

COMMONWEAL

A Collective Memoir

PART I The Early Years 1975-1982

**Written in part, and edited by
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Preface

Dear Friend:

What you have before you is the first installment of the Commonwealth Collective Memoir Project. This is a project that my dear friend and colleague Mary Callender and I have been working on for ten years.

Mary needed the patience of Job to stay with this project. I was continuously pulled away by the urgencies of life in any small nonprofit organization. The Memoir was unquestionably important, but it was never urgent.

What finally enabled me to concentrate on the Memoir were four considerations.

First, my colleague Oren Slozberg set out with great determination to mark Commonwealth's 40th anniversary. He believed the Memoir should be part of that occasion.

Second, as I write in 2016, I am 72 years of age. I hope for many years of service. But I know I may be called away to whatever lies beyond this life at any time.

Third, my colleagues with whom I have worked for two, three and four decades are not getting younger themselves. We needed to get their memories down on paper.

Fourth and finally, I am the sole survivor of all of Commonwealth's four decades—the only person who has been here throughout that time. Hence I was the obvious one to tell the story. I found in Mary Callender a partner whose dedication has been truly exceptional. Mary has done most of the work, prevailing on others to write their memories down and editing many pieces of my writing into a more coherent narrative.

This is not a memoir where you will find our greatest moments of human struggle. The exception is that I do describe the near-collapse of Commonwealth in 1982, and the personal crisis I faced at the same time. The Commonwealth story cannot be told without including it.

Commonwealth has been graced for 40 years with a remarkably low level of staff and Board conflict. But we have had our share, and they have sometimes been heart-wrenchingly difficult. You won't find those stories here. It would be neither kind nor wise to tell them, and it would not further our dedication to the work.

This Memoir is intended as a source book for others who may construct their own stories of Commonwealth by drawing upon it. I offer my heartfelt gratitude to each of the hundreds of my fellow pilgrims who have walked this path with me. I give special thanks to those who have been willing to commit their memories to paper. We hold this as a work in progress and welcome new contributions.

Thanks for being a part of the Commonwealth journey of 40 years.

*Michael
May 21, 2016*

I. A VISION OF COMMONWEAL

By Michael Lerner

On a crisp fall morning in 1975, I was walking along a dirt road in Bolinas, a small town north of San Francisco overlooking the Pacific Ocean. I gazed up the coast at an old white building nestled on a high bluff by the ocean's edge. An offshore breeze sent swirls of mist scudding across the fields, as sunlight flickered through the clouds. By chance, a shaft of light broke through the mist and lit upon the building, half-hidden in a grove of pine trees.

I knew the history of the old building. It had been built in the early 20th century by the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi. Against enormous odds, Marconi, a home-schooled child, had invented wireless communication. In 1897, he created the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company that was later taken over by Radio Communications of America (RCA) as part of its global radio communications network. The Marconi transmitter station was the place where wireless transmissions across the Pacific Ocean first began.

While gazing at the abandoned building, I had a sudden and unexpected thought. Perhaps we could transform that old transmitter building into a healing center—a place dedicated to healing those in need and restoring the earth. I was astonished by the clarity and power of the vision. I walked the quarter mile back to Carolyn Brown's house and told her what I had seen. Carolyn, the divorced wife of a Presbyterian minister with three children under seven, was in her kitchen drying dishes. She looked at me with penetrating blue-grey eyes and said softly: "Let's try."

In the three preceding years, Carolyn and I had built Full Circle, a school for troubled children on the outskirts of Bolinas. No reason, we thought, we couldn't start a healing center on 1,100 acres of land surrounding an old RCA transmitter facility at the southern edge of the Point Reyes National Seashore. It was a time when many young people were following their dreams. We would continue working with at-risk children, while expanding our healing work to include adults. Aware of the deep connection between human health and the health of the earth, we wanted to create a center where human and environmental health were seen as fundamentally linked. That has been our intention ever since.

My Path to Commonweal

Born the eldest of my parents' three sons in New York City in 1943, I grew up surrounded by artists, writers, thinkers and journalists. I attended Dalton School in New York, a private progressive school, as did my younger brothers Steve and Adam. In 9th grade, I entered Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. After the warm and kind environment of Dalton, Exeter felt like jumping into an icy lake. It was an academic and emotional boot camp.

After Exeter, I worked in Paris for a year as a copyboy for the *International Herald Tribune*. The Algerian war raged and plastic bombs exploded. I was arrested in a roundup of Algerians—the police mistook me for one. After work ended at 3 a.m., I rode my ancient BMW motorcycle home through the freezing streets to the cold-water, dollar-a-night Left Bank hotel. During the day, I haunted Shakespeare & Company, the great Left Bank bookstore where George Whitman presided.

When I returned to the U.S., I went to Harvard in 1962 to study psychology and politics. Joan Baez was singing in a little club near Harvard Square. Writing for the *Harvard Crimson*, I covered the Vietnam War and President Kennedy's assassination, and watched my friends go south for Mississippi Summer.

In 1965, I went to Rio de Janeiro on a Fulbright Fellowship. Soon after I returned from Brazil, the Six Day War broke out in Israel in June 1967. My brother Steve and I scrounged press credentials—he for *The Village Voice* and I for *The Washington Post*. We flew to Tel Aviv on the second day of the war. I caught a ride with three other reporters into the Syrian foothills in a convoy of Israeli jeeps. When the commander learned that reporters were riding with his troops, he ordered us to walk back toward Israeli lines in the twilight. The Israelis were expecting Syrian troops might attack. It was the closest I came to getting shot. I headed south and joined the first convoy of correspondents to cross the Sinai Peninsula. We stopped to give water to a wounded Egyptian soldier sitting by the side of the road. The smoking tanks and personnel carriers littered the desert like a Fellini landscape.

Once back in the United States, I started graduate school in political science at Yale. My mother was a psychologist, my father a political theorist—psychology and politics were my focus from college through graduate school. My doctoral thesis on *Personal Politics* focused on in-depth studies of Yale undergraduates with ambitions for high political office. Psychology and politics were also at the root of my lifelong interest in personal and planetary healing. After graduate school, I began teaching political theory, psychology and politics at Yale.

In 1972, I took a sabbatical from teaching at Yale to work as an Associate with the Carnegie Council on Children. The organization was headed by my mentor, Kenneth Keniston, who had written two books on the youth culture: *The Uncommitted* and *Young Radicals*. Ken and I agreed that I would work half the year in New Haven and half the year in San Francisco, while researching the needs of children growing up in the United States.

My girlfriend, Leslie Acoca, and I packed my red 2002 BMW with all our possessions and drove out to the West Coast. When we reached San Francisco, we couldn't find an apartment. I remembered that a friend from Yale had mentioned Bolinas, a small town on the Pacific Coast, so we took a day off to explore West Marin. Arriving in Bolinas, we walked through a light rain into Scowley's, a smoky coffee shop. There I recognized Orville Schell, whose brother Jonathan had been a classmate and close

friend at Dalton. Orville told us how townspeople had recently ousted the pro-growth board of the Bolinas public utilities district and installed a board that shared a vision of a small and sustainable community.

We arrived in Bolinas just after the Summer of Love in San Francisco. Hippies were moving back to the land and many had discovered that Bolinas had become the epicenter of the counter-culture movement. It was no accident that Leslie and I were drawn to Bolinas. At Yale, I had created and taught a popular course on the American counterculture. Dozens of young people were living in shacks on the beach or building their own houses on cheap land along the meandering dirt roads of the Bolinas Mesa. You could buy a decent house for \$25,000. We saw an ad for a house for rent on the community bulletin board downtown. We rented the house and settled in Bolinas for what we thought would be a sabbatical year.

While working with the Carnegie Council on Children, I decided to volunteer at the Bolinas School, where the first generation of children of these young counterculture parents were encountering public education for the first time. Their familial relationships were complex, as their parents changed partners and had children in various combinations. The casualties of this cultural transformation were only flickering future shadows.

Dave Duffin, an ex-Marine who drove the school bus, had built a motorcycle repair shop on the school campus and was raising a whole generation of young boys who were trying to make sense of their world. I volunteered to sweep out the repair shop so I could watch Dave work his gentle magic with the children.

George Bailey, a gentle Texan with a deep Southern accent, was the teacher in the second grade classroom where I volunteered. One day, George said to me: "Michael, ahm fix'n to introduce you to a friend of mine." George's friend was Carolyn Brown. Meeting Carolyn changed my life. We sat and talked in an empty classroom for several hours. She told me about her oldest son, who had been born with severe learning disabilities. His pediatrician suggested putting him on medication, predicting that he would never be able to live on his own. Carolyn refused to accept that prognosis. She had studied books written by Adele Davis, the popular nutrition educator, and was convinced that nutrition could help children with serious learning and behavioral problems. She truly believed that there had to be a way to raise children like her son so that they could live independently as adults.

The idea that nutrition could help learning disabled children seemed highly dubious to me. But I agreed to go to Berkeley with Carolyn to visit the Growing Mind, a school she had founded for neurologically handicapped children, in a converted warehouse not far from the freeway. Carolyn introduced me to a little girl who had been diagnosed as retarded and was unable to leave her mother's side. An elderly Hungarian psychotherapist put the little girl on a diet free of gluten and dairy products. Within weeks, the fog of seeming retardation had lifted. The dietary change made a dramatic difference in the child's ability to function in the world. It

turned out that she was learning disabled—not retarded. A month after changing her diet, she was able to go down the street by herself to the corner grocery store, something her mother would never have imagined possible before.

I was astonished. I had studied child psychology as an undergraduate at Harvard and a graduate student at Yale. I had worked at the Yale Child Study Center, the Yale Psychiatric Institute for young adults, and the Carnegie Council on Children. *No one had ever suggested that nutrition might affect consciousness.*

I was so struck by this little girl that I decided to give up my teaching position at Yale to find out how many other children had similar reactions to foods and chemicals. I crisscrossed the country visiting centers that offered nutritional therapies for children and adults. I met Ben Feingold, M.D., who believed that food additives caused hyperactivity, Theron Randolph, M.D., the pioneer of clinical ecology (the study of food and chemical sensitivities), Carl Pfeiffer, Ph.D., a pioneer of orthomolecular medicine, and many others. I wrote a report for the Ford Foundation called *Tomorrow's Children: The role of nutrition in the learning and behavior disorders of children*. I reported that nutrition helped some children a lot, some children a little, and some children not at all.

Founding Full Circle

In late 1972, Carolyn and I began making plans to build a residential school in Bolinas for children with severe learning and behavioral problems. It was a major life decision to leave Yale in order to try to start a school for troubled children. My parents thought I was crazy. I didn't blame them. I knew this looked like—and might be—professional suicide. I was giving up a likely future as a tenured professor at Yale to try to build a school where we would feed delinquent children a nutritious diet to see if it would alter their behavior. And yet, the question was compelling—could nutrition actually play an important role in consciousness?

We bought an old apple orchard on 22 acres of land in Dogtown, a small cluster of houses just north of Bolinas on Route One. We enlisted George Bailey and Tim Tabernik to help us build the residential center from the ground up. Tim was a carpenter and former Catholic seminarian with a long, blond pigtail down his back. Together with other long-haired friends, we tore down a dilapidated farmstead in the Point Reyes National Seashore. We loaded the lumber onto a creaky flatbed Ford truck, then drove five miles to Dogtown. We hustled materials from building supply centers that were willing to give cut-rate deals to a good cause.

On a beautiful spring day in 1974, Leslie and I were married by Carolyn Brown in the unfinished building, with the rafters rising above the concrete slab on which we stood.

When we finished the 5,000 square foot residential treatment center, we named it Full Circle. I knew that the San Andreas Fault—the major earthquake rift in

Northern California—ran right through the property. When I was younger, I had thought two things were incomprehensible—one was choosing to live in a volatile earthquake zone. The other was choosing a life of social work with seriously troubled children. How strange that my precise image of incomprehensible choices at a younger age was the life path I was now following.

Once the building was finished, we needed children to fill it. Carolyn called juvenile halls throughout Northern California and told probation officers that we would take severely troubled children that no one else wanted. In her search, Carolyn often heard the phrase “throw away kids” applied to the children we hoped to bring to Full Circle.

I went out in my old red BMW to pick up James, a little blond boy with pale skin, dark circles under his eyes and severe hyperactivity. He had a long history of arrests for burglary, theft, drug dealing and violent assaults. Extremely belligerent, he needed to be physically restrained at least once a day. He was uncooperative with the Full Circle dietary program until he was tested for allergies. Within seconds after a nurse placed a drop of blue food coloring under his tongue, James went wild, attacked the nurse and started throwing furniture around the room.

James’ rages subsided once he agreed to stop eating junk food and anything with preservatives. He never became what most people would call “well behaved”, but after a while he rarely had to be physically restrained. He became much more self controlled, filled out physically, and his academic performance improved considerably. We never knew precisely what caused these changes, but beyond the counseling, staff attention, clean air, exercise and some placebo effect, it seemed that nutrition was a significant factor.

And then there was Jack—a small, blond nine-year-old who constantly tripped over his own feet. His longest sentences were only three words and he answered almost every question with “I dunno.” Jack was extremely hyperactive and had psychotic episodes each morning. He couldn’t find his way out of his room and down to breakfast. At the table, he couldn’t get food onto his fork and into his mouth. His father had a degenerative disease; his mother had suffered a nervous breakdown, and his brother was a drug addict. Jack’s therapist predicted that he would probably commit suicide by age fourteen.

Jack was diagnosed with severe hypoglycemia, food allergies and chemical hypersensitivities. His blood sugar went down so low overnight that by morning he was out of touch with reality. Putting him on a hypoglycemic diet with high protein snacks before bedtime and orange juice upon arising ended the morning psychosis. Allergy tests showed dramatic psychological and behavioral responses to eggs, wheat, yeast, chlorine, and red, yellow and blue food dyes. Removal of these allergens and chemicals from his diet brought further improvement. Within a year, Jack was able to speak in long, complex sentences and stay connected with reality. He remained a strange child, in a world of his own, but he would not have to spend

the rest of his life confined to an institution.

We filled Full Circle with traumatized young boys like James, Jack, and ten-year-old Sam who had been raped, whipped with wire and tied to his bed. We staffed the school with young hippies, two just back from a trip to India, and an ex-Special Forces soldier who had served in Vietnam. Leslie and Tim Tabernik started teaching in the unfinished classroom in the front of the building. Working with these young boys, we discovered that behavior disorders were far more responsive to nutritional treatment than learning disabilities that seemed to change very slowly, if at all. Over the years, we found that nutrition made a big difference with some of these children, a lesser difference with others, and no difference at all with still others.

A Center for Service and Research in Health and Human Ecology

Having successfully built Full Circle from the ground up over the previous two years, Carolyn and I were strangely confident that we could actually build a healing center on the RCA property. As our plans evolved, we decided to call it *a center for service and research in health and human ecology*. While that is an awkward descriptor, it remains at the heart of our work 40 years later.

Initially, Carolyn and I wanted to call the new center *The Institute for Planetary Services*. It sounds farcical to our ear today, but it accurately reflects our consciousness at the time and, indeed, the spirit of the original vision. Carolyn had walked the land with Arthur Okamura, a close friend and gifted local artist. Carolyn had a vision of the new center as one of the acupuncture points on the surface of the earth that was needed for healing the planet. But Judge Mary Conway Kohler, an early advisor and one of the first juvenile court judges in the country, firmly told us that the name would never do. She suggested that we find a name with its own power that would resonate with the consciousness of the time. One afternoon, when my wife Leslie and I were brainstorming about a possible name, she suddenly came up with “Common Wheel.” That sounded promising. Then in a flash it came to me—“*Commonweal*”—an old English word meaning “the well-being of the whole community.”

Carolyn suggested that we invite Burr Heneman, a Yale-trained journalist and television producer, to join us in founding *Commonweal*. At the time, Burr was helping the artist Christo lay the ground work for *Running Fence*, an 18 foot tall, white nylon fence that snaked 24 miles through western Sonoma and Marin counties, with one end emerging from—or disappearing into—the Pacific Ocean. Burr had guided the construction project through the maze of permits, environmental studies and local politics. As a leading environmentalist, Burr was well respected in Bolinas as one of the most effective community strategists who was committed to saving the small town from unwanted development.

We imagined we would open a medical clinic to test and treat children with neurological disorders and adults with chronic illness, and a research institute to

document the findings at the clinic, and explore the relationship between health and the environment. We planned to open a residential community where we could provide a low cost alternative to nursing homes and hospitals for the chronically ill.

We envisioned a farm with an abundant organic garden, free from chemical fertilizers and pesticides, to provide healthy, nutritious food for those staying at the resident community, as well as the staff. Community buildings would be powered by alternative energy sources—windmills, methane generators and a solar still. Water flowing down out of the hills could be collected in ponds and tanks to be used for gardening and other needs. The entire site would be transformed into a dynamic model of ecology in which the whole system—buildings, energy, farming, water and waste—worked together to benefit both humans and the environment. Forty years later, the vision remains incomplete. But we’ve come a long way.

II. FOUNDING COMMONWEAL

By Burr Heneman

When Carolyn Brown first asked if I would be interested in co-founding some kind of health and environmental organization with Michael and herself, I was living in a trailer on five acres of land I had bought at the edge of Bolinas. I was in the midst of designing and building a house on my property. I had gotten most of the lumber, board by board, by taking apart a large house that the Point Reyes National Seashore wanted removed from Limantour Beach.

Owner-built homes popped up all over Bolinas during the 1970s. There was an epidemic of construction without contractors. We all had our own motivations, but there were a few common threads. Money, most of all. We wouldn’t have had houses if we hadn’t built them ourselves. A lot of us arrived here in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, over-educated and under-employed, but interested in settling down. Bolinas didn’t look to us like just another way station.

Building our own home was a long-time dream for many of us. Some of us had modest construction skills when we started, and we relied on knowledgeable friends who were generous with their time and advice. Those who weren’t too stubborn learned from trial and error, too. We made it up as we went along, reinventing a lot of wheels along the way. Using recycled building materials was the norm—we felt good about saving both money and trees. The spirit—and reality—of community was new to many of us, but also a necessity. We dismantled buildings together, and held barn raisings and roofing parties. Friends crewed for each other when concrete was poured. Idealism, combined with the question-authority, outlaw streak at large in Bolinas at the time, may have been just as strong a motivator as financial necessity for many of us.

What Carolyn and Michael were proposing was crazy, of course—buying the 1,100-acre RCA property on the California coast to create a center for model approaches to health and healing, earth stewardship, and agriculture. But the possibilities were just too attractive to me to say no. Carolyn, Michael, and I spoke the same language: my family history had steeped me in the same respect for traditional medicine and openness to alternatives. And I was brought up with an ethic of caring for land and a desire to apply that ethic to a piece of ground. I was doing that on my own five acres, but 1,100 more was irresistible. The gutted, derelict historic buildings that are now Pacific House, Bothin, and Kohler were another big draw for me with my love of design, construction, restoration and re-purposing. But the reality is that Carolyn and Michael cast their spell and made the whole crazy dream seem perfectly reasonable. I don't know anyone who ever said no after being double-teamed by them.

We all knew that we faced tremendous challenges in getting the site. First of all, we needed to be able to explain our vision so that it made sense to others. We also needed to figure out how to get in touch with RCA. Doug Ferguson, a friend and the attorney who had negotiated the purchase of the Full Circle property, opened the conversation with RCA. It turned out that RCA was interested in selling the site, so Michael and I entered into serious negotiations with them.

When we set out to acquire the RCA property as the home for Commonweal in 1975, we recognized that Commonweal could help realize important objectives of the new Bolinas Community Plan. The plan had just been drafted by the community; it was approved by the County later that year.

The 210-acre Holter property along Poplar Road was for sale for development, and RCA was scaling back its use of its 1,100-acre property. People for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) wanted those properties added to the Point Reyes National Seashore. The community was worried about how the National Park Service would use the land and the substantial buildings on the RCA property adjacent to the Mesa, where most of Bolinas residents live. If Commonweal, and a grazing operation under Commonweal's supervision, occupied the RCA lands and buildings, it would create a buffer between Bolinas and the Seashore's southern entrance at Palomarin. Commonweal would preclude development of high-intensity visitor use if the RCA property became part of the Seashore.

We reached a tentative agreement to buy the entire 1,100-acre site and buildings for \$1.8 million—an astounding amount of money we certainly did not have. RCA would continue to operate on a reduced scale, maintaining some antennas and using half of the main building.

Just as Commonweal was close to a deal with RCA, I got a phone call from Huey Johnson, the founder and president of the Trust for Public Land (TPL). He reached me at home, in my trailer on Horseshoe Hill Road, which was also the official corporate address of Commonweal. I pictured Huey in somewhat more exalted

offices. Having heard from People for GGNRA about our potential deal with RCA, Huey told me that we could forget about our plans to buy the property and build some kind of “Boys Town,” as he put it. He had decided that TPL would buy the 1,100 acre site and eventually convey it to the Point Reyes National Seashore. (In the process, TPL would turn a tidy “non-profit profit.”)

This was quite a blow, part of it personal. I didn’t know Huey then, but he was one of my heroes—a visionary conservationist and environmental policymaker who had been key to preventing development of a planned town of 10,000 in the Marin Headlands. I explained to Huey that People for GGNRA had given him the wrong impression and that Commonweal was not to be anything like a Boys Town. I described how we would be just the sort of steward of the land that TPL would approve of. After a lengthy and frank exchange, it was clear that Huey wouldn’t budge. I told him I was sorry I hadn’t been able to convince him that Commonweal would be a good alternative to the Seashore, but Michael, Carolyn, and I would continue to pursue our plan. He said, “Fine. I like a fight.” And that was the beginning of a struggle that lasted more than a year.

The first round went to Huey. After being approached by TPL, RCA backed away from the sale to Commonweal and effectively told us and TPL to sort it out between ourselves. In a strange twist, this large and distant corporation decided not to sell to either of us because they didn’t want to become involved in a local dispute with their reduced operation continuing on the site.

Michael, Carolyn, and I began a high-stakes chess game, trying to gently maneuver Huey away from his hardline position. An early move was to invite Huey out to walk the land and talk about Commonweal’s plans. He agreed to come. Orville Schell, who was a Commonweal board member, and County Supervisor Gary Giacomini, a supporter, also came along. We hoped Gary would give us more credibility. That gathering did not go well. Huey was mostly silent. He left shortly after Gary had to go, but not before chewing us out for inviting our Supervisor in an effort to intimidate him.

As it happened, serendipity was on Commonweal’s side. A woman on the TPL staff whom Huey had great respect for was also an admirer of Carolyn’s work with the Growing Mind school in Berkeley. But the really astonishing coincidence was that Doug Ferguson, our attorney, was one of Huey’s closest associates and chairman of the executive committee of TPL’s board of directors. For some reason that I can’t recall, I think we did not learn that until a few weeks after Huey phoned me. That circumstance changed the nature of the discussion, but it took many more months to resolve the conflict between Commonweal’s desire to be on the land and TPL’s desire to buy the land and sell it to the National Park Service. Without Doug, the outcome might well have been very different. Commonweal and TPL both owe the eventual deal to his patience, competence and good humor.

The stalemate ended with another phone call from Huey to tell us that he had

decided, in essence, to become Commonweal's godfather. TPL would buy the land from RCA and convey it to the National Park Service. Commonweal would become a long-term tenant.

And that's what happened—after a few more months of twists and turns. We had gotten Huey's agreement, but we would have to deal with other obstacles on our own. The primary opposition came from the formidable People for a Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Responding to People for GGNRA, John Burton, then our Congressman, introduced a bill to add the Bolinas lands to the Seashore. People for GGNRA urged John to reject the TPL-Commonweal deal. The organization was co-chaired by Dr. Edgar Wayburn, a longtime president of the Sierra Club and one of the greatest advocates for the creation of national parks in the 20th century. People for GGNRA was close to both John and his older brother, Congressman Phil Burton, whose legislation added more land and wilderness to our national parks than anyone else.

But we were close to John Burton, too. I had walked precincts for him in the '60s when he first ran for a state Assembly seat from San Francisco. I had also been a minor participant in San Francisco liberal politics as one of two representatives of my broadcast industry union on the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education. We had consistently supported John and other candidates he favored. And he had helped us out when we went on strike in 1967: mutual political loyalty was—and is—bedrock to him. Aside from that personal/political history, John was sympathetic to the serious concern of his Bolinas constituents: the possibility of an overpowering National Park Service presence adjacent to us.

To help him resolve the conflict, John asked his chief of staff, Barbara Boxer, to arrange a site visit and include us and Ed Wayburn. We all trudged across the magnificent lands with John and ended up at the old RCA hotel, which then was an empty shell. Just before we left, John asked Dr. Wayburn what he thought the Park Service should do with the buildings. Ed paused—I don't think he'd thought about it before—and said they could make a good visitor center. John didn't say anything—just grunted noncommittally. I blessed Ed silently—he could not have said anything better for us. I have always thought that was the moment when John decided to write Commonweal into his bill as the best use for the RCA property, respecting community concerns and precluding the visitor center.

As planned, TPL purchased the land and conveyed it to the Point Reyes National Seashore. Commonweal signed a 50-year lease on 60 acres of land that included the main buildings. In addition, Commonweal would have a 20-year lease on the garden site, and a 10-year lease on all the remaining acreage, which was to be used for grazing cattle, a stock pond and BCPUD reservoir site.

In late 1977, we moved into the 1929 RCA main building. We had desks, telephones and old manual typewriters. There were no copiers, fax machines or computers. By

then, Commonweal had been incorporated as an official 501(c)3 non-profit organization and the three of us took on new roles: Carolyn was Chairman of the Board, Michael was Executive Director and I was Director of Operations. It was a mildly terrifying prospect. We faced the staggering task of turning an old RCA antenna farm with a half dozen gutted buildings into a center for personal and planetary healing.

Though we had just moved onto the site, Commonweal had been in existence as an idea and a campaign for two years. We had supporters who were eager to see us deliver on our promise. The San Francisco Foundation was one of the most important of these. Martin Paley, executive director of the foundation, asked if he could visit our new home—the successor to my trailer. We could have just shown him the place, but we wanted it to look at least a little bit lived in, as though we were actually inhabiting it and good things might be happening there. We invited Martin and his wife, Muriel, for a tour of our “operations.”

We had very little money, but I found half a dozen beautiful 1920s oak office desks and chairs plus desk lamps at BusVan in San Francisco—a great place for used furniture bargains in those days. Although Michael, Susan Dun and I were the only employees, we set the six desks up in the four existing offices on the east end of the second and third floors of the main building. When the day of the Big Visit arrived, my sister and brother-in-law, Joyce and Jim Schnobrich, arrived with refreshments to help host the reception at our Potemkin headquarters. We pulled it all off rather well, and the Paleys were pleased with what they saw.

The internal pressure we felt to show that Commonweal was in motion began even before we had acquired the site and moved into the RCA building. I saved a remarkable memo Michael wrote me in September 1976, more than a year before the Paleys came to visit. It encapsulated our—and particularly Michael’s—vision for what we’d accomplish in the coming year. The memo, a 36-year-old time capsule, captures the Commonweal reality in 1976-77. But the memo, combined with hindsight, also reveals how Commonweal has evolved ever since. Whatever collaboration there has been in that process, and however many people have been part of it, Michael’s consciousness has been the single consistent factor shaping the outcome. As long-time Commonweal friend and observer Janet Visick has said, “The evolution of Commonweal is a mystery if one doesn’t understand a few things about Michael.”

Here’s how Michael’s 16-page memo began:

Burr: I have tried to organize my thinking on Commonweal in a way that we can discuss and share with Carolyn and Orville as we make decisions.

The overall situation appears to me to indicate that Commonweal is now an existing center in Bolinas for service and research in human ecology. It does not yet have a permanent site, but it exists. It has a staff and is setting its goals and

production priorities. It has approximately \$200,000 to work with, and the good prospect of more support. Thus the time has come to recognize that we exist and that we now must begin to plan and produce efficiently.

I would rate the chances of our getting the RCA site now at about 80%. In order to get it on the best possible terms, we must assume at this point that we have it and that we are planning its use.

Since Commonweal now exists, I have begun to ask myself why we cannot have all four components of Commonweal functional in Bolinas whether or not we get the RCA land. In other words, let's make the commitment to do the whole project one way or another. The clinic and the research institute could be housed anywhere if it were necessary. As for the farm and the therapeutic community, land and living space are both available if we start small, which we would want to do anyway—a house with some land around it, or a house and land separately.

I hope and expect that all this will in fact take place on RCA. But unless we visualize the whole piece of work as something we intend to go forward with, and make it clear to those we are asking for support that all aspects will go forward, then we don't generate the inner strength to make the project go through. We are not talking of some enormous thing that will overwhelm the town. Perhaps only six residents initially, if we did not have RCA. The game that is being played here is finding a way to gear up flexibly to increase the probability that we actually get and can then defend the RCA site from those who will try to take it away.

In the event, we didn't pursue plans to start the alternative clinic, research institute, farm, or therapeutic community anywhere but on the RCA property. Our time was absorbed by the campaign to get the land firmly in hand. It had been promised to us, but there remained labors between us and the prize (slaying the Hydra, cleansing the Augean stables, etc. were tasks that Michael and I shared equally). Fundraising, primarily Michael's responsibility was a continuing demand on our energy. And we began intensive site planning to understand in detail how we wanted to use the buildings and land and to prepare for another great labor—the County and California Coastal Commission permit processes, which were within my purview, and without which we could not open our doors.

The reality was that Michael and I—and Susan Dun when she joined us—could not possibly have prepared, simultaneously, for a Commonweal on the RCA site and another Commonweal at some other location. Instead, we put all our chips on the bet that we would acquire the RCA property and, with one exception described below, focused all our attention on that site.

The durable message of the opening paragraphs of Michael's memo was that we would succeed in creating Commonweal, and that visualizing it and having that

confidence would give us the inner strength, reflected in our actions, to win local and broader community support, approach funders, and engage successfully with any opponents.

Michael's September 1976 memo continued:

VISION FOR A YEAR FROM NOW

Let us imagine Commonweal a year from now in terms of the vision we are developing here.

And, following that, a section on each of the four sections of Commonweal—the clinic, research institute, therapeutic village, and farm. Here, slightly condensed, is the section on the clinic.

CLINIC

We would have a functioning clinic, probably out at RCA! What I foresee at present for the clinic is a space where we have a clinic set up, and where almost all of the lab work is initially contracted out. We would contract out a lot of the blood work, hair analysis, and other work. We would have an excellent referral system for patients who came to us seeking cancer visualization therapy, etc. We should be thinking in terms of laying out at least \$30,000 of the \$50,000 from the Haas Foundation by early in the New Year. Getting the clinic working will be the highest priority.

Staff would include the medical director and his associates, who would work on straight fees for services basis initially (medical director and support staff, secretary, lab tech, nurse, would be on salary; rest of possible medical associates would be on fees for services). The clinic would include consulting service on where to go for other forms of therapy. We'd be seeing a mixed population of children and adults with a variety of nutritional diseases or stress-related diseases. Probably also doing some straight pediatrics for West Marin—straight nutritionally based pediatrics.

The clinic would be involved in one or more straight and careful research projects, for example the Office of Criminal Justice Planning-Youth Authority study of the biochemistry and disorders of juvenile hall kids. This would be a major research project with a separate project director, and would be co-sponsored through Commonweal with the Growing Mind for delivery of services.

I would think we would, organizationally, want monthly meetings of the clinic and specific associates on different months that included you, me, the medical director, perhaps the person who organizationally is making the clinic tick (if different from the medical director), for policy decisions. I would think that Carolyn would be in on those meetings ex officio as she had time and wanted to

stay current.

I would think that we have to be prepared to open the clinic by March 1, 1977 (6 months after the date of Michael's memo) in some form or other, or our credibility with SF Foundation and others will begin to go down the drain. Fail-safe date for opening would be June 1 (9 months after the memo)—absolutely no later than that, and it is my long experience that to open and function by June you must start to open 3 months ahead. We should have a medical director by this December at the latest. Start looking for temporary clinic quarters in December if RCA is not through by then. Clinic absolutely must start up.

In general on the clinic, I think we are going to have to move strongly ahead, picking up the right people as we find them, putting them in place and letting the process weed out those who are going to leave and those who are going to stay.

At present, I believe the way the clinic would work at the start is that we would have equipment to take blood samples, spin them down and freeze them for transport to other labs. We would take blood, hair, do glucose tolerance, do some sublingual allergy tests but do most of our allergy testing via RAST test from blood sample. We would prescribe diagnostic diets, prescribe fasts in some cases. We would prescribe vitamins, minerals, etc. We would refer on informal basis for acupuncture. We would refer (and might start doing ourselves) cancer cases for visualization, and prescribe nutritional here. We would do excellent straight pediatric medical, check-ups. We would do family counseling work. We would be plugged into really excellent massage work for those who needed it. We would do complete learning disabilities work-ups, using Full Circle resources (which is required by the existing Law Enforcement Assistance Administration grant to Full Circle, since we told them we were starting an associated outpatient service).

All of this is just a working gestalt for us to modify and proceed from, just visualization so we can hone it down.

It is very important that we not be frightened into too great a conservativeness on what we are providing in the clinic by what our foundation sources might think. And it is very important that we set up a very excellent system of clinical research so that we can keep track of, and demonstrate, precisely what results from different therapies. The Clinic, above all, should be under way early in the new year (with screw-ups, by early spring).

This was a broad-brush picture of the finished product, combined with minute attention to the details that Michael had focused on so far, and almost no suggestion about how all this would happen. Both the six-month and nine-month deadlines were, of course, impossibly ambitious.

Again, there were core messages embedded in this vision for the clinic. Commonweal needed to open a clinic as soon as possible. We shouldn't back off from our vision of how Commonweal should try to make a new contribution to health care. Most important: all the rigid-sounding imperatives in the first paragraphs were really "just a working gestalt for us to modify and proceed from." Susan Dun and I, the main implementers in those first years, understood that we needn't be slaves to the details of The Plan. We had the license to find the optimal path, to revise and improvise as opportunities emerged, to get as close as we could to the heart of the vision on the shortest timeline we could manage.

By and large, it was an easy collaboration among the three of us. One reason was that The Plan was only the latest plan. As Michael absorbed the realities that Susan and I and others would discover, there would be a new plan. And another plan after that. Each one became closer to the final reality. In retrospect, I'd say there was an astonishing amount of improvisation.

What those of us who worked with Michael came to understand was that he is most comfortable when he has a clear and definite plan, even when the rest of us might think such a plan was premature. But Michael's plan might not outlive the week or the month before he'd be on to the next clear and definite plan forged from changing possibilities and imperatives. But as the details changed, the core ideas and central truths remained. Sometimes really big details changed.

Taking the example of the clinic, what in that section of Michael's September 1976 memo came to fruition? Commonweal opened a Family Practice Clinic in downtown Bolinas in the fall of 1977, little more than a year after the memo. That was a tribute to our ability to improvise, plus Susan Dun's wizardry with impossible health care bureaucracies. There had been no mention of a Family Practice Clinic—it wasn't part of the plan until Plan B or C or maybe D.

We didn't open the alternative clinic by June of 1977, of course. That "fail-safe" deadline really was impossible. We did open a clinic at the RCA site in the spring of 1978, only a year and a half after the memo.

Michael included similar sections on the research institute and the therapeutic community, which were implemented with even greater evolution than the clinic plans.

The last section of Michael's memo included thoughts on how Commonweal would function and who would do what over the following year or so. In its simple, almost narrative exposition it reflects Michael's familial rather than hard-core corporate organizational style:

ORGANIZATIONAL THOUGHTS

Heneman, Brown and Lerner meet monthly on regular day at regular hour to review. Heneman and Lerner meet weekly and are then joined by Dun and

others as they come for weekly conference. Heneman and Lerner take such independent actions as are called for by daily logic of their work, checking with each other as they proceed. As site director of on-site operations, Heneman exercises wide discretion with regard to development of agriculture, water system, therapeutic village, housing renovation, energy systems, budget, personnel. Additionally, Heneman is responsible for local and county political and community coverage, calling Lerner in when needed. Lerner takes primary responsibility for developing the research institute and the (alternative) clinic as project person on these projects until they are organized, at which point their normal operation shifts to Heneman, with Lerner focusing on policy, research, and development questions in conjunction with Heneman. Lerner and Heneman shift off on Sacramento and Washington stuff as needed. Each covers for other during vacations. Believe we should aim for three months total vacation time per person, although in contact by phone, but able to leave Bolinas for two months at a time, with a month off at Christmas, within three years ('til then probably harder to get away...If you hear somebody who wants to get away for a while. . . you're right.)

Michael was absolutely right that it would be hard for us to get away for three months of vacation a year in the following three years. That didn't happen.

Michael's memo focused entirely on our program aspirations, but there was another daunting checklist to work through before we could open our doors. We had inherited magnificent old buildings from RCA. The ones that later became Pacific House, Bothin House, and Kohler House were derelicts built in 1914. We weren't certain they were salvageable and would measure up to earthquake standards adopted long after those buildings were constructed. It was a great relief when our consulting civil engineer, Jaspar Strandgaard, and retired Marin County Chief Building Inspector Herb Wimmer confirmed our bet that they could be rehabilitated.

The Main Building was newer—1929—and still in use by RCA. We weren't worried about the integrity of that massive, reinforced concrete structure. But it had only a few usable offices; the rest of it was two large spaces crammed with transmitters and transformers. In the spring of 1977, Susan Dun adroitly acquired CETA funding to hire 16 high school students to dismantle the abandoned RCA equipment that summer under Michael Rafferty's gentle supervision.

The 1970s was the era of the federally sponsored Comprehensive Employment and Training Act programs, which provided funding to hire the unemployed. Commonweal became the largest CETA contractor in West Marin, hiring construction workers, administrative staff, gardeners and researchers with federal funds. For a number of years, we had over 40 people, primarily students, working there to renovate the neglected site and dilapidated buildings, and to run the new programs we were starting.

While the kids were clearing the two 58'x58' rooms, local designer Steve Matson

and I planned the layout for the clinic and offices. That fall and winter, a CETA crew of unemployed carpenters, using our blueprint and a lot of donated and recycled materials, transformed the cavernous downstairs space into a clinic, complete with a reception area, waiting room, offices, exam rooms, library and a partially equipped laboratory.

The offices were unusable unless we had safe, adequate and legal electric, water, and waste water systems. Let's just say that achieving each of those was another adventure on a site where all the infrastructure was more than 50 years-old.

Putting pipes and wires and partitions in place didn't give us the right to use them. For that we needed a few permissions. Besides building, electrical, plumbing, and septic tank permits, we needed a Use Permit from Marin County to operate programs. The California Coastal Commission was the last big hurdle. It had to grant Commonweal a permit to exist in the Coastal Zone. All of this required us to think through and commit to on paper all the infrastructure that Commonweal needed now and might ever want to have on the site.

To make the permit process as smooth as possible, we needed broad support for Commonweal from Bolinas and our wider communities. Just building that support was a full-time job in a town that is understandably suspicious of change, especially on the neighboring 1,100 acres. Some townspeople opposed the southward extension of the Point Reyes National Seashore; they just wanted RCA to stay and continue its operations. Some people wondered who we were, what Commonweal was, and why it should inherit the site.

In the end, there was a gratifying outpouring of support and only a few voices in opposition. As we had expected, what we proposed for programs was very much in tune with Bolinas. And we helped the community understand that RCA was leaving, the National Park Service was coming—that was a done deal—and that Commonweal, occupying the RCA buildings, would be the best possible buffer between the Seashore and the town.

As Carolyn Brown had anticipated, all of this was familiar territory to me. All my experience was relevant: TV news producer, designer and builder of my home, participant in Bolinas, National Park, and California Coastal Act planning, and one member of the small team responsible for construction and environmental planning and permits for Christo's massive Running Fence project. Getting Commonweal launched was an immense challenge for our little group. Knowing the steps we had to take to get there—that dance had become second nature to me.

III. THE COMMONWEAL CLINIC

By Brian Bouch, M.D.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, I took some time off to go on a biking adventure throughout Europe with my wife, Anita. We were sitting on a houseboat in Amsterdam when I got a call from an old friend from medical school who told me about plans for a new start-up health clinic located in a small coastal town in Northern California. They were looking for a Medical Director who was grounded in conventional Western medicine, but also interested in exploring holistic alternative treatments.

A transatlantic introductory call with Michael Lerner led to an interview at Commonweal. Michael told me about their plan to open two health clinics—one in downtown Bolinas to serve local residents and the other at Commonweal to serve children with neurological disorders and adults with chronic illness. I was interested, though a bit wary at some of the questions posed by the search committee. For instance: “Did I think that two Virgos (Anita and myself) could work well with a staff comprised mostly of Capricorns and Sagitarians?” Not concerned by potential astrological incompatibility, I accepted the offer. I was intrigued by the opportunity to explore the burgeoning interest in alternative medicine that, in fact, was thousands of years old and just being rediscovered in the United States during the 1970s.

In 1977, Anita and I started working at the Commonweal Family Clinic in downtown Bolinas. I became the Medical Director and she was a Physician’s Assistant. I had worked in family clinics before and was well versed in the practice of providing traditional medical services to all ages. But I soon discovered that the local population was unlike any group I had worked with before. Many townies were suspicious, and even a bit paranoid: why would a bunch of Eastern-trained intellectuals—“outsiders”—want to open a health clinic in a small town on the West Coast?

I knew that the mental institutions in California had been closed in the early 1970s due to a lack of funding. Many former patients found their way to small towns throughout the state, including Bolinas. Peace-loving flower children and hippies had also moved to town and were living under cardboard boxes on the beach, in tree houses, and in their cars. Suspicious at first, the locals eventually got used to us and began to wander into the clinic seeking medical care. We treated many routine complaints, everything from colds, burns and foot infections to asthma, pneumonia, and broken ribs following a late night brawl at the local bar. We delivered newborn babies at home—natural childbirth, of course. We were on call 24/7 and never knew if we would be awakened by a midnight call reporting a drug overdose. We got used to the hairpin turns along the winding road over Mt. Tamalpais as we transported patients to the Emergency Room at Marin General Hospital, 45 minutes away.

With the Family Clinic up and running, efforts focused on opening the alternative clinic at Commonweal. Once the rusty, old RCA equipment had been cleared out of the first floor of the Main Building, the cavernous, dilapidated space was transformed into a modern clinic, complete with a reception area, waiting room, offices, exam rooms, library and a partially equipped laboratory.

In the spring of 1978, the Mesa Clinic at Commonweal officially opened for business. I served as a consultant to a group of physicians providing traditional medical care, as well as alternative practitioners who specialized in allergy testing, nutritional and vitamin therapy, acupuncture, biofeedback, massage, meditation, guided imagery, and Chinese herbal medicine. With such a wide variety of specialists, the Clinic was able to provide a comprehensive spectrum of integrative care for children with learning and behavior disorders and adults with chronic illness. In an effort to treat the “whole person,” not just the symptoms, patients were encouraged to take responsibility for their own health through diet, stress reduction, relaxation techniques, exercise, and the exploration of spirituality in their lives.

Word spread rapidly. The Clinic was soon filled with troubled young children, adults from West Marin, and many others who had come “over the hill” seeking alternative care. Through clinical testing, we discovered that many of the adults had undefined illnesses and multiple chemical sensitivities. Most clients had already made the rounds seeking help from conventional physicians who could not pinpoint the cause of illness, nor provide adequate relief for their symptoms. We suspected that as a society we were just beginning to experience the onset of stress-related illnesses, particularly among young people. We wondered if the increase in chronic and degenerative diseases was related to the pollution of our environment and the contamination of our food supply. Looking back, it’s very likely that some of those illnesses were precursors of 21st century maladies, such as chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia.

IV. THE COMMONWEAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

By Steve Lerner

It has never been easy to find good work. In 1968 the Vietnam War was in full flower and many of my college friends were seeking safe havens in graduate school deferments. I decided to try my hand at journalism in New York and landed a job as a staff writer at the *Village Voice*. It wasn’t long before the local draft board suggested that I should instead fight a war I opposed in the jungles of Vietnam. At the Whitehall Army induction center in lower Manhattan, I found myself in a long line of men being given mental and physical examinations. At the end of the line, I was told that I was in the Army. I politely noted that no one had looked at my medical records that I had brought with me documenting problems I had with a knee that had been operated on twice. I was told I had a choice: I could join the army or go to prison. I declined the offer to join the Army.

Along with two other young men, I was told to sit on a bench while 500 other recruits were processed. After everyone else had left, I was ordered to come back in two weeks to appear before a board of medical examiners. One of the other young men with me was obese and was informed that he did not qualify for the military. He wept on the way down in the elevator.

Two weeks later, I was subjected to a second physical and was awarded a medical deferment. It was a moment of intense relief. At the same time it was clear to me that many other young men with disabilities, as bad or worse than mine, had been shipped off to fight in Vietnam. The difference between us was that I came from a privileged background, had gone to elite schools, and felt confident that I could say no. Sure, it was scary to stand up to authority and face the possibility of prison or exile to Canada, but I knew that if I got in trouble there would be attorneys to argue my case. Fortunately, I was spared facing prison or sneaking across the border into Canada. But the point was driven home that the system was unjust and rigged in favor of the affluent.

Thus it was that having participated in (and reported on) protests against the Vietnam War in Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C. and having avoided the draft, I was in no mood to join one of the Establishment jobs for which I had been educated. I had become a card-carrying member of a counter-cultural army of young people who, disaffected from the power structure, were looking for alternative ways to make a living.

For the next seven years I traveled overland to Asia, wrote a book about my journey (still unpublished), moved to Vermont as part of the back-to-the-land movement, and began cutting firewood, growing food, and building my own home on a ten-acre parcel of mountain that an artist friend had given me. To make money, I worked in a tool factory, pottery, orchard, and as a carpenter.

I was living in Vermont in 1975, in a house I built out of recycled barn wood, when my brother, Michael, came to visit and asked if I would like to move to California and work at Full Circle as a counselor to young people with learning and behavior disorders. The idea intrigued me. I had discovered that I could eke out a subsistence living on the land, but was still looking for a job that would permit me to engage in what I loosely considered "right livelihood." Working with troubled kids sounded as if it were in the ballpark, so I jumped at the chance, packed my tools in my jeep and drove to Bolinas.

The job at Full Circle was not easier than pruning apple trees in waist-deep snow in Vermont. One essential aspect of the job entailed keeping the kids from hurting themselves, each other, members of the staff or community, destroying stuff, or running away. We also engaged the kids in positive projects devised to teach them educational and coping skills. Unfortunately, I was not a natural authority figure. Some of the kids were my size or bigger and were not all that impressed when I told

them to stop doing idiotic stuff. Part of our training involved the non-violent restraint of these kids in an unlocked facility. That translated into taking the kid to the carpeted floor as gently as possible and physically restraining him so he could not hurt himself, a member of the staff or anyone else until help arrived. There were time-out rooms and a variety of incentives for kids not to “act out,” but I came to dread the moment when I would have to control a kid physically. Others were good at it. I hated it.

One of my last days on the job I found myself restraining a boy who was both strong and athletic and who looked strikingly like Dennis the Menace. He had been allowed to adopt a dog as it was thought this would help tame the wilder impulses in him. When I wrestled “Dennis” to the ground, he called his dog and it promptly bit me in the eyebrow. A week later I was out of Full Circle having decided that I was not cut out for counseling delinquent young people. I admired those who could do the job gracefully, but I knew I was not one of them.

As it happened, my brother Michael, Carolyn Brown, Burr Heneman, and Susan Dun were planning to open Commonweal and I signed on as a general go-fer. My first job was working with Burr and a local crew of day laborers, building a barbed-wire fence around a watershed so we could create a reservoir of water for Commonweal that was free of cow poop. Subsequently I worked on a crew disassembling some of the old radio equipment and building offices. We did whatever needed to be done and were happy to be building an environmental health center.

This was part of the reality of working at Commonweal. There was no job security. We survived from one grant to the next. Furthermore, in the early days, salaries were modest at best. You got to do interesting work, but we were not paid a lot. To economize, I first lived on the back of a truck. My living room was Smiley’s Schooner Saloon in downtown Bolinas. I cooked over a hotplate and got my water illegally from a garden hose. Friends came over and used an outdoor shower I had rigged up. Potlucks were the way we fed ourselves. The “Freebox” in downtown Bolinas provided an eclectic wardrobe. We lived on the cheap. This went on for years.

While my official title at Commonweal was “Director of the Resident Community,” since there was no resident community, and it looked like there wouldn’t be one for a number of years, I started writing about environmental issues, which I felt were not adequately covered in the mainstream media. No one told me to do it. I just started doing it and Commonweal later adopted the project. A lot of work at Commonweal got started in this fashion.

I had read a book by Lester Brown entitled *Twenty-Nine Days*. The book focused on the accelerating deterioration of the ecosystems on which all life depends. Its central metaphor was that a single lily pad in a pond could replicate geometrically until 29 days later half the pond was covered. There was still plenty of open water on the 29th day, but on the 30th it would be completely covered. The author was making the point that there is a parallel tipping point for environmental degradation

where ecosystems are incrementally poisoned or paved over until, all of a sudden, they reach the point of collapse.

This notion appealed to my apocalyptic penchant and I went to Washington to interview Lester Brown. I then began researching stories on chemical and radioactive contamination, noise pollution, the dangers of microwaves, species extinction, dead zones, indoor air pollution and farm workers sickened by pesticides

I started out small, typing up my stories on an Olivetti typewriter I had brought back from my travels in Asia. I would type up the story, glue it on a piece of paper and when I had a bunch of stories I'd copy and staple them together and begin to peddle them to friends and through local outlets. I called the series "*Working Papers*." Demand for them was less than spectacular.

Meanwhile, my social life was beginning to suffer as a result of my monomaniacal focus on environmental threats to public health. I would go to the homes of friends and regale them with stories about the banned pesticides in their Guatemalan roast coffee beans, the pesticides on their apples, the formaldehyde out-gassing from the plywood subfloor. To my astonishment, I was often not asked back. Some wit came up with the moniker "Grim Reaper" for me and pretty soon I was greeted in the streets of Bolinas as "Reap."

You would think this would have a deterrent effect, but I remained convinced that the problem posed by the over-use of toxic chemicals, their inadequate regulation, and the criminally negligent way in which they were disposed was not getting the attention it deserved. So we began to publish *Common Knowledge: A Quarterly Journal and Environmental Threat to Public Health*. When CETA funds became available from the federal government, I hired six local residents who were living in tool sheds and cardboard lean-tos to work with me on researching and writing the journal.

The Research Institute, which I now directed, also published monographs on a number of subjects including clinical ecology, nutrition, juvenile justice, and other topics of interest to various people working with Commonweal. We were educating ourselves, as we collected information about environmental threats to health, as well as new technologies in health care and disease prevention. Our primary concern was to find out if what people were doing to the environment would affect the survival of humans and other species. We presented research being done throughout the country on the potentially damaging health effects of ultraviolet radiation, oil spills, lead poisoning, electromagnetic smog, smoking, chlorinated water, estrogen drugs, flame retardants in children's sleepwear, cholesterol, high voltage power cables, food preservatives, air pollution, ozone depletion and much more.

As one of the first newsletters in the country that focused on toxins in the environment, *Common Knowledge* began to attract national attention for our

comprehensive, objective reporting as we raised a number of provocative questions in each publication.

- Do Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs), which are present in most American households, lead to numbness of the limbs, temporary loss of vision, miscarriages, and even cancer?

- Why is dioxin, a chemical described by the Environmental Protection Agency as “perhaps the most toxic small molecule known to man,” turning up in samples of mothers’ breast milk?

- Has the tremendous increase in sugar consumption led to increased hyperactivity in children? Is it linked to the increase in juvenile diabetes?

- Should the use of antibiotics be banned in animal feed? As early as the 1970s, critics of “medicated feed” suggested that by exposing the population at large to low level doses of antibiotics, certain strains of bacteria would become resistant and subsequently harder to combat?

- What is the long-term effect of dumping “low level” radioactive wastes at the Farallon Islands, located just 22 miles off the coast of Bolinas?

We published photos of fish swimming in and out of cracked open barrels lying on the bottom of the sea near the Farallon Islands, which were visible, on a clear day, out my window at Commonweal. Most of the materials disposed of at the Farallons contained contaminated research equipment, dead laboratory animals, and other radioactive residue of the *Manhattan Project* which spawned the atom bombs dropped on Japan at the end of World War II. In an editorial, I wrote: “The ocean floor is, of course, a handy storage area. Best of all, what we put there is out of sight and out of mind. Soon, however, we will be eating off that ocean floor, sucking up the manganese nodules that are the food of the future. There is no way to sweep Plutonium under the rug.”

In a 1979 editorial in *Common Knowledge*, I voiced my deep concern: “Keeping toxic waste out of the environment is a matter of public health. In trying to understand the life cycle of toxic chemicals, we realize that it is critical to ensure ‘cradle to grave’ regulation of hazardous waste. We need to build an objective, scientific case against those who pollute our world and hold them responsible.”

V. WRITING FOR COMMONWEAL

By Francine Allen

In 1977, I’d just received a master’s degree in Creative Writing at SFSU, my genre: poetry. My poet/professors illuminated the steps along the path of becoming a late 20th century poet: self-publish chapbooks, apply for grants, do as many public readings as one could, get a job somewhere to teach “the craft” to younger poets. No, I thought. No, no. The notion of doing that to my soul repelled me. And yet, I realized, I did want to write. It seemed the one thing I could do. Did do.

I began freelancing articles about the environment and the threats it faced. They sold, but I realized I could never make a living that way. By this time, I had moved to Inverness (Inwardness, I called it). At night, I typeset the Point Reyes Light. And I'd become a West Coast correspondent to *The National Fisherman*. Someone mentioned that a nonprofit in Bolinas had written about a "radioactive dumpsite" off the Farallons. That, I decided, was my next story.

I called Commonweal and was connected to Stephen Lerner, who sounded genuinely surprised by my interest in the radioactive sponge story. And so, the next morning, having driven from Inverness through Olema Valley which, during the two years of my upcoming daily commute I would silently call "the Palm of God," I entered the dank gray coastal air and, at last, stared up at the glum cement edifice: Commonweal. The building was surrounded by soggy, pitiful, neglected lawn, half rotted jade plant—all in all, profoundly dreary. Up a cement vestibule that echoed sadly "elementary school", or worse, "high school," I found Stephen and Jane Borchers, each seated in front of an electric typewriter, next to an electric heater, cozy in their large corner office warmed as well by desk lamps, floor to ceiling books, an orange shag carpet, and two huge old wooden desks.

Stephen, the "Director of Research and senior editor of *Common Knowledge: A Journal of Health, the Environment, and Technology*," got up from his desk: a charming, genial guy with a Jewish Afro wearing baggy tan cords and a button-down, long sleeved blue shirt that he might have gotten when he left home for prep school. He graciously introduced me to Jane, and then lifted a big, fat, messy manila folder that held, within it, many other messy folders which he carried, me following, into the room where, he said, I was welcome to work.

It was a profoundly empty, huge gymnasium of a room with concrete floor and walls, and a ceiling more than two stories high. Voices, footsteps, the folder that he dropped on the table—echoed metallic and hollow. Stephen commented happily that it was so much better now that the PCB tainted equipment from the RCA days had been removed.

I tried finding comfort on the metal folding chair. Alone, I read and took notes for hours, while, every once in a while, Steve came in to check on me and refill my mug with hot herbal tea.

The next day, while I continued my research, Stephen brought in the director of Commonweal Institute, his brother Michael. I had not known who or what sat or lay in the crevices of the building that surrounded me, but it had seemed completely empty and silent except for Jane, Steve and the receptionist who sat in something called the "outpatient clinic" down below. Like Steve, Michael was so cordial. Gracious. The brothers spoke in the hollowness of the room and I listened to the beautiful timbre of their voices, the clarity and ease of their diction. Who were these guys?

They asked how much I made writing my articles for *The National Fisherman*. When I admitted to receiving a penny per word, they offered to pay me more if—when I showed them the article I was writing—and they determined my writing skills were acceptable.

And so I began working as an Associate Research Editor in the Commonwealth Research Institute. My salary was paid for two years by the CETA program (the fed's Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). It was the best job I have ever had: the people, the freedom, our goals and values, and the setting (but not the physical plant). I learned to write better, to do layout, to use the EPA library in San Francisco and to interview high-level government officials and scientists without fear. I wrote about so many different things: epidemiology and cancer, bottled water, the health effects of overcrowding in prisons. Once I tuned in to KPFA during a program specifically for San Quentin prisoners and heard my "overcrowding and stress in prisons" story read aloud to them. I think I may have wept. Okay, I did weep.

I remember how, in the midst of our "Genotoxin Survey Project, we realized that in 20 or 30 years, we would witness, and experience, an upsurge of cancer in human sex organs—prostate and breast cancer. All of us felt cursed with Cassandra complex—and I began to feel as if we were counting the ways in which the world was coming to an end. Steve, Jane and I recognized we needed to become "solution" rather than "problem" oriented in our work.

And just about then, the funding ran out. Publication of *Common Knowledge*, Commonwealth's quarterly journal, ceased.

I was exposed to wonderful people and information while working at Commonwealth. William Cambier and Avis Rappaport, who transformed an overgrazed sand dune into the Commonwealth Garden, taught occasional lessons that carried the deep knowledge they'd gained as students of Alan Chadwick—approaches and insights into Gaia that I carried into my own garden, as well as the three years of free organic vegetable gardening classes I organized for the Tomales Bay community. Michael periodically graced us with lunchtime seminars featuring his friends. I remember Michael Murphy and Sam Keen testing out their thoughts on the staff. (Obviously, these afternoons were forerunners to *The New School*.) The cancer residential treatment program was a dream still in labor. The outpatient clinic provided esoteric treatments such as chelation therapy and the detection of food allergies and environmental sensitivities. We watched Carolyn Brown and Michael work on their goals for the Full Circle Program in Dogtown. I had my first acupuncture treatment from Jane Tang.

And then I was no longer at Commonwealth. I carried forward, however, the experience and skills I had gained, first becoming a program evaluator for a family foundation. Then I decided to write a book length manuscript, hoping the three

months of research I regularly undertook to write a single *Common Knowledge* article provided adequate preparation. When my manuscript didn't sell, my time spent at Commonweal provided the uncommon chutzpah to sell my piano, layout the manuscript myself, commission illustrations, and self-publish it. (Ten Speed Press then purchased the copyright and eventually sold over 40,000 copies.)

In 1986, I did what I never planned to do. I began teaching non-fiction writing at College of Marin. And, in the summer of 2012, I retired.

During the last two years, I've returned frequently to Commonweal. The evolution of the plant is amazing. No one sitting at a New School event or walking about a beautifully hung art exhibit could ever imagine how empty and cold that space was in 1977. Or sitting on the outside deck, how drab the exterior.

Nowadays, as part of the audience, I am astonished by Michael's (and the Wizard's many apprentices) tenacity. By how steady, positive, skillful work breathes life into an intricate, extended system of creative, positive energy.

During the last two years, I've dedicated myself to yoga practice. One of my teachers often reminds us what "Namaste" means: the deepest part of me bows to the deepest part of you. When I worked at Commonweal, I did not yet have a name for that spirit, but I recognize now it is what we silently breathed together, the spirit that informed our effort.

Commonweal is the same, but so grown-up.

VI. THE COMMONWEAL GARDEN

By Michael Lerner

In the spring of 1976, Burr Heneman and I drove up to Covelo in Northern California to visit the French biodynamic garden on Richard Wilson's ranch. The garden had been created by Alan Chadwick, a mythic gardener, Shakespeare scholar and devotee of the Austrian mystic Rudolf Steiner.

We had heard about two of Chadwick's students—William Cambier and Avis Rappaport. We wanted to interview them as possible stewards for the Commonweal Garden. From the moment we met, I was taken by them. William was a slight, bearded and quietly intense young man. Avis was a radiantly beautiful young woman, a native of Marin County. Not long after, William and Avis moved to Bolinas to establish the Commonweal Garden.

"When we arrived at Commonweal," Avis recalled, "we spent much of our time walking the property, exploring every canyon in the 1,100 acre parcel of land, looking for just the right place to start a garden. At the time, the hills had been

heavily grazed, hundreds of transmitting poles still towered over much of the land and the wind blew fiercely across the landscape, with few trees to provide shelter. But William and I loved it. The air, the ocean, the springs and the land offered so much opportunity and promise. We decided to settle in a south-facing canyon on the north side of Mesa Road. The sun exposure was ideal, a mature row of cedars was already in place to help block the coastal winds, and there were several springs in and around the valley. We fixed up an old hunter's cabin so we could live on-site in the garden."

William and Avis brought with them the visionary teachings of Alan Chadwick, who had been inspired by Rudolph Steiner's celestial philosophy of the interconnectedness between all life forms. "Chadwick's whole view of the gardener," Avis explained, "was that we are here to give back more than we take. The earth can produce everything that we need. There is a sense of chaos in the world and the gardener's job is to bring order into the garden. What is real is growing your own food, storing your own food, relying on the sun to rise every day and the seasons to change throughout every year. In Chadwick's philosophy, to rely and invest in the earth's ecology for warmth, safety and food was the true nature of economics."

During their first year in the garden, William and Avis began to grow food in cold frames they built out of recycled greenhouse panels. As the years went by, the garden expanded from a 50 x 100 foot plot to 1 1/2 acres of intensive beds and four acres of field crops. They created an heirloom fruit orchard, filled with apple, pear, peach and plum saplings. They planted hundreds of Monterey pine and cypress trees as windbreaks to protect crops from wind and increase productivity. They installed a windmill to pump water uphill from the reservoir to the holding tank—a towering 20,000-gallon redwood barrel. They laid over 6,000 feet of irrigation pipe running from the reservoir through the garden and adjacent fields. "Everything we used for the garden infrastructure was recycled from other projects," said Avis. "We built the garden with the help of hundreds of volunteers and farm apprentices. We taught them how to grow crops organically, using techniques that minimized reliance on off-site resources and maximized garden outputs."

The garden flourished under Avis and William's green thumbs and nurturing care. Within two years, the garden was producing enough fruit and vegetables to feed the entire Commonweal community, with plenty of surplus that was sold at the local farm stand in Bolinas. Visitors stepping through the rustic wooden gate for the first time were amazed at the beauty, profusion and serenity of the garden. One visitor observed that: "Flowers and vegetables carefully planted together in beds on a southern slope allowed adequate drainage and maximum exposure to the sun. The result was some of the biggest heads of lettuce, plumpest raspberries and saucer-sized dahlias ever grown along the chilly Marin county coast."

William and Avis were married while living at Commonweal Garden. Under the roof of their garden cottage, Avis gave birth to their son, Sylvan. The proud new parents were often spotted pushing Sylvan up and down the dirt paths in a wheelbarrow as

they farmed the land. Reflecting back on their tenure at the Garden, William recalled: “some of the most special times in the garden centered around community gatherings—solstice and equinox celebrations, poetry readings, meditation retreats and much more. At one memorable summer solstice event, we pit-roasted a pig wrapped in herbs and garden vegetables and invited the whole town to come and party. And what a celebration it was! Bolinians arrived by car, by foot, by bicycle and by horse to feast and revel in Commonweal Garden on the longest day of the year.”

VII. BEGINNING TO RENOVATE THE RETREAT CENTER

By Michael Lerner

In the ancient world, there were Asclepian healing centers—named in honor of the Greek god of medicine Asclepius—scattered throughout Greece and along the coast of what is now Turkey. Patients would go there to rest and to await dreams that would guide the course of their healing journey. My wife Sharyle and I visited the ruins of one such center in Turkey on a freezing spring day when the ruins were covered with snow and ice for the first time in 20 years.

Commonweal is in the lineage of the Asclepian centers in our healing work. For over 30 years, people have come to the Cancer Help Program in search of a vision that will guide their healing. Only the forms have changed. The mission—discovering the inner voice of the authentic self—remains unchanged.

Many other countries regard places to rest and restore health—spas and the like—as integral to their health care systems. Our earliest intention in creating a Resident Community—which we later renamed the Retreat Center—was to provide a peaceful, nurturing environment where patients with chronic illness could come to heal.

The renovation of the three residences in the Retreat Center took many years. Bothin House, a rustic, 70-year-old cottage with a red tile roof nestled in a large grove of Monterey pine and cypress trees, was finally ready for occupancy in 1981. The grove extended over 100 yards from the cottage to the edge of the cliffs overlooking the Pacific coast, protecting Bothin House and the Retreat Center from the winds that often blew off the ocean. After six years of planning, Commonweal was ready to welcome our first visitors—people who were seeking a place to heal, to re-create themselves, or simply a place to stay while working with the staff. Bothin House offered a peaceful respite for those seeking uninterrupted silence and a quietly dramatic immersion in the magnificent wilderness of the Point Reyes National Seashore.

Not long after Bothin House was finished, I wrote to the Commonweal board and other supporters. Looking back over the prior six years, I reflected on the progress we had made as a fledgling non-profit organization. I wrote:

“A prolific biodynamic garden has taken root on the site. We have planted almost 1,000 young trees to reforest the denuded land. We have rested the land, long overgrazed by too many cattle. We have put community people to work educating themselves and others in a new kind of research institute. We have opened two clinics—one to serve our rural community and one that has already made a great difference in the lives of some children, and may touch the lives of many more in the years to come.”

“In this strange landscape of antiquated radio transmitters, on the site of the old Marconi-RCA antenna farm, at the very westernmost edge of the country, a new kind of institution is struggling into existence. You now hear echoes of Commonweal up and down the West Coast and across the country. It is not unreasonable to imagine that Commonweal will be known by its example, its service and its words in the years to come.”

VIII. CRISIS AND REBIRTH

By Michael Lerner

Six years had passed since the day I looked out across the grasslands and saw a vision of Commonweal. Now our core programs were thriving. We were unaware of the dark clouds looming over us.

1981-1982 was a year of crisis for me and for Commonweal. My father was diagnosed with cancer. My marriage with Leslie ended—though we were to remain good friends for life. My dog died. And we came very close to losing Commonweal.

After a promising start, Commonweal faced a crisis as our funding sources collapsed. The CETA (Comprehensive Education and Training Act) federal contract that enabled us to employ 40 local people ended. At the same time, the San Francisco Foundation, a major source of our funding, decided that Commonweal was no longer of interest.

I was forced to lay off virtually the entire Commonweal staff of 40 people, including my brother Steve and myself. The only remaining paid staff were the business manager and the receptionist. The Mesa Clinic closed. The Research Institute shut its doors. Burr had moved on in early 1980 to become Executive Director of Point Reyes Bird Observatory. Carolyn and I continued to work without salaries.

The large Main Office Building, the size of a small gymnasium, felt cavernous and empty. The Commonweal Board of Directors lost faith in my capacity to lead Commonweal. It looked as if the whole enterprise would fail—a fool’s errand for which I bore responsibility. We were hanging on by a thread and struggling to survive.

A Family Crisis

In the midst of the dire situation at Commonweal, I was facing a personal crisis. My father, a vibrant 77-year-old political philosopher named Max Lerner, was diagnosed with a large cell lymphoma. When pressed for a prognosis, the oncologist guessed that he might have a year to live.

I knew how devastating chemotherapy could be. I wondered if the treatment would be worth it. I also wondered if alternative cancer therapies could help. For the past seven years, I had been immersed in the study of alternative treatments for troubled children and adults with chronic illness. I knew little about complementary therapies for cancer, but I did know that mainstream medicine considered them pure quackery.

Determined to explore any possible option that might help my father, I undertook an extensive study of alternative cancer therapies. I traveled across the United States, to Mexico, the Bahamas, Europe, India and Japan exploring complementary cancer treatments. I never imagined that I was embarking not just on a brief survey of alternative cancer therapies, but on a journey of healing work with people with cancer that would span more than a third of a century.

When I decided to explore alternative cancer therapies, there was no reliable map of the field. In the early 1980s, there was a vast divide in mainstream medical attitudes toward complementary and alternative medicine. An interest in alternative therapies for learning and behavior disorders of children, or asthma, or hypertension, or even heart disease was considered eccentric and professionally risky, but nonetheless tolerable. But alternative cancer therapies were in a cultural category of their own. They were indelibly marked with the stamp of *quackery*. Even showing interest in these therapies was officially beyond the pale. I was acutely aware of how dangerous the investigation of alternative cancer therapies could be both for myself and for Commonweal.

Alternative cancer therapies were the “third rail” in the world of traditional Western medicine. It appeared to some of my advisors and Board Members that I was compounding Commonweal’s dire financial crisis by wanting to step into this forbidden territory. I was putting not only my reputation, but also their good will on the line, and risking the faith of the entire community of Commonweal’s supporters.

Why did I persist in wanting to explore these alternative cancer therapies? I could have tried to help my father with these therapies quietly—and not made this exploration the focus of my professional life. The arguments against studying alternative cancer therapies were especially sensible at this perilous time. I knew that many careers had foundered on the rocks of alternative cancer therapies. But as I look back on my life, it has been marked most decisively by intuitions that led me to make decisions that defied logic—the choice to leave Yale, to build Full Circle, and

to found Commonweal. But each time I made one of these logic-defying choices, I did it with the greatest care and forethought possible.

So, if I was going to take this dangerous step, I would chart my path with every ounce of strategic acumen I could muster. I truly believed that it was possible to pursue an objective study of unconventional cancer therapies without destroying my career or further damaging Commonweal. I sincerely did not have a stake in whether the alternative therapies worked or not. I knew that I was on shaky ground in pursuing this path, but once again, I felt compelled to follow my intuition.

My father never used any of the complementary cancer therapies that I explored with the hope of helping him. He underwent rigorous chemotherapy that undoubtedly saved his life. He experienced a remarkable recovery from the lymphoma, and a more remarkable recovery from a second diagnosis of metastatic prostate cancer. He lived for another 12 years—not six months. Max Lerner declared himself “triumphant” in writing *Wrestling with the Angel*, a book about his personal healing journey that The New York Times reviewer called “the best of the illness memoirs.”¹ My father lived to the age of 89. He died peacefully with his family by his side.

I see now, so clearly, that my father was teaching me an invaluable lesson as he lived with his illness. Through all the struggles of his last 12 years—chemotherapy, cancer, a heart attack—my father tenaciously clung to life with an unwavering strength and vigor, wholly befitting the immigrant child who had fought all his life for what he wanted. I treasure my father’s last lesson to me as the greatest gift of all: he demonstrated the power and triumph of the human spirit in all its magnificence—in living *and* in dying.

I have come to treasure something else about my father. He did not seek to live a “spiritual” life. He was an agnostic, a secular man. But he sought to live fully. He urged his biographer, Sanford Lakoff, to write a biography that depicted him “warts and all.” My fathers sought to be fully human.

How Yoga Saved My Life

At the height of this life crisis, a friend, a young physician named Sandra McLanahan, invited me to Charlottesville, Virginia to meet Swami Satchitananda, an Indian yoga teacher who had gained fame at Woodstock. As the founder of Integral Yoga, Swamiji had just established a new ashram called Yogaville on a high bluff with a sweeping view of the James River. The community was under construction and most of the ashramites were living in trailers.

¹ Max Lerner, *Wrestling with the Angel: A Memoir of My Triumph Over Illness* (NY: Norton, 1990), 25.

I waited to meet Swamiji in one of those trailers on a muggy August afternoon. The door was opened by a tall, slender, imposing looking man dressed in an orange robe. With a long white beard and flowing white hair, Swamiji looked like a yoga guru sent from Hollywood Central Casting. I had seen photographs of him, but they could not convey the grace with which he moved and the absolute peace that surrounded him. Over tea, Swamiji asked me what I was seeking in life. I told him that all I wanted was peace. He nodded. "That is all I want too," he said.

Yoga helped me emerge from the darkest time of my life. Without yoga, I am not sure I would have survived. Gradually, testing each step, I immersed myself in the practice and philosophy of Integral Yoga. The physical yoga practices, the breathing techniques, the vegetarian diet, and the perennial philosophy of yoga were all critical elements along my path to healing. I learned the joys of *The Bhagavad Gita* and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, two of the greatest yoga texts.

Satchitananda taught me that the path to the peace I sought was a life of service. I came to see the "self" I sought as an instrument of service, and therefore an instrument of peace. St. Francis said: "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace." I knew I would always be imperfect as an instrument of service. But that became my goal.

By extension, I began to see Commonweal as an instrument of service—not an institution. I no longer felt that we had to sustain specific programs indefinitely. As a tool, Commonweal should have no institutional ego—no need to be grand or famous. This understanding fit with my own psychological preference, as an introvert, for a "half-hidden life." It also fit with the sense I had long held that there was no need for Commonweal to last forever.

I understood that the spirit of real service alights in different places at different times. We can never know how long the grace of the spirit will remain with us as individuals—or with any organization. As long as the spirit of service was alive at Commonweal, I thought that the community would probably survive. But if the spirit of service were to depart from Commonweal, I hoped that we would have the grace to recognize it, to celebrate the work we had done, and then move on.

My rebirth through yoga—it was nothing less than that—did not end the crisis at Commonweal. But I had found an anchor within myself that connected me to a deep sense of inner peace. Though uncertain about the future, I knew that I would work as hard and as skillfully as I could to sustain Commonweal's work. But if Commonweal were to come to an end, I knew that somehow, somewhere, I would find a way to continue to serve.
