

# **The Work That Reconnects in the Prairie: An Interview with Teri Grunthaner**

*by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg*

Since the 1970s, Joanna Macy and other deep ecology activists developed “the Work That Reconnects” to, according to the Work’s website, “...bring us back into relationship with each other and with the self-healing powers in the web of life, motivating and empowering us to reclaim our lives, our communities, and our planet from corporate and colonial rule.” The Work helps people develop practices that helps us connect with our despair for the pain and loss in the living earth as well as develop communities of resilience that allow us to wake up to and address “...the systemic injustice, racism, and oppression of the Industrial Growth Society, and generate our commitment to transform all our institutions for the benefit of all humans, whatever their color, culture, religion, gender identity, and history.” Macy’s work is based on the premise that the earth is alive, and we are part of the earth. The

Work leads people through a process -- a spiral (<https://workthatreconnects.org/spiral/>) -- that moves through the following arcs: “Coming from Gratitude, Honoring our Pain for the World, Seeing with New Eyes, and Going Forth.”

Teri Grunthner, executive director of the Transformative Language Arts Network, a drama therapist, and an activist, has been leading monthly excursions in this work through open community workshops in Lawrence for several years. Here, she talks about what led her to the Work, and why it matters.

**Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg (CMG):** How did you encounter the Work That Reconnects?

**Teri Grunthner (TG):** I was an undergrad at Humboldt State University in California, and some friends and I took a trip to Santa Cruz. We were hanging out on the campus, and a young college kid came up to us and said, “Hey, you guys look cool. Come to this potluck tonight.” We checked out the flyer, and it said, “The Work That Reconnects Potluck and Gathering.” It was at someone's home, and there was

probably 15 of us, including my friend group of 4. After eating and hanging out, they led some of the practices in Joanna Macy's book, *Coming Back to Life*. I still remember sitting on the floor, closely facing a perfect stranger, and pouring my heart out about the despair I felt when thinking about my grandchildren in a way that I never connected with or expressed before. I realized then and there that this work was profound and that I needed to get my hands on that book. I bought it right away, read it cover to cover 2-3 times in a row, and let it completely change my life.

**CMG:** What led you to go from the book to studying with Joanna Macy?

**TG:** Joanna's writing spoke truths that I knew in my heart but couldn't articulate — that my pain for the world grows from my interconnection and love with the world; that our culture pathologizes the expression of grief and fear, keeping us trapped and numb; that there are many ways to work for cultural and systemic revolution, and that they are all needed. So that alone was a compelling reason for me to be in her presence. The practices outlined in *Coming Back to Life* were also very profound, and while I had

experienced a few and could imagine others, there were many that I knew would be profoundly transformative if I experienced them. Though I quickly internalized the teachings and desire to facilitate the Work into my identity, it actually took me close to 10 years to finally go to one of her intensives. It was one of those things I had no doubt would happen, and already felt connected to, so I wasn't trying to make it happen until I realized one year — she was getting old! How much longer would she be facilitating? I decided I couldn't make up any more excuses, that I had to go, especially after moving to Kansas and feeling like it was getting further away as a possibility.

**CMG:** You've done several intensives, and they've had a profound effect on you. What did you experience?

**TG:** My first intensive with her was for 10 days in July of 2016 in California, then again in January of 2017 for a 7-day retreat in New Mexico. At the first intensive, I went expecting to experience and express more fully my grief for the conditions of the world. Mid-way through, I still hadn't had a good cry or heart-break/open moment. I patiently waited, putting my heart into the process, and on day 10, we

were saying goodbye to each other, and while I had many amazing experiences and fell in love with dozens of new friends, I still hadn't broke open. I was disappointed.

So I said goodbye and got in my car to drive away, and as soon as I turned on the car on, I lost it. I bawled for an hour straight, then on and off for days, wailing and crying in ways I hadn't since I could remember, since I was a baby. What had finally hit me wasn't my deep grief for the suffering and loss in the world, but a loss even deeper — my felt disconnection from Mother Earth and feeling like I don't belong.

The immersion retreat into the wilderness with these people doing this work helped me realize, without a doubt, that I belong to this world, I belong to the Earth, I have a place, I am important, I matter to the web of life. I have never felt so loved and empowered to be me and follow my heart in all my life.

**CMG:** What made you want to offer workshops based on the Work in Lawrence?

**TG:** Even since that experience in Santa Cruz, I've been wanting to offer these workshops because of how simple

and profound that informal potluck was. But I kept procrastinating, hesitating, feeling like I needed to gain my skills in facilitation, expand my tool belt in drama therapy, and so on. Then after going to the intensive, it just felt like I had no more excuses. It's a waste of my privileges to have gone to such a thing, to have the facilitation skills, and to not share it. Those feelings combined with Trump taking office, in addition to the ongoing cascade of social and ecological unravelings, led me to start offering a monthly workshop.

**CMG:** What happens at the workshops you offer?

**TG:** Every session is different, though we always move through what's called the "spiral of the work." Joanna developed this over time after many years of offering the workshops, recognizing it as a natural and healthy progression of practices and teachings. This work is often known for its despair work, the space for grief, but that's certainly not all of it, and you can't leave people there without support. It also takes time to get there in a whole-hearted way. So we work through the spiral which is:

- Coming from gratitude

- Honoring our pain for the world
- Seeing with new eyes
- Going forth

We go through this spiral in every session but because we only have three hours in a workshop, I focus each session on one of the aspects of the spiral, and we move through it in a progression each month. In this past month, we came back to “coming from gratitude,” bringing the theme of gratitude into each part of the spiral.

So every month it looks different, but in general, we do practices that incorporate expressive arts therapies, guided meditations and visualizations, dialogues and role-plays, writing and movement, and so on. We explore our love and pain for the world and our lives, bringing in the intelligence of our bodies and heart, and, through our creative imagination, deepening our living relationship with ancestors and fellow species on the planet. We’re trying to sink down and place ourselves in this time, in this place, and feel our belonging, our role, and our responsibility. See Joanna speak about Deep Time here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCXxFU4igAU>

**CMG:** Where can people find your workshops?

**TG:** The workshops are currently on a break, but I am excited to relaunch the Work in Lawrence early to mid 2018, with plans formulating for a weekend intensive and/or weekly series. You can learn more and get notifications on FB by joining the Work That Reconnects LFK Facebook group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/166364917192315/>

Teri Lynn Grunthaler has been studying and practicing dramatic enactment, expressive arts therapies, and intersectional liberation as a means to unlearning domination and re-embody our cooperative nature for nearly a decade. She recently graduated with a master's degree in Drama Therapy and is moving into an East Lawrence co-housing community with her partner, whom she is expecting her first child with in February of 2018.