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WIDENING THE CIRCLE

Philip Novak

I MET JOANNA IN 1973 AT Syracuse University, where we had come, she a year earlier, to earn doctorates in the Department of Religion. I was twenty-three and just a year out of college. Joanna was forty-four and at a very different stage of life.

She and her husband, Fran, had already lived on four continents and raised three children, then eleven, fifteen, and nineteen years old. Twenty-five years earlier, Joanna had been a star student and campus leader at Wellesley College. Fluent in French, she took a post-undergraduate Fulbright year in France studying European Marxism and Jacques Ellul's seminal work in technology. At that point she thought perhaps her career path would follow those of her grandfather, his father, and his father, in service to the liberal Protestant church. But that vocation would soon slip underground for two decades until, via Syracuse, it resurfaced quite transformed as the inspired, trailblazing, and globetrotting Buddhist ecological and social justice activism of the second half of her life.

But there were a few other stops along the way. The Central Intelligence Agency had spotted the twenty-two-ish Joanna on their perpetual scan for American brainiacs. She accepted their job offer but knew within eighteen months that it wasn't for her. When she married Fran in 1953, she agreed to support his career in Soviet affairs, which took them to Munich where he worked for Radio Liberty. Joanna learned German well enough that twenty years later she could score a perfect eight hundred on her graduate German

exam and, later, publish translations of Rilke's poetry. American democratic idealists to their core, Joanna and Fran would soon experience the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 as a personal blow, confirming their Cold War concerns. Present at Kennedy's 1960 inaugural and moved by his charge to "ask what you can do for your country," they were ready when Fran was recruited to help run the American Peace Corps in India. Deputyships and directorships took them to successive two-year stints in India, Tunisia, and Nigeria. In India, friendships with Tibetan refugees led to Joanna's first serious encounters with the Buddhist ideas that would play an inestimably important role in her life.

At Syracuse, Joanna and I were classmates in Huston Smith's Buddhist Philosophy seminar—fortuitously, since the Dharma was destined to be our deepest bond. As our friendship developed, Joanna asked if I might babysit the kids for a couple of nights when she and Fran were out of town. I was honored but, lacking experience, a tad daunted. Needlessly. My delightful charges that weekend were sixteen-year-old Jack and twelve-year-old Peggy who, not really needing supervision, welcomed me warmly nonetheless. We too became friends.

I didn't know then that Joanna and Fran had been thinking about merging their family into a larger communal living situation. Inspired by the nascent American ecological movement and in the habit of walking their talk, they were hoping to live more simply and also to creatively disrupt their nuclear family roles. Joanna had another motive as well. She knew from direct experience how all too often the unwritten job description of the nuclear-family mom is to mastermind the universe on a daily basis. Communal living might redefine her role in a way that gave her more uninterrupted time to dedicate to her precious years of graduate study.

But Joanna and Fran would do none of this without Jack's and Peggy's consent. (Christopher, their eldest, was already living communally on The Farm in Tennessee.) A March weekend in 1975 marked, says Joanna, "a turning point in our lives." The Macys drove to Philadelphia to attend a Movement for a New Society workshop dedicated to "living more frugally and with less of an impact on the earth." Joanna was impressed to see from a distance that Jack and Peggy, separated from their parents and each other, were comfortable in "managing their own time and contacts and being treated as competent and interesting people in their own right." The workshop's content enthused them all. On the way back to Syracuse the four agreed: "Let's do it!" Two months later they sold their tidy single-family house in Dewitt to purchase 600 Allen Street, a sprawling, eight-bedroom fixer-upper near the university.

The Macys initially considered inviting a second family of parents and two children to join them, but Peggy vetoed this on grounds of insufficiently diverse generations. Much better, they eventually decided to bring in four singles—two men and two women—in their twenties and thirties. Thanks to my famous one-night stand of babysitting, I was one of them. All eight of us dove in gleefully, little suspecting that a distinctive era of our lives would forever after be dubbed "600 Allen." Joanna has called these days the dawn of one of the happiest adventures of Macy family life.

We did not pool income or assets, but we did share food costs and household responsibilities, setting up rosters for cleaning, shopping, and cooking dinner. We regularly checked the communication notebook at the back door to read or scrawl messages to one another. All of us joined Syracuse's New Environmental Association and the food co-op, where, in exchange for a few monthly hours of service, we enjoyed excellent produce. And we held a

weekly house meeting, the agenda for which always began with a wise little practice called Feeling Dealing, a chance to share as-yet-unshared feelings about our interactions. No one was required to share a feeling, and if one did, it might be simply to express thanks: “The mushroom gravy you made for Tuesday’s mashed potatoes made me feel downright loved.” But Feeling Dealing’s killer app was helping us deal with hurts that, if ignored, could poison our life in common. The reporter adhered to a simple verbal structure: “I felt X when you said (or did) Y.” For example, “I felt ignored when you said we didn’t need the heat turned up.” The reporter owned their feeling from the get-go instead of beginning with the typical and predictably counterproductive “You ignored me . . .” type of accusation. It made a world of difference and usually set the stage for swift and satisfying resolutions via clarifications or apologies. No small thanks to Feeling Dealing, 600 Allen was a happy and harmonious house.

How did Joanna and Fran balance relating to Peggy and Jack as their own incomparably beloved children and as two of eight equal housemates? During house meetings they never interfered with Jack’s or Peggy’s autonomy, even in those difficult moments when the teens might have been tempted to let their parents speak for them. Nor did Joanna and Fran ever even hint that Peggy’s or Jack’s responsibilities ought to be any different from everyone else’s. Yet I never witnessed a moment when they could doubt the reality of their parents’ special concern for them. Even within the communal dynamic there was plenty of opportunity for Peggy and Jack, as students and maturing teenagers, to enjoy their parents’ special solicitude, encouragement, and quality time. The Macys continued to hit the ski slopes together each winter, vacation together in the summer, and enjoy their familiar rituals and traditions throughout the year. Joanna and Fran hugged and

kissed their children and laughed with them. Not too surprisingly, the children's love for their parents has always been palpable.

An unforeseen opportunity to study abroad would limit my own time at 600 Allen to one year. Yet within the next seven years, unpredictably and for very different reasons, I and most of the Macys had relocated to the San Francisco Bay area. Here we and other Syracuse pals have remained in warm touch for nearly forty years, often congregating around the Macy dinner table, as we did after Huston Smith's 2017 memorial service. I like to think that nothing less than dharmic currents pulled Joanna and me out West and kept us there. After all, the great Buddhist scholar Edward Conze, concluding his late-1970s visit to the San Francisco Zen Center, cheekily proclaimed his discovery that Buddhism actually comprised not just two great schools but three: Theravada, Mahayana, and Bay Area.

Joanna mentions a time in her life, before I knew her, when an unskillful tendency for "everlasting seriousness" was bearing some unpleasant fruit. Yet my experience of Joanna's basic vibe has always been quite different, one of spacious love. It's safe to say that the Dhamma (Dharma) had something to do with this difference. "Who sees dependent arising sees the Dhamma; who sees the Dhamma sees dependent arising," said Gautama. No idea would be more foundational for Joanna's work, her thought, or her life than what she rightly calls the Buddha's central teaching, the dependent co-arising of all phenomena. It revealed to her "the awesome coherence of everything the Buddha thought and did," and in those words we hear her own recognition that would inspire everything else she would henceforth think and do. Its psychological entailment, of course, is that the separate self, also dependently arisen and thus empty of own-being, is a fiction, an insight matchlessly handy for sanding down even the gnarliest edges of our "ev-

erlasting seriousness.” But let me be clear—dependent co-arising did *not* make Joanna any less serious about the bodhisattva vow that would guide the rest of her life; rather, it allowed her access to that incomparable, selfless seriousness classically etched in the *Diamond Sutra*—working ceaselessly to save all beings from suffering while never forgetting that ultimately there are neither beings to save nor bodhisattvas to save them.

For many aspiring to walk along the Buddha’s eightfold path, the practice of meditation appears indispensable—as in the T-shirt imperative “Don’t just do something, sit there!” But Joanna’s self-described “innate itch for action and passion for justice,” while not dismissing sitting, have always tilted her dharma work in the direction of the imperative’s standard form: “Don’t just sit there, do something!” Even during her initiation into the Vajrayana some forty-five years ago, when she learned that one of her new Tibetan names meant “meditation,” she admitted having hoped for “something more active!” So much for names: active she has been!—in half a lifetime more than enough for ten. In her own way the ancient archetypal tension riddling every heart that aspires toward the good—how to balance the great ways of contemplation and action—was strikingly resolved. And her resolution of it, favoring the way of action, is to me as impressive and consequential as Thomas Merton’s famous resolution a generation earlier, favoring contemplation. Joanna’s activist writing and teaching have made an immeasurably great contribution to the American creation of socially engaged Buddhism, sending numberless waves of *dukkha* antidotes rippling across vast stretches of time and space. Countless present beings already are, and countless future beings surely will be, deeply grateful.