

Time For Us All To Come Out

Joanna Macy and Susan Moon interview Caitriona Reed

Caitriona (formerly Christopher) Reed is a Dharma teacher in Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing, and a long-time BPF member. She and her partner Michele Benzamin-Masuda are the founders and directors of Manzanita Village, a Buddhist retreat center in Southern California.

Joanna Macy is a BPF mentor and guide, a teacher, author, and activist doing anti-nuclear and deep ecology work worldwide. Her most recent book, *Coming Back to Life*, is reviewed on page 45 of this issue.

Together with Susan Moon, editor of TW, they talked in Joanna Macy's Berkeley living room, in June, 1998.

MACY: Caitriona, would you like to tell us a little bit about your life story?

REED: Just over a year ago I made it known that I am transsexual, and I started living as a woman. I have been practicing the dharma for over 20 years, and teaching since the early '80s. At the time I was convinced that I would be out of a job and out of a sangha, and that my teachers would really no longer have anything to say to me. But far from being defiled and rejected, I—so far, touch wood—seem to be accepted and acknowledged.

MACY: Before you came out, I knew that she—Caitriona—was there, and I asked you when I would meet her. I felt grief coming up that I might never know her. And you said not to worry; she'd come visit me sometime. But when you called to say you had actually done it, I shook with joy, but also felt profoundly challenged. I said to you, "Now we're all going to need to come out." I remember walking to my study that day, stopping in my tracks, and thinking, "How dare I do anything that doesn't answer my deepest joy."

REED: It's as if the fruits of 28 years of practice have fallen upon me all at once. I've known since childhood that there was some gender dissonance, but for years I also felt that there was probably nothing I could do about it and still maintain my credibility. Then, when I took that risk, what fell into place—or what fell away, I should say—was years of shame and conflict.

MOON: How did your practice help you to come out?

REED: My practice helped me to let go of my fear of anticipated consequences, and most importantly, it helped me reach out to people in my own community, to friends and teachers, like Joanna. I found more than support; I found joyful celebration—because they trusted something which I was only just coming to trust, which is the manifestation of truth.

MACY: In other words, you did not rely on some reified concepts of what the Dharma was; you relied instead on your own experience—your experience of shame and your experience of joy, your experience of your nature. The Buddha told us never to trust somebody who takes us away from our own experience. You had the courage to take life seriously. This is awesome!

REED: Everyone is afraid. Everyone has secrets, shameful secrets that have to do with our dreams and our sexuality, with our aging and dying. And to pretend that Buddhism somehow exempts us from addressing those, because there is some transcendent realm we can enter in meditation, seems to be an insult to the Buddha, an insult to the planet, an insult to our friends and to our teachers and to everything.

MOON: In changing your gender identity, you have changed something that not many people have changed. You've crossed a line that seems like a very big line to most people. So people are fascinated by your experience because of that. I don't think it's just an obsession with sexuality. I think it's that you have crossed a boundary that seems so uncrossable. Even while we say there's no fixed self, there's nothing more fixed in our minds than people's gender identity.

MACY: It's the first thing we want to know when a baby is born.

MOON: It's the first thing we want to know. So by pushing that edge for people, you help us think about what, if anything, is fixed. What does it actually mean to say that somebody is a man or a woman?

MACY: Or how have I limited my own understanding by assuming I have a fixed definition as male or female?

REED: Although I now live as a woman, I don't have the experience of having been born a girl-child and having grown up as a woman. I am not-man, not-woman. And now many people of many genders confide in me, saying that they, too, have had a discrepancy within their own identity. It turns out that instead of a rigid polarity of two genders, there's a spectrum which we're all a part of, and yet it's been unspoken because the taboo is so great. So now we're opening up that conversation.

However, in becoming a woman, I am in the process of changing my physiology through hormones. I find myself moving from a static state of endocrinological existence to a cyclical state. I see how chemically conditioned my mind and emotions are. It has been like moving from a monochromatic world into a very technicolor and sometimes shocking world.

MACY: With the hormonal change, what has shifted in the boundary between you and the world?

REED: I am happy to make a fool of myself now, because at least it's myself as I embody it. Perhaps as a man one tends to be a little more guarded. But I have nothing to lose now.

MACY: That's a beautiful definition of the Dharma: We have nothing to lose.

MOON: But Caitriona, I don't think your understanding of that truth comes from the fact that you're living as a woman. It comes from the fact that you have made a huge transition. Because as a person who has always lived as a woman, I feel like I would lose a lot by losing that identity. I'm not talking about status or advantage; I'm talking about basic identity.

MACY: Well, I think our second-class citizenship, the fact that we are viewed as the other, that we are dismissed so consistently, all this changes our perspective. I cut out from The New York Times yesterday an extraordinary front page article by Barbara Crossette on the rise of the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war in the last decade. There is such vulnerability in being a woman.

REED: And an added marginalization in being a transsexual.

MOON: You already know what it's like to live as a man, and now you are living as a woman. I wonder myself, as a feminist, whether you notice that you have less credibility with people now. But you don't just come to people as an ordinary woman, so maybe that's an unfair question.

REED: The feminist movement, in America especially, has created a uniformity of expression for women—for example, the makeup that may or may not be worn. There's also a clear bias within the traditional monastic Buddhist framework that decoration is not necessary; it's a ruse, a deception. Women have come to me and thanked me for giving them permission to adorn themselves in a way that they enjoy doing, but which their feminism or their Buddhism has prevented them from doing.

MOON: That may be true of Buddhism, yes, but I wouldn't want to blame feminism. The kind of feminism I feel connected to doesn't say anything bad about makeup.

REED: But the culture discriminates between women who are to be taken seriously and women who are not, according to how they adorn themselves. It's because of our obsession with sexuality. Adornment is seen as merely putting out sexual signals. I think that's a hopeless reduction of what is a celebration of our life.

I think the puritanical impositions on Buddhism are culturally based—and especially in America—on puritanical traditions, on the denial of Eros, rather than on an authentic understanding of the teachings of emptiness. The Buddha did not, as I understand it, suggest that we get rid of desire, but said rather that desire unacknowledged leads to craving and obsessive, addictive behavior. If we deny the desire

to begin with, we move into that obsessive, addictive behavior, even though it may be disguised as worthy and spiritual.

MACY: Our fear of the erotic has tinged every single religious tradition, not just Buddhism. This hierarchical view of Spirit over Matter, Mind over Flesh, Light over Dark, Male over Female has produced biopathic behavior. So the liberation of the erotic is crucially important at this point in our history. I see tremendous political relevance in what you've done, Caitriona. And I know you haven't done it for that.

REED: You can't do it for that.

MACY: I believe we're not going to save our world until we fall in love with it. And you've dared to do that. The Dharma path strikes me as profoundly erotic. Buddhism teaches us to pay attention, and if you put your attention mindfully on anything, you find love arising for whatever it is. A piece of shit. Anything. You put your attention on it and it reveals itself to you.

REED: It's also important to pay attention to the taboos of our society, the unspoken boundaries that we set for ourselves.

MOON: Speaking of boundaries, how did the boundary dissolve for you? You must have a picked a day when the pronoun changed from "he" to "she."

REED: Well, the day picked itself. I came out verbally while on retreat at a community in Santa Monica. I said, "I need to say that I am transsexual, and I am changing my life expression to manifest myself in a way that is not acceptable for a man to do. It's not that I am a woman in a man's body, because I don't buy the simplicity of that. It's very complex."

The response I had from my community was, "Don't worry—it's fine." People said things like, "Thank you, I feel unaccountably light and free for you having said that." All this came as a surprise to me.

About a year ago I was leading a retreat in Phoenix, and I was manifesting in a manner that was, to say the least, ambiguous. And I didn't say anything. I didn't excuse myself. I just led the retreat. In a discussion on the first day someone said, "I have to thank you. I expected to see someone with a shaved head and a robe, and I found you instead, and it undermined a lot of my expectations. Then I realized that's probably your job as a teacher."

MOON: Your refusal to accept a set definition seems important to me. To say, "This does not define me," is brave. Sometimes people do not have such a happy experience when they dare to come out and express who they really are. You took a risk. Sometimes when people take the risk of expressing themselves truthfully—in more political situations perhaps—it doesn't work out so well.

REED: A teacher I have great regard for, Ruth Denison, said to me recently, “But darling, of course it would be fine for you. The Dharma is protecting you.”

MACY: I would interpret her to be saying that the Dharma will protect you even if people reject you.

I’m thinking of Warren Beatty’s movie, “Bullworth,” about a senator who, when he expected to die, started to tell the truth. It did cost him his life, and yet it was enlivening for him to tell the truth.

REED: A crucial part of this has to do with my partner, with whom I’ve lived for 17 years.