

COMMONWEAL

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

November 2011

Dear Commonweal Friends:

I hope this Fall Letter finds you well. Commonweal is green with rain. Sunsets over the Pacific color the sky red and purple.

Walt Whitman's "Barbaric Yawp" Called "An Astonishment"

A community reading of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" at The New School at Commonweal was, Steve Heilig wrote in *The Huffington Post*, "a literary event for the ages...I think it is a fair guarantee that nobody present will forget it." Painter, writer, and Commonweal Board Member Eric Karpeles organized the reading. Eric previously brought former U.S. Poet Laureate W.S. Merwin and playwright/actor Anna Deavere Smith to The New School. For Whitman, he asked West Marin neighbor and former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Hass to join him. Hass recently published a beautiful edition of the poem.

Heilig, a senior staff member at Commonweal and San Francisco Medical Society, writes:

Hass himself introduced the poem expertly, warmly, and then without fanfare launched into the first section, beginning, "I celebrate myself." Sitting in two rows behind him, readers took their turns at two podiums, flanking a rare and invaluable copy of the poem that stood there like some version of the biblical Ark of the Covenant, admonishing us to do it justice. I did not know everyone who was reading, but those I did know were, yes, poets and writers, but also carpenters, dancers, naturalists, winemakers, philanthropists, scientists, healers, lawyers, actors, artists, ranchers, scholars, surfers, farmers, businesspeople—and many more...

The reading flowed seamlessly, for almost two hours...As the poem required, we contained multitudes, contradicted ourselves, let forth a barbaric yawp, and much, much more. But it built like a symphony; the power of it was really astonishing by the end, a celebration of life and love and nature and, well, almost everything, including, yes, death...At the poem's final word, there was a huge collective exhale, and the whole room erupted into loud, exuberant, sustained applause and cheers... We all stood, cheering for one another, and for Whitman. We had "fetched" him, no doubt about that. Walt was in the room, in one form or another, for as the very first stanza of his poem holds, "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." ...I think he would have loved Bolinas— saved by other visionaries from so much of "progress," surrounded by the natural

splendor he celebrated—populated by some people who look just like him. In fact, I bet he'd live here. Maybe he does. He certainly did on Sunday afternoon.

People still talk about the legendary San Francisco "Six Gallery" reading that some say launched the "Beat" movement in 1955 with Alan Ginsberg's reading of "Howl" (and without Whitman, there would be no such "Howl"). I wonder if, over 50 years from now, this reading might join that one as a truly historic event. Again, who knows? Afterward, I asked an elated-looking Hass if, in his long poetic career, he had seen and heard anything like it, and he replied, "No. This was just amazing." It was an astonishment.

You can download a podcast of the entire reading from The New School website (www.The-New-School.org) or by finding us on iTunes (our website has a link).

Lia Fund Launches the Institute for Art and Healing at Commonweal

The healing arts focus on the ancient practice of engaging with art to relieve suffering and explore meaning. The Lia Fund recently made its largest ever grant to found the new Institute for Art and Healing (IAH) at Commonweal. The Lia Fund is the legacy of Randy "Lia" Weil, a dancer and Feldenkrais practitioner who lived in West Marin and loved the healing arts. Her sister Sharon Weil Aaron and Lia Fund consultant Beth Rosales were among the dedicated group at the Lia Fund that made this bold choice. Jaune Evans, a longtime Commonweal friend, poet, photographer, hospice worker, and senior foundation officer, is the new IAH Director.

The healing arts arrived at Commonweal in 1986 with a slender, elegant woman in her sixties with short-cropped white hair. Marion Saltman, a sandtray therapist diagnosed with cancer, lived on an ancient houseboat in Sausalito. A close friend of Buddhist-Christian theologian Alan Watts, Marion brought sandtray to the first Cancer Help Program. After Marion Saltman died, healing artist Marion Weber succeeded her. On her first Cancer Help Program, Marion Weber reported that Marion Saltman came to her in a dream to instruct her in sandtray.

Marion Weber and Barbara Smith Coleman guided two pioneering Commonweal conferences on *Art as a Healing Force* in the 1990s with Michael and Linda Samuels. Barbara had first come to Commonweal to explore bringing the Cancer Help Program to Washington, D.C. Her legacy, Smith Center for Healing and the Arts, has done that and more for over 12 years. Recently renovated under the inspired leadership of Executive Director Shanti Norris, Smith Center, close by DuPont Circle, has the only healing arts gallery in the nation's capital. Barbara also established the Barbara Smith Fund to support Smith Center. Susan Braun serves as Board President.

Jenifer Altman's life was transformed by the Cancer Help Program. She had a special interest in Anna Halprin's dance therapy. The Jenifer Altman Foundation was her legacy. JAF in turn co-founded the Health and Environmental Funders Network, which has had a powerful impact on national and international health, environment, and justice funding.

Marion Weber joined Rachel Naomi Remen at the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness (ISHI) at Commonweal. Marion invented group sandtray for ISHI and designed a circular table so that eight or more people could do sandtray simultaneously. Irene Gallwey has now offered sandtray in the Cancer Help Program for over 12 years. Sandtray also helped draw Executive Director Susan Braun to Commonweal. After discovering sandtray in the Cancer Help Program, Susan trained in sandtray. Susan also led the development of the Institute for Healing and the Arts. The healing arts have been seminal at Commonweal. The Lia Fund's foundational three-year seed grant will, we hope, create a longstanding base for the healing arts at Commonweal.

“The Micro Is Great!”—Commonweal as a Community of Micro-Initiatives

“How are you doing?” I asked a friend, a pioneer of Western land conservation. “The micro is great!” he said. So it is. In *Blessed Unrest: How The Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*, Paul Hawken likens the global micro-initiative swarm to a planetary immune system. This vast planetary movement wasn't recognized because it has no conventional structure. If you look at the problems, they appear insurmountable. But if you look at this unprecedented global movement, Paul says, you cannot help but experience some hope.

My friend's comment—“the micro is great!”—caused me to reflect on Commonweal as *a community of remarkable micro-initiatives*. At the heart of all these initiatives is a commitment to healing—working to heal ourselves, and doing all we can to restore the sacred beauty of the earth. Susan Braun has now been Commonweal Executive Director for almost three years, nurturing our current micro-initiatives and incubating our new ones. Commonweal has never been stronger, healthier, or more vibrant. You will read reports on all our major programs in the upcoming Commonweal Newsletter:

- The Commonweal Cancer Help Program recently completed our 161st retreat, guided by Coordinator Arlene Allsman.
- Rachel Naomi Remen's Institute for the Study of Health and Illness has placed her *Healer's Art* course in over 70 medical schools around the world and has initiated a new program for medical residents.
- The Collaborative on Health and the Environment, with over 4000 partners worldwide, is thriving under Elise Miller's leadership. We're delighted that Ted Schettler, M.D., Science Director of CHE and the Science and Environmental Health Network, has moved to Bolinas. Having him as part of our local community is a true joy.
- The New School at Commonweal, guided by Coordinator Kyra Epstein, has added our End of Life Conversations Series to its portfolio. We continue our eclectic conversations on everything from climate change to Walt Whitman to inner life questions.

- Sharyle Patton’s Biomonitoring Resource Center has been biomonitoring fire fighters for the International Association of Fire Fighters.
- David Steinhart’s Juvenile Justice Program has (thus far) saved critical juvenile justice funding from major California budget crisis cuts.
- The Commonweal Garden/Regenerative Design Institute, under co-directors Penny Livingston-Stark and James Stark, draws permaculture students from around the world.
- Burr Heneman, founder of the Commonweal Oceans Program, is building condos for endangered penguins in the Galapagos Islands.
- Jenepher Stowell’s Retreat Center provides “sacred space” for Commonweal programs and retreats for like-minded individuals, organizations, and Commonweal friends.

Equally important, Commonweal Executive Director Susan Braun has led the incubation of five new programs:

- I’ve described the new *Institute for Art and Healing* with Jaune Evans as Director.
- Rebecca Katz’s *Healing Kitchens Institute* will train individuals to provide healthy and delicious food to many people with cancer and to others who share her passion for the “power of yum!”
- The *End of Life Conversations Series* is building to critical mass, opening many options for end-of-life work—including support for professionals and for patients. These conversations are part of The New School.
- The *Environmental Health Trainings* that Susan Braun, Heather Sarantis, Davis Baltz, and Ted Schettler, M.D., have created, are teaching health advocates from around the country how to evaluate environmental health science grant proposals—and thus push the scientific enterprise in the direction of community concerns. These trainings are part of the Collaborative on Health and the Environment.
- Heather Sarantis, Women’s Health Program Manager, and Susan Braun also launched a National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS)-funded partnership with the University of California. The purpose is to encourage community based participatory research (CBPR) on environmental and health disparities factors in breast cancer. “Our team hosted 11 workshops across California in Vista, Los Angeles, Chico, San Francisco, Oakland, Arcata/Eureka, Merced, Nevada City, Watsonville, San Bernardino, and Sacramento,” Heather writes. “We gave more than 270 participants information about CBPR and the science of what we already know. We told participants how to apply for a year-

long training we are offering in 2012 to help teams of community based organizations and academic researchers prepare to apply to the leading breast cancer research funders.”

When I first envisioned Commonweal as a center focused on healing ourselves and healing the earth I could not have known the shape the work would take. But 36 years later, here we are—at the forefront of work in healing and making skillful contributions to healing the earth. *The micro is great!*

A Closing Thought on the Commonweal Cancer Help Program

We finished our 161st Commonweal Cancer Help Program this afternoon. We launched eight new alumni back into the world. I don't know what is more astonishing—the incredible healing power of the Cancer Help Program or the fact that so few people have the opportunity to experience healing at this depth in the course of their lives.

So much of modernity militates against deep healing. Deep healing is best evoked in very small groups—no more than eight—with an absolute focus on the needs of each person at a moment of maximal crisis. There is a fundamentally *hand-crafted* quality to the Cancer Help Program. Participants do not feel “processed” through some cookie-cutter machine. They feel fully met, exactly where they are. William Blake said we can only help another in “unique particulars.” I could not agree more.


I turned 68 the Saturday before this Cancer Help Program. I like to be in a Cancer Help Program on my birthday. There is nowhere I would rather be. I find 68 to be a fascinating age. I still have the energy to contribute to guiding the work. And I've learned a few things that I can pass on to others who carry more of the burden.

So friends, as I close, let me say we are beyond grateful for the support of the Commonweal community. There are at least ten thousand of us across the country and around the world who feel connected somehow to Commonweal. I invite you to *think creatively* about the ways you can participate actively in our work. We welcome your prayers, your time, and your financial support. You can also help by donating really good stuff that you no longer need—cars, trucks, houses, or land. Check with me and see if we can put something to good use! It is also a very special gift to remember Commonweal in your estate planning, or to ask that donations in your memory benefit Commonweal. Those gifts make a tremendous difference.

We are here because you are part of Commonweal's circle. You have chosen to believe in our work for 36 years. As long as we hold this circle of trust together, Commonweal's work will go on. I end this letter with special gratitude to Susan Braun, Commonweal's Executive Director and an incomparable partner in leading Commonweal's work. Those of us who work with Susan know we could not do this without her. The renaissance at Commonweal bears the mark of her wisdom and kindness.

Thank you for being part of our work at Commonweal. Please use the enclosed envelope to support our work. Give what you can.

With warm best wishes and deep gratitude,


Michael Lerner
President