



FEATURE STORY

Soul Food

BY JENNIFER M. GANGLOFF

Finding inner peace at a cancer retreat.

It's a cool, soggy April, and on the bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean on the grounds of Commonweal, the paper-thin petals of the wild purple irises belie their strength and determination as they thrive amidst the stinging winds, salty air and even trampling by free-grazing cattle.

Metaphors, too, bloom at Commonweal. It takes less than a week for a group of eight strangers thrust together, cancer patients all, to discover their strengths, the ability to thrive amidst the stinging pain, salty tears and even trampling by all the forces of life and nature and inner demons.

For many cancer patients, Commonweal becomes a magical place. You can scramble down the cliff, stand before the yawning Pacific, duck as the hovering turkey vultures swoop too close for comfort, and feel as if you're nothing but a speck. If you wanted, you could let the anger and grief pour from your mouth into the crashing waves, and no one would ever hear you.

And then you could clamber back up the cliff, say hello to a passing calf, walk gently through the Enchanted Forest, turn your face up to the rain, head inside, shed your coat and muddy shoes, grab a warm cup of tea, sit down to chat with the nearest human and suddenly become the world's most important person. You would be heard.



Participants at the Commonweal cancer retreat call the Pacific House (top left) home during their weeklong stay on the northern coast of California (above). Photos by Jennifer M. Gangloff.

Commonweal is a nonprofit health and environmental research institute a stone's throw from the coastal town of Bolinas, California. Founded in 1976 by Michael Lerner, PhD, Commonweal conducts programs that contribute to human and ecosystem health. A political scientist by training, Dr. Lerner left academia to start the institute, which added the Commonweal Cancer Help Program (CCHP) in the mid-1980s after Dr. Lerner's father was diagnosed with cancer. The seven-day integrative healing retreat for cancer patients has since inspired numerous other cancer retreats.

Marian Ford was one of eight people, including myself, who arrived as strangers in early April to attend the retreat. "I have never before been surrounded by such

love, support, unconditional trust and active listening,” says Ford, 40, of San Francisco, who is in treatment for metastatic breast cancer.

We came from different backgrounds and different cancer experiences, and ranged in age from late 30s to late 70s. I was diagnosed with leukemia in March 2000, and although now in remission, I am still in treatment. During those six years, other than participating in a clinical trial, I’d never ventured beyond traditional medicine. But at age 39, and now also a year out from surviving life-threatening blood clots in my lungs attributed to the leukemia, I was interested in learning about different forms of healing—those that integrate mind and body. Others at the retreat had more extensive experience with nontraditional medicine, including Ford, who practices yoga and meditation, receives acupuncture and takes Chinese herbs. We all knew Commonweal would be intense and emotional, but we also hoped it would give us insights and tools into leading fuller, happier lives.

Liora Soladay of Point Reyes Station, California, had also tried nontraditional medicine before she arrived at the Commonweal retreat, including yoga and Chinese herbs. Like Ford, she says the retreat had a profound impact. “I had not expected how awe-inspiring it would be, and how much it would teach me about myself,” says Soladay, 37, who has undergone surgery, chemotherapy and radiation since her tongue cancer diagnosis in November 2003. “In many ways, it was a life-changing experience.”

Those are strong sentiments, not made lightly. What is it about Commonweal that evokes such feelings, that has the power to change lives in a just a few days?



Bothin House, another guest house, is secluded in a grove of Monterey pin and cyprus trees. Photo by Jennifer M. Gangloff.

A Supportive Envelope

Everything about CCHP seems designed with a healing purpose. Each facet of what Dr. Lerner calls the “vital quartet” of healing is addressed—spiritual, psychological, physical and nutritional.

During the day, CCHP offers an integrated program of healing that includes yoga, group support sessions led by a psychotherapist, therapeutic massage, meditation, deep relaxation, symbolic learning through sandtray, writing and a gourmet vegetarian diet. Evening discussions with participants and staff explore choices in healing, mainstream and integrative therapies, pain and suffering, death and dying, spirituality, sacred space and other topics.

But be clear about this: Commonweal isn’t a treatment center. It doesn’t offer any medical or alternative treatment. Nor does it push an agenda. Its goal, simply enough, is to give participants the internal and external resources—or at least a good start—to live a more enjoyable, fuller life side by side with cancer, no matter how long that life is.

People seek out Commonweal for various reasons, says Dr. Lerner, who is author of *Choices in Healing: Integrating the Best of Conventional and Complementary*

Approaches to Cancer. Some participants are looking for inner peace, some want information about treatment alternatives, and still others hope to reconcile conflicting emotions about death and dying.

“When people come to the Cancer Help Program, one of the things they quickly come to understand is that the staff can provide a very supportive envelope, but that the work is theirs to do,” Dr. Lerner says. “What people get out of Commonweal is a reflection of their own unique personality and story, which is as individual as your fingerprint or the iris of your eye.”

There's no television, no radio [unless you bring your own] and no computer access. Somehow, though, none of that matters. In fact, unplugging is a welcome relief from the blaring disruptions of everyday life.

For Robert Rand of Santa Rosa, California, it was learning a different approach to everyday life. “I was inspired to make the best of every day, accepting the bad days and enjoying the moment because our life is just a series of moments,” says Rand, 44, who’s in treatment for metastatic salivary gland cancer. “Cancer doesn’t have to hijack our lives. We don’t know what will happen tomorrow or the next day, so we must plan for the future but live for today.”

Nourishing Body and Mind

Commonweal, as Dr. Lerner notes, is indeed a protective, safe envelope, emotionally and physically. It’s nestled on a 60-acre, relatively secluded site overlooking the Pacific, in the Point Reyes National Seashore area, a scenic hour’s drive north of San Francisco. Commonweal’s buildings, most of them beautifully restored, are scattered about land that used to house an RCA and Marconi radio transmitter site. In the Pacific House, where retreat participants stay, you can steal away to an upstairs windowseat and hear nothing but the gentle sound of breaking waves far below and watch as the golden orange streaks of the setting sun fade away.

But don’t expect a spa-like resort. “We have a pretty simple aesthetic,” Dr. Lerner says. “A more or less kind of Quaker aesthetic of simplicity and quiet and tasteful frugality.”

Bedrooms in the Pacific House are small and sparsely furnished, with a bed, a desk and an armoire. Most bathrooms are shared. There’s no television, no radio (unless you bring your own) and no computer access. Somehow, though, none of that matters. In fact, unplugging is a welcome relief from the blaring disruptions of everyday life.



A former storage shed, this meditation hut is known as The Chapel [above and below]. Photo by Jennifer M. Gangloff.



The food, however, is far from Spartan. Commonweal chefs, including Rebecca Katz, author of *One Bite at a Time: Nourishing Recipes for People with Cancer, Survivors, and Their Caregivers*, create healthy, low-fat menus that include such culinary delights as carrot-ginger soup with cashew cream and poached coconut ginger salmon. The chefs can accommodate many special dietary needs and are eager to sit with you in the dining room and dish about everything from organic shopping to sea salt to stocking a healthy pantry.

All of the staff at the Cancer Help Program—and they outnumber the participants by 12 to 8—are similarly helpful. But helpful isn't a big enough word to express what they do. They're genuinely caring, nurturing and interested, whether you're having a frank discussion about death, chatting about your dog or tracking down information about a new clinical trial. And no one who attends a Commonweal cancer retreat will forget program coordinator Waz Thomas, whose deep, gentle voice dispensing words of wisdom and breathing instructions resonates long after you've left. "Why do you look at a deer in the woods with awe and wonder," he asked us one day, "but not yourself when you look in the mirror?"

Perhaps because the staff members hold themselves as family—most have been doing the retreats together for years—they're able to easily adopt participants into the fold.

"I felt so completely taken care of 24 hours a day," Soladay says.

Strength in Community

Indeed, it's the intense but protective community that Commonweal envelopes you with that seems most healing. The retreats are small, with only eight or nine participants at a time. And they're held only six times a year, which means there's often a waiting list to attend. Certainly, the dynamics of such an intimate group can shape how you experience the retreat. Seldom, though, has a group of eight strangers not left the retreat as new friends, who stay in touch through the years and even make the pilgrimage back to Commonweal for periodic reunions.

"Your individual healing is greatly strengthened if a group is able to collaborate in meeting needs together," Dr. Lerner says. "It generates a very powerful sense of shared purpose and deep respect for how different each person is and how different the needs are that brought him or her to Commonweal."

The healing is not always easy or enjoyable. To get the most out of the Commonweal retreat, you may need to venture out of your comfort zone. That may mean trying Hatha yoga or meditation practices—albeit, the basics—revealing raw emotions during group support sessions, or simply openly receiving the help that's offered. Regardless, you won't be judged, mocked, dismissed or ridiculed.

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—Michael Lerner, PhD

“It’s important to meet people at as many different levels as possible when they often feel very stressed, very anxious, depressed and wounded by this difficult experience of cancer,” Dr. Lerner says. “We meet them at the physical level, with physical well-being and security and gentle touch and relaxation, at the emotional level, with tears that need to be cried and feelings that need to be expressed, at the mental level, with stories about themselves that are broken and ideas about themselves and the world that no longer work for them, and at the spiritual level, where they may find meaning in their lives.”

New Way of Living

Most retreat participants, Dr. Lerner says, arrive anxious, fearful and worried. And then, as with wild irises blooming despite the harsh elements of their life—or maybe because of that—something magical happens during Commonweal.

“Commonweal offers a quiet, unique, intensive exposure to deep healing practices that quite honestly are rarely available in people’s everyday lives,” Dr. Lerner says. “Some people find that medical treatment alone is not enough to deal with the spiritual and mental dimensions of having cancer. And so we see this little miracle time after time of people experiencing profound benefit.”

It was only in reflecting on his Commonweal experience afterward that Rand realized how much he’d gained from it. “I felt there was some big secret I might learn about living a more meaningful life that never was revealed,” Rand says. “As I look back, that big secret was the little things we learned, tidbits of wisdom here and there from staff and participants alike.”

Marian Ford says Commonweal inspired a change in the way she moves through life. “I have a renewed, clearer sense of self and purpose,” Ford says. “My cancer is and was truly a gift. I have had the opportunity to ask the big questions—what does my life mean, how do I want to live it, how do I want to make meaning of it, what are the aspects of my life that support my vision and what is holding me back. Thank god I got cancer. What a superficial life I would have led if I hadn’t.”

Editor’s Note: Robert Rand passed away in July. CURE is proud to honor his memory.