with some Jewish students of Tibetan Buddhism. The story of the conference was reported in a remarkable book called *The Jew in the Lotus*. What the Dalai Lama wanted to learn was how Jews had managed to preserve their culture and spiritual tradition—against all odds—while living in diaspora for two thousand years.

First, he emphasized how old Tibetan culture is—going back 30,000 years, archeologists have found. Then he spoke of the ancient sources of Tibetan Buddhism. He spoke of the times in Tibetan history when the country had been powerful. During those periods, Tibet had been an open culture, learning and borrowing from its neighbors. Then it became isolated and inward-oriented—and that had been a mistake. The culture lost its power. But Tibetans are by nature an open and inquisitive people, he said. They, as students living in the United States, have had the great benefit of a modern education. But they should realize what a powerful contribution their culture is making to the advancement of science and culture—and they should be proud of it.

The essence of their heritage, he said, was not ceremony but Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. They should study that philosophy, preferably in Tibetan, but in English if need be. At the core of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy was the recognition of the interdependence of all things. Understanding this fundamental interdependency of all things—"nothing absolute," he said in English—would reduce their suffering and bring them greater happiness in their daily lives. If you harm others, you bring harm to yourself. If you help others, you do good for yourself. This is a law of nature, he said.

These two experiences—the Yale conference *Toward a New Consciousness: Creating a Society in Harmony with Nature* and hearing the Dalai Lama speak to the grandchildren of the Tibetans who fled Tibet with him in 1959—were both pivotal experiences for me as we continue the work of creating The New School at Commonweal. The Yale conference was a strong affirmation that serious people share my belief that the Great Work of our time demands our recognition that every facet of the human mind and spirit must be engaged in the great struggle to preserve our planetary inheritance. The Dalai Lama's talk was a vivid reminder that cultural as well as environmental survival is at stake—the survival of the myriad cultures of the world—all precious—as well as the survival of the rich diversity of nature and of our own species.

Two of my most recent New School conversations have been with great pioneers of the religious dimension of this work. Paul Gorman, Executive Director of the National Religious Partnership on the Environment, has done more than any other single person to bring the Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical and Jewish faith communities into direct engagement with the great environmental health and justice issues of our time. Krista Tippett hosts the National Public Radio show *Speaking of Faith* and has written a lovely book of the same title about her own journey.

Both Paul and Krista have long experience with radio dialogues. Paul hosted a public radio show in New York for more than two decades. Our conversation focused on the interface between our shared experience growing up in New York in Christian-Jewish families, our encounters—like Jonathan Rose and Dan Goleman—with Buddhism and other traditions—and our struggles to be of some service to the Great Work of our time. Krista Tippett has made a remarkable contribution to the national dialogue on issues of faith, successfully adopting a first-person approach to interviewing an extraordinarily diverse community of people about their experiences of faith, meaning, and science. Krista skillfully cuts through the polarized public dialogue about faith to the inner places in which so many of us find that we can truly understand each other.

The New School is in its infancy. But I am convinced that what it gives Commonweal—that we did not have before—is a way of exploring the larger issues of the ecological and human crises of our time with the extended Commonweal community and with others across the country and the world who share these concerns.

Commonweal has done well for three decades with programs that focus on a single specific piece of work—helping people with cancer, advocacy for troubled children, saving our oceans, permaculture gardening, transformative education for health professionals, and the wide range of our environmental health initiatives. These focused strategies have been, on the whole, extraordinarily successful. But our single-minded attention to these strategies left little space for organized exploration of the great social and ecological issues of our time, which represent the context that so shapes our focused initiatives.

The power of The New School for me is that it enables us to draw on so many parts of Commonweal's work—especially the Cancer Help Program, the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness, the Commonweal Garden and our environmental health programs. As we reach out to touch the work of so many others with shared values, we can weave into these dialogues our own direct experiences.

I hope you will join us in The New School conversations and events at Commonweal. You can download any of the conversations we are having at **www.commonweal.org**—and then click on The New School. Better yet, you can receive the conversations by subscribing to them as pod-casts. And you can get our monthly emails about events, conversations, and other observations by emailing us at **newschool@commonweal.org**.

We need help with The New School—your ideas, your engagement, and your financial support as well.

Let me simply close by thanking you for your interest in, and support for, all our work at Commonweal. We are so grateful for your ongoing engagement with our community, and for all the ways you contribute to our work.

With warm best wishes,

Michael Lerner
President

ENDNOTES

1 A small sampling of the participants, other than those mentioned in this Letter, includes Juliet Schorr, a sociologist of consumption from Boston College; Rober Costanza, an ecological economist from the University of Vermont; Ursula Goodenough, a biologist at Washington University; Dave Foreman, founder of the ReWilding Institute; Peter Forbes, founder of the Center for Whole Communities in Vermont; Chip Giller, CEO of the online publication *Grist*; and Wes Jackson of the Land Institute.

2 There is a debate about the choice between a carbon tax and carbon cap and trading schemes. Most economists regard the carbon tax as more efficient than carbon trading schemes. Politicians prefer cap and trade schemes because they are politically allergic to taxes. Both can be useful. But if you elect to cap carbon emissions and then trade carbon permits, you have to auction the permits—you can't give them away—or you lose the essential point which is putting a price on carbon.

3 The most serious, salient—and acknowledged—limitation of the conference was the paucity of participants of color. We were assured this did not reflect the invitation list. As a result, issues of justice received less attention than issues of the environment.

4 Dan Goleman is a friend of over twenty years. Commonweal hosted one of the earliest conferences of social and emotional intelligence, the field to which Dan has made such a seminal contribution.

5 Jon Kabat-Zinn has also been a friend of more than two decades. His books include *Full Catastrophe Living* and *Coming to Our Senses*.

COMMONWEAL

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

Fall 2007

Dear Commonweal Friends:

I hope this letter finds you well. Commonweal continues to thrive with Charlotte Brody's inspired leadership. I remain focused primarily on the Cancer Help Program, the Collaborative on Health and the Environment, the Fund for Women's Health at Commonweal, and The New School. I share my thoughts on each of those projects in the Commonweal Letter. Here, in this personal letter, I want to talk with you about the larger issues of our time, which are also the focus of our work through The New School.

On October 12-14, I joined a conference called *Toward a New Consciousness: Creating a Society in Harmony with Nature* at the Aspen Institute in Colorado.[1] The Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, a venerable institution that counts Aldo Leopold among its alumni, had convened us. I was invited by Commonweal's good friends Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, two leading authorities on religion, spirituality and ecology. Mary Evelyn is a close collaborator of the great Catholic "theologian/geologian" Thomas Berry, whose central insight is that science—especially astronomy—has for the first time in history enabled humanity to understand the true creation story, and that this creation story can return us to a way of life lived in harmony with the earth. Mary Evelyn edited Berry's beautiful recent book, *Evening Thoughts*.

The Dean of the Yale School of Forestry is Gus Speth. Speth was previously administrator of the United Nations Development Program, founder and president of the World Resources Institute, and co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Counsel. Speth is profoundly worried about climate change.

The conference prospectus began:
Our world, our only habitat, is a biotic system under such stress that it threatens to fail in fundamental and irreversible ways. Major change is required to stabilize and restore its functional integrity. This topic has been extensively elaborated by the scientific community, and debated by many in policy and government. This issue has not yet emerged, however, as an overwhelming priority among the public, or altered values, consciousness, or behavior toward nature. It is important that we understand this failure to alter our society's core consciousness toward nature, and come to understand what can be done to change basic values and behaviors.

As the conference opened, we learned that Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change had won the Nobel Peace Prize. Richard Somerville, professor emeritus at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, had been a member of the IPCC. I sat with Somerville and his colleague Susan Hassol, an eminent climate change science writer, at dinner. I asked what we need to know about climate change. Their answer:

- Climate change is happening much faster than most scientists had anticipated—at beyond the upper end of IPCC estimates.
- The acidification of the oceans as they absorb carbon dioxide (CO_2) from the atmosphere is a major problem. The acidification attacks reefs and other structures at the base of the oceanic food chain.
- One out of every four CO_2 molecules in the atmosphere is of human origin.

P.O. Box 316, Bolinas, CA 94924 ■ PHONE: 415.868.0970 ■ FAX: 415.868.2230 ■ www.commonweal.org ■ commonweal@commonweal.org

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I asked about solutions. Their answer:

- We must put a price on carbon.[2]
- Energy efficiencies can get us halfway to our carbon reduction goals.
- We must stop subsidizing fossil fuels—and direct our subsidies toward new energy technologies.
- Investing in renewable energy sources is critical but, Somerville argued, nuclear energy is an essential transitional source of energy (others at the conference strongly disagreed on this point).
- We need a massive research and development project (comparable in focused effort to the Manhattan Project that developed the nuclear bomb during World War II) on hydrogen and fusion energy and other energy technologies.

David Orr, a visionary professor of environmental studies and politics at Oberlin College and the University of Vermont gave a keynote talk that underscored the point Somerville and Haskoll made: *almost all the new science indicates that the "surprises" on climate change are on the negative side*. We are in a very narrow cusp of time, Orr said, in which dramatic reductions in greenhouse gasses will be necessary to preserve life as we know it.

Why has America has not acted on the climate crisis? Political opinions of the American people have not moved significantly to the right during the post-Reagan era. Polls continue to show that most Americans favor doing "whatever it takes" to take care of the environment. They also favor increases in the minimum wage, and other broadly humane centrist positions. How then, Orr asked, have Republican conservatives been able to move the American agenda so far to the right?

Orr organized his response under three headings: *media, mass distraction, and mismanagement*. First, conservative activists spend $300 million annually on a tightly organized media machine that communicates their political and cultural message in media markets. These media markets are increasingly dominated by monopoly corporations. Second, advertising has successfully shaped our aspirations and beliefs, distracting us from our real interests and values. Third, conservative activists have a conscious strategy to destroy the resource base and decisional authority of government.

Paul Hawken, author of seven books and, like Orr, one of the most important thinkers of our time on environment, health and justice issues, gave a moving talk on the theme of his most recent book, *Blessed Unrest*. Hawkins argued that the greatest social movement in the history of the earth—a movement of core shared values driven by between one and two million non-governmental organizations—represents our best hope for survival. He likened this movement to a planetary immune system. He emphasized that justice issues are as central to this movement as environmental issues. He said that most of these organizations are place-based, and therefore they tend to reach out for collaboration with their neighbors, not to polarize toward extreme political positions.

Gus Speth, in his address, emphasized the need for a new collective narrative in America—a story about who we are, what we face, and what we need to do—that is simple, memorable, compelling, and engages us all in our response to a challenge that human beings have never before encountered on earth. Speth spoke on the theme of his new book, which comes out in March—*The Bridge at the End of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*. He believes we are staring into the abyss; that modern capitalism is out of control and contemporary environmentalism is fatally limited. He argues for a "Great Transformation" that reshapes the market to support the environment, moving to a post-growth society, limiting consumption, changing the fundamental dynamics of the corporation, and moving beyond today's capitalism. Most important, he argues that the "seedbeds of transformation" require both a new consciousness and a new politics.

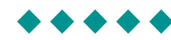
The conference participants were drawn from the domains of business, the sciences and social science, public policy, environmental advocacy, civil society, communications, the humanities, and religion.[3] Working in groups of eight, participants were asked to forge responses to two basic questions: (1) what is the *diagnosis*—what core problems in science and society have brought us to this impasse; and (2) what is the *prescription*—what transformation of values, behaviors, shared narratives, and policy are needed to create a society in harmony with nature.

Randy Hayes, founder of Rainforest Action Network, suggested we consider *survivability* as well as *sustainability* as a critical concern. He spoke of the power of the re-localization movement, the Peak Oil movement, and the thousands of communities where people are organizing to transform energy use, grow foods locally, and drop our carbon footprint from an average of 22 tons a year to two tons a year—the level some estimate is required to stabilize the climate. He proposed that the Federal Government mandate that big accounting firms perform triple-bottom-line audits on all corporations—audits for finance and for environmental and social impact. Hayes has an uncanny capacity to identify societal leverage points.

In one iconic moment in our group, Theodore Roosevelt IV, Managing Partner of Lehman Brothers and a dedicated environmentalist, wondered aloud what had happened to the Progressive Movement in this country—a movement that his great-great grandfather, unquestionably one of America's greatest presidents, had played a central role in forging.

In a plenary dialogue facilitated by Mary Evelyn Tucker, the participants focused on a debate over *sacrifice*. Some urged we acknowledge that deep sacrifices will be required. Others disagreed—the nature based society will provide "a richer life, not a life focused on riches." Mary Evelyn reminded us that sacrifice was a central dimension of all religious traditions. The word literally means "to make holy." I suggested that the majority of people on earth are already living lives of deep sacrifice—an homage to the justice issues that were not sufficiently present in the dialogue. Someone noted dryly that if we were all committed to a two-ton carbon budget none of us would be at the conference. That truth was greeted with solemn silence.

On Saturday evening, Jonathan Rose, one of the foremost ecological developers of our time, traced the evolution of urban society, from the earliest use of irrigation to create food surpluses to the petroleum-based urban world of our time. Rose offered a vision of an America living in culturally rich urban enclaves surrounded by nature and infused with nature. I left the conference with a strong impression of the power and seriousness of the scientific and cultural consensus that the participants had voiced.



I regretted leaving the conference early. I missed the essential talks on spirituality and ecology by Brian Swimme, author of *The Universe Story*, and Mary Evelyn Tucker. But I had to be in New York the next day, and so did Jonathan Rose, and the forecast was for snow. So right after Jonathan's talk Saturday evening, we jumped in a four-wheel drive jeep for the four-hour drive through the deepening snow to Denver International Airport.

Jonathan had been my student at Yale in a class I taught in the early 1970s on contemporary political theory. He had been as caught up in the zeitgeist of the 1970s as I was. He signed on in Europe as a mechanic for a hippy bus that was traveling overland from Europe to India. He came home knowing he wanted to be an ecological community planner. He has become a preeminent force in both community planning and project development for more socially just and sustainable human communities. Some years ago, Jonathan and his wife Diana, both committed Buddhist practitioners, came upon an old Catholic monastery in Garrison, New York, across the Hudson River from West Point. Together, Diana and Jonathan created the Garrison Institute with a focus on "meeting social and environmental challenges with contemplative intelligence."

The following morning, at the Garrison Institute, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was scheduled to speak with the Conference of Tibetan Students of North America. Dan Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence* gave the introductory talk. Goleman told the young Tibetans, gathered in the vaulted chapel of the monastery, that their tradition of Tibetan Buddhism has inspired great advances in the affective neurosciences.[4] He described his own journey that started in a farming community in California. He received a fellowship to Amherst and was quite unprepared for the stresses of elite academic life. Meditation helped him learn to manage those stresses. After college—like Jonathan Rose—Dan went to India. There he found that experienced meditators could do more than handle stress well. Meditation, he discovered, shaped their whole way of being in the world. Returning to the U.S., he wrote his Harvard psychology doctoral dissertation on meditation and then became a science journalist for *The New York Times*.

Dan told the young Tibetan students, many in traditional robes, that His Holiness was fascinated by the sciences. For years the Dalai Lama has conducted dialogues with leading neuroscientists through The Mind-Life Institute. He told them how frequently observations from Buddhist contemplative practice were guiding the thinking and research of neuroscientists. He talked about how the affective neurosciences have come to understand that the mind is a muscle, and that exercising different aspects of the mind-muscle, through meditation and other dharma practices, changes the plasticity of the mind itself. Dan talked about the power of emotional and social intelligence. He explained that emotional intelligence involves being aware of and learning how to manage your own internal states, and social intelligence involves awareness and skill in relating to the emotional states of others. Contemplative practice, he explained, enhances both social and emotional intelligence, with beneficial consequences in school, in work, and in our personal lives.

Dan cited Jon-Kabat Zinn's program, which found that eight weeks of meditation of thirty minutes a day is enough to begin significantly to increase a sense of peace, reduce anxiety, and enhance immune function.[5] He told them that mindfulness practices are being adopted in schools as a key element in Social and Emotional Learning programs, and how corporations like Google were adopting contemplative practice programs as well. The point of his talk was that they, as Tibetans, had a heritage that they could be deeply proud of—a tradition that was contributing to the evolution of our scientific understanding of the human brain, and a tradition that could help them do better in their careers and live happier and healthier lives.

As Dan finished his introductory talk, twenty-five of us, board members and friends of the Garrison Institute, were ushered out of the chapel and down to a room to await the Dalai Lama. I had first met His Holiness in Dharamsala in 1971. Thirty-five years later, I was introduced to His Holiness again. He greeted each of us as we held a white silk scarf in our outstretched hands. My moment came. Diana Rose introduced me and described our work at Commonweal. His Holiness nodded. He uttered a soft warm sound of acknowledgement. "Hummmp." Then he put the scarf around my shoulders.

We were escorted back to the Chapel. Moments later the Dalai Lama entered the Chapel, surrounded by State Department security staff and a contingent of Tibetan aides. Now 73 years old, dressed as always in a dark orange robe with a light orange short-sleeved shirt under it, he prostrated himself low on his knees before an ancient statue of the Buddha that is enshrined at the front of the chapel, then sat on a raised platform and addressed the students in Tibetan. One of his senior aides whispered a translation to us as the talk proceeded.

The Dalai Lama had a clear goal. These students were the grandchildren of Tibetans who had followed the Dalai Lama when he escaped from Tibet in 1959. They are assimilating into American culture very rapidly. They are in serious danger of losing contact with their cultural roots. His Holiness has a long-standing concern with preserving Tibetan culture and teachings. Years ago, he held a conference in Dharamsala, India,