go crazy with it, or do I numb myself again?

In the weeks and months that followed I carried these questions inside me like a bomb in my chest. Bereft of answers, I had no choice but to let them live there pressing against my heart. Even though I attempted to express my despair and feelings of anguish to a couple of colleagues, I was reluctant to share it with those whom I loved most, as if I did not want to spoil the time they had left. I felt like the sole victim of a unique and nameless disease with no one to share and compare symptoms. Later I learned, of course, that I was far from alone. Others carried, too, like a hidden ulcer, this dread-filled grief for our planet, this sorrow for humanity.

That was made clear over a year later in August 1978, at Notre Dame University where I chaired a week-long seminar on planetary survival issues. College professors and administrators had prepared papers to deliver on themes ranging from the water crisis to nuclear technology. As we convened, I took time to acknowledge that the topic we were addressing was different from any other, that it touched each of us in a profoundly personal way; I suggested that we introduce ourselves by sharing an incident or image of "how" it had touched us. The brief introductions that followed were potent, as those present dropped their professional manner and spoke simply, poignantly of what they saw and felt happening to their world, of their children, of their fears and discouragement. That brief sharing transformed the seminar.

It changed the way we related to each other and to the material, it unleashed energy and mutual caring. Sessions went overtime, laced with hilarity and punctuated with plans for future projects. Some kind of magic had happened. Late one night as a group of us talked, a name for that magic emerged. Despairwork.

Just as grief-work is a process by which bereaved persons unblock their numbed energies by acknowledging and grieving the loss of a loved one, so do we all need to unblock our feelings about our threatened planet and the possible demise of our species. Until we do, our power of creative response will be crippled.

As we struck on despairwork, we were not being theoretical, we were groping for an explanation of what had just happened. We knew that it had something to do with a readiness to face the dark and take that darkness into us; that it had to do, in other words, with a willingness to acknowledge and experience pain, and that this pain for our world, like pain for the loss of a loved one, is a measure of caring. We also knew that the joint journey into the dark had changed us, bonding us in a special way, relieving us of pretense and competition. Something akin to love had occurred, an alchemy that caused us to feel less alone and bolder to face without flinching whatever challenges might lie ahead.

This alchemy has happened again and again with groups and individuals across America and Europe. After the publication of the first paper on despairwork, many hundreds of people—doctors, housewives, convicts, teenagers, factory and officeworkers—wrote to share their feelings of anguish for our common world. In such cases, and they are countless, despairwork has been done alone, in reading and reflection. At the same time workshops sprang up, where people from all walks of life could share feelings of pain for the world and move through this pain to discover together the power that lies within it. Sometimes these workshops have been called "Despair and Empowerment," sometimes "Awakening in the Nuclear Age," and sometimes "Taking Heart."

In helping to design these workshops, with a growing number of Interhelp colleagues, I drew on years of exploring the interface between spiritual growth and social change, years of adapting meditative practices to empower people as agents for peace and justice. Yet the workshops themselves taught me more than I could have imagined beforehand. They have demonstrated that our apparent public apathy is but a fear of experiencing and expressing this pain, and that once it is acknowledged and shared it opens the way to our power (Macy, 1983).

**The Model**

The despair and empowerment model involves three phases—despairwork, turning and empowerment—and can be used as a format for planning workshops, conferences, and other projects. It also describes the phases of feelings and reactions an individual experiences when responding to life threatening global issues in daily life. It will be helpful to define terms.

1. **Despair:** Used in the larger sense, despair is compassion or the “ability to suffer with.” It is anguish that coexists with hope. The word is derived from the Latin “podere,” to suffer with.

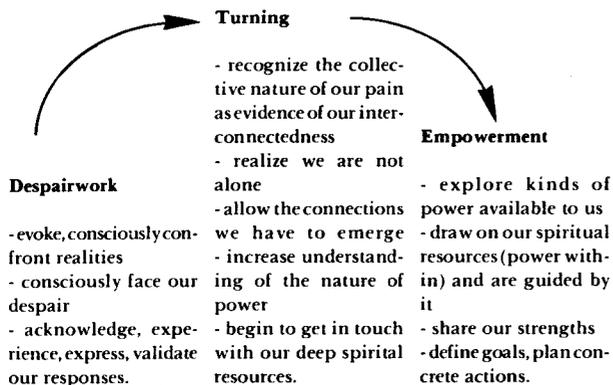
2. **Turning:** “As we allow ourselves to feel our pain for the world, we find our connections with each other.” (Macy, 1983) This process of discovering relationships and making connections is called turning. This also involves a deepened understanding of the nature of power; the differing world views operating within our lives based on definitions of power as “power-over” (dominance) and “power-with” (immanence). (Starhawk, 1982)

3. **Empowerment:** Through all of this arises a sense of personal power and the ability to take action. That is “growth of personal strength, power, and ability to enact one’s own will and love for self in the context of love for others.” (Wheeler and Chinn, 1984)

These phases are also described as the “arc of the work.” Here is a diagram illustrating the despair and empowerment process.

**The Despair and Empowerment Arc**

It unfolds in three successive movements: pain turns to power.



The Despair and Empowerment model is based on five principles:

1. Feelings of pain for our world are natural and healthy. Confronted with widespread suffering, threats of global disaster, experiences of oppression, responses of anguish—fear, anger, grief—are a measure of our humanity.

2. This pain is morbid only if denied. If we disown this pain we become dysfunctional. It creates hatred we direct at others or self-hatred we turn inward.

3. Information alone is not enough. Facts, figures, and intellectual analysis of what is going on are not enough. Without acknowledgement of the emotional impact—the direct feeling effect on us—it is damaging.

4. Unblocking the pain releases energy and clears the mind. Repression—physical, mental, emotional—dulls and drains the ability to think and act.

5. Unblocking pain reconnects us with the “larger web of life.” Beyond catharsis, this distress reflects concerns that extend beyond the individual and creates awareness of interconnectedness, mutual belonging and a new kind of power.

**Despair and Empowerment Work in Saskatchewan**

After the publication of *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, several women in the Saskatoon area became interested in the notion of “despair and empowerment” work. In the spring of 1984 Joanne Oldring Sydiaha went to Boston and participated in an experiential despair and empowerment workshop and a training course in leadership in despair and empowerment work. Upon returning to Saskatoon, she facilitated despair and empowerment workshops in the area and met Barbara Roberts, a feminist academic, with whom she organized a training seminar in despair and empowerment for the prairies, in Winnipeg in December of 1984. Judy Fretz, Muriel Wiens, Joanne Blythe, Barbara Roberts, Joanne Oldring Sydiaha, Barb Eyolfson, and Vicki Obedkoff were the women who attended from from the Saskatoon area.

This training provided a network that extended beyond the prairie provinces, because people from Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Ontario attended. It also created a core group of trained women in the Saskatoon area who began to work together. Since then several workshops and events have been organized using the despair and empowerment model, by these women working individually or in varying combina-

tions with each other, as well as with other women interested in particular projects. Some examples include: the Women and Peace Conference, Saskatoon, 1985; Helping Ourselves, a follow-up workshop; the production of the video *The Sharing Circle* by Frances Buchan; as well as various workshops for individuals. A collective called Women and Peace evolved.

### **How Despair and Empowerment Work Relates Directly to Women's Issues**

Despair and empowerment work empowers women as they address their own issues of oppression and inequality. Women are oppressed by a culture or world view of dominance. The despair and empowerment model offers an opportunity to analyze and explore this further, as well as the opportunity for women to share their pain, face it and move through it.

More specifically, despair and empowerment work: (1) offers the opportunity for women to express our deepest feelings about oppression in our lives, as it effects ourselves and others in the world; (2) provides ways to explore the nature of power and the different world views based on different operational definitions of power; (3) assists women to discover and experience with awareness the nature of their power: all of which gives direction and control in working for equality and nonviolence; (4) provides women a collective forum in which to conceive goals and action plans for change congruent with their needs.

Women are investigating and finding the roots of violence. Finding ways of eradicating the "symptoms" of violence such as war is only a part of the necessary change. Change needs to incorporate the notion of personal change, self responsibility and control of oneself.... Until women became aware of their own oppression and made the larger connection they did not know that this very oppression was basic to keeping the world in a perpetual state of competition, hostility and warfare. (Alice Wiser, 1984)

### **Resources**

#### *People*

*Joanne Blythe* - despair and empowerment workshop facilitator and organizer; 215 Maple Street, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7J 0A3; 242-3406

*Judy Fretz* - organizes projects using despair and empowerment model; R.R. #5, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7K 3J8; 373-5622

*Joanne Oldring Sydiaha* - despair and empowerment workshop facilitator, organizer and counsellor; R.R. #3, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7K 3J6; 382-0489

*Muriel Wiens* - despair and empowerment workshop facilitator and therapist; 306-245 Third Avenue South, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7K 1M4; 665-8008

#### *Videos*

##### *The Sharing Circle*

- one-half hour video using materials from the 1985 Women and Peace Conference, it shows women's reactions to the nuclear threat, from despair to hope, and their thoughts about making change.

- produced by Frances E. Buchan

- for more information contact: Frances Buchan, 704 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7N 0J4; 242-6017.

##### *Despair and Empowerment*

- 45 minute color documentary on Interhelp work, featuring a weekend workshop and interview with Joanna Rogers Macy, intercut with portraits of people doing peacework inspired by Interhelp programs.

- directed by Freke Vieijst and produced in Holland by IKON-TV. \$65 U.S. VHS or Beta. Order from Freke Vieijst, Box 629, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, USA 01230; (413) 528-9613  
- for possible screening contact Joanne Oldring Sydiaha.

#### *Books*

*Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* by Joanna Rogers Macy, New Society Publishers, 4722 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA USA 19143, 1983.

*Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* by Starhawk, Boston: Beacon Press, 1982.

#### *Periodicals*

*Interhelp: a networking newsletter* - lists resources and upcoming events. Available from Interhelp USA, P.O. Box 331, Northampton, MA USA 01061

*Interhelp News in Australia* - available from Interhelp Australia, P.O. Box 172, South Lismore, NSW 2480, Australia

*Awakening in the Nuclear Age* - a quarterly journal published by Interhelp USA. Articles, action and workshop reports, poems, photos, artwork, exploring the intersection of global issues and daily lives. ANAJ, P.O. Box 4742, Berkeley, California, USA 94704.

#### Organizations

*Interhelp*, P.O. Box 331, Northampton, MA USA 01061  
Interhelp is a nonpartisan global network whose purpose is to provide people with the opportunity to experience and share their deepest responses to dangers which threaten our planet—be they dangers of nuclear holocaust, environmental deterioration, or human oppression. Interhelp aims to enable people to know the power that comes from their interconnectedness with all life and to move beyond powerlessness and numbness into action. In addition to workshops, trainings, community gatherings and other programs, Interhelp also provides support and resources for those wishing to

organize and facilitate such programs, and for those whose projects share an affinity with their goals and purposes.

*Women and Peace*, Sub 1 - 810 Broadway Avenue, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7N 1B0

#### REFERENCES

- Bodian, Stephen. "Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age: a conversation with Joanna Macy." *Yoga Journal*, January/February 1985.
- Macy, Joanna Rogers. *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983.
- Starhawk. *Dreaming the Dark*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982.
- Wheeler and Chin. *Peace and Power: A Handbook of Feminist Process*. Margaretsdaughters Incorporated, P.O. Box 70, Buffalo, New York, USA 14222
- Wiser, Alice. "Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Women." Paper presented to the Canadian Peace Research and Education Association at the Annual Conference of the Learned Societies of Canada, June 1984, at the University of Guelph. Published in *Atlantis*, Volume 12, Number 1, Fall 1986, p. 123-128.



*PRAIRIE II*, pencil on Arches, (22" x 30"), 1983, by Joanne Oldring Sydiaha Collection, Sask. Tel.