

Celebrating the Life of Joanna Karl

August 18, 1951 – February 29, 2008

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it will destroy our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Howard Zinn



Joanna Karl was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on Aug. 18, 1951. Joanna died on Friday, Feb. 29, 2008 when she fell while working on her house.

She received her first bachelor's degree from Ohio University and completed a second bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from UC Santa Barbara.

In 1986, Joanna moved to Portland to work at Metro (the Portland area's regional government). She completed a master's degree in environmental engineering and was licensed as a professional engineer in 1993. While at Metro, she was especially excited about the opportunity to work on projects involving water conservation, rainwater harvesting and rooftop gardens. She worked at Metro until the time of her death.

Joanna was one of the most creative people we have ever known. An accomplished woodworker, she built harps, banjos, and hammered dulcimers, among much else. She also made clothing, outdoor gear and beautiful quilts, most of which she gave away as gifts to friends and family. She enjoyed photography, collage, and various other graphic arts, most of which, again, she gave away. Gifts were wrapped in beautiful used fabric, rather than new paper. She was especially gifted in repurposing paper, cloth, and other materials into new and useful works of art.

Joanna loved outdoor activities such as hiking and cross-country skiing and frequently took backpacking trips with her friends. She was also an energetic and playful contra dancer, laughing and smiling as she skipped and swung and spun down the line.

In an autobiographical sketch written in 1993, Joanna wrote, "I try to live simply, respect life, and to impact the natural environment as little as possible. I attempt to be consistent between my personal belief system and my lifestyle choices, [including] vegetarianism, bicycle commuting, and war tax resistance ... I am also an activist ... (hopefully) teaching by example ... It feels good when someone seeks me out for information or to excitedly report on their own lifestyle changes."

To a rare degree, Joanna truly did walk her talk. And she did it with a big smile!

In 2001, Joanna and a friend purchased a dilapidated house on Crystal Lake Drive in south Corvallis. Their plan for rebuilding the house included straw bale insulation, earthen plaster, sustainably harvested lumber, recycled metal roofing, and an adobe floor with radiant heating. Friends and neighbors joined in the project at a number of work parties.

Joanna is remembered as an exceptionally warm, generous and loving friend to many. Joanna's loving heart, wide smile, and outspoken concern for the Earth will be greatly missed.

Celebrations of Joanna's life were held over a vegetarian potluck and contra dance in Corvallis, on top of Mt. Tabor and various other venues in Portland, as well as in Cleveland, Ohio.

Donations of money or time in Joanna's name may be made to any organization which supports peace, social justice, or a healthy environment. But the very best way to honor Joanna's memory is to be generous and kind, ride your bicycle ... and smile!