Chapter 2

THE GREATEST DANGER:
APATHEIA, THE DEADENING OF
MIND AND HEART

It is the destruction of the world
in our own lives that drives us
half-insane, and more than half.
To destroy that which we were given
in trust: how will we bear it?
—Wendell Berry

THE GREAT TURNING ARISES in response to what we know and feel is happening to our world. It entails both the perception of danger and the means to act. As conscious, embodied beings endowed with multiple senses, we are geared to respond: instantly we leap from the path of an oncoming truck, dash to douse a fire, dive into a pool to save a child. This response-ability has been an essential feature of life throughout our evolution; it allows us to adapt to new challenges and generate new capacities. It enables whole groups and societies to survive, so long as their members have sufficient information and freedom to act. In systems terms, response to danger is a function of feedback—the information circuit that connects perception to action. Appropriate response depends on an unblocked feedback loop.

But in our present situation, things don't seem that simple. The perils
Facing life on Earth are so massive and unprecedented that they are hard to believe. The very danger signals that should rivet our attention, summon up the blood, and bond us in collective action, tend to have the opposite effect. They make us want to pull down the blinds and busy ourselves with other things. Our desire for distraction supports billion-dollar industries which tell us everything will be all right so long as we buy this car or that deodorant. We eat meat from factory-farmed animals and produce grown by agribusiness, knowing of the pesticides and hormones they contain, but preferring not to think they'll cause harm. We buy clothes without noticing where they are made, preferring not to think of the sweatshops they may have come from. We don't bother voting, or if we do, we vote for candidates we may not believe will address the real problems, hoping against all previous experience that they will suddenly awaken and act boldly to save us. Have we become callous, nihilistic? Have we ceased to care what happens to life on Earth?

It can look that way. Many reformers and activists decry public apathy. To rouse us, they deliver yet more terrifying information, as if we didn't already know that our world is in trouble. They scold and preach about moral duties, as if we didn't already care. Their alarms and sermons tend to make us pull the shades down tighter, stiffening our resistance to what appears to be too overwhelming, too complicated, too out of our control.

So it's good to look at what this apathy is, to understand it with respect and compassion. Apathia is a Greek word that means, literally, nonsuffering. Given its etymology, apathy is the inability or refusal to experience pain. What is the pain we feel—and desperately try not to feel—in this planet-time? It is of another order altogether than what the ancient Greeks could have known; it pertains not just to privations of wealth, health, reputation, or loved ones, but also to losses so vast we can hardly name them. It is pain for the world.

PAIN FOR THE WORLD
From news reports and life around us, we are bombarded with signals of distress—of job layoffs and homeless families, of nearby toxic wastes and distant famines, of arms sales and wars and preparations for wars. These stir within us feelings of fear, anger, and sorrow, even though we may never express them to others. By virtue of our humanity we share these deep responses. To be conscious in our world today is to be aware of vast suffering and unprecedented peril.

Even the words—fear, anger, sorrow—are inadequate to convey the feelings we experience, for these connote emotions long familiar to our species. The feelings that assail us now cannot be equated with ancient dreads of mortality and "the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Their source lies less in concerns for the personal self than in apprehensions of collective suffering—of what happens to our own and other species, to the legacy of our ancestors, to unborn generations, and to the living body of Earth.

What we are dealing with here is akin to the original meaning of compassion: "suffering with." It is the distress we feel on behalf of the larger whole of which we are a part. It is the pain of the world itself, experienced in each of us.

No one is exempt from that pain, any more than one could exist alone and self-sufficient in empty space. It is as natural to us as the food and air we draw upon to fashion who we are. It is inseparable from the currents of matter, energy, and information that flow through us and sustain us as interconnected open systems. We are not closed off from the world, but integral components of it, like cells in a larger body. When that body is traumatized, we sense that trauma, too. When it falters and sickens, we feel its pain, whether we pay attention to it or not.

That pain is the price of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world. It is not only natural, it is an absolutely necessary component of our collective healing. As in all organisms, pain has a purpose: it is a warning signal, designed to trigger remedial action.

The problem, therefore, lies not with our pain for the world, but in our repression of it. Our efforts to dodge or dull it surrender us to futility—or in systems' terms, cut the feedback loop and block effective response.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SOURCES OF REPRESSION
No outside authority is silencing us—yet, at least in North America. No physical force is restraining us from devoting our courage and creativity to the protection of life on Earth. What then is stifling our responses, as individuals and as a society? Let's look first at the psychological reasons why we repress our pain for the world, and then at those that derive from economic and social forces.

Fear of pain
Our culture conditions us to view pain as dysfunctional. There are pills for headache, backache, neuralgia and premenstrual tension—but no pills, capsules or tablets for this pain for our world. Not even a stiff drink really helps. To permit ourselves to entertain anguish for the world is not
only painful, but frightening; it appears to threaten our capacity to cope with daily life. We are afraid that if we were to let ourselves fully experience these feelings, we might fall apart, lose control, or be mired in them permanently.

Distrust of our own intelligence
Many of us are reluctant to express our concerns for fear of exposing our ignorance, or of getting embroiled in a debate requiring facts and figures beyond our command. The conditions we face are complexly interwoven and hard to understand. The global economy encourages us to rely on “experts”—like the scientists and economists and politicians who tell us that there is no link between nuclear plants and breast cancer, pesticide spraying and asthma, trade agreements and joblessness. It is easy to distrust our own judgment, especially when others around us seem to agree with the way things are. This intellectual timidity, so useful to the power holders, can override our own legitimate experience of distress.

Fear of guilt
Few, if any, of us in the Industrial Growth Society are exempt from the suspicion that we are accomplices to far-reaching abuses of other beings and of the living body of Earth. It is hard to participate in social and economic life without feeding, clothing, and transporting ourselves at the expense of the natural world and other people’s well-being. As Peter Marin writes in an essay on moral pain,

Many of us suffer a vague, inchoate sense of betrayal, of having somehow taken the wrong turning, of having somehow said yes or no at the wrong time and to the wrong things, of having somehow taken upon ourselves a general kind of guilt, having two coats while others have none, or just having too much while others have too little—yet proceeding, nonetheless, with our lives as they are.

We also carry an inchoate sense of accountability for the massive acts of violence perpetrated by our governments. Americans have a huge burden to bear in this respect: the declination of our native peoples, the enslavement of Africans and the oppression of their descendants, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, suppression of liberation movements in Central America, spiraling arms sales around the world, and CIA-abetted drug traffic—the painful list could go on. We prefer to sweep it under the rug, because we hate feeling guilty—it flies in the face of all we like to think we are and represent. We have neither patience nor practice for dealing with collective guilt, but we can learn. Other governments—Canada, South Africa, Japan, Germany, England—are showing us today that it is possible to acknowledge moral shame, with strength and dignity—and that it is healing. Meanwhile, until we all learn what to do with our feelings of guilt, we’ll be likely to lock them away—and in so doing, lock up our pain for the world.

Fear of being unpatriotic
Love of country lies deep within most of us, often deeper than our criticisms and disappointments about national policies. It is woven of pride and gratitude for our history and heroes and for the land itself. In America, built as it was on utopian expectations, this love of country seems to require an almost religious belief in our manifest destiny as a fulfillment of human dreams. To entertain feelings of despair over our country’s present condition and role in the world seems almost un-American. If we express such feelings, do we sap the confidence we need as a nation to survive in a competitive world? Many politicians would have us silence our fears and doubts, lest they erode our sense of national virtue, and our determination to prevail.

In paying heed to these voices, we overlook an essential element in the American character—the capacity to speak out, to “tell it like it is.” From the time of the pilgrims, there have been those who refused to be silent, who rang alarms with Paul Revere, who called for defiance with Patrick Henry, who with Sojourner Truth, Emma Goldman, Martin Luther King and countless others gave voice to the future by speaking out. Most of these people were criticized by their contemporaries and attacked as unpatriotic, but we now can see the vital role they played in history.

The mass media
Information about what is happening to our world is far more restricted now than twenty years ago. With the rapid corporate monopolization of the media, less information comes through to convey the abuses being inflicted on other humans and on the natural world. Censorship increases, blocking reports that would inform the public of corporate misdeeds, and the collusion of politicians. So does “misinformation,” outright deception, lest the public question the nature of the system in which it lives. This control of the mass media makes it much
easier for individuals to avoid feeling pain for their world, by staying ignorant of its true plight.

Instead of informing people about the condition of the world, the corporate-controlled media serve predominately as distraction, soporific, and goad to consume. As the economy globalizes, and corporations sink their teeth into every society they can reach, the monoculture they purvey infects even subsistence farmers with dreams of unobtainable and unsustainable affluence. Australian activist Benny Sable dramatizes the pervasive message of this monoculture in many a demonstration against clearcutting or uranium mining or massive hydroelectric projects. He stands motionless, often high atop a pile of casks marked radioactive, in a black wetsuit painted with a skeleton and these words:

CONSUME
OBEY
BE SILENT
DIE

Belief in the separate self

It is hard to credit our pain for the world, if we believe that we are essentially separate from it. The individualistic bias of Western culture conditions us to think so. And so does mainstream analytic psychology, with its assumptions that we are driven by competitive impulses and that our sufferings stem from intrapsychic conflict. Psychology has been the study of the individual psyche. Though in the last decades attention has broadened to include family dynamics, the family system is generally seen as the sole source of its own dysfunction, while the social, economic, political, and ecological systems in which that family lives have been largely ignored.

So people have come to assume that feelings of fear, anger, or despair about the world are merely a reflection of personal inner conflict. If all our drives are ego-centered, then our distress over the state of the world indicates an abnormality; it must manifest some private neurosis—rooted perhaps in early trauma, or unresolved distress with a parental figure that we're projecting on society at large. Thus we are tempted to discredit feelings that arise from solidarity with our fellow-beings, dismissing them as some kind of personal morbidity. "Even in my therapy group," writes a teacher, "I stopped mentioning my fears of nuclear war. The others kept saying, 'What are you running from in your life by creating these worries for yourself?""

Conditioned to take seriously only those feelings that pertain to our individual needs and wants, we find it hard to believe that we can suffer on behalf of society itself, and on behalf of our planet, and that such

Socioeconomic Sources of Repression

When Joanna first wrote about our pain for the world in 1978, the causes which she explored and enumerated were largely psychological. By now, given the accelerated and hypertrophied state of the Industrial Growth Society, additional factors emerge. The corporate global economy, with the increasing pressures it exerts on individuals, families, and communities, and its spreading control of information channels, makes it yet more difficult for people to respond to the world's cries of distress, or even to hear them. How is this so?

Fragmentation and alienation

We all tend to lead a double life. While on the surface we focus on business as usual, underneath there is a vague awareness of impending doom. As with any form of dishonesty, this creates an internal split, engendering self-doubt and leading us to distrust our inner knowing. Our deep source of creativity and insight. Cut off from our own authority, we become more susceptible to manipulation by advertising and propaganda.

This inner split gives rise to a sense of isolation. Inhibitions against speaking of our deep concerns distance us from others. Even when, on a cognitive level, these concerns seem valid, it is hard to relate them to the tenor of life around us. They produce such psychic dissonance that we begin to question our own perceptions, even our own sanity.

So we seal off an authentic part of ourselves and we are cut off as well from deeper connections with others. "Given the social taboo against crying out [over the state of the world], people distance themselves from each other as do the families and friends of the terminally ill," says theologian Harvey Cox. And so many of us suffer alone and apart, unaware of our common struggles, deprived of the mutual support we all need.

Avoidance of painful information

To the extent that we fear feeling despair for the world, we tend to screen out the data that provoke it. People admit with increasing frequency, "I don’t read the paper anymore...I tune out the news...I can’t take it anymore, it burns me out." We often tune out even the news that is available to us, cutting ourselves off from vital feedback.
Burnout

When we are courageous enough to study the available data, they turn out to be more alarming than most of us had assumed. Many peace and environmental advocates, exposed to terrifying information in the course of their work, carry a heavy burden of knowledge. It is compounded by feelings of frustration, as they fight an uphill battle to arouse the public. Yet they view their own despair as counterproductive to their efforts. They take no time to mourn. In their role as mobilizers of the public will, they don’t feel they can “let their hair down” and expose the extent of their own distress. The consequent and continual repression of feelings takes a toll on their energies that leaves them vulnerable to bitterness, depression, exhaustion, and illness.

Sense of powerlessness

Silence concerning our deepest feelings about the world and the future of our species along with the fragmentation, isolation, burnout, and cognitive confusion that result from that silence—all converge to produce a sense of futility. Each act of denial, conscious or unconscious, is an abdication of our power to respond. It relegates us to the role of victim, before we even engage and try to change the situation.

Breaking Free

Our pain for the world, including the fear, anger, sorrow, and guilt we feel on behalf of life on Earth, is not only pervasive. It is natural and healthy. It is dysfunctional only to the extent that it is misunderstood and repressed. We have seen in this chapter how easily that repression happens in today’s culture, and what it costs us. We don’t break free from denial and repression by gritting our teeth and trying to be nobler, braver citizens. We don’t retrieve our passion for life, our wild, innate creativity, by scolding ourselves and soldiering on with a stiff upper lip. That model of heroic behavior belongs to the worldview that gave us the Industrial Growth Society.

The most remarkable feature of this historical moment on Earth is not that we are on the way to destroying our world—we’ve actually been on the way for quite a while. It is that we are beginning to wake up, as from a millennia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves and each other. This new take on reality makes the Great Turning possible. We described it in Chapter 1 as the third and most basic level of that revolution. It is so central to the arising of the Life-sustaining Society that it is like the hub of a turning wheel.

The worldview now emerging—if we are bold to experience its implications—lets us behold anew and experience afresh the web of life in which we exist. It opens us to the vast intelligence of life’s self-organizing powers, which have brought us forth from interstellar gases and primordial seas. It brings us to a larger identity in which to cradle and

as a gateway into deep participation in the world’s self-healing. The group work of the last twenty years, which this book describes, is based on this worldview.

More basic to the Great Turning than any ideas we have about it is the act of courage and love we make when we dare to see our world as it is.

And I would travel with you to the places of our shame

The hills stripped of trees, the marsh grasses oil-slicked, steeped in sewage;

The blackened shoreline, the chemical-poisoned water;

I would stand with you in the desolate places, the charred places, soil where nothing will ever grow, pitted desert;

fields that burn slowly for months; roots of cholla & chaparral writhing with underground explosions

I would put my hand there with yours, I would take your hand, I would walk with you through carefully planted fields, rows of leafy vegetables drifting with radioactive dust; through the dark of uranium mines hidden in the sacred gold-red mountains;

I would listen with you in drafty hospital corridors as the miner cried out in the first language of pain; as he cried out the forgotten names of his mother I would stand next to you in the forest’s final hour, in the wind of helicopter blades, police sirens shrieking, the delicate tremor of light between leaves for the last time. Oh I would touch with this love each wounded place—Anita Barrows