

Remembrance for Joanna Macy
By Lynn Burnett, July 2026

Joanna took my arm as we stepped onto the rickety platform, and then onto the soil beneath the trees as we approached the pond. She told me to throw a rock into the center of the sun.

I was feeling very tender for her that day, because she was struggling more to walk, but still wanted to visit this beautiful place with its uneven terrain that required a gentle guidance. I placed my head next to hers, so we were both looking at the sun's reflection in the pond from the same angle. I tossed a rock into the center of the sun. We leaned back as the ripples of sunlight that began in the pond washed up the trunks of the trees and shimmered above us in the canopy.

Joanna Macy entered the realm of the ancestors a year ago today, but for those of us who loved her, she will always be like that shimmering sunlight, rippling across the canopy of our lives.

I fell in love with Joanna's spirit the moment she hired me to be her caretaker, in November of 2023. The very first thing she did was introduce me to her precious stuffed animals: the sweet and reflective teddy bear Helen, and the crow Angerboden, who knows so much about the relationship between grief and wisdom. Walking me into the kitchen, she introduced me to Masjid: the palm tree who swayed gently outside, while remaining sturdy across the years. Masjid, Joanna told me, was a being who knew how to take the long view. He was a shelter for many creatures. From her kitchen table, Joanna enjoyed the beauty and nobility of this bodhisattva... who also reminded her of her dear departed husband, Fran.

Joanna had a love for this world that was contagious: entire books are named after that fact. She threw the curtains open in the morning, often with some comment about the sky: "Oh, look at that blue! Let's go out there," or, while playfully making a downcast face, "The sun can't quite decide if it wants to visit us today." She beamed each morning as her daughter, who lived downstairs, brought her dear Amma her morning mocha... and would unfailingly exclaim after taking her first sip: "Mmmmmmmmm! Oh MY, this is good!"

Joanna adored flowers. On our very first walk, as we passed by a flowerless bush on her righthand side, she asked me if there were flowers on it. Confused and curious, I told her that there were none. She then explained to me that her right eye was "dead," but because it had blue fuzzy dots dancing around in it, that she was going to "decorate the bush" with them. Later, she burst into laughter while approaching some roses: when I asked her what she was laughing about, she said, "Look at them! They're just so BEAUTIFUL!" Joanna would not only stop and smell flowers; she would speak to them: "Oh MY, what a lovely dress you're wearing today!" On her 95th birthday, as we sat around the table celebrating, I expressed my love to her by saying: "Joanna, it took me 42 years to truly learn to stop and smell the flowers. Thank you."

For Joanna, virtually anything could become an object of play. To take just one example: her beloved shoehorn, which was the object of much adoration given its magical ability to help Joanna put on her shoes. Joanna might joke on one day that it was a sacred object that more properly belonged on her altar. On another day, the shoehorn might have become an actual bodhisattva, and we would giggle imagining its place in the pantheon of Buddhist deities. On yet another day, Joanna might reveal that the shoehorn was a tool so beloved by early humans, that they had to invent shoes for it; or that human feet themselves had evolved to more properly meet the glory that was the shoehorn, implying that our bipedal nature and ability to free our hands for making more complicated tools was, in fact... all due to the great shoehorn!

Mornings with Joanna often consisted of endless laughter as we conjured absurdist stories for socks and pants (often the objects of imaginary circus performances,) or the rays of sunshine coming through her morning window (they had travelled millions of miles to gently stroke her cheek.) Humans are the storytelling animal, and Joanna remained a master of the craft until the very end. Her humor and playfulness were like shining gems of deep intelligence, condensed into its most enjoyable forms. And her joy was a foundation for looking, unflinchingly, at the hardest realities of the world.

One morning when I arrived, Joanna was in the rocking chair in her parlor, looking out the window with a reflective look on her face. She had had a dream of swimming against a strong current, through a maze so deep underwater that it was pitch black. "But I knew," she emphasized, "that I was not going to get lost. And I was not afraid."

It was the first of five or six long conversations we had about death. Joanna related to death as a profound mystery she was "excited to explore," or as "the last great adventure" in an incredibly adventurous life. In one conversation, she dove deep into the notion of ancestors: for most of human history, she exclaimed, we were closer to nature, with death, and therefore with our ancestors. Ancestors, for much of the human experience, were not simply beings of the past, but remained with us in the present in ways that warped standard notions of linear time by folding the past much more intimately into the present. She embraced humility and curiosity in relation to this deeply Indigenous human experience... especially as she approached the moment of becoming an ancestor herself.

Joanna paused in the middle of eating her cereal one morning, looked at me, and matter-of-factly said: "You will very likely be with me when I die. There are some things you should know." If she was dying, she wanted to be allowed to die. If her body was shutting down, she wanted her family to allow her body to follow its natural process. She wanted to be spared great pain, but she also desired to be as present to the mystery and journey of dying as possible, and to not be more numbed with medication than was required for her comfort. I assured her that she had already had these conversations with her children... but that when the time came, that I would continue to advocate for these desires.

I was not present when Joanna's journey into dying began, when she fell and broke her hip the morning of Friday, June 13, 2025. But I knew as well as anyone could that a fall was becoming more likely, and that it could precipitate her death. I had seen how, every time

Joanna so much as had a cold, that she was never able to bounce back completely, and was never able to return to walking as far as previously. I was very aware that her body was losing its capacity to recover. Four days a week, for nearly two years, Joanna and I had walked arm in arm around her neighborhood or up in the Berkeley hills. Over time, she stumbled more. My hand would quickly dart out, palm against her chest, to stabilize her. But it was unlikely that I, or anyone, could always catch her. Although Joanna ended up falling when she was by herself in her own home, it could have just as easily happened with a cane in one hand, and the arm of a dear friend in the other.

When Joanna's daughter texted me with the news, I closed my eyes and sat in the stillness of this new reality. Then I walked over to my bookshelves, pulled out Joan Halifax's "Being With Dying" to prepare myself for supporting Joanna and her loved ones in the period I knew we might be entering, and began a five-day fast to prepare myself spiritually. Soon I was in the hospital, reading her poems by Rilke, Mary Oliver, and John O'Donohue. We pretended that the omnipresent beeping of hospital machines were coded machine messages, which we delighted in deciphering.

We wrote silly songs riffing off her wild and rebellious embracing of uncertainty in the hospital, during which she would often tell the nurses: "Do you want to know something? I don't need to know." One of our songs began: "Sometimes it's fun to know things/but it's fun to not know too/and so this song is for the wise ones/who are the same ones as the fools." For Joanna, uncertainty was not only a mystery, but a playground.

Joanna's relationship with uncertainty had been deeply influenced by the dharma. Although at times it was a playground, uncertainty was also a spacious place that she could release herself into... like a clenched fist of certainty releasing into an open-palm of not-knowing. But uncertainty as playground and uncertainty as realm of peace were not two separate things: play allowed for release; laughter was followed by calm; all of it was about connection.

During this period of embracing uncertainty, I began chanting more for her. She had always loved the Buddhist refuges chanted in Pali, but now I made a point to chant the Heart Sutra every time I was with her... sometimes as she listened and danced with her hands to the words "form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form," and sometimes just under my breath as she rested, as if the ancient words created a container for her journey... and for mine.

In the hospital, Joanna brought laughter and wisdom to moments of pain. It was in these moments where I witnessed her express her deepest gratitude for the dharma. During a moment of intense pain, I watched her body relax as she chanted "Sarvam anityam" to herself, meaning, "Everything is impermanent." In another moment, she winced and then fluttered her hands towards the sky like leaves dancing: "It's just passing. Everything passes." Turning her head to look me in the eye, she exclaimed: "You're witnessing the beauty of great acceptance." In yet another moment of pain, the woman so well-known for facing down the apocalyptic potentials of nuclear threats and climate catastrophe gave me a playful frown and said: "Don't worry. I'm accustomed to bad news." The nurses looked

confused as we both convulsed in full-belly laughter. Later, when she yelped during the redressing of a wound – but then proclaimed that she wasn't actually in much pain – she told the nurse: "I don't NEED to say ouch, but I CHOOSE to. That's the best way to say ouch!"

I will be forever grateful to the friends and family who advocated for bringing Joanna home, instead of being relocated to a rehabilitation facility. They did so with the understanding that being in a comfortable and familiar environment, surrounded by people she loved, would best facilitate her recovery... or provide the sacred container for her process of dying. It became clear, shortly after her return home, which path she would take. Joanna became ever more internal and took ever less food and water. As hospice advised – and as Joanna had wished – we listened to what her body was telling us, and we followed her lead.

I will also be forever grateful for my dear sisters and brothers who created what we called "The Container," to hold the emotional, spiritual, and practical needs around death and dying. The Container consisted of Joanna's family, and a very small handful of friends who supported the family's need to be as present as possible with Joanna, by tending to the cooking and cleaning, the necessary communications and planning and logistics, tending to Joanna, and providing grounding energy. Although my primary role was simply to be a loving presence, it also included mapping out the needs surrounding the moment of death, including who would take on which tasks. Such planning meant that when that moment came, our clarity could support our presence. I am deeply grateful to Roshi Joan Halifax for supporting me in this great task.

Doctors informed the small crew of us huddled in Joanna's living room that since her wounds would not heal, that infection was a significant possibility, which would lead to pain... and which made cleaning and redressing her wounds especially important for a peaceful dying process. During one of the redressing's, the wound had dried to the bandage. It was a long and painful redressing. In my memory, it feels like it was dark, even though I know it was daylight. Joanna was in so much pain. I was on one side of her, dear friends on the other. Her son stood next to me, and the grandchildren at the head of the bed. I felt helpless as I heard her cry out.

And then I heard her son, quietly next to me, begin chanting "Om Namah Shivaya." The grandchildren began to chant. In the darkness of that moment, the tension of pain fell from Joanna's face, as the chanting of loved ones helped her settle into her pain. We chanted for a long time... until the redressing was complete. In the sacred silence that followed, I understood more about how I wanted to be present to pain and to one day die myself, and about how to be with all my loved ones who walk that path before me. Back in the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of wine. I wondered if any of my loved ones would know what to chant for me? I wanted them to know. And I wanted to know what they would want chanted to them, and sung to them.

It was June 30 when I last sang Louis Armstrong's "It's a Wonderful World" to Joanna, with the certainty that she could hear it. It was my special song for her. She had not been speaking much, and I suspected that we may have had our last full exchanges. But Joanna rallied clarity and energy for that day. She gazed deeply into my eyes after the song and

said: "You have been a treasure in my life." With the words, "You have," not "you are," she was acknowledging for the first time to me that she knew she was dying. And then she said: "I will see you everywhere."

I felt her hand in mine in that moment as if it was there for all eternity. In her eyes I saw the soul that I loved. And I knew that I would, actually, see her everywhere. I told her so. Thinking of our special song, I sang: "I'll see you in the trees of green, Joanna. I'll see you in the red roses too." She smiled at me as I left, to make room for family to be with her during what I thought might be her last precious moments of alertness. She would continue to have such moments over the next week, but at the time, there was no way we could have known.

I walked out the sliding glass doors of her bedroom and onto the back deck, where her grandson sat. Earlier, we had talked about feeling complete with Joanna. I told him what I had just experienced, and said: "I was wrong. NOW I am complete." But very shortly afterwards, while tending to all the concrete and practical needs of the dying, I realized that completeness was not something that Joanna or anybody else could grant me. Joanna had given me some parting words to cherish. But my completion would be in knowing that I had shown up for her, with love and with presence, until the very end.

Soon, the moment came when we thought that end had arrived. Sitting in meditation on a zafu on her old bed, I looked at her grandchildren, gently stroking her hair. I felt as if I was gazing out onto a vast horizon of human love. I watched as her children held the last pulses of life in the hands that had raised them. And an explosion of gratitude burst inside me.

Its shockwaves began from the center of my body. They pressed against the outer perimeters of my being, before bursting through layers beyond my physical body, surrounding me, and then exploding far beyond me. I sat in loving stillness in this ocean of gratitude, as I watched Joanna's breath become shallower. Unconsciously, my inhaled and exhaled matched hers. Prayers came with each breath. On the inhale: "You are surrounded by love." On the exhale, imagining it might be her last: "It's ok." "We are with you." "Peace, peace, peace." A few times when I exhaled with her, she did not soon inhale again. I held the exhale with her, and felt that exquisite stillness of mind that yoga teaches us comes with the stillness of the breath. Three times as I held the exhale with her, I felt it was her last, and I sat in the sacred moment. And then she took another inhale.

I later joked that this was the first of our "dress rehearsals," and of how appropriate it was that one of the great mothers of climate justice had apparently learned to live on pure sunlight. Joanna would live for a couple of more weeks, during which death hovered over each moment . . . and during which Joanna, no longer in a verbal state, often smiled. Sometimes she smiled because we rubbed her scalp. Sometimes because we sang her a song. But probably also because of inner processes mysterious to us... and because she had spent nearly a century loving this world.

After not speaking for many days, when her daughter nuzzled her Amma's cheek and assured her – in a longstanding ritual of familial playfulness – that she was not a hedgehog,

Joanna began to laugh. And when her daughter, knowing that each night might be her Amma's last, asked Joanna if she wanted to snuggle that night, Joanna mustered a single word from her stillness and said "yes." And so, for three nights her daughter snuggled with her in her hospital bed. During this time, I slept on the back deck, separated from them by a few feet and a pane of glass, drifting off to the sound of the oxygen machine... and imagining that I might be awakened by the absence of that sound, and would know that she was gone.

Joanna, however, insisted on teaching us that love required a deeper embrace of what, during her hospital stay, she had called "not needing to know" – and the greater presence and self-care that is required to step into unknowability. As time went on, it became ever more important that we tended to ourselves, so that we didn't become overly exhausted and stressed... and then have that impact our ability to be present and loving.

And so, after three days, her daughter returned to sleeping in the main bed, while myself and one of her dearest friends divvied up night watch so that she could sleep more easily. Dying happens on its own mysterious time. As we settled more deeply into that reality, I showed up with a stuffed version of my spirit animal – the sloth – as a gift for Joanna's daughter. This would all happen in its own time. We just had to show up for the moment, and keep putting one foot in front of the other. The fuzzy version of that truth was good to snuggle with, too.

Joanna died on July 19, shortly after I stepped out for a walk in the Berkeley hills that she so dearly loved. I left to go on that walk knowing that she might die... and I left to go on that walk knowing that I needed a walk to stay grounded and be of service to the family. When I arrived back, I saw her daughter and one of her dearest friends in the living room, and with no words, I knew.

Together with her grandchildren, we cleared the medical supplies from her room. We replaced them with flowers and candles... many of which were grown and made by her dear friends. Other dear friends had harvested lavender to be hung in the corners of her room, and herbs that the grandchildren used to make tinctures to lovingly cleanse her body. Soon, the room smelled of beeswax and roses; sage and lavender. Joanna looked happy.

After the ritual bathing, her grandson and I set her eyes and her jaw. The family then lifted Joanna back onto her long-beloved bed. The quilt, so lovingly handmade by her daughter, soon became her burial shroud. Mandalas and dharanis offered by lamas in Tibet, Dharamshala and Tashi Jong were placed against her heart. Her precious prayer beads were placed on her chest. Later, in a moment of candlelit quiet, I chanted the prayers from the Tibetan Book of the Dead for her, and then placed the book under her pillow. In the silence afterwards, I felt temporality and eternity merge... a story of its own, which I recently wrote about for my dear comrades at Libertroph Magazine in a piece called "In the River with the Ancestors."

For three days, hundreds of friends came and covered Joanna with flowers. Afterwards, a friend of hers offered me sanctuary in their home by the Russian River, where I thought I needed to go to be in nature and sit in silence. Instead, writing poured out of me as I processed my grief. For a week I pulled a dilapidated old desk, eroded by years of sun and mist, out into the woods, moving it as the light crossed the sky so I could write under the shade of the forest. As I finished this writing, the desk disintegrated... piece after piece falling away as I wrote the last lines.

Although I wrote this a year ago, until now I've shared it with few beyond the Macy family. I felt that such an intimate piece required the family's blessing, and a year ago, during their height of grief, wasn't the time to ask for it. But as the anniversary of Joanna's passing approached, I sat down with her daughter again on that old yellow couch where we had sat together a hundred times. She and I had always been a good team. Now, she told me that it wasn't so much a blessing she was interested in giving... but that she wanted to explore the text until she arrived at a wholehearted yes. I told her I felt the same way.

She snuggled on the couch with the enormous Lucy the Goose, whose long neck lovingly wrapped around her, while I cuddled with the sweet teddy bear Helen. We read this piece together all cozy like that, and then we talked about a few things, and we made a few edits that made this remembrance exactly what it needed to be. And very soon she arrived at the wholehearted yes that really we both needed, and then we wandered down the street to her favorite local ice cream shop, where we ate delicious treats of chocolate and cardamom, and talked about the many other dimensions of our lives.

And so here it is. It means the world to me to be able to share this writing as we remember Joanna today, not only because it is an expression of my love, but because it is an expression of how deeply she was cared for in her final days... and because this world needs examples of such care.

As one of Joanna's favorite authors on grief, Frances Weller, writes: "Bringing grief and death out of the shadows is our spiritual responsibility, our sacred duty." Joanna believed in that spiritual responsibility, and so do I.

We grieve because we love. The dance of love and grief matures our soul. It is through engaging in this dance fully that we can offer our highest selves to the world... and can make our most important contributions to The Great Turning.