



## Dr. Joan Borysenko, PhD

Joan Borysenko, PhD, is trained as a medical scientist and is a licensed psychologist. She received her doctorate from the Harvard Medical School where she also completed three post-doctoral fellowships. She is the co-founder and former director of the Mind/Body clinical programs at Beth Israel/Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and a former instructor in medicine at Harvard Medical School. A pioneer in integrative medicine, Joan's work encompasses creativity, women's issues, relationship-centered healing, spirituality, and the inter-religious dialogue. Author of twelve books and numerous audiocassette programs, she also writes a monthly column, "Staying Centered", which appears in *Prevention* magazine. Co-founder of the Claritas Institute for Interspiritual Inquiry, she directs the Interspiritual Mentor Training Program (IMTP), a two-year certificate course in spiritual direction.

## Change, Healing and Interspirituality: *An Interview with Dr. Joan Borysenko, PhD*

Interview by Matt Laughlin

**UE** (UnifiedEnergetics™) Thanks for taking the time to interview with us. I understand you're juggling a lot right now.

**JB** (Joan Borysenko) You're welcome; I'm happy to. I am juggling a lot; I'm just barely hanging in there. And here my field is about trying to simplify life and make work more fluid and meaningful....You know, the Universe has a real sense of humor. (Laughter)

**UE** That which you're moved to teach about you're required to know intimately, yourself, right? (Laughter)

**JB** That's absolutely true. We're in the midst of launching a new institute. I knew at the outset this new undertaking would mean taking a somewhat manageable full-time job and adding a second full-time job to it! (Laughter) It was just going to require biting the bullet and getting really fierce around my boundaries. I am, you could say, adjusting. (Laughter)

**UE** I definitely would love to talk with you about

the Institute. Given your diverse background I feel we could go anywhere. Let's begin with the book you recently co-authored with your husband Gordon Dveirin, titled, *Saying Yes to Change: Essential Wisdom for Your Journey*. What inspired you to write it?

**JB** Part of the inspiration came from the strong interest in the essence of change that we share. What forces initiate change? Why do people respond to change so differently? Why is it so hard to change even when we know that life would be so much better if we did? Gordon is an organization development consultant; he's a change agent for corporations. And I'm a change agent for individuals. I directed the Mind-Body clinical programs at two Harvard teaching hospitals for most of the 1980's, then in '93 my first book about change - *Fire in the Soul: A New Psychology of Spiritual Optimism* - was published. It was inspired by the patients who were my teachers - and this is so relevant to the readers of *UnifiedEnergetics™*. Most of my patients were in a process of unwanted change brought about by illness. Life as they knew it had ended suddenly, and they were caught unawares in the space between

the no longer and the not yet. With a serious illness, you die to who you are the moment you get the diagnosis, but are not yet reborn to whom you might become. Some people undergo positive spiritual and psychological transformations in the process, and illness becomes a valuable teacher for them. Others despair and give up. I became fascinated with the difference between those two diverse outcomes.

As Gordon and I were sharing our experiences across our different sectors, we both realized that change occurs in the same way as a traditional rite of passage. There is no question about it. A rite of passage characteristically has three parts: separation from the known world, then the chaotic wandering in the wilderness, and then the return with some gift to the community. In our fast-paced society, very few of us like to lurk in the wilderness looking for the Promised Land. There is a societally sanctioned tendency to rush through the situation and seek resolution, rather than getting quiet and waiting to receive guidance for the next phase of the journey.

As we began our conversations about the change process, we were undergoing significant personal changes in our own lives, as we had decided we would get married. (Laughter) Marriage is a welcome change but, nonetheless, one that entails moving house and changing work patterns. We spent a lot of time preparing the field for change - we took a lot of quiet time and also combined two old households into one harmonious new one. In the field of beauty and co-creativity that we established, two Divine seeds landed and started to sprout. One was the cheeky idea to write a book about change together. The other was to combine our other common interest - in spiritual growth - and to start an institute that approached that from a spiritual, but not religious, framework - the Claritas Institute for Interspiritual Inquiry.

That's how our ongoing work partnership came about. The book *Saying Yes to Change*, which was published in January of 2006, just after our first anniversary, was our first collaborative dance. We're writing a new book now on spiritual guidance, and we've learned a lot about how to do it and how not to do it from writing the book on change. Life is a mystery, a trip into the unknown. You can never know the final outcome. But when you get a strong sense that it's time to do something, then it's a grace and a sacred duty to carry the project through to completion. So, that's what *Saying Yes to Change* was all about; taking a bold step into a new life together that was greater than the sum of its previous parts.

**UE** Of the many themes in the book, there is an emphasis on this shift from an external to internal

focus, really taking the time to be quiet in a significant cycle of change. Would you comment on that theme?

**JB** Yes. In our society, when something changes significantly, we're taught to take control to try and manage the anxiety that arises, to always know what's next. That usually has to do with an outside focus. For example, you lose your job. For many people, the instant response is to get on the Internet, get on your network, and e-mail your friends - to start looking for the next thing instantly. Most commonly, our initial focus is external.

Yet, there is a way of focusing internally - of waiting, of listening. Much like Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein's book title, *Don't Just Do Something, Sit There*. When we're focused internally and take the time to get centered, remarkable things can happen; we begin to notice what is really going on for us and can catch the scent of where the higher life wants to take us. We get more mindful of our feelings, and what it is that we genuinely want to be doing. We're less likely to simply recreate the old situation. We're more open to something new and potentially transformative coming to us and through us.

This is the point at which I always get sheepish talking about metaphysical things. I'm a scientist and my training is that you don't teach things that haven't been thoroughly researched. The whole point of scientific research is reproducibility and certainty. But, nonetheless, in terms of empirical research, of noticing things in my own life and the lives of many people over the years, I've noticed certain things about centering. When we take time to



be quiet, to get comfortable in our own skin, something remarkable often happens. The road opens in front of us, and synchronicities abound. Perhaps a friend calls and says something like, “Heard you left your job and I wanted to let you know the company where I work is hiring” or “Hey, I just heard about this great graduate program,” or whatever it is that might help you find your way.

There is something about coming into a sense of alignment and harmony within. Again, here is the metaphysical part that I can't address scientifically; somehow we come into right relationship - harmony with a larger flow - and the path opens up because we were still and watchful; not because we did something. So my sense is that perhaps an unexpected path, or guided path, however you understand that in your own framework, opens up. Instead of just doing the only thing I know how to do, something infinitely richer, and often entirely unexpected, awaits me in the silence and stillness of patience - and in the practice of dwelling in the unknown with willingness and curiosity.

**UE** That reminds me of another pearl I appreciated in your book, which was the statement, ‘rather than trusting that things are going to be alright, is trusting that they are already alright’, this idea that life moves from complete to complete, from whole to whole, rather than incomplete to complete.

**JB** That is a very good way of putting it. Seeing it from incomplete to complete leads to one of the greatest sources of suffering, which is attachment to wanting something to be a certain way; resulting in disappointment if it isn't. It's a really interesting thing to ask; how in the midst of something happening that I don't like; how in the midst of experiencing thoughts and emotions that I don't like; how can I still track with and find what spiritual teacher Rose Mary Dougherty calls “the vector of love” and growth in what's happening?

**UE** That question seems very much to be at the heart of the The Claritas Institute for Interspiritual Inquiry that you recently co-founded.

**JB** It is. The impetus to begin Claritas was a little bit like the impetus to write *Saying Yes to Change*. For years, Gordon and I have both had an enormous interest in the nature of transformation. That led to the question; “What is the nature of spiritual mentoring - companioning another person in their journey of growth and transformation?” How can you sit with another person in a way that is not about giving advice, but is about listening very deeply and inviting the other into the mystery of not-knowing from which authentic guidance arises? This is similar to what

our Catholic friends might call spiritual direction or soul friending. What is the skill set involved in that sacred relationship? As we were thinking about these questions, we invited one of my dearest life-long friends, Dr. Janet Quinn, into the conversation. Janet is a nurse PhD and she and I have worked together for many years in the field of mind/body medicine and healing.

Janet is both a spiritual director, and a supervisor of spiritual directors. Companioning others on their journey is dear to her heart, as is silence and alignment with the Source of Being. She is an expert in the place between no longer and not yet - a phrase that she is famous for. The three of us began to work together and to entertain the idea of starting a school to train spiritual mentors - not within a recognized tradition where there is a certain type of spiritual formation - Catholic, Jewish, Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu or Protestant, for example. We are interested instead in what the late Brother Wayne Teasdale called interspirituality - the place where mystics of any tradition can share the same ultimate experiences at depth. A place beyond dogma and belief, which he called the mystic heart. It was his belief that interspirituality could pave the way to build a civilization with a heart, where religious-based wars and persecution would cease. Janet, Gordon and I outlined a set of practical, teachable, spiritual competencies that any motivated person of good heart can embody. These, by the way, are what any excellent healthcare provider - who is also a healer - intuitively embodies.

Gordon and I were both friends of Brother Wayne. We were with him during his last public appearance at an interfaith conference, a couple of years back in Vancouver, BC, where I was the moderator. Wayne had written a book called *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*. It is a profound inquiry on the nature of interspirituality, a word Father Thomas Keating coined and that Wayne expanded upon. What is this place of depth, where regardless of what religion you're from (or not from) you can stand on common ground and have a meaningful, heartfelt conversation with any other serious spiritual seeker? Gordon and I were both galvanized with the realization that interspirituality was the future, the path to a new global consciousness that might transform our troubled world. We spoke with people like Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Father Thomas Keating, both wonderful teachers. We all recognized the value and potential that interspirituality holds. Yet, the fact of the matter is that all the spiritual teachers we've been in conversation with agree that interspirituality is still a glimmer in our collective eye - a quickening, but not yet born. We're all trying, in our own way, to give birth to this new evolu-

tionary possibility.

**UE** And this inspired the creation of an institute dedicated to that inquiry?

**JB** Yes. We asked whether it might be possible to create a community of people who want to develop the deep spiritual competencies of stillness, listening, non-judgment, open-heartedness, mindfulness, curiosity, and inquiry. How can we train people in these qualities and competencies so that they can work with individuals from any spiritual tradition, including people who are spiritual but not religious? Our first class in the Claritas Interspiritual Mentor Training Program - with about 50 students from the United States and as far away as Columbia, South American and the Yukon - has just been wonderful. It's a group of people who said, YES, we're interested in this experiment. We're interested in seeing what, in essence, a community of inquiry can bring forth, a community where there is no dogma; where instead, deep queries about the movement of spirit in our lives are what guide us. As a program, there is a fair amount of work involved. It is academically rigorous, yet people can do it in the context of coming once every six months for five days, four times, and then working independently in between at a distance over phonebridge and on the Internet. We're having an amazing and inspiring collective experience. The transformations and insights that our students - and the faculty - are reporting are beyond anything that any of us could ever have imagined.

**UE** Claritas holds three fundamental principles: alignment, discernment and action. How do you see these principles meaningfully relating to the practice of medicine among healthcare professionals of different disciplines?

**JB** These three fundamental principles are at work in every area of our lives. We all know in our bodies what it feels like to be alignment with the Source of Being; we know there is a sense of balance, a feeling of aliveness within us that guides our actions and creates health and flow in our life. Alignment happens when there is less obstruction to that life force; when we embody it. In terms of the spiritual metaphor, we are present to the essence of our true nature rather than our limited, egoic self. Alignment with true nature means shedding the false self - our reactivity, conditioning and tired, old, self-centered stories that get in the way of functioning freshly in the present moment. That is exactly, you could say, part of what a chiropractor is doing; removing the obscurations to ease and balance at a physical level.

At another level, alignment opens us to a sense of flow; to being present in the moment; to being

present to what we feel; to being present to other people; to being present and curious about the world unfolding around us. It's what allows us to be freshly born, moment by moment. And in that fresh birth, to see with new eyes. "Oh, this is what's actually going on here now." Curiosity dissolves reification—setting the world into stone (like seen one sunset, seen them all) - and opens us to new depths of relationship with the world. So another way to talk about alignment is right relationship with life. Relationship opens us to guidance; it really opens us to the other principles you mentioned.

**UE** Discernment and action.

**JB** Exactly. Of course, the question of discernment is always an interesting one. Take someone in medical practice, for example. It's interesting to ask, okay, how do I discern the best treatment for a person? This brings to mind indigenous healers of different cultures, who acknowledge that even the same herb is not appropriate for different people - it can cure one and be neutral or even injurious for another. This is also true in Chinese medicine. The same herb may not be appropriate; it depends on the flow of the life force within a person, the balance of the humors, etc. In some indigenous cultures, healers would actually dream the right herb for the right person.

Today, there are all kinds of algorithms for ethical practice, for what might be the best form of practice in different contexts. But most medical practitioners, whether nurse, medical doctor, chiropractor or naturopath, will tell you that a great deal of what





they do is based on a balance between the knowledge they have, standards of ethical practice, and an intuitive knowing derived from years of observation. This conglomerate of “knowing” is what’s really going on in modern clinical practice. So we’re not so different from more traditional forms of medicine because we also use intuition, even if it isn’t spoken about.

As a practitioner, your own ability to be present; your own ability to align with Source; your own ability to get your busy mind out of the way to tune into the moment, allows you to discern more easily the correct course of action. And here again, I have to disengage the scientific part of myself from the spiritual; but there is something in this that goes beyond book knowledge. A great deal of healing, when you see a healthcare provider, has to do with the quality of that person’s presence. It’s way beyond the question of whether they prescribed the correct pharmaceutical or the right herb, or whether they adjusted the correct vertebrae - whatever the technique or approach might be. Something nonlinear happens. A field of harmony is created that entrains the body like a giant tuning fork. The greatest gift we can give to our clients, to our family, and to the world is ultimately the quality of our own presence. That’s the main thing that we’re developing as a community at Claritas; a clearer sense of what it means to show up with presence and heart in all the situations of our lives.

Of course, out of that comes the right action. We live in the world of dualism, where we extract a three-part movement of alignment, discernment and action from something that is really a unified field. But there has to be a way to talk about it, so what the hell. (Laughter)

**UE** Your vision, as articulated in your literature, is to bring science, medicine, spirituality, and psychology together in service of healing. Part of this includes consciousness itself. In your book, you write ‘consciousness is the secret energy, that natural intelligence that both does the work of transforming us and is the nature of transformation itself.’ In your experience, does it seem more healthcare professionals are acknowledging the presence of this underlying substrate of consciousness in transformation and healing? Is there something bringing people together across disciplines?

**JB** You know, it’s hard for me to answer that question and I’ll tell you why. I moved from Boston and the Harvard scene to Boulder in 1992. I promptly received a postcard from Dr. Bernie Siegel, and Bernie said to me, “Joan, you’ve made a big mistake moving to Boulder because you’re going to start thinking that everyone thinks like you do.” (Laughter)

**UE:** So very true! (Laughter)

**JB** Yes, so very true (Laughter). I’m so steeped in a unified consciousness of healing and flow, living in this community. Its important for me to remember that this has become my filter, and to stay open to observing how other people across the country are really thinking because Boulder is not the exactly the mainstream. (Laughter) Since I am known as a health professional who thinks in the psychospiritual terms that we’ve been discussing, fascinating people will show up to hear me speak in the most unlikely settings; in the midst of academia, in hospitals across the country - places you might not expect. Medical professionals show up and have conversations with me and say yes to the question you just asked - is something bringing people together across disciplines? Once again, the old scientist here; I don’t know if there are any polls or data that really look at the question of whether medical consciousness is changing. I know what I’d like to believe. I’d like to believe there is a transformation in consciousness toward a more holistic perspective in the world of healthcare.

**UE** Would you speak to some of the more formative teachers, or inspiring mentors or individuals in your life, people who have been pivotal in shaping who you are and what you offer the world?

**JB** Well, that’s an interesting question, because what comes to mind are the people that I have lived with - from my family of origin, to my mates, my children, and now my four grandchildren-- all the way to being a newlywed again at 60. I experience spiritu-

ality as a down-to-earth journey, where the people closest to you are your teachers and companions. You can have millions of theories. You can be a Buddhist, you can be a Sufi, you can understand the kleshas (mind poisons) and every cause of suffering, you can practice loving-kindness, you can take communion and you can get inspiration from endless sources. But the real question of who mentors you in your life, of how you put these practices into action, comes down to your own family, friends and work situation - and generally for most of us, that's a mixed bag. There is both - hopefully - so much love there, together with a modicum of, shall we say, challenges. (Laughter)

It was recently the 17th anniversary of my mother's death, and I've been thinking a lot about her this week. As I look back, I would say my mother, with whom I had a truly difficult relationship, was my greatest teacher. I see changes in the ongoing relationship with my three children as I get older and it makes me delve more deeply into the inquiry of what it means to allow them to be themselves without judgment. How to let go of the conditioning of my own childhood, the stuff that I wear as blinders, and wake up before I lay that on them? Or at least catch myself and make amends.

And what is it all about to come into this new marriage consciously and with an unbending intention for kindness; where finally I've grown enough to be with someone who has also grown enough to be with me, and here we are together... So while I've studied with a lot of inspiring spiritual teachers, I would say the true inspiration has been my family and my friends, both through love and through difficulty, error, and all the rest of that; that's where life and learning happen. That's the journey - the great adventure. Where does the old saying come from, if you want to make rapid spiritual progress, don't go

to a monastery, get married. (Laughter)

**UE** That brings to mind the importance of meeting someone where they are, making these - spiritual principles, if you will - meaningful to people. It brings to mind the merit and beauty of ordinariness.

**JB** That's right. You know, if you can't meet someone in life as it is happening right now, understanding the lens through which they see the world, then it simply means you can't meet them. Or rather, that the meeting you have is not going to be a truly relational meeting, much in the spirit of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, speaking of 'I and thou.' If you can't meet them where they are, the reason that you can't, the very definition of that, is that some part of you is in judgment and can't be in the moment for whatever is unfolding for the other person or for yourself.

Whether I'm showing up in an "I-it" or an "I-thou" relationship is a potent inquiry. If I can't meet someone heart to heart, I have to look within and ask, "Where is my pride, where is my fear, what is it that's giving rise to judgment, keeping me from truly relating to the other here and now?" Without the "I-thou" as a healthcare provider or as a teacher, I'm maybe as good as an online encyclopedia. The field of presence and transformation - that attunement to the Source of Being that I might bring to the table - is the most crucial part of being a healer or teacher, which in the end is the same job description.

**UE** Reading your work gives me this sense of a keen appreciation on your part to authentically communicate the depth of what you write about in a practical and accessible way without compromising the integrity of the message or teaching. Is that a constant challenge for you?





**JB** That is a constant challenge for me. One of the biggest challenges is to realize that we develop a kind of lingo, a kind of understanding amongst people who have done this stuff for a long time and that, in fact, it's jargon. The average person wouldn't know a klesha from an armpit. (Laughter) So, it's not good to use that term in certain circles. I write a monthly column for Prevention magazine; it's my third year now. They've been great like that, because every once and awhile they'll send a column back and say "Hey, you know, you missed the mark here; this is full of jargon, let's get real." And I realize, "Oh no kidding, that was full of jargon." I'm grateful, because that feedback has kept me honest.

I think it is really easy to become insular and parochial. I am always trying to stay accessible to people who might not think of themselves as on a spiritual path; I'm not a spiritual teacher from a venerable lineage like Pema Chödrön or Father Thomas Keating. It's not my role to work with advanced practitioners who have spent years being formed in a specific spiritual tradition. I like to keep whatever I teach accessible enough to anyone, and for the more advanced on the path, still a statement of something that is useful, though maybe in a more practical, ordinary way than the teachings they've been immersed in.

**UE** Was it difficult to arrive at that kind of clarity regarding your role?

**JB** Absolutely - it's taken a lifetime or most of one. I think it is vital for all of us to get a sense of what our gifts and talents are. How are we going to serve those gifts? Because when we do, those gifts will serve others; they're given for us to use not just for ourselves, but for the community we're part of. I'm a good synthesizer, I'm articulate and I have the capacity to make things clear and simple. And that's what I try to do. (Laughter) That was the fun part about writing *Saying Yes to Change*. Gordon is a much more complex and rich thinker; he has a library in his mind, quite literally. When people asked during the writing process, "How is it going?," I'd shake my head and say, "Oh my God, it's like Kierkegaard meets Peanuts."

**UE** What's on the horizon now?

**JB** Claritas is on the horizon, and the new book that Gordon and I are writing. We've just finished the research. It has been the most exciting book I've ever worked on. The title is *The Golden Compass: Living a Spiritually Guided Life* and it will be published in August of 2007. We live in a time of great chaos and spiritual indirection; people are hungry for meaning and for purpose. It's so easy to get your head full of ideas about what meaning and purpose might be, some of which are useful, some of which may not be. We decided we would interview a variety of people. We met with Hindus, Sufis, Buddhists, Jewish Rabbis, Catholic priests, Episcopal priests, indigenous healers, Quakers, assorted spiritual teachers; a very interesting group. We asked them all variants of the same twelve questions about the nature of guidance. What a great gig! We were exposed to a depth of interspiritual teachings that we hadn't ever been in conversation about before.

In terms of our nascent understanding of interspirituality, we're seeing that what really comes out is the value of not knowing. It's thinking that we do know that can close the gates to wisdom and curiosity. Stillness, compassion and humility are portals to presence and guidance. Understanding, applying and teaching what we have learned is the next thing on the horizon. And who knows what comes after that? I never know what's going to happen next. I'm always just thrilled when I wake up and there's another day, another horizon. (Laughter) It's like, whoopee, I'm still here! (Laughter).

**For more information on the Claritas Institute for Interspiritual Inquiry see the website [www.ClaritasInstitute.com](http://www.ClaritasInstitute.com). For more information on Joan's work, and for her workshop schedule, go to [www.JoanBorysenko.com](http://www.JoanBorysenko.com).**