



## Newsletter

Fall 2010

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### Letter from John

This past October TWI held its third retreat for grantees, board, and staff at the Marconi Center in Tomales Bay. It was a wonderful weekend full of new and deepened connections, rich, engaging conversation, time for reflection and rejuvenation, and more than a few laughs. Two months later, here is some of what continues to percolate for me from the experience.

At each of the previous TWI retreats, participants talked about the TWI community and how they felt a part of it. This year I allowed what folks were saying to sink in as it hadn't quite before. My realization? The TWI community is evolving into something bigger than the grantees we currently fund.

Former grantees, like-minded thinkers and doers, and other funders are part of the mix, too. How to weave our growing network together as we go forward is a question TWI is eager to explore. For now, we are looking at how *convening* and *storytelling* can be used to leverage our resources, develop allies, and enhance our mission. Participants at the retreat gave us a lot to think about on that front, and we remain grateful for their input.

Before attending the retreat, a new grantee told me that after reading the list of TWI grantees on our Web site, he couldn't figure out what tied this eclectic group together. At the retreat, it all started to make sense to him. Regardless of the context or the fields they worked in, what the grantees all had in common was a deeply-held belief in the importance of dialogic and relationship-based work.

After talking with this grantee, I realized that our Web site describes *what* the organizations we fund do, but it doesn't specifically explain *why* we fund them. Given the range of people and organizations we fund, I believe TWI has to do a better job of publicly articulating the reasoning behind our grants and the common threads that weave them together. I will put that on my New Year's resolution list!

It's ironic that a clear explanation has been missing from our funding rationale because the importance of making explicit what is implicit is something I bring up frequently in reference to process and relationships. Often people take for granted or ignore the importance of *how* we think, communicate, and build relationships. That needs to change. Until dialogue is explicitly valued by the wider society and until relationships that spring from it are embraced as an important measure of impact, process and relationship-based work will continue to be underfunded in organizations, schools, and communities. And the result? A world with more conflict, more close-minded and alienated citizens, and less social capital to creatively tackle the daunting, complex problems that confront us.

TWI remains dedicated to creating a different scenario by promoting and supporting respectful dialogue, critical thinking and vibrant citizen engagement. In that spirit, we hope you find interesting the highlights of the work of the TWI grantees featured in this edition of the newsletter.

In what remain difficult times, I continue to draw hope and inspiration from the people and organizations we are privileged to know and work with. I am excited about the prospects for the TWI community to continue to evolve and expand. Thank you all for helping to move our mission forward. I wish the best to you and your families in the coming year.

**Happy New Year,  
John**

### **CJ's First TWI Retreat**

CJ Callen, TWI's newest board member, joined the board this past spring. Her life was already pretty hectic, but joining the board, she says, was an opportunity she couldn't pass up. "TWI's explicit focus on process resonated powerfully with me."

CJ had a chance to see TWI's philosophy in action at the October retreat for grantees and board members. Accustomed to attending more tightly scheduled nonprofit retreats, CJ says TWI's leisurely pace was a breath of fresh air. "The organic nature of the retreat with its structured and unstructured time gave grantees who work really hard in the community a chance to restore their spirits. I appreciated the attention to the intellect and the heart that allowed grantees and board members plenty of time to reflect on their lives and work and to make deep connections with one another. It was a wonderfully relaxing and energizing weekend."

## **The New School: Expanding Minds through Dialogue**

Imagine a school that has no degrees, no grades, and no homework. One actually exists, and it's located on the grounds of the Commonweal Center in Bolinas, California. A nonprofit center for service and research in health and human ecology started in 1976, Commonweal has offered dozens of programs on health, the environment, and education aimed at helping cancer patients. But what was missing for Michael Lerner, Commonweal's president and co-founder, was an exploration of what he calls "the emergent."

"Commonweal had no program designed to capture and explore what's going on right now with the thought and action leaders changing our world," he says. "After talking with friends and colleagues, I decided to start such a program."

The New School grew out of Michael's interest in the power of dialogue, personal and social transformation, and change. Over the past four years, it has recorded more than 100 lectures and interviews on themes in the fields of spirituality, culture and cultural shifts, arts and literature, philanthropy and social investment, social and environmental advocacy, science and education, and cosmology. Among the extraordinary thinkers recorded are Ram Dass, Paul Hawken, Fritjof Capra, Joanna Macy, Terry Tempest Williams, and Walter Mirch. Recently, the New School completed its first series of lectures dedicated to one topic: End of Life Conversations.

Michael conducts most of The New School interviews. Given that he spends about a week preparing for each interview, he has to be passionately interested in the individuals' ideas and work to talk with them about what they are thinking and doing. That speaks well of The Whitman Institute. After The New School became a TWI grantee, Michael had the opportunity to get to know TWI board, staff, and grantees. "I discovered the rich interaction between individuals in TWI and the TWI community as a whole and wanted to explore it." So far, he's interviewed TWI staff members John Esterle and Pia Infante, former TWI Fellow Edd Conboy, and grantees Rachel Kessler, Mark Gerson, Leslie Medine, and Ellen Schneider.

The lectures recorded at The New School and the interviews conducted by phone are offered as podcasts on iTunes on The New School's Web site. By following a business model Michael calls "the economy of generosity and attention," The New School can offer its lectures and interviews free of charge as gifts to the Commonweal community and the interested public. With a small staff of only three part-time workers, The New School has built an e-mail list of about 2,000 and attracts more than 500 people to the New School lectures on a fairly regular basis. Anywhere from 40 to 100 people attend a given event. "John (Esterle) pointed out that the people who come to the New School share not only the space at Commonweal, but also the power of community," says Michael. "That was an acute observation and a significant part of what's been happening."

In a relatively short time, The New School has created an impressive archive of a cross-section of the leading thought and action leaders of our time. Says Michael, "Martin Buber said that truth emerges from dialogue, and that is absolutely the core of what we're doing at The New School."

To find out more about The New School and listen to its podcasts, click [www.commonweal.org/newschool](http://www.commonweal.org/newschool)

## **Advocacy and Organizing Keys to Housing Program for Homeless**

James Tracy has been a familiar face in housing rights and economic justice circles for the past 20 years. Besides participating in projects to revitalize public housing, expand tenants rights, and develop affordable housing, he has also worked in the Community Housing Partnership's employment and training department. Community Housing Partnership (CHP) is a San Francisco nonprofit provider of housing, support services and economic opportunities for the homeless. In 2006, it launched its Community Organizing and Civic Engagement Project and chose James to lead it.

Key to the project's success is its grassroots organizing class, We're All Organizers, which gives everyday people the tools, practice, and optimism to engage in often difficult dialogue and advocacy. The classes are open to the public, but residents and emerging leaders of nonprofits located in the Tenderloin and South of Market have first priority. Besides turning formerly homeless people into advocates and organizers for themselves and other homeless people, it connects them to a larger community of changemakers. Among the organizations that have participated in the training are Young Workers United, Green Action, the Coalition on Homelessness, and Labor Unions.

"A lot of nonprofits talk about the homeless as if they're people with no history and no skills who had something terrible happen to them," says James. " But most of these people had full lives, jobs, and families before they became homeless. Advocacy and organizing training is part of their healing process."

Speak up for their rights also means learning how to handle thorny conflicts. CHP and other affordable housing projects frequently encounter opposition from residents who don't want low-income people moving into their neighborhoods. Its project to build low-income housing at Fulton and Gough, behind City Hall, met with two-years of fierce opposition from affluent members of the community.

"We had a superior application, plans, and architect," says James, "but what got us the unanimous votes of the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors were the voices of activists and some of the poorest people in the neighborhood who had gone through our training. Many of our residents had been pushed out of the neighborhood by urban renewal projects, so it was really powerful to hear them advocate so persuasively for themselves. We were able to win over people in the neighborhood who at one time had opposed us and move ahead with the project." The 120-unit building, currently under construction, will be called the Dr. Raye Richardson Apartments in honor of Dr. Richardson, a community organizer who fought against urban renewal in the area.

CHP is gearing up for another battle, this time with neighbors in the Marina District opposed to CHP's plans to convert the Edward II Inn into 24-unit housing for youth transitioning out of foster care. CHP will apply valuable lessons it learned from its last campaign regarding the importance of dialogue in turning opponents into allies.

"John (Esterle) encouraged us to convene dialogues with stakeholders in the Fulton and Gough project," says James. "He reminded us that good organizing can win the housing battle, but there's a second victory to be won: transforming the dynamics of the community. Engaging in dialogue with neighbors is a critical step in helping the residents feel welcome when they move in."

James heard a lot about the importance of dialogue and process from fellow grantees at the TWI October retreat. "TWI is not a typical foundation," says James. "It's an incubator for change that challenges its grantees to embody the world they want to see and to be the seat of change. It was interesting and inspiring to hear how other grantees were integrating TWI's values in their work in their communities. I left the retreat feeling inspired to do the difficult work ahead—and with new colleagues whose work ties in with ours whom I can contact for help and advice."

## **LeaderSpring Featured on TV**

Cynthia Chavez, LeaderSpring's executive director, and LeaderSpring Fellow, Hilary Abell, recently had a chance to tout their accomplishments on CNN Headline's Comcast Newsmakers. LeaderSpring is an Oakland-based organization that fosters high-performing nonprofits by strengthening and connecting the people who lead them. To date more than 158 Bay Area nonprofit executive directors have participated in its two-year, on-the-job Fellowship Program.

Hilary Abell, executive director of WAGES (Women's Action to Gain Economic Security) and a 2004-2006 Fellow talked about how her LeaderSpring Fellowship had helped her expand the program's reach so that many more women can achieve economic self-sufficiency. Not included in the short clip was Hilary's account of the impact LeaderSpring's Fellowship has had on her organization:

*As a 2006 graduate of the LeaderSpring Fellowship, I can proudly say that I am a better executive director and that my organization is stronger thanks to LeaderSpring. Since my Fellowship began in 2004, WAGES has continued to grow, creating and retaining high-quality green jobs and asset-building opportunities for low-income women during an international economic crisis. Our co-op members have more than doubled in number, our annual budget and staff team have doubled; and our co-op sales have increased from \$880,000 to nearly \$3 million in annual sales. My training through LeaderSpring was a critical factor in my ability to build WAGES' capacity to achieve this growth and to serve greater numbers of women.*

To view the four-minute Comcast Newsmaker clip, click on the homepage at [www.leaderspring.org](http://www.leaderspring.org).

## **Active Voice Invites Ideas for Collaboration on Two Important Projects**

Active Voice continues its work on two exciting projects. **Make Agent Orange History** is a collaborative campaign whose goal is to eradicate the harmful effects of Agent Orange dioxin hotspots in Vietnam. The **Shelbyville Multimedia** project aims at elevating immigrant integration efforts around the country by using a host of innovative resources. The campaign is organized around the film *Welcome to Shelbyville*, directed by Kim Snyder and executive produced by BeCause Foundation in association with Active Voice. Please visit our site or contact us if you have ideas for collaboration. [www.activevoice.net](http://www.activevoice.net)