

# COMMONWEAL

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

November 14, 2005

Dear Commonweal Friends:

I hope this Letter finds you well. With this mailing, you have the news from Commonweal Executive Director, Charlotte Brody. It is the first time in thirty years that I have not undertaken to weave together summaries of all of Commonweal's work for you. Now I am free to write to you about the ideas and issues that engage me, at Commonweal, in my own life, and in the world.

Life goes exceedingly well at Commonweal. Charlotte is doing a truly exceptional job as Executive Director. She is a gifted shepherd of this community. She is also a visionary social thinker attentive both to the lessons of history and to reflective personal experience. In many respects, Charlotte is doing a far better job of guiding Commonweal than I ever did. The importance of these leadership transitions can scarcely be overstated. The fact that Commonweal now has such a gifted CEO augurs well for the coming decades of our work.

It is unusual for nonprofit organizations in leadership transitions to find a role for the founding CEO that continues to add value for the organization. Interestingly, for-profit businesses keep their founding CEOs around frequently, often as Chair of the Board. That is essentially the role I am serving as President of Commonweal now. I continue to be deeply active in Commonweal's work, focused on three areas – the Cancer Help Program, the Collaborative on Health and the Environment, and new opportunities for Commonweal's work. I have written about both the Cancer Help Program and CHE in Charlotte's Letter. In this Letter I will continue to write to you about issues that intersect with Commonweal's work that are on my mind.

## The State of the World

It is remarkable how rapid the rate of change is these days. The force vectors that made the administration seem almost impregnable two years ago have reversed. There is a quite nonpartisan sense of possibility in the air – the possibility that the American people may see the need for change. That said, the capacity of more thoughtful Republicans, Democrats and independents to steer the country back toward a sensible course remains in doubt, because the present dispensation is so deeply entrenched.

The history of imperial overreach by hegemonic powers, I have often noted in this Letter, is a very old one. Most hegemonic powers ultimately implode because they commit their blood and treasure to overseas adventures. They lose their "soft power" and debase their currency. As they become empires, they often destroy the citizen base of their original strength at home. The policies of this administration are now doing more to advance the cause of a multi-polar world than one would have believed possible. We are so exhausting our national resources in the Middle East that we have no choice but to practice diplomacy elsewhere.

This administration is also doing a stellar job of advancing global opinion on the need to act on climate change. Its patently blind energy policies have stimulated a reaction nationally and internationally that cannot be ignored. American public opinion on the reality of climate change has decisively shifted, not because of another scientific study but rather because of the undeniable facts on the ground. The record-breaking number of high force hurricanes, the palpable experience of Katrina, and the clear evidence that the arctic ice is melting are what really ended the public debate.

In fiscal policy, the Iraq War has now cost as much as the entire Marshall Plan in Europe. The palpable sense of what we could have done with this enormous proportion of our national treasure shocks even conservatives. The continuing efforts to cut services as basic as food stamps and care for the disabled while continuing to lavish tax cuts and benefits on the wealthy has begun to affect public sensibility. The country is being hollowed out, its substance sold to China and the newly affluent Middle Eastern oil barons, who lend us back our money in order to keep the roulette wheel turning for a few more years. We have entered a period of increasingly radical discontinuities. We will reap a grim harvest in the decades to come.

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There is a whisper of hope, an intuition that the tide has begun to turn. California nurses have won a great battle for adequate hospital staffing. California unions turned back an ill-conceived plan to gut their contributions to political campaigns. A multi-faceted campaign to curb the excesses of WalMart has begun to take hold. The systematic pillaging of pension plans at United Airlines and many other companies is stirring deep public revulsion. In Virginia, a Democratic Catholic candidate for Governor demonstrated that a real faith-based values campaign is not incompatible with a centrist progressive social program. New Jersey has elected a Governor who believes in a vigorous approach to chemical policy reform. Senator John McCain has drawn a line in the sand on torture and none dare gainsay his right to do so. These may be some of the early flowers of spring after this winter of deep discontent.

### **The Philosopher Prince: HRH Prince Charles and Camilla Visit Bolinas**

"I expect a full account," my friend Ruth Hennig in Boston emailed me the day before HRH Prince Charles visited Bolinas. This is the email I sent Ruth:

it was like this. i planned to ignore it. but at noon i got on my bike and pedaled down to the bolinas school. my friend charles fox was there in his wheelchair with his french wife veronique. my friend marion weber was there. marion had shaken hands with camilla in point Reyes at toby's feed barn. lillian, also french, who runs the hardware store was there. and aggie murch was there, a brit like charles. she had called her husband walter who is shooting a film in london and asked him where their union jack was but she couldn't find it.

the royalty were to be the guests of warren weber and his wife. warren is a well-known organic farmer in town. in front of warren weber's stately white house where lunch was to be served to the royalty stood a balding young man in khaki pants and a blue jacket. he had an official gold emblem in his lapel. he had a coiled plastic cord going to an ear piece in his ear and he talked into his cuff. someone told me he was secret service. he wore dark glasses.

down the street at the school, there were two young blond women in khakis with blue jackets and the same little gold emblem. they also had dark glasses, coiled plastic cords going into their ears, and they talked to their sleeves. they looked like they were modeling themselves on how security agents look on television. i asked one of the young women if she was secret service. she said she was state department security. she said they protect visiting dignitaries.

a man from the british embassy, a little sweaty, a flower in his lapel, incongruous in a formal blue pinstripe suit, chatted with the state department security woman. a dozen marin county sheriffs, almost all with short cut brown hair and mustaches, were all business. cameramen wandered by with a half dozen lenses hanging from their bodies. one of the sheriffs came and told one of my neighbor terry that she had better put her dog in her car. he said he had a dog and the defense department had a dog and if these dogs were brought out they weren't socialized to be nice to other dogs. terry has one of the most beautiful gardens in bolinas.

now there were about a hundred people gathered at the school. Several little girls had signs saying "camilla country." we waved to all the cars coming by. most of us did those little royalty waves where you keep your arm still and rotate just the hand. the motorists did the same thing. it was all very friendly. we were having a grand time.

then a blonde lady showed up with a sign that said DIANA LOST HER LIFE/ EVIL MISTRESS WIFE. she wore khakis and white tennis shoes and a blue shirt with a white cap. we all booed her loudly. but she was brave. first people tried to block her sign with their bodies but the sheriffs had us all come to the school side of the street. the lady with the sign was protected on the far side of the street by two sheriffs. aggie murch made a run for her sign but the sheriffs stopped her. the blonde lady stood against a telephone pole and waited. we thought she might be standing in a clump of poison oak. we thought that might be a good thing.

the royalty were supposed to be there by 1 p.m. but they were running late. and we were getting hungry. by 1:45 p.m. many of us had been there for almost two hours. i thought about leaving. but i didn't. we talked about who we would wait two hours for. there was pretty much a consensus in the bolinas crowd. the dalai lama. nelson mandela. bob dylan. bb king? maybe. so why were we waiting two hours for HRH? well, it was a nice day, and he was a big champion of organic agriculture, and it is not every day that the quality come to bolinas. and we had invested two hours in waiting, and it couldn't be too much longer. but a lot of us were thinking about all the other things we might have done.

finally at about 2:10 p.m. the royalty showed up behind three sheriffs cars with their lights flashing. there were

three SUVs with the windows darkened and a limosine with dark windows too. the cars turned quickly into a side road beside the school and drove the back way to warren's property.

as soon as the cars went by, most of us left. i went across the street with charles and veronique to have some lentil stew, which was very good. i didn't see HRH or camilla but veronique said she saw him. she said she wondered who he was, staring at her like that. several other friends showed up. one friend had brought some cookies from the bolinas peoples store, and an apricot crunch made with oats. it was the best desert i had tasted for a long time. i think all of us at lunch had been in bolinas for at least fifteen years. charles and i had been here over thirty years. we talked about bolinas things. then i bicycled downtown to the people's store and bought some more of the apricot crunch and some other things for my friend heeten kalan who was coming for dinner.

i was glad i went to stand by the road and wait for the quality to come. even though i did not actually see them, i felt somehow that my life had been touched, ennobled – dare i say enriched? – by the passing so close to me of the quality. it was a fine day for our little town.

In the weeks since the royal visit, I found myself reflecting further on why Bolinas welcomed Charles and Camilla so warmly. My neighbor Jerry Mander put the answer simply to me over breakfast on Sunday at the Coast Café. “He's one of us,” Jerry said.

I think that is right. And it is not just Charles that feels like one of us. Camilla does too. The little girls with the signs saying “Camilla Country” out in front of the school caught that dimension of our welcome. Camilla is a woman unafraid of age and quite happy to be a little dowdy in a community at home with those choices.

But our appreciation of Prince Charles goes beyond his avid support for organic agriculture. I truly recommend a book that Commonweal friends Paul and Eileen Growald recommended to me, *Radical Prince*, by David Lorimer, who lives in Scotland and serves as program director of the Scientific and Medical Network. Lorimer describes Prince Charles' deep thinking on sustainability, on organic agriculture, on integrative medicine, on architecture, on education, on globalization and corporate responsibility, on his sense of the sacred, and on his ecumenical sense of the true meaning of faith. Paul Growald said to me, rightly, that Prince Charles is may be the foremost exponent in the world of a coherent social philosophy congruent with the values that many of us hold dear.

If Prince Charles assumes the throne, I hope that some day we are mature enough to see beyond the tabloid hysteria with Charles' personal life and are able to recognize that England has found a philosopher-king. For Charles truly has evolved a public philosophy of a high order, and in Lorimer he has found a Boswell worthy of his role. And I, for one, cannot imagine a better role for the King of England in the uncertain 21st century than that of affirming the public philosophy that Prince Charles holds. Like President Clinton, whose great gifts were similarly obscured by his personal indiscretions, Prince Charles is a seriously talented man. In Camilla, he has the life partner he has sought. Bolinas turned out to wish them well. I was glad I was there.

### **Ordinary Immortality: Lessons from Joe Hill**

Ever since my heart attack two and a half years ago life has seemed infinitely precious to me. Sometimes my sense of how precious life is frightens me. I wonder if the universe is affording me this acute sense of the preciousness of life because I am to be called home. I hope that that is not the case. I feel healthy and well. I take the intensity of this sense of the preciousness of life as the natural feeling of a 62 year old man who has been brushed by mortality and who loves life.

The fear of death stems from the deep biological instinct that preserves life. “Even the wise fear death,” the Buddha says in *The Dhammapada*. “Life clings to life.” This same fear of death has inspired spiritual teachers to seek a place beyond that fear. The Hindu prayer says it beautifully:

*Lead us from the Unreal to the Real.  
Lead us from the Darkness into the Light.  
And lead us from the Fear of Death to the Knowledge of Immortality.*

In over one hundred and forty Cancer Help Programs at Commonweal and at Smith Farm Center for the Healing Arts in Washington, D.C., I have sat on Wednesday nights as we go around the circle and talk about what death means to us. I ask each participant to share her beliefs about death. The beliefs traverse the whole spectrum. For some, death is the end. For others, there is something after death. For many, death remains a great mystery.

When my turn comes, I confess that death remains a mystery for me. I will not be surprised if I awaken after death to find that the witness place in me has survived. I will try in that moment to remember the great instruction of many spiritual traditions to move toward the light. But if my consciousness ends with death, I will not be disappointed. I have truly come to trust the way the universe has designed life. Gregory Bateson put this trust in the universe beautifully when Rachel Naomi Remen asked him: "And who are you?" "I am," Bateson said, "a friend of evolution." If we are friends of evolution, we trust the design of life.

Although I remain ignorant of what lies beyond this life, I still know that what matters to me about my life will survive. I agree with Rachel that one of the best purposes we can embrace in life is to grow in wisdom and to learn to love better. It is an ancient formulation. That commitment to wisdom and compassion leads many to conclude that the best way to live is to try to be of service.

The hope to grow a little wiser and a little kinder as we get older, and to be of some genuine use to others, are among the most common human aspirations. They are essentially humble hopes. The miracle is that all of us who share these simple hopes become bearers of a light that we pass down from one generation to the next. If our individual lights are extinguished when our bodies fail, the light itself is carried on by the next generation.

To be numbered in the vast throng of those who seek to carry that light is what matters to me. In fact, the vastness and the humility of the brotherhood and sisterhood of those who seek to be a little wiser and a little kinder and who, stumbling along, pick each other up when we fall, comforts me. It is like being part of a universal Alcoholics Anonymous. We are born with an innate tendency to get addicted to something. At some point we get tired of being drunks. You do not have to be special to be in recovery – but it can take every ounce of your strength and your prayers to stay there.

There is an old labor song my brothers and I used to sing with our parents in the Packard driving out from Manhattan to our summer home, a farmhouse near Conscience Point, outside Southampton, on Long Island. It is a song from the decades that our parents dedicated to helping working people fight for their rights. They were part of the movement that built the labor unions and created the middle class in America. The gains of this working middle class are again deeply threatened in our own dark time.

The song was about a labor organizer named Joe Hill. It starts:

*I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, alive as you or me.  
Said I to Joe, "You're ten years dead" – "I never died", said he  
"I never died," said he.*


The singer goes on to say that Joe had been framed and killed. But Joe tells the singer that it doesn't matter. And finally Joe says:

*"In every plant and mill,  
Where working people organize,  
It's there you'll find Joe Hill.  
It's there you'll find Joe Hill."*

The universe has shown me no certainty about individual immortality. But I know in the fabric of my being that there have been countless people before me and there will be countless people after me who will see life essentially through my eyes. They will be wounded as I am wounded. They will know the preciousness of life as I know it. They will seek whatever wisdom they can find and practice whatever kindness they have within them. And they will try to be useful to others because that is a deep human instinct and because they cannot imagine a better way to live. Joe Hill understood the power of that ordinary immortality.

Thank you, friends, for continuing to participate in and support the Commonwealth community. We cannot do this work without you. I hope you will again choose to support our work this year.

With warm best wishes,



Michael Lerner  
President