

**A Conversation with Ram Dass, Rachel Naomi Remen, MD and Michael Lerner – February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

*Sponsored by the New School at Commonweal*

*Michael:* Welcome to this new school conversation with Ram Dass and Rachael Naomi Remen, MD, my name is Michael Lerner and today we are talking about healing, aging and dying. Rachel Naomi Remen, my colleague at Commonweal is Director of the Institute of the Study of Health and Illness, she is the Medical Director of the Commonweal Cancer Help Program and she is a clinical professor at University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine. Ram Dass is well known to many of you but many of you don't know his whole story and it's worth taking a few minutes to describe some of his varied experiences on his path.

Born in 1931 he studied psychology at Wesleyan and got a Ph.D. from Stanford. He was then on the faculty of Stanford and University of California and from 1958 to 1963, taught and did research in the Department of Social Relations and taught at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard. In 1961 he began explorations of consciousness with Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, Aldous Huxley, Allen Ginsberg and others and explored psychedelic chemicals. Out of this research came two books and because of the controversial nature of this work he was dismissed from Harvard in 1963.

He continued his research under the auspices of a private foundation until 1967 when he traveled to India where he met his spiritual teacher Neem Karoli Baba who gave Ram Dass his name which means servant of God and since 1968 Ram Dass has pursued a variety of spiritual methods and practices from various ancient wisdom traditions including devotional yoga focused on the Hindu figure Hanuman, meditation in a whole series of different traditions, karma yoga, Sufi and Jewish studies and he also practices service to others as a spiritual path. In 1974 he created the Hanuman Foundation which developed the Prison Ashram Program designed to help prison inmates grow spiritually and the dying project conceived as a support structure for consciousness and dying. He has published about a dozen books including, "Be Here Now", "The Only Dance There Is" "Grist for the Mill", "How Can I Help" and more recently "Still Here" embracing aging, changing and dying. In 1997, almost exactly 10 years ago this month, he experienced a stroke which left him with expressive aphasia and partial paralysis. The after effects of the stroke made it necessary for him to change the plans he was making at that time and now he is living and continuing his work in Hawaii on the island of Maui. He is a co-founder and advisory board member of the SEVA Foundation, an international service organization, and he continues to teach about the nature of consciousness and service as a spiritual path.

Ram Dass, one of our central interests as you know now, that Rachael and I and others have pursued here at Commonweal is in our subject, healing, aging and dying. And when we visited with you a month ago in Hawaii, in your sunlit home overlooking the ocean, what struck me more than anything was how radiant and joyful you seemed and I asked you what was uppermost in your mind and you reflected for a while and you said "healing" and you proceeded to tell me about the trajectory of your experience you had with your stroke and how your experience with the stroke had changed over time. And I

wondered if we could start just with the evolution of your experience in healing with your stroke?

*Ram Dass:* When I had the stroke, the night before the stroke I was trying to write a book about aging and I was only about 65 and I decided I wasn't really competent to do that book and I sort of asked God for help to write the book on aging, and then I went to sleep and when I was asleep I was stroked and when I woke up in the morning I found that my right foot was crippled by it and I didn't know it was a stroke and I decided I had a powerful mind because there I wanted aging and I was giving it to myself. Well anyway then I started to.... I didn't know it was a stroke but they were all discussing my death, although I was not conscious of anything about death. I went into a depression but it was interesting, it was a spiritual depression because I had lived a very graced life, having met my guru. and I suddenly felt this stroke was the end... I was not having grace. So it was about 2 weeks I think that I had the feeling of being let down, I felt my guru was out to lunch, he wasn't gracing me. And then after about two weeks I had a picture of him on the wall in the hospital and I started to look at his picture and think of his grace and then I was surrounded by people who said "oh, it's too bad, you poor thing, you had a stroke" and they felt the stroke was lack of grace but after about some weeks I got that his grace and the stroke started to come together. I started to think of the stroke as grace. And I started to notice how it gave me silence, and it gave me a place to sit in the sun with the wheelchair and it gave me a way in to people who were suffering, because they saw that I was suffering. And also there were people in my audiences, they were there because their wife brought them or something like that and they were sitting with arms crossed and I was noticing that my infirmity got them, it got their heart and I could work with their heart and as long as I was in California the stroke was grace, and then I went to John of God in Brazil and then I came here to Maui and there was so much emphasis on healing and I was feeling, if I'm healing I'm taking this grace, this stroke and I shouldn't be pushing away this stroke, and then my doctors here said that they could feel that I was pushing away healing and so I started to do healing and it went incredibly and I suddenly saw that healing was the grace, the stroke was grace, and the healing was grace and here I am in Maui, I've got healing grace and I'm healing with allopathic, Chinese herbs, acupuncture and rolfing and so many things and physical therapy. And the healing of this island is just magnificent and I walk in the swimming pool because the water keeps me up, and once a week I go in the ocean swimming and boy I feel wonderful, wonderful.

*Michael:* It's a wonderful description Ram Dass. Rachel as you listen to Ram Dass what does this evoke for you?

*Rachel:* Actually it evokes a memory Ram Dass, of the very first time I saw you. I was one of those people that were dragged along by somebody else. Mostly it was a guy I was attracted to so I went quite willingly I wasn't at all interested in you I was interested in him. And I went to Dominican and you came into the room and you sat down in the only seat there was, which was a chair on the stage and you looked at the audience and I waited for you to say something wise and important and you didn't say anything at all—anything at all—for about twenty minutes and gradually people became more and more and comfortable with the silence and something started to happen in that silence for me, it

was a kind of a direction that I had always known was there in me but had never really felt before and you did that with the power of your silence, you enabled a silence to be present in me and it enabled me to be able to learn how to listen to the silence in myself by sitting there for twenty minutes of that. And I was wondering what you had learned further about the power of silence through this stroke?

*Ram Dass:* Because of aphasia I have gotten to keep silence in my lectures, but in my lectures previously I have to explain the silence by saying “we’ll all meditate” and now I say “Ladies and gentleman you’re going to have to put up with the silence because I have “aphasia” and then I say “You can spend the time feeling sorry for me but I think you will spend the time enjoying the silence” and that’s part of the joy of the stroke.

*Michael:* Ram Dass, you mentioned when I saw you in Hawaii something that connects with what you just said that connects with how the stroke enabled you to reach the hearts of those who had come to listen to you and were sitting there with their arms crossed and you talked about how when you do counseling with people who are dying, people with HIV and people with other conditions, that your approach is to seek to merge your suffering with their suffering and I have never really thought about it that way and I wondered if you could say more about how you do that and what it means to you to do counseling by merging your own suffering with the suffering of the person you are with.

*Ram Dass:* Well, there’s quite a difference between compassion and other ways of dealing with another person, because compassion is when you’re one with the other person because then their suffering becomes our suffering and my suffering becomes our suffering and we deal with the human condition. I try not to give them the role of being a sick person, which puts them in that role if I’m in the role of a helper, so I try not to get into the helper role even though I might act it. But my consciousness is we are both souls dealing with the consciousness of the incarnation.

*Michael:* Yes, that’s very helpful. Rachel in your work with counseling with people who are dying is your approach similar to the one Ram Dass describes or is it different?

*Rachel:* I just wanted to say something to Ram Dass around the suffering, the blending of suffering, the recognition that it’s one suffering and it’s the suffering that we all have and we’re all vulnerable to because we are incarnated. Isn’t it the hardest thing though to accept your own suffering enough, that you’re not pushing the suffering away from yourself, your suffering and the other persons suffering? That you’re willing to be there with it so that it can deepen and change? How does that happen? How do you learn to accept the suffering enough so that you can be with the other person who is suffering?

*Ram Dass:* You mean my own suffering or theirs?

*Rachel:* Well, perhaps without accepting your own suffering you can’t accept anybody’s suffering.

*Ram Dass:* Well I move into certain planes of consciousness, for example, the witness and I am witnessing my thoughts and the thoughts are what is causing the suffering. Now I'm witnessing my thoughts and therefore those thoughts are my suffering and when I'm witnessing, the witness doesn't suffer.

*Rachel:* Ah... so when you are with a person who is not in that place, who is pushing the suffering away, who is not with you say.

*Ram Dass:* Then I invite them in to witness our suffering, because they are telling me what they are going through and the telling of it is witnessing it.

*Rachel:* Yes, yes, you know in my experience I think it's interesting Michael, that all three of us have had significant illness of one sort or another.

*Michael:* That's right.

*Rachel:* And in my experience the loneliness of the suffering is the thing that is hardest for me and when the loneliness is eased, because someone is sitting with me and unafraid to sit with me wherever I'm going, then I'm able to witness. Something about that, isn't it?

*Ram Dass:* Um, Yes that's a good one.

*Michael:* You know I have a rather radical thought to explore with the two of you because we all have had these experiences with life threatening illness and then we've all done something with those experiences that's not completely ordinary. In that, almost everybody when you are "stroked" in one way or another most people need to talk about it, as Ram Dass you were saying about what the person is going through. What some people do, certainly what each of us has done, is to take our illness, to take our own suffering and to work with it both to try and serve our own experience and also to serve others. What has struck me about that process is that somehow the originally nonverbal experience of just being thrown into a completely different universe becomes over time for me, as I talk to other people about it, it becomes ineluctably almost a kind of performance. That is to say that I find a way of telling the story that makes sense and is useful to others and in doing so I shape it in a way that is different from the absolutely nonverbal sort of awestruck place that I was in originally. I was reading a review of a remarkable book by Colin Tudge, called something like "The Tree," which is a great study of trees and Colin Tudge, a great British naturalist said, "You know a tree is not an inanimate object, a tree is actually a performance, it is a performance of life, it is constantly changing, it is constantly moving." And it made me think of the way I work with my own health and illness and how the process of shaping it so that it can be of service to others, is, not in a negative sense, but in some actual way a performance, it moves it into a shape that it didn't originally have in the moment. And Ram Dass I'm just curious, I've never tried this thought out on anybody before. Have you found the process of working with your stroke; of shaping the experience so that it can be of use to others, has it changed the original experience for you?

*Ram Dass:* I think what happens is that I find myself disappointed in the wording of the words because they don't represent the feelings of the stroke.

*Michael:* That's what I was trying to say.

*Ram Dass:* No, and I find that I would like to give people the experience but not through words.

*Michael:* Rachel have you had any of these experiences?

*Rachel:* Well, you know I've been at this a very long time, fifty three years actually, since I became a person with a chronic illness and you know perhaps I am less of an intellectual person, less of an enlightened person but at the beginning there was a lot of drama, I mean it was all drama. And it was a lot about being special—I was special—I was a hero, I was victim, I was whatever it was, I was doing a lot of things with this and pulling people into these things for a long, long time. And then this thing instead of making me special, started to make me real.

*Ram Dass:* Real, oh boy...

*Rachel:* and it wasn't like I was shaping it I had become shaped by it in ways I had never even known it was possible to be shaped. And I became in a funny way larger and much more able to accompany people through darkness than I was when I was "whole and well" and I can't say that I shaped it to help people, I would say it shaped me so I was able to help in some way.

*Michael:* I think that's right, certainly I've been deeply shaped by the experience but there's a sense for me in which having been shaped by it, that this changed self in turn, as Ram Dass said, that finds a way to put it into words that assumes a shape and yet that shape of the words is a kind of a curtain between the actual experience and what I'd actually like to convey and what I'm able to convey in words. And I was thinking today about this conversation, I was thinking how could we have this conversation so that people who are listening, or are participating, who are actively facing being very ill or dying in its acute experience, that we're speaking to them, and I was wondering how that is possible given that each of us is at some distance or other from the acute phase of our own experience.

*Rachel:* You know Michael there are many different sorts of people, even though I am a writer, I am not a word person. Word is always a translation for me of something else, I have something and then I have to translate it into words like translating into English from French, but what I get, and I sense this in you in the time since your heart event, there gets to be a kind of a presence and a kind of a showing up that you were not able to do before. People recognize this and they recognize one, that they are safe with you that you will not judge them as a lesser person because they are suffering or they are ill. And it's something that is conveyed, not by the story of the illness, but by the change in you that the illness has wrought.

*Ram Dass:* You know, before my stroke I wrote a book called “How Can I Help” and I was very powerful in my helping and I found it a very powerful role and now, if I want to write a book, I’d have to say “how can you help me?” and what happened was the stroke brought me to dependency and this was a whole new part of my being and I found that my caretakers and I, we were together souls. We were giving each other spiritual solace.

*Rachel:* And I think you can do that in storytelling as well of course, it’s just that for a person like me it is better, it’s easier to do that without words.

*Michael:* How do you do it without words Rachel?

*Rachel:* I think it’s a question of presence, I think there are so many probably nonverbal cues but you know I’m not afraid, I’m not afraid of suffering anymore. And I think that everyone that sits with me after awhile they get less afraid and then it can begin, you know the real thing, and how do you do that? I don’t know but the story of the illness, telling my story, perhaps because I’ve been sick for so long, I really haven’t told my story except little snippets of it here and there, where I feel it might be useful, for a long, long time and my story doesn’t even interest me anymore, it’s a little boring after all this time. What’s interesting is being present enough with another person so that you are, oh, together...how did you put that Ram Dass? Soul, together as souls? That interests me, that feels like all we need to do.

*Ram Dass:* Yeah, the presence makes me feel about my guru. My guru died in about 74 and I talk to my guru all the time and some people say, “you talk to your dead guru? That’s pretty far out.” And so it works this way, I feel the presence, his presence or the presence and then with that feeling I construct a dialog which comes out of my imagination. So when somebody says, you aren’t talking to your guru, it’s only your imagination, well I say, yeah, it’s only my imagination, but he gets into my imagination and I say God, Guru and Self are the same thing and so that I’m talking to my higher Self.

*Rachel:* It’s like the ultimate feeling of loneliness.

*Ram Dass:* Yeah

*Rachel:* And maybe that’s why we are here to heal each other’s loneliness as we age and as we die and as we suffer, that’s the thing we do.

*Ram Dass:* Well, loneliness is an ego problem.

*Rachel:* (laughter) Yes.

*Ram Dass:* Aloneness is the next level.

*Rachel:* ah...say more.

*Ram Dass:* When you become the one.. that .. loving awareness, you are, you are the one you are identifying with your awareness and that is, it is part of the God, and that is... it's just aloneness.

*Michael:* You know Ram Dass when you speak of the remembrance of that loving awareness that you become one with your higher Self, with your guru, with God, it makes me reflect. I've been immersed recently in the period of time around the Mediterranean, in the centuries just before and after the birth of Christ in the Common Era. And what's really striking to me is that this awareness of oneness was pandemic in all the Abrahamic faiths and all the other faiths as well. There was just an extraordinary sense of what's called the Gnostic mystery of oneness that was around, and then there was this process that took place by which some combination of the tribal impulses and the organizational processes of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic faith and others and they separated from each other and from this awareness of oneness and created public theologies which emphasized their differences rather than this oneness. And I often ask myself was this a necessary development in human consciousness that we would go through 2,000 years of struggling, sometimes horrifically, with these divisions among the faiths? Because I have a very strong sense that there is a return of awareness of this oneness that is taking place that extends to many, many different areas. Not only healing, aging and dying but also to the awareness of the oneness of life on earth, the awareness of oneness in different scientific disciplines, what E.O. Wilson calls convergence, there just seems to be a return of this theme of oneness and I wonder if you would reflect on that and reflect on how can we can help this move forward in the global culture on every level again?

*Ram Dass:* The evolution of the many to the one, now we're in the midst of that revolution—you're absolutely right—it's in many, many fields. It's also moving from the head to the heart.

*Michael:* Yes

*Ram Dass:* Because the heart is where the oneness is. The head is thoughts, thoughts, thoughts and objectivity and dualism and things like that. In a way we have the mind, as a tremendous vehicle for us, and also the downfall of all of our culture.

*Michael:* Yes, Rachel does this bring up any thoughts for you, this aspect of the conversation?

*Rachel:* Well, the thought that I have goes back to sustainability, Michael, because I think what both you and Ram Dass are saying is that the direction of sustainability is the growing awareness and the coming home again to oneness and that underneath all of our efforts, and there are so many of us working on this in so many different ways; save the planet, toxicities, what is bringing healing into medicine, bringing justice into the law, all of this. That underneath all of this is an effort to go back to the oneness, because without the awareness of oneness in everyone we probably can't go on. We can't act in ways that

will really save the planet and we can't act in ways that will insure the continuity of the human race.

*Ram Dass:* That's true, it's like the United Nations, it's egos, egos, egos and it's many, many, many, it's too bad the institutional structure didn't make it one.

*Rachel:* Yeah, well you know it's almost like you can't do it with structure can you, don't you think perhaps you have to do it with consciousness?

*Ram Dass:* That's right.

*Rachel:* then the structure follows the consciousness rather than the structure causing the consciousness.

*Ram Dass:* Yeah

*Rachel:* We are struggling as fast as we can to grow up so we can stay alive.

*Ram Dass:* Yeah

*Rachel:* Michael, what do you think?

*Michael:* Well I think this is a very powerful conversation about questions that are central in my mind, and I agree deeply with both of you that we are in this process of trying to grow up before, in our adolescent phase, we do too much damage to ourselves and to the rest of life on this earth. I also think that one of the realities that we face is that the struggle for sustainability will never be finally won. The human venture, I suspect on earth, always has been and probably always will be, a perilous enterprise and we will always live with suffering and with endless challenges even if we succeed in moving decisively toward a more sustainable world. And therefore it seems to me that we cannot imagine moving toward a "static" consciousness of oneness anymore than a "static" system of sustainability and justice, but rather a deeper consciousness of what is perhaps an endless evolution, both of ourselves as individuals and a collective destiny as a species and as stewards of life on earth. So somehow to me this conversation begins to come full circle because one comes back to the ongoing need that we have, and will have, to address human suffering. One of my own experiences which certainly resonates in much of the world literature on the wisdom traditions, is that it is precisely in my experience of suffering, if I can simply be conscious enough to be present with it, that the light, whatever one calls the divine, is present. That there's an inseparability for me of my experience of conscious suffering and awareness of the light, and I know it's not the only way we get to the light, I know we can get there through joy and art and creativity and many other ways, but it always strikes me as one of the most extraordinary things about the design of being human, that we were designed so that when we suffer there is this possibility that the wound is not only a wound, but an opening and that the light is present. And I know you both have reflected on that and I'd love to hear any thoughts, Ram Dass that come to you on the subject, to start.

*Ram Dass:* Well I think that the Buddha's first noble truth is there is. And then I look at what lessons I have learned during this incarnation and I've learned about suffering and about compassion. But I was down with John of God and I've started to work with joy and I looked at my life and my life was centered around suffering and right after that I centered it around joy and then it's a whole different ball game.

*Michael:* And you know it's so visible Ram Dass that when I saw you, you just seemed to be just radiating joy and it was just a very striking experience for me because I had seen you much closer to the stroke when you were, you know working with the fierce grace that you have experienced and it was so wonderful to see this and I must confess that I have not made that transition to seem centered around joy. Do you have any operating instructions for those of us that haven't figured it out yet as to how you managed to do that?

*Ram Dass:* Oh boy, it's really transformed every single thought and feeling. There was one day when I looked at my life and my culture's life and how it was all centered around suffering and then I thought what would happen if I made it centered around joy? Because I kept thinking about joy and it took about two weeks to (laughter) change.

*Michael:* How did you do it?

*Ram Dass:* Oh gosh, well my guru had instructed me "Love everybody" and as I tried to do that, it was just joyful, it was joyful. That "loving everybody."

*Michael:* hmm, Rachel?

*Rachel:* Just a thought, I was just thinking how joy is really not a part of the American culture; happiness is the thing we're all going for.

*Ram Dass:* Yeah.

*Rachel:* And it's different than joy and as you were talking Ram Dass, I was thinking about people hearing this and thinking about this guy having a stroke and what the hell is he talking about joy? (laughter from both) I mean, please (more laughter) but you know in a funny way joy is invulnerable, happiness is vulnerable, happiness is impermanent and joy is not and what I was getting is that happiness is, you need things to go your way. Happiness is the absence of suffering, you cannot be suffering and be happy, that's crazy. So joy is different than that, because you can suffer and be joyful.

*Ram Dass:* Joy is the spiritual value and happiness is a worldly value.

*Rachel:* Ah, say more, say more about that.

*Ram Dass:* Well, I think that happiness is a step towards joy. Joy is just like you say, it's beyond time and space.

*Rachel:* Well you know I find myself thinking there's this thing like the cosmic giggle. That if we were able to expand our consciousness beyond the human and understand the great direction and flow and purpose of all of this, our response to it would be a giggle that would last forever. (Laughter from both) You know, and that somehow joy comes from for me, just being alive. Aliveness is what's underneath it, willing to show up and meet with, curiosity, so what's this? kind of it's like, oh I don't know, there's a passion in it. Happiness shows up for the things that give me pleasure and they're vulnerable because it could be taken away from me in a minute and so I have to hold onto it.

*Ram Dass:* That's right

*Rachel:* Where as for me joy is a state of being and I hear you have moved into that Ram Dass.

*Ram Dass:* Well you know I've been a model, which is... I've been going through the difference of two planes of consciousness, the plane of consciousness which is the ego and the plane of consciousness which is the soul and now what I've done is converted my perception to the soul plane and because a soul comes into the incarnation from many other incarnations and the soul is a spiritual entity, it's much nicer to view yourself as a spiritual entity and then just dipping into the incarnation.

*Rachel:* So a soul with an ego, rather than an ego with a soul?

*Ram Dass:* yeah, yeah exactly right.

*Rachel:* So you have, you are both, but it's where you center yourself.

*Ram Dass:* We Homo sapiens have two planes of consciousness.

*Rachel:* It is so interesting, I have a little cousin who is about five now but when she was four I was helping her to go to bed and she is brushing her teeth and she says to me "why do I have to brush my teeth?" And instead of hearing it as a four year old saying that, I heard it in a whole other way, you know.

*Ram Dass:* yeah

*Rachel:* Like, I mean why do I have to have teeth and need to take care of them and wash them. I heard it in a way that was almost bewildered and the answer to that question would change a lot for me if I knew why I had to brush my teeth, why I was here in this body, why I am vulnerable to suffering and why I am involved like this, in this level of being. I think I could do it with much greater grace than I do it now.

*Ram Dass:* That's looking at it from the soul point.

*Rachel:* Yeah, ah.

*Ram Dass:* And I realize that the witness is the soul.

*Rachel:* The witness is the soul.

*Ram Dass:* The witness of your incarnation...

*Rachel:* Is the soul.

*Ram Dass:* Is the soul.

*Michael:* Ram Dass and Rachel before we open this up to questions, there's one thing Ram Dass that you've mentioned that I'm sure I'm not the only one, who is curious about, which is this experience with John of God where you made this movement from suffering to joy and I'm sure many people may or may not have heard of John of God but I just wondered could you describe him, could you describe your encounter with him and describe what the experience was like?

*Ram Dass:* Yeah, he is a medium, he's a farmer and when he was about fifteen he was walking in the woods and he heard a voice that said to him "go to a church, [a very specific church] and they'll be waiting for you." So he walked to this church and he knocked on the door and a big crowd welcomed him and from then on he doesn't remember anything from that point until he got out of the church and when people came out of the church they were saying to him "you have healed us, you have healed us" and he was bewildered. He was going to be a tailor like his father and when he went into the church an astral healer took over his body and that's why he didn't remember that. And now what you do is you go in a line of which there are hundreds of people and you are faced with him and in him are these astral doctors and they will give you certain procedures and so on to cure you and that they are astral doctors and they know your illness, but they know the source of your illness and they know your incarnations and they are speaking from wisdom that we don't have. And his face changes as these astral doctors come into him and the place is purity and it's faith. I just broke down, I couldn't stand it. It was just like the temple, my guru and I know each other when in India. And it's the presence again that Rachel spoke about. And there are two rooms, there are people are meditating in the rooms and you go through those rooms and the one that he's in, there are the meditators and the environment for the transfer for these astral beings. So when I, this is a very subtle thing, but when I first went there they healed my heart. And my heart is that same place when the stroke occurred that I felt that my guru was not with me and I think that it hurt my heart. And I put down healing my foot and my leg and arm but that's what they did.

*Michael:* Thank you for telling us that story Ram Dass. Rachel when you hear Ram Dass' story of John of God what comes to you?

*Rachel:* What comes to me is a kind of an awe of the mystery that is alive in this world. And just how amazing, how amazing it is and how much grace is present, it's just an

incredible thing, it is, and you know if I think on it there is this flow of suffering humanity that goes past this man and something in this world is large enough to meet with it, and heal it, something comes through him that is so much larger than the flow of suffering and that gives me a sense of gratitude, that something exists.

*Ram Dass:* That's what I felt, that's what I felt. And the mothers bringing deformed babies and people with all sorts of illnesses and John of God shows nothing but just compassion.

*Michael:* I want to thank you both, Ram Dass and Rachel for this part of the conversation, we have about fifteen minutes left and I am going to ask the operator to open the lines and I'm going to ask the participants to see if we can keep the same contemplative quality to the conversation even as you join us. If you'd like to make a comment or ask a question, please keep it brief so that others can speak and please try hard to minimize noise on the line so that we can enjoy this time together, so operator would you please open the lines for us now? I welcome comments or questions, please say your name.

This is Jim Quay

*Michael:* Hi Jim

*Jim:* Before I try to put what I am going to say into words, I just want to say how thankful I am and how grateful I am for hearing this conversation. I remember something Ursula LeGuin said, she said "happiness is earned, but joy is a gift." And I've been thinking about the school and one of the threads running through the conversation is the world of control and ego and the world of gift and acceptance and service and I wonder how do you offer suffering as an experience?

*Ram Dass:* By bringing the sufferer to the witness and getting them to witness their own suffering and the witness is not the sufferer. I went into a room that had in it an AIDS patient who's family is spurning him and the society does and he was in the throes of AIDS and I went in, not in my usual role of the visitor of dying people but I went in as a soul, and I saw as a soul can see, a soul in the room and I said to the soul "how's your incarnation?" (soft laughter from all)

*Michael:* Are there other questions or comments please?

*This is Alan Margolis:* I don't have a question, I think I'd really like to thank the participants for allowing us to witness and listen to this conversation. It's given me a lot of things to think about and I haven't gotten well enough formatted to come out with anything—but thanks a lot.

*Michael:* Thanks a lot Alan. Other questions or comments? Okay.

*This is Virginia Veach.* And I want to send greetings and love to all three of you and thank you so much for this gift you've given all of us and I think it will continue as it's been taped. I hope it will go on to be heard by many, many more. I am remembering early on, I

think it was '68 the first time I spoke directly with you Ram Dass was in a little house in Big Sur up on the hill and you said "and how may I serve you?" and then ensued our conversation. The last time I saw you was in Barnaby's having lunch together. And then thinking that how life has unfolded in both of us and listening to your speaking today and marveling at how you're able to articulate what it is that you're trying to say and knowing that really our language doesn't have the words in it that one needs to express the kinds of things that you're trying to express.

*Ram Dass:* Yeah.

*Virginia:* And yet it has to be done. And the kind of transition to not experiencing oneself as oneself, is so joyful and filled with such compassion and joy of living that it's hard to use the word "I" in that situation, when one is living that way, so I'm very appreciative of how you were expressing all of this for us today. And Michael and Rachel it's always a pleasure to listen to both of you struggling with the fact that whatever the experience is of suffering it really can't be expressed we can only approximate it.

*Michael:* Absolutely.

*Virginia:* And so what we're doing is creating something for both of us to be together. It's not... language is creating a relationship and it's by way of being able to be together which we can do in silence or we can do in language verbally and yet what's happening is being together.

*Rachel:* You know that is such a beautiful definition Virginia, of service; that service is the capacity to be together. And I was also remembering something that our colleague Marion Weber said when I asked her, you know I was trying to understand service and I went around asking people what is service and writing everything that was said to me down. And she said "oh, service is belonging" and I think that says it all. That we are all yearning and moving towards the belonging that was the beginning and that service is just what you said. It's about being together, it's about the capacity to be together in whatever it is so that nobody is separated like that.

*Michael:* Ram Dass I want to give you the last word, first, just my deep gratitude to you and to Rachel for this time together and to all who have participated. And I want to just ask you to help us reflect as we are starting this project, that we are calling the New School at Commonweal. This is actually only the second conversation we've had. How is this been for you and how can we support your work and are these explorations you would enjoy in some way continuing with us in ways that don't tax your time or energy but feel alive and nourishing to you?

*Ram Dass:* Oh I think this is a school I wish I'd gone too. (laughter from all) And I'm in ecstasy. (laughter)

*Michael:* I'm so glad. Well, we're making this up as we go along Ram Dass so you're helping us bring joy into the work in a very early phase.

*Ram Dass:* The words... I think my stroke really got me to words because of the aphasia in the stroke. I could get a concept or a feeling and then I couldn't find the words. And I had a word closet, like a clothes closet and I'd cloth the words and cloth the concept and the word closet had been bombed out.

*Michael:* Yes.

*Ram Dass:* And I was really working to.... It's gotten me very close to words. And I think that a service like.... I think if you, if you identify with your soul and everybody you meet, you will help them identify with their souls. That's my way of service.

*Michael:* Well thank you so much, Ram Dass, Rachel any last word from you?

*Rachel:* Just that I love you Ram Dass, and I love you Michael. (laughter from Ram Dass)

*Michael:* It's been such a joy to be together and let me simply say that if anyone on this call has friends who would like to join the New School, we welcome your friends and you can email the New School at [thenewschool@commonweal.org](mailto:thenewschool@commonweal.org) and we will put you on the list and may all be blessed this beautiful evening, or earlier where Ram Dass is, we'll be together again soon. Thank you Ram Dass so very, very much.

Everyone says good-bye.....