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# A Great People To Be Gathered: The View From Pendle Hill

Parker J. Palmer June 1, 2011

In the olden days, when I was here, Quakers did not applaud at lectures. Remember those days? I was asked to give my first Monday evening lecture before I had gone to one of them, so I didn't know about the "no applause" thing. I was given this grand introduction, I walked up front, and the place was just dead as a tomb and I thought, "Holy moley! I've already done something wrong." So it is a little shocking to get so much applause from Quakers.

But I am very grateful for this opportunity. Giving this talk gives me a chance to repay a very small part of the great debt I owe to Pendle Hill, a place where I did some of the hardest and most important learning of my life, learning that I think was unlikely to happen anywhere else. I arrived here as a 35- year-old in the fall of 1974 with my wife, Sally, and our children, Brent, Todd, and Carrie. I came to Pendle Hill as an adult student for a year-long sabbatical. That year eventually stretched into 11 years, during which I served as dean of studies, teacher, and writer-in-residence.

I have a vivid memory of our first community gathering in the Upmeads living room. Douglas Steere spoke to us that night, and his words were prophetic. I quote them as best I can from memory: "All of you made a big decision in coming to Pendle Hill. You left your homes for at least a while, you left friends and maybe some family members behind. Some of you left your jobs and your sources of security. All of you are taking some sort of risk. So I am sure that all of you have good reasons for coming here, and you know exactly what they are. But if you keep your eyes and ears open, in a few months you will learn the real reason you came!"

It has been 35 years since then, and I am still learning why I came to Pendle Hill. What I want to share with you this afternoon is an account of my sojourn at this place, and how the transformation I experienced here continues in my heart today. I hope you will receive it both as an expression of my gratitude and as a challenge to expand Pendle Hill's reach and deepen its ministry over the next 80 years.

I arrived here knowing next to nothing about Quakerism. This may seem odd for someone who studied religion in college, spent a year at Union Theological Seminary, and received a PhD from Berkeley in the sociology of religion. However, it does not seem quite so odd when you remember that Quakers have often been reluctant to verbalize their beliefs in the public square, preferring to communicate through action.

One of my favorite stories from my years as dean of studies involves a student named Li Chengshi. He arrived here from the People's Republic of China in the fall of 1981, soon after China opened up. After he had had time to rest from his long trip, I sat down as his consultant (or advisor) to get to know him. He looked a bit disoriented, so I asked him how he was feeling. "Well," he said, with some consternation, "I had no idea Pendle Hill was a church."

Back home Chengshi was the deputy director of the Bureau of Water Conservancy and Hydroelectric Power for the People's Republic of China and he was, of course, a member of the Communist Party. International relations were part of his portfolio, so his government wanted him to improve his English and learn more about U.S. culture by spending some time at a U.S. educational institution. How had he gotten to Pendle Hill? Through two Quakers whom he had met when they were in China advising on water conservancy projects.

Chengshi said, "These Quakers did wonderful work and I liked them a lot, so I asked them for names of some U.S. schools where I might spend a year. They said, 'Oh you must go to Pendle Hill. It will remind you of the Chinese Communist ideal, because it is a place where the workers study and the scholars work. So you would feel right at home.' But they never said a word about Quakerism being a religion."

As often happens for people who come to Pendle Hill, Chengshi spent a year reclaiming his own deep and rich spiritual life, a life that had been suppressed by living in a time and place where it was not safe to express his own truth. (I might add that this has been, is, and will continue to be true for capitalists as well as communists.) Chengshi was one of the kindest and most generous people I have ever known, and during his time here he recovered the deep spiritual roots of his own Confucian tradition.

Chengshi was also funny, another mark of the spiritual person. He had been trained as an engineer, and he told me that he was one of many educated people who had been sent from the cities to work in rural China during the Cultural Revolution. I asked him where he had been sent and he told me he had worked on a pig farm. When I asked him what that had been like, he grinned at me and said, "Well, it was

pretty hard on us. And it was very hard on the farmers. But it was really horrible for the pigs!”

But I digress.

Why did I come to Pendle Hill if, like Chengshi, I had no idea of what Quakerism was all about? Five years prior to coming here I had worked as a community organizer in Washington, D.C. The deeper I got into that work, the more I realized that I was trying to lead people towards something I had not experienced in any real depth, a place called community. So Sally and I cast about for an intentional residential community that would be hospitable to a family of five. When we stumbled across Pendle Hill—with its educational program and ongoing life of shared meals, work, decision-making, and worship— we knew we had found a place that was just right.

And it was exactly that—for the first week or two!

I soon became vexed and distressed by what everyone around me was calling the heart of Pendle Hill’s life: meeting for worship. I was a church-going person. For me, worship was about hearing readings from sacred texts, listening to a preacher expound, singing a few hymns, and greeting each other with a handshake as a token of peace. If there was any silence, it was because someone had missed his or her cue.

So the deep silence of meeting for worship was unnerving. And when people spoke out of the silence, they sometimes said things I had never heard in church. I remember, for example, one fine spring morning in the barn, with the windows wide open, when a particularly vocal bird broke into extended song. It was not long before a dear friend whom I came to love, rose to speak about the “bird within.” I could not ever remember reading about such a thing in Rudolf Bultmann or Karl Barth, nor did I remember hearing any of my distinguished professors lecture on such a subject. I began to wonder what planet I had landed on.

I soon began to express my consternation in personal conversations and classes, a theme that carried into my first term paper. As many of you know, Euell Gibbons was a student at Pendle Hill. He wrote his first term paper on “Stalking the Wild Asparagus,” which became a very popular book that made his career. My first term paper was more like “Stalking the Misguided Quakers,” which took me nowhere in terms of a career. But writing that paper required me to stop babbling and give form to my vexation. I used the paper to call into question the Quaker version of the inner journey, on the grounds that it was prone to be uninformed and undisciplined and could easily lead to

quietism and narcissism, evading the world's problems and becoming obsessed with ourselves, all the while fortifying ourselves with the fantasy that all of this has God's blessing.

Fortunately, Pendle Hill was a community full of people who knew how to invite a malcontented lip-flapper into a friendly conversation. With great patience, they helped me see that while my concerns did have some merit, they might not be the whole story.

Something else was going on with me, and these Friends helped me embrace it. I came to understand that the threat I was feeling from the silence of meeting for worship had nothing to do with Quakerism being a bogus form of religion. It came from the fact that, in the silence, the religious scaffolding that had upheld my life was collapsing—a scaffolding that had been handed down to me or had been constructed intellectually instead of arising from the grounded experience of my life.

You all know Margaret Fell's famous account of what George Fox said the first time she heard him speak: "You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a Child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?" And then there is the British poet and songwriter Sydney Carter with his marvelous couplet, "Your holy hearsay is not evidence/ Give me the good news in the present tense."

So during my first year at Pendle Hill, I asked myself, "What can you say experimentally on the basis of your own experience? What good news arises from your life in the present tense?" It was a new and challenging question for me, and at first the only answers I could come up with were very short ones: nada, zippo, zilch.

Before coming to Pendle Hill, I had discovered the books of Thomas Merton. Merton once told the novices of the Abbey of Gethsemani, "Men, before you can have a spiritual life, you've gotta have a life!" Well, I had a life, so I had the main ingredient for a spiritual life, but I did not yet have a spiritual life that I was aware of. I knew nothing of the inner mystical tradition that informs both monasticism and Quakerism. I had never been taught to read my personal experience through spiritual lenses. I had never been helped to understand that what I know from being in the world as me, with you, is a critical element of a living religious faith. I had always been in settings where it was unnecessary to live or think that way. Belief had simply been handed down to me or had arrived through reading and thinking.

So meeting for worship, along with some good folks in the Pendle Hill community, did me the great service of surrounding me with silence

and compassion—without which silence can feel like benign neglect—so that my make-believe theology could collapse and I could clear away the rubble. And that same silence and compassion, along with the classes I took during my student year here, gave me the time and the tools necessary to start rebuilding my theology from the ground up, the ground of my own being. Eventually, I was able to reclaim Christianity as my own tradition by realizing that I had, in fact, experienced such key elements as forgiveness, grace, and the kind of death and resurrection that come in the midst of life. I am forever grateful for that reclamation because, as the years have gone by, I have found myself standing in need of all of those spiritual gifts time and time again.

My student year at Pendle Hill was actually more like half a year. During 1974–75, Pendle Hill was looking for a new dean of studies. Encouraged to apply for the job by several people on the administrative staff and Board, and feeling called to this communal way of living and learning, I decided to toss my hat into the ring during Christmas break. There were four candidates, as I recall, and all of them were Quakers who had a history here— all of them except me. All of us had our advocates, and all of us had people who kept saying, in their Quakerly way, “That name would not have occurred to me!” (which is actually one of my favorite Quaker phrases).

I understood why my name would not have occurred to some people. After all, I was a non-Quaker who was applying for a post that had been occupied by some of the great figures of contemporary Quakerism. But even so, the months that followed were hard for me. It was then that I started to learn that Pendle Hill is not only a little bit of heaven on Earth but a little bit of that other Zip Code as well. Yes, dear Friends, politics happen, even in Quaker institutions.

From where I sat, part of the problem was that Pendle Hill’s Board had to choose a dean by the spirit of the meeting—and at that time, the Pendle Hill Board numbered something like 80 people, more than were in residence here. So as Pendle Hill searched for a new dean in the spring of 1975, the sheer number of people involved meant that there were a whole lot of interviews, sidebar conferences, back room conversations, and pari-mutuel betting! (I was delighted to learn that Pendle Hill was able to downsize its Board last year to a maximum of 24 people. I would call that a good move, and it took only 79 years!)

I experienced a lot of conflict around me and within me as I moved from being a sheltered student to an exposed job applicant. But I am grateful for that experience. In fact, I am grateful for all the hard times I had here. They taught me a great deal about myself and about community. The most important thing I learned about community is

that conflict is not the end of it but the doorway into something deeper. Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche network, who may know more about true community than anyone on the planet, has a very simple definition: community is a continual act of forgiveness. I am grateful for the fact that my emergent experiential theology was forged in the crucible of community and forgiveness.

During my early years here, I began to understand that reality is always better than fantasy— even when the reality is very, very hard—because reality, if you read it right, will never let you down. I also began to understand that God is a God of reality who wants us to live in the midst of its challenges, witnessing as we are called and able, and picking ourselves up when we fail and fall. God does not want us floating above the fray in a hot air balloon. I know that for certain. Trust me: I have been up there and I never got religion, only vertigo!

In the midst of these hardships, I wrote a couple of lines about the reality of community that people seem to remember, which pleases any writer. I have heard these lines quoted back to me so often that I think they are as close as I will ever come to immortality. The first one is Palmer's definition of community, which came to me during my first year here: "Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives." The second line came to me during my second year. I call it Palmer's amendment to Palmer's definition: "And when that person moves away, someone else arrives immediately to take his or her place." What I am referring to, of course, is the fact that in the closeness and intenseness of community there is always someone on whom to project that which you cannot abide in yourself. One of the great gifts of community is the chance to see yourself in the mirror of another person, and by forgiving that person, to forgive yourself as well.

Hard times in community can also provide a few laughs.

As I said, I was not a Quaker when I applied to be dean of studies, an understandable cause for alarm among some Board members. One Board member who liked me and wanted me to become dean felt certain that with a name like "Parker Palmer" I must have a Quaker dangling silently somewhere on my family tree. She believed that finding this person would help me cross over into the Promised Land. So she invited me to her house in Swarthmore for high tea while she combed her genealogical library looking for ancestors I did not know I had. She opened many books, tried many names and places and dates, and asked many questions. It was a lovely but fruitless afternoon—my family tree was Quaker-free. Finally convinced that I was not kidding about the fact that my ancestors were Methodists,

free-thinkers, circus people, and possibly a horse thief, she sent me back into the cold world with the knowledge that I had lost the genealogical lottery. My Dad used to say that the whole secret of life is proper selection of ancestors, but in this case he was wrong: I got the job despite my genealogical deficits, and I am forever grateful.

Some of the most vital things I learned at Pendle Hill I did not learn in a class. I learned them because of the way life was structured in this place during the period 1974–85. I am thinking especially about all the ways the Quaker Testimony of Equality was embodied here. I was 35 years old when I became dean of studies. I was married with three children, and I had a PhD, but my base salary was identical to that of an 18-year-old who came to work in the kitchen while seeking a long-term path for his or her life. Pendle Hill understood that people with families had special needs, so on top of my base salary we received a modest cash increment for each child. But the message of the shared base salary was clear: all of us in this community do work that is challenging and worthy, and none of us is more valuable or important than anyone else.

But even more than the shared base salary, the great equalizer I remember involved Pendle Hill's work program. We had a weekly workday when everyone turned out to do some of the larger jobs together. In addition, all of us had daily meal jobs. In my case, the folks who assigned work details quickly found out that putting me on food prep was not a good idea, so I was consistently assigned to wash dishes after lunch. As dean of studies, I had off-campus responsibilities that many of the other staff members did not: giving talks, attending certain meetings, and raising grant money. But for every day I was off-campus, I had to find someone to replace me on the lunchtime dish-washing line. Then, when I returned, I had to do double-duty, covering that person's job as well as my own for as many days as I had been gone.

As my 11 years went by, this hidden curriculum slowly did its leveling job on me. I came to value people more for their gifts than for their rank or status. I became more perceptive about the wide variety of human gifts, with some people shining in class, some on a challenging work project, some in meeting for business as we untangled knotty problems, some in the simple acts of kindness they doled out every day. All of this was quite a contrast to the culture of the upper-middle class community where I had grown up and to the culture of academic life where I had spent so many years before coming to Pendle Hill.

I was deeply challenged by this hidden curriculum of equality, and my inward responses to it were sometimes downright unquakerly, but looking back, I recognize all of this as one of the best parts of Pendle

Hill in the education of Parker J. Palmer. Since I am a white male with a good education who has long been surrounded by privilege, it is not hard to figure out what one of my shadows might be and is: an overweening sense of entitlement. Pendle Hill did not totally eliminate that shadow in me—any more than life has made me totally color-blind or devoid of all racism. But my experience here diminished my sense of entitlement considerably. I have found it is enormously liberating to walk through the world not thinking that I deserve more than the next person, or at least thinking that less often than I would have if I had never come here. A sense of entitlement, I have learned, is a crimped and cramped form of self-imprisonment. I am grateful to Pendle Hill's hidden curriculum for helping me realize that the door to that cell is unlocked.

The classes I took here as a student were an important part of my personal reclamation project, spiritually, intellectually, and professionally. Two of those classes, and their teachers, represent two critical poles of the educational energy field that I learned about at Pendle Hill.

One pole is represented by Eugenia Friedman's brilliant poetry classes. Under her guidance I overcame the bad taste left in my mouth by the academic habit of chewing live poetry to death. More importantly, I began to get clues to the inner search by finding probing questions and real nourishment in poetry, which I continue to draw on and share with others in my life and work to this very day. I now understand what William Carlos Williams meant when he said, "It is difficult to get the news from poems; yet people die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." He is talking about the good news that comes from within.

The other pole of this energy field is represented by Steve Stalona's classes on nonviolent social change—brilliant, passionate, and sometimes off the wall, just like social change itself and just like Steve himself! Prior to taking Steve's classes I knew little about nonviolence, but I think I had pictured it as a noble form of passivity. I soon came to understand that nonviolence is a form of deep engagement with the world, requiring more courage, more intelligence, more strategic sensibility, and a larger repertoire of proactive moves than violence ever has.

So there I was, standing at the intersection of the inward search and the outward reach. That is when I began to understand what I now call "life on the Möbius strip." What is inside us keeps flowing out into the world, and what is outside us keeps flowing in. Whether we know it or not, we are continually engaged in a process of co-creating reality—inwardly and outwardly and with one another. So here at

Pendle Hill I got started on what is perhaps the central spiritual question of my life: as I stand at that point of co-creation on the Möbius strip, where inner and outer continually merge and co-create, how can I make the best possible choices about that exchange, choices that are on balance more life-giving than death-dealing? In this moment and in this place, how can I help to co-create something of heaven on Earth instead of adding to the hellish mess?

As I sat in meeting for worship, and in meeting for business, I saw how important it was to bring what I regard as my inner leadings into the community where they could be tested in a gentle but compelling way. It is the essence of sanity, is it not, to know that not every voice from within is the voice of God, a sanity that some of our political leaders have yet to achieve. I need a community where I can say, “Here is what I think I know, here is what I think I am hearing. Help me test my leading over the long haul. Stay with me and help me sift and winnow Truth.”

The community I need is one in which others do not presume to know what my leading is, but can speak from a deeply inward place about how they see the world and God at work in it—a community that through testimony, witnessing, and asking honest, open questions of each other, can do what I have come to call “weave a tapestry of Truth” to which all can contribute and by which all can be tested and corrected. When this process is going on, I have a strong visual image of us weaving this tapestry together, with people contributing threads, withdrawing threads, finding their last contribution corrected or checked or amplified or enriched by the next contribution, drawn more to this part of the tapestry than that. It is a demanding but edifying and animating process. In Pendle Hill’s meeting for worship and monthly meeting for business, I found myself alternately illumined, tested, challenged, and affirmed, stopped in my tracks and then sent forth again.

One fine spring day, as I was walking through the breezeway between the Barn and Chace, I had an epiphany when I saw a plaque out there with a quote by Martin Buber engraved on it: “All real living is meeting.” My epiphany had to do with that little word “meeting.” Meeting for worship and meeting for business as I experienced them at Pendle Hill bore no resemblance to the kind of meetings we wish we could avoid and do our best to endure because they are so devoid of meaning.

Quaker meetings at their best are spaces where that which is deep within us meets that which is deep between us, where something of the living presence—of that which is deep within the structure of reality—is revealed. One of my favorite Taoist poems, “The

Woodcarver,” ends with the line, “From this live encounter came the work that you ascribe to the spirits.” A Quaker meeting is meant to be a live encounter from which arises real work and real life.

As I reflected on “meeting” in this sense, I began to think about the Pendle Hill curriculum. As dean of studies, I shared responsibility with the rest of the teaching staff for a set of courses in which students were not propped up like dummies in a row while a professor lectured nonstop. The adult students who came to Pendle Hill would have bailed out of such classes. They were not looking for grades: they were looking for meaning and purpose. Pendle Hill teachers were responsible for creating the conditions for a real meeting— a meeting in which students, the subject, and the teacher could have a live encounter; a meeting in which the result would be learning that had something of the living presence in it. In that moment it occurred to me that at Pendle Hill we not only had a “meeting for worship” and a “meeting for business.” Every time a class met, we also had a “meeting for learning.”

Thomas Merton has a line in one of his journals that says, “April 7th, 1948: I had a pious thought this morning, but I’m not going to write it down.” I will never be able to write a line like that! I started writing about my epiphany on the day I had it. The result was a bulletin called “Meeting for Learning” that was published and sent out to Pendle Hill’s mailing list in 1976. When that bulletin went into the mail, I was sure that people in the wider Quaker community would start sending me historical stuff on the history of the phrase “meeting for learning.” The words felt so natural to me that I was quite sure I was reinventing the wheel. After a year or two went by and no one had said anything, I asked a knowledgeable friend about it. He told me that, as far as he knew, the phrase had never been used before.

In many ways the work that has consumed me for the past 15 years is a direct result of my time at Pendle Hill and of the impact of Quaker faith and practice on my life. I am referring not only to my writing, but to the project my colleagues and I created back in the mid-1990s, which eventually became a nonprofit called the Center for Courage & Renewal. Some of my colleagues from the Center are at this gathering, including Valerie Brown and Judy Sorum Brown.

Thanks to very able leadership of the Center, people younger and smarter than I, the work it does has had quite a reach. We now have 180 facilitators around the country, in 30 states and 50 cities, as well as in Canada, Australia, and Korea. We offer a long-term retreat series for a wide variety of people, including K-12 teachers and school leaders; faculty and administrators in higher education; physicians and other health care professionals; clergy and lay leaders; heads of

nonprofit organizations; as well as philanthropists, attorneys, judges, and others. More recently we have been developing programs for citizens who want to help renew U.S. democracy, which is the topic of my latest book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. Our programs have reached some 40,000 people over the past decade.

In our programs, a circle of 20 to 25 people journey with each other through a facilitated series of five to eight three-day retreats, spread across a year and a half or two years. That gives us time to have more than a mountaintop experience, time to go deeply inward in the context of the community. Our goal, in all this work, is to make a safe space for people to listen to the Inner Teacher and rejoin soul and role, to bring selfhood, identity, and integrity more fully into our lives and work in the world. If this sounds familiar, it should. The seeds of this program were planted in me here at Pendle Hill.

When I was on staff at Pendle Hill, there were two perennial topics of conversation that had a lasting impact on me. The first was that Quaker faith and practice have a great deal to offer the larger society, but that Quakers too often hide their Light under a bushel. And that helps explain the fact that too many people associate the word “Quaker” with a grain that comes in bushels— which is not a good thing! So the work of the Center for Courage & Renewal is, in some ways, my effort to take some of that Quaker light and share it with the larger world.

The second topic that grabbed my attention was the idea of a program called “Pendle Hill on the Road.” Most of the talk focused on visiting Quaker meetings with Pendle Hill-style enrichment programs. I am very glad that there is a lot of good work going on these days, like this marvelous thing called “Quaker Quest,” aimed at deepening the spiritual lives of Quaker meetings and their outreach. But I had an image of taking Pendle Hill on the road in a way that would involve a lot of people in addition to Quakers, including folks who have no interest at all in organized religion. (Not that Quakerism is all that organized, but you know what I mean.)

So that is what the work of the Center of Courage and Renewal is all about: Pendle Hill on the Road. Quakerism is not the only wellspring of this work, but it is one of them. I am deeply grateful to this place for handing me the dowsing rod that allowed me to find the living water that Quakerism draws upon.

I have a vivid memory of a friend who spoke in meeting and gave me an image I have never forgotten, just as I have never forgotten “the bird within.” This friend said, “We seem to think we will find unity by

going upwards toward the generalizations and abstractions that we can agree on. But that does not work. It robs us of our own traditions and our own stories. It flattens our rich variety and dulls everything out. But if each of us will go down into the depths of our own story, of our own well, as far as we are able, we will find the unity we seek in the living water that feeds all of the wells.” That, I believe, is the path to true self and true community, and it is part of the mission of both Pendle Hill and the Center for Courage & Renewal.

I am going to end with a small story that has big meaning for me. Back in the day, a wonderful man named Robin Harper was head of buildings and grounds—and I am delighted that Robin is here today. As many of you know, Robin was and still is a conscientious war tax refuser. Not only did this mean the possibility of prosecution and imprisonment, but tax resistance made very heavy demands on his life. He had to be employed by people who would agree not to withhold any taxes, which shrinks one’s job opportunities dramatically, and he could not own any real property that could be seen by the I.R.S. as capable of being turned into cash. But he has never done time because his integrity is so self-evident, not unlike that of John Woolman.

When I was a young man here, I shared Robin’s abhorrence of war (as I do to this day), but I could not imagine taking the risks and making the sacrifices required of me. I was at that stage of moral development where I had very high ethical aspirations and equally high levels of guilt about the way I continually fell short. One day I went to Robin and told him of my dilemma. “I believe what you believe,” I said, “and I want to put my beliefs into action, but I just cannot bring myself to do what you do.”

Robin responded plainly, simply, and with great compassion. “Keep holding the belief,” he said, “and follow it wherever it may lead you. As time goes on you will find your own way of resisting violence and promoting peace, one that fits with your gifts and your calling.” That is Quakerism at its best. That is community at its best. That is teaching at its best. That is friendship at its best.

Even at age 71, I know that I still have a long way to go in tracking the leading that Robin helped call me to. But far from being discouraged by that fact, I have had such a remarkable adventure trying to follow the Light this far that I am eager to know where it might take me next. As I go, I am ever grateful to Pendle Hill and the grace that led me here for getting me started down a path that has taken me deeper and deeper into life.

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*This article is an edited transcription of the Fourth Annual Stephen*

*G. Cary Memorial Lecture, delivered at Pendle Hill on November 13, 2010, as the keynote for Pendle Hill's 80th anniversary celebration.*

Parker J. Palmer lived and worked at Pendle Hill as a student, dean, teacher, and writer-in-residence from 1974 to 1985. He is the author of nine books including *A Hidden Wholeness*, *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Active Life*, *The Courage to Teach*, and *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (forthcoming), and is founder and senior partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal.

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