

COMMONWEAL

com•mon•weal (n) kōm'an-wēl noun 1. The public good or welfare 2. Archaic: a commonwealth.

April 16, 2006

Dear Commonweal Friends:

I hope this letter finds you well. I write to you on the Monday after Passover and Easter. These holy days are ancient celebrations of Spring and of rebirth. Spring is here in all its beauty.

Bolinas has experienced the wettest March on record. April so far is just as wet. The experience has made us all amateur hydrologists, studying the movement of water and guiding it where we can to minimize the threat to our roads and homes. The biggest danger is to houses close to the high cliffs overlooking the ocean. Heydendahl House, the retreat house in Bolinas bequeathed to Commonweal last year by Don Heydendahl, is about fifteen feet from one of the steepest cliffs in town. We are hoping for the best. At Commonweal, a swath of our "magic forest" 15 feet wide and several hundred feet long slid down the cliff about three feet. It is very dramatic. If you walk the beach from Bolinas out to Commonweal you see dozens of slides from below. All of the Commonweal buildings are safe, fortunately, far enough back from the area of the "magic forest" slide to give us some comfort.

Charlotte Brody's Leadership of Commonweal

The weather is wet, but Commonweal is thriving. Charlotte Brody is doing superb work as Executive Director. Her leadership is felt everywhere in our community. Her wisdom, capaciousness, and cheerful steadiness are a gift to us all. Surrounding Charlotte is a circle of extraordinarily gifted people who have worked together for decades as each of us is particularly called to serve. So the sense of renewal, of vitality, of possibility is everywhere at Commonweal. You will find her report in the Commonweal Letter that accompanies this personal letter from me.

On Being an Elder at Commonweal

I am working more wisely, and perhaps more productively, if not harder, than I ever have before. The joy of being an elder in the Commonweal community is like the joy of being a grandparent. What I treasure most is the sense of spaciousness. I have time to plant a pear tree that captured me with its strong young branches and full white blossoms at the Bolinas Nursery.

I believe that in this spaciousness, in this right balance of life and work, wisdom about life is most readily found. Thomas Merton wrote some famous lines about activism and overwork that have always stayed with me:

There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence...[and that is] activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence.

The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.



The thousand tasks that might help repair the world glitter with urgency and importance. I can only do a few of these tasks well. I remain deeply engaged with the Cancer Help Program. We recently completed our 128th Cancer Help Program retreat. My other major focus is the Collaborative on Health and the Environment. Beyond the Cancer Help Program and the Collaborative on Health and the Environment, I am working on a new Commonweal Autism Project. I continue to be engaged with the Commonweal Heart Program. I work with Charlotte on the strategic direction of Commonweal. And I am following an intuition to think more about where practical wisdom—wisdom that touches us, wisdom we can live by—may be found. Throughout each day I savor a pace at which work itself is a joy and a recreation, and in which there is time for nature, for music, for art, for ideas, and for friends and family.

Regenerative Design in The Commonweal Garden

One of the greatest delights at Commonweal is the extraordinary renewal of the Commonweal Garden. James Stark and Penny Livingston Stark have brought a renewal of energy to the Garden that recalls the energy William Cambier and Avis Rappaport, the founders of the Garden, brought to the Garden thirty years ago. Penny and James have become close friends with Avis. Once again the Garden is bursting with the energy of incredibly committed people.

There is nothing more extraordinary in this time of widespread pessimism than to watch one of the Garden classes held at the Julie Nielsen Library at the Commonweal Main Building. I peek through the glass doors and see young people teaching other young people how to make real a shared vision of a beautiful light way for humans to live on this earth.

I was asked earlier this month to speak about healing gardens at the opening of the Bolinas Art and Garden Show. Since I am not a gardener, I asked Penny Livingston Stark to open the talk with a discussion of what she and James mean when they describe the Garden as a center of Permaculture and regenerative design. Penny explained that Permaculture sees humanity not as a mistake and a blot on the earth, but as a keystone species that can in fact make the earth more fertile and more abundant than the earth could be without the human presence. She and James founded the Regenerative Design Institute to bring their own unique vision to the field of Permaculture.

That vision of the necessary role of humanity in the regeneration of the earth has deep roots in the faith traditions around the world that see men and women as stewards of creation. It is one thing to think of this stewardship role in an abstract sense. It is quite another thing to be in the presence of bright, promising, educated young people who have taken a different path—from the instrumentalism of modern career-oriented education. These young people have taken up this earth stewardship as a life challenge. They are enacting this vision not just in policy or advocacy roles, but in the hands on role of physicians and healers of the earth itself.

In this respect, the Garden has deep resonances with the Cancer Help Program and the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness at Commonweal. Just as the Cancer Help Program and ISHI work directly with helping people with cancer and physicians to heal, so the Garden works directly with helping the earth to heal. This direct healing work has an energy about it that changes everyone who comes into its orbit. It is from this direct work with health and illness, with the soil, with animals and the fertility of the earth, that our policy and advocacy work ultimately derives its strength.

Just before Penny and I spoke at the Art and Garden show, I came up to the Garden and walked the land with Penny. The inspiration and joy I felt as we walked through the Garden is hard to put into words. In my talk to my Bolinas neighbors, I spoke of three levels at which the concept of healing gardens and regenerative design resonates for me in Commonweal's work.

First, as the great Rockefeller University scientist René Dubos said, to achieve a sustainable world we must learn to cultivate the whole earth as a garden. It is only if we bring a gardener's understanding of the deep interplay of human intention and the generativity of nature that we will achieve regenerative design on earth.

Second, if we are to achieve regenerative design at a national and global level, we must start in our own communities and workplaces by seeing them as gardens, and asking how we can cultivate a gardener's vision of community and organizational regeneration.

Third, and most important, we can only do this outer work if we cultivate the inner garden of our own psyche. And it is no accident that in so many spiritual traditions, the garden appears as symbolic of that meeting place where love and will, generative power and intention, come together in the balance that we call wisdom.

The Commonweal Autism Project

The Commonweal Autism Project is a small but fascinating project at the interface of our work in the Collaborative on Health and the Environment and Commonweal's long tradition of work with at-risk children.

There has been a great deal of media attention to an apparent epidemic increase in the incidence of autism. Some researchers dispute whether the increase in autism is real. Thousands of parents, their health care providers, and some researchers across the country believe that the epidemic is real.

Some of these parents believe that mercury, especially from vaccines that contain thimerosal, contributes to the development of autism in some children. This has been a particularly controversial and well-publicized claim. Whatever the merits of this claim, it may be that mercury exposure from vaccines is a particular case of a much more important claim, namely that environmental exposures may play a role in the etiology of autism. Many parents believe that their children do less well in environments where they are exposed to contaminants to which they have been sensitized, and do better in a chemical-free environment with organic foods.

Clinicians and researchers exploring these claims are developing a new paradigm of autism. They see autism as a complex condition in which inherited vulnerabilities interact with diverse environmental exposures that contribute to the development of the disease. This new paradigm suggests that the disease is treatable, and that some autistic children may improve or even recover with treatment. This paradigm contrasts with the current medical view that autism is an entirely genetic condition, that it is essentially untreatable, that neither vaccines nor nutrition nor other toxic substances have anything to do with its cause or its treatment.

A year ago, we held a small conference at Commonweal with a group of researchers, clinicians, and parents or relatives of children with autism who, to varying degrees, share these beliefs. We started with a public symposium at University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine where Elizabeth Horn, founder of the Autism Recovery Consortium, previewed an early version of her new film that shows children recovering from autism. We also presented a series of talks by leading researchers and clinicians with experience with these recovering children.

This debate is, for me, deeply intriguing. It takes place on clinical and scientific territory I first explored in 1972-74 when Carolyn Brown and I started Full Circle School in Bolinas, a year after I arrived in town, to explore the role of nutrition in the learning and behavior disorders of children. With a grant

from the Ford Foundation, I traveled around the country visiting researchers and clinicians who claimed that nutritional interventions helped these children. One of the researchers I visited in San Diego was Bernard Rimland, the founder of DAN!, the Defeat Autism Now Network, one of the central gathering points of patients and health providers who believe in the epidemic, the vaccine hypothesis, and the reality of recovery.

One of the physicians I met in those early years was Robert Sinaiko, M.D., who became interested in these claims in part as a result of visiting with me and Carolyn, and who developed an allergy and immunology practice that worked with these children.

Martha Herbert, M.D., an extraordinary physician-researcher at Harvard Medical School, has been my guide to the serious and balanced investigation of these claims by a group of mainstream researchers at Harvard, Columbia, and the University of California Davis. Martha is one of the leading researchers of this new paradigm of autism that would provide a theoretical basis for the observations of the parents and clinicians who are reporting that some children recover on programs that include nutritional and detoxification strategies.

Commonweal has undertaken, with Martha Herbert and Bob Sinaiko, to develop a research database that would document some of the best-established cases of children with autism who are reported to have recovered or greatly improved. The design of the protocol, with Martha as the principle investigator, is underway. We have also helped convene an Autism Strategy Group which is exploring the best ways to move the dialogue on the new paradigm of autism into the mainstream of research and clinical practice. Our second annual conference on the new paradigm of autism will take place, in conjunction with a Continuing Medical Education seminar for health professionals at the University of California Davis, in November.

Cultures of Integrative and Environmental Health

The question of whether and at what speed the new paradigm of autism moves into mainstream credibility is a specific example of a broader phenomenon in medicine and health. Thirty years ago, I thought the most promising alternative therapies for cancer, heart disease, learning and behavior disorders and many other conditions would be evaluated. If efficacious, I expected them to find their way into mainstream medicine. I share with Andrew Weil, M.D., and many others a belief in the desirability of a single “integrative medicine” based empirically on what works.

There is significant progress toward an integrative medicine. But an equally important social phenomenon is the resilient growth of different distinct “cultures” of medicine and health. What has happened, in autism, cancer, heart disease, and many other conditions is that complementary and alternative medicine seem unlikely to fully “integrate” with mainstream medicine. While mainstream medicine is being affected by these complementary streams in healthcare, the complementary streams appear here to stay.

This fragmentation of cultures of health care reflects, I believe, the broader cultural arc toward a multicultural society and a multicultural world. Healthcare is increasingly multicultural because the world is increasingly multicultural. Nor is this just the result of the encounter of different cultures in the traditional sense. It is a commonplace of marketing research that broad “markets” are losing market share to “niche markets” as technology makes it increasingly possible to target the specific preferences of different demographic niche groups.

I believe my earlier faith that new and promising complementary therapies would be tested and merge into a single integrative medicine did not give sufficient credit to the possibility that we would all become “multiculturalists” in health care as well as in consumer goods, media, and politics.

Cultures of Health and the Collaborative on Health and the Environment

We see these multicultural perspectives on health in the Collaborative on Health and the Environment. The Collaborative, described in the Commonweal Letter, is a national and increasingly international partnership of individuals and organizations concerned with human health and the environment. I have written about its progress in the Commonweal Letter. The Collaborative has given me the opportunity to enter a much broader array of “disease tribes” than I ever did before.

As the Collaborative on Health and the Environment now has over 2000 Individual and Organizational Partners, we find that across a wide range of disease tribes there are different clusters of economic and professional interest and different cultures of belief. Epidemiologists pursue classic epidemiological studies. Scientists and physicians are interested in the environmental health science revolution and the new understanding of mechanisms of causation. Government officials worry about the policy implications of the environmental health science revolution. Environmental health activists are interested in recruiting leaders of the disease tribes into specific environmental health campaigns. Patient advocates from smaller patient groups are interested in finding the best of both conventional and complementary approaches to treatment. Representatives of larger patient groups seek to balance patient interest in complementary therapies and the new environmental health sciences with the scientific conservatism of their medical research directors. Advocates of complementary and alternative medicine seek mainstream credibility for the therapies they believe in.

Within the Collaborative, the environmental health science revolution is driving an understanding of the immense complexity of the interactions between genetic inheritance, gene expression as modified by a wide range of environmental factors, environmental contaminants, nutrition, stress, exercise, ethnicity, income disparities, and other factors affecting health outcomes. Paradoxically, the driving power of the environmental health science revolution, while demonstrating the important role of chemicals in health in some respects, is also increasing uncertainty about the precise contribution of these contaminants because of the extraordinary complexity of the interactions that lead to specific health outcomes.

The policy and advocacy struggle is over what to do with this uncertainty. Chemical industry advocates say: if scientific uncertainty exists, do nothing until we have scientific certainty. Environmental health advocates say: scientific uncertainty exists, but the preponderance of the evidence indicates a strong probability of harm, therefore act with precaution to reduce chemical exposures.

Researchers and scientists face competing pressures with respect to these scientific uncertainties. On the one hand, the evidence of the environmental health science revolution is compelling. On the other hand, there are few economic incentives to follow a career in environmental health sciences. There are many incentives to focus on medical technologies and pharmaceutical interventions.

A very similar struggle over scientific uncertainty takes place between conventional and complementary approaches to treatment. Some mainstream researchers and conservative mainstream physicians say: we do not have clear evidence of the efficacy of complementary and alternative medicine, so do not use these modalities until they are proven effective. Advocates for these therapies say: the environmental health science revolution strengthens our case for the interactive role of diet, stress, exercise and other factors in chronic disease. Thus the new environmental health science makes it very plausible that these therapies help in health promotion and disease prevention.

These strong differences of opinion about what to do about scientific uncertainty in personal health and public health cannot in principle be decided on the basis of science. The decisions must be based on personal and public values and beliefs. Patients are strongly driven to use both mainstream-experimental

and complementary therapies—neither of which are typically proven effective—because existing therapies are so often palliative at best.

The truth is that in an increasingly stressed world, health promoting complementary therapies and lifestyles that increase resilience and reduce toxic exposures and stress make a tremendous amount of common sense. The more we understand about the complexity of interactions between genetic and environmental factors affecting health, the clearer it is that strategies of health promotion and disease prevention must be pursued both in our personal lives and through public health measures. Eat right, exercise, reduce stress, and work for sensible public health measures that promise us clean air, pure water, safe foods, safe homes, safe products, and safe places to work.

Where Is Wisdom Found?

The theme of this letter, I realize, weaves in and out of the role of multiculturalism as it affects our understanding of personal and public health. How do we find the practical wisdom to guide our choices in health, and more broadly in life, in a multicultural world?

My reading this year has focused on the question of where we find wisdom in our lives. I do not mean academic wisdom, but rather wisdom to live by. For the first two years after my heart attack, I studied wisdom teachings in the religious and spiritual traditions. This year, I turned to the wisdom teachings in philosophy, literature and the arts. This new inquiry greatly deepens my understanding of the wisdom teachings found in the spiritual traditions.

Three books that have moved me in this regard are Harold Bloom's *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, Richard Rorty's *Irony, Contingency and Solidarity*, and Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. These three books are, I admit, heavy lifting if you are not presently in a philosophical mode of inquiry. But I think I can give you a useful synopsis if you bear with me. And I may tempt you into a close look at these three great thinkers.

Harold Bloom, the renowned Yale literary critic, wrote his book after a life-threatening heart attack in his seventies. Bloom explores prudential and negative wisdom in the Western Canon. He has written a beautiful account of wisdom contests in Job and Ecclesiastes, Plato and Homer, Shakespeare and Cervantes, Nietzsche and Emerson, Freud and Proust, Aquinas and the gnostic Gospel of Thomas. Bloom writes:

All the world's cultures...have fostered wisdom writing. For more than half a century I have studied and taught the literature that emerged from monotheism and its later secularizations. *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* rises out of personal need, reflecting a quest for sagacity that might solace and clarify the traumas of aging, of recovery from grave illness, and of grief for the loss of beloved friends. I have only three criteria for what I go on reading and teaching: aesthetic splendor, intellectual power, wisdom...The mind always returns to its needs for truth, beauty, insight. Mortality hovers, and all of us learn the triumph of time. "We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more." [p.1]

Bloom dedicates his book to Richard Rorty, whom he has called "the most interesting philosopher in the world today." Rorty returns the compliment:

In my view, an ideally liberal polity would be one whose culture hero is Bloom's "strong poet" rather than the warrior, the priest, the sage or the truth-seeking, "logical," "objective" scientist. Such a culture would slough off the Enlightenment vocabulary...It would no longer be haunted by "relativism" and "irrationalism." Such a culture would not assume that a form of cultural life is

no stronger than its philosophical foundations. Instead it would drop the idea of such foundations. It would regard the justification of liberal society simply as a matter of historical comparison with other attempts at social organization—those of the past and those envisaged by utopians. [p.53]

Iris Murdoch, best known for her novels and the touching film about her, “Iris,” based on an account by her husband, which documents her descent into Alzheimer’s Disease, was also a serious writer on philosophy. Murdoch is, by contrast with Bloom and Rorty, a Platonist and a “Buddhist-Christian.” Like Rorty, Murdoch is concerned with both the private and the public spheres. But Murdoch will not surrender some of the deepest platonic insights. She struggles to define a ground for both personal and public morality that no longer requires belief in a personal God who has become, in her view, implausible to a growing number of people.

Philosophers have sought for a single principle upon which morality can be seen to depend. I do not think that moral life can be in this sense reduced to a unity. On the other hand I do not think it can be satisfactorily characterized by an enumeration of various “goods” and virtues... The idea of goodness remains a magnet; the higher part of the soul speaks to the lower part of the soul, the good lightens and reforms the bad, the bad darkens the good...The image of good here takes the place of God in its connection with a whole being. At our “deepest” or most serious level we may be “pulled together,” not felt as a collection of heterogeneous impulses. [p.492]

These three books appeal to me because they provide a wonderful context for returning to the classical work in literature, art and philosophy that they discuss. My own personal orientation, which is braced but not overcome by the challenge of reading all three, remains an orientation toward what Leibnitz and Huxley called the Perennial Philosophy at the heart of all the great spiritual traditions.

Thus I can acknowledge the extraordinary power of the “dark wisdom” Bloom finds in the Western Canon. I am intrigued by the practical value of Rorty’s proposal that we stop seeking a unifying truth as a basis for both private fulfillment and the best polity, as the metaphysical tradition from Plato to Hegel and Marx sought to do. Rorty says we should believe in liberal democratic institutions not on the basis of some shared spiritual or philosophical insight but, pragmatically, because they work better than the alternatives and because they offer the best warrant of reducing human suffering. In a multicultural world, this seems to me to be a reasonable approach.

Yet my intuition is that all three thinkers, Bloom, Rorty and Murdoch, underestimate the staying power of what Leibnitz and Aldous Huxley called the Perennial Philosophy and its powerful expression in the global ecumenical movement. In the contest between Nietzsche and God, which Bloom and Rorty score for Nietzsche, I find myself siding with the deity in the famous exchange:

“God is dead.” – Nietzsche
“Nietzsche is dead.” – God

I have no doubt that the secular ironist tradition that Bloom and Rorty celebrate is here to stay, just as the modernist and scientific traditions will not go away. But none of these three traditions has succeeded in displacing the quest for the experience of deeper knowledge among people of faith or of a spiritual inclination.

My intuition is that the metaphysical tradition proclaimed dead by Nietzsche and Heidegger and Derrida is in fact not dead. But it is shifting. I think the coming regenerative Platonism is heralded by thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin, with his core concept that all life on earth is moving toward higher states of consciousness. Chardin, too, believes that humanity is indeed the keystone species in this movement toward a regenerative life on earth.

I also think Thomas Berry is right that the physical sciences are enabling us to tell the true creation stories for the first time, and that looking at the images of the Hubble telescope at the origins of life is for many people, secular and spiritual, a fundamentally religious experience. I trust historians of religion like Mary Evelyn Tucker who, a student of Thomas Berry in the lineage of Chardin, seek out common ground on teachings on environment in all the great spiritual traditions.

I believe, above all, that the global threat to humanity and to life on earth from our misuse of our stewardship of the planet provides what Marxism sought but failed to provide, which is a real material basis for an absolutely compelling analysis of some of the fundamental conditions of the public good. Therefore I believe that a regenerative public good is inescapable in our time. The recognition of this inescapable public good will become ever more compelling as the cost to ourselves and our families of climate change, chemical contaminants, poverty, and the global war system escalate.

Thus I believe that the wisdom of the earth will lead us where Marxism failed and where unrestrained market dogma is also failing. The dialectic between Marxism and capitalism led in our time to a triumphant capitalism. But the manifest failure of triumphant capitalism to address its human and environmental costs means that the “end of history” has not yet arrived. A future synthesis, guided by the embodied wisdom of holding the earth in our hearts and minds as an infinitely precious garden, is possible but by no means inevitable. Such a synthesis would use the efficiencies of markets as a means, but not an end. Markets would function within clear constraints that hold the earth as sacred and hold justice as our greatest human responsibility.

Wisdom and the Connection of Personal and Planetary Health

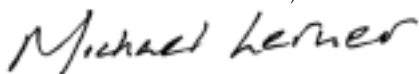
I propose, in conclusion, that the linkage between personal and planetary health, the great chain of connections between our health and the health of our families, our communities, our countries, and all life on earth, will be the material basis for the emerging consensus on what is to be done to salvage what we can in this Age of Extinctions, and then to design the regenerative human, animal and ecosystem structures that can lead to a New Era of peace, justice, and plenty.

There is nothing certain about this trajectory. But it is not impossible. And the hope that we may find our way to this promised land is a hope that resides somewhere in the human psyche, reflected in all our great spiritual and secular traditions, wherever truth, goodness and beauty survive as values that we hold dear. The way to this promised land had always been one of sacrifice and hardship, of setbacks and discouragement. It may be a journey not only of a thousand miles, but even of a thousand years. We have no way of knowing how many cycles of destruction and effort at renewal it will take us to get there. We cannot even know for certain that we will ever arrive.

But I for one, on this beautiful Spring day, find wisdom in the garden—in the Commonweal Garden, in the garden of our work at Commonweal, in the gardens of communities around the world where people are engaged in regenerative work, and in the gardens of our souls, where the hope that we may make a difference is ever nourished and ever survives.

Thank you for your support of our work at Commonweal. We truly cannot do the work without you.

With warm best wishes,



Michael Lerner
President