

Dear Interhelpers and Friends,

I'm pleased to report that our 2008 Interhelp Gathering, held in November, was a great success. Thirty of us journeyed together the spiral of Gratitude, Honoring our Pain for the World, Seeing with Fresh Eyes, and Going Forth. Here are a couple of reflections, each one from a first-time participant:

I treasure the memory of entering into a world of mostly strangers, and being welcomed with smiles and hugs and acceptance. It was very clear that most people knew each other, so it is a great testament to the spirit of Interhelp and the individuals who make it up, and to the careful planning of the Council, that I felt included beginning to end. I also appreciated the modeling of group leadership, handled with grace and humor.

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The night after the Gathering, I was to teach the Nonviolent Communication class at my church. After we did the exercises from our chapter, our main teacher whipped out her new game Empathy Poker, which teaches another NVC exercise. One person has a deck of cards with the basic human needs printed on them, and the other players have cards with names of different feelings on them. The first person puts on the table the needs that got met in a situation s/he is visualizing, and the others put out cards as they ask, Are you feeling x because your need y was met? (Example: are you feeling thrilled that your need for recognition got met?) I was looking at my deck and thinking of needs that got met on the weekend, and I must have put down 20 different cards. I was amazed. No wonder I was feeling so good!

Otherwise I would say: I don't know when I have ever met a group of such mature, integrated people, who have such wisdom. This is beyond the partnership of head and heart to some sense of original unity.

On another note, I was thrilled to receive a beautifully written account from Jay Goldspinner about her experience co-creating a Council of All Beings this past fall in Massachusetts. This Update concludes with her story, reprinted in full. (Submissions to this newsletter are always welcome.)

On behalf of the members of Interhelp Council, I wish each of you a New Year bright with blessings.

Paula Hendrick
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An ongoing gathering in the Boston area has grown out of our recent Interhelp Gathering. Meetings are held at the home of Pam Kristan and Brad Brockmann in Jamaica Plain. For more info and to get on the announcement list, contact Pam at pam@pamelakristan.com .

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Once again, Chris Johnstone, editor of the online *Great Turning Times*, combines inspiration and practicality in the editorial to the current issue. See his reflections on the "I can't see that happening" phenomenon at <http://www.greeturningtimes.org/current.asp> . He also suggests a way to include the entire spiral in the course of an evening talk:

At a talk I gave recently, I asked people to divide in pairs and listen to each other completing the following sentences.

"Things I love about our world include..."

"Concerns I have about our world include..."

"A perspective I find inspiring or refreshing is..."

"Steps I can take to participate in the Great Turning include..."

This was a short and simple way of moving [through the spiral]. With two minutes for each sentence, it took about ten minutes each way, yet the process deeply touched many of those present.

I can imagine this process working well, so long as material presented before the exercise includes some stimulation for Seeing with Fresh Eyes.

Chris also reminds us we can watch Joanna Macy guiding the Work that Reconnects workshop process online at http://www.turntowardlife.tv/joanna_macy_workshop_video/about.htm

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Finally, I recommend Terry Tempest Williams' new book, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, an account of her experiences learning about prairie dogs, volunteering in Rwanda, and studying with a mosaic artist in Italy. Reflections on art and activism, suffering and love, bewilderment and hope, simply and beautifully expressed.

Council of All Beings

Jay Goldspinner

*The day is cool and says, "I'm just staying overnight."
Hymn to Life, James Schuyler*

The days were cool, chilly even, and the nights, notwithstanding the bright-orange flames of the campfire in the black darkness, were so cold that sitting at the fire I thought my toes would freeze. But "I'm just staying overnight" was the signifier. We were in this together, for two nights and parts of three days; our

little group of seven people, a leader/guide and six students, some in their late teens, some in their forties, a septuagenarian – that was me. It didn't matter that I was sleeping in a bed in a house and others were in tents or cabins, one in a sleeping bag and tarp under the stars.

We were creating the experience together, sharing food and conversation and lives and chores; opening ourselves to each other and to the natural world around us; recalling our evolution from so-called nonliving substances to the tiny cells who “came to life” and on through the ages to plants and animals and human beings; then going out to connect with an entity – a tree, an animal, a stream – and coming back to create a mask to represent the being who had chosen us, and finally, in the Council of All Beings, gathering together in a circle to speak out as our entities, to be heard by each other and by the humans we became when in turn we laid aside our masks and listened.

Sent out into the woods to find my Being, I went down an overgrown trail which had been much more used a few years ago. I was thinking how things had changed since I first came here. Then I noticed down a slope off to my right some large quarried stone slabs lying across each other. They had once been – what? A root cellar? A well? The stones were too big, not the right shape for a well. Surely it wasn't a sacred cave, like ones I have found in other parts of the Valley and surrounding hills? I scrambled down to examine the pile of slabs and concluded it was a structure built by people, now in ruins. It was not the Being I sought. Yet there was something about it.

At the bottom of the hill the track gave out among high weeds, no longer crossing the earth dam which had held back the water of the small pond I had known from years ago. The drained pond was now a shallow depression, swampy in spots, with a curving narrow rift – the stream that had fed the pond – running through it. Missing the pond, I crossed its bed, only slightly wetting my boots, and climbed up the bank on the other side.

A few feet farther up the hill, there it stood, waiting for me – the enormous blackened trunk of a dead tree, its broken-off place more than a dozen feet over my head, one great shoulder and arm stretching out on the high side of the trunk, where it had fallen. Thick pieces of the furrowed bark were scattered around; moss and lichen, creepy crawlies and creatures too small to see were making these tree-bits their home; all was changing, decaying, turning into other forms of life-and-death intermingled. I felt a sadness and a triumph of spirit in this living/not-living being that I had once known in the fullness of its tree-power, rooted in the earth, reaching toward the sky, green leaves on its branches that turned to gold and fell to the ground only to be renewed again the next year and the next. Often in the spring I had found hepatica blooming beside the great trunk in a spot that was now a gaping hole.

I knew the moment I saw it that the Dark Snag (as standing dead trees are called in an English folk tale I know) was my Being, the one who was calling me to speak for it. And I realized afterward that I was called to speak for that larger class of beings which have become something else, are not what they used to be: the stone slabs that were once a man-built structure, the damp valley that was once a pond, the dark snag who had been a giant living tree.

But the Dark Snag, the Dead Tree, is particularly my challenger, for I am trying to come to terms with Death. Death has always been an important character in my stories and my thinking; it is even more so now that many people dear to me have died and my only brother is nearer to death than before. I am trying to understand Death in Life, Death as part of Life. Lynn Margulis says there is no Death because Life stretches in an unbroken strand for four billion years from its earliest beginnings.

And I am trying to face the enormous changes that are coming, that have already come to our human society and to the earth on which we live, of which we are a part. I am trying to see the beautiful as well as the terrible. To not despair. To keep going.