

Whidbey Institute
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Working the Gap: How, Now, Must We Live?
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I want to express my gratitude to the Board of the Whidbey Institute and to our Executive Director, Dianne Shiner, who along with a spectacular Committee and the sponsors of this event have created this wonderful evening. When they asked me to speak, they did not initially convey that this would be an evening of tribute for me. I am still trying to take it all in! Thus I particularly want also to thank each one of you here this evening, who sometime over the last weeks made the decision to invest your time and treasure to be a part of this gathering. I am keenly aware that some of you are here tonight simply because you have come to value and share the spirit and the mission of the Whidbey Institute at Chinook, and thus when we gather, you show up—knowing that it will be a time to share and renew meaningful bonds and commitments. Some of you are here only because someone invited you and you trusted them, and we want to honor that trust. Some of you are here because across the years, you and I have become colleagues and friends, and you have generously shown up for me tonight.

As you can imagine, it is also very meaningful to me that though my immediate family is scattered all across the country, nevertheless, there are three women here tonight that have known me all my life: My aunt, Grace Koopmans, and two my cousins, Francis Parks Graham and Jean Parks Roth.

The title that I have offered for our contemplation is: “Working the Gap: How, Now, Must We Live?” The first phrase, working the gap, I selected because it has been said that cultural artists “worry the gap between what now is and what is needed.” Those of you who are familiar with my reflections on leadership, know that it is my growing conviction that we have much to learn about the practice of leadership from the practice of artists. In the times in which we now live, we must

create new patterns of life and culture. Routine management is increasingly inadequate, and as Ron Heifetz with his colleagues at Harvard's Kennedy School have articulated, there is now a call for "adaptive leadership." Adaptive conditions call for new learning and innovation and are often signaled by a gap—a gap between established ways of life and what is actually needed, or a gap between what we say we value and what we actually do.

Thus, one of the questions that reveals many of the gaps that we are now facing is simply the question: How, *now*, must we live? Obviously, this is a question that I cannot presume to answer for others and am only working the edges of myself. But perhaps our shared contemplation and ongoing conversation can be fruitful.

The torque on the question is determined by the way the word *now* punctuates, orients and defines the question. For each of us the *now* is shaped, in part, by our particular personal circumstances.

Those who planned this event did not fully realize that this occasion coincides with a time of redefinition in my own life. One month and one day ago, I turned sixty-five. Though I am not retiring for another two years, in our culture this is traditionally a moment for reflection and taking stock of one's life. It is also a time when after a decade of work with the Institute, my responsibilities are somewhat reconfigured, and I am able to set some responsibilities aside and step into new opportunities. In March, Larry and I entered into our twentieth year of marriage. Larry's children, my stepchildren, are marrying within the year—last September, Todd married Susanna, and in August, Kate will marry Edward. In February my mom turned 90, and in the following two weeks both of my sisters became grandmothers. By that circumstance, I became a great-aunt—and as I recall, when I was growing up there was nothing older than a great-aunt!

***Now* – personal and collective**

Whatever the circumstances of our own personal *now*, there is also a collective *now* that we share as we ask the question: How, *now*, must we live? *Now*, as the gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to

widen, and four out of five people worldwide are underfed, underclothed and/or underhoused; *now* when the specter of climate change has taken hold even in the popular consciousness; *now*, after 9/11 and the incessant rise of militant Islam; *now*, when we are learning that there are more human beings subject to slavery at the present time than there were at the time of the American Civil War; *now*, when our young must come of age in a more complex, diverse and morally ambiguous world; *now*, when war occurs primarily within marginal states over protracted time periods and there are 35 million people involuntarily displaced from their home communities by violence; *now*, when new media technologies are dramatically reshaping our politics and our personal lives; *now*, when it is expected that in the next decade 1.5 million people will move into the Puget Sound region; *now*, when a deadly microbe can travel the globe in 36 hours; *now*, when half the world still walks to get their water (and Larry and I have 12 water faucets on our property, counting both the house and yard).

The list is long. *Now*, when there is a vast gap between what is and what is needed; *now*, when as Marshall McLuan saw, the artist is the one most needed in today's global village, not because the artist has a crystal ball through which the artist can see the future, but because the artist is so skilled at seeing what is happening in the present, when others are still looking through the spectacles of yesterday.

As we acknowledge the unprecedented conditions we face, at the same time we tend to seek continuities that can help us compose a trustworthy sense of coherence as we try to make meaning of our lives within this changing world. Reflecting on this phrase, "working the gap," I found myself remembering a stand-out moment from the time when I was just seven years old. It was New Year's Eve and for the first time ever my parents let me stay up until midnight. The reason was that my father, a Protestant Christian minister in an American Baptist congregation in the heart of Los Angeles, had chosen to serve that congregation even though they were burdened by a 30-year mortgage that they despaired of ever being able to pay off. He didn't tell them initially that he thought they could do it in about six years. In fact, it took seven.

The final year was 1949, and California was celebrating the centennial of the California gold rush. My dad came up with a slogan, “The finish line by ‘49.” He then proceeded to have a grid of six inch squares, as many of them as it took, painted on the narthex wall of the church, and in the center of each square was the number 49 representing forty-nine dollars. Whenever anyone paid that much on the debt, then a piece of gold paper that looked roughly like a gold nugget would be placed over one of the squares.

As the story comes down to us, members of the congregation sacrificed to pay off those “nuggets.” It is said that many husbands and wives in the congregation made the decision not to exchange Christmas presents with each other that year. It was said that older women living on fixed incomes decided to go without nylons and other “necessities” as they were perceived in that era. My parents participated in that all-out effort. At budget planning time, the trustees told my father they wanted to give him a raise in salary, but he responded that he couldn’t preach sacrifice and accept a raise. They said, “But you can’t live on what we’re giving you.” They were right. My parents were borrowing money from my grandparents in order to buy groceries. Through such acts of commitment, all the nuggets were paid off in time for the mortgage to be burned at the close of the Watch Night service on New Year’s Eve that began at 11 pm and ended at mid-night. As I look back, I am quite touched that my parents were only 32 and 33 years old when they wanted their seven-year-old daughter, their eldest, to be present for that celebrative moment.

My mother had persuaded Cecil Marshall, a layman in the congregation, that he could rig up a gas flame in the front part of the church, and, in fact, it was quite dramatic when at the stroke of mid-night a three-foot-high flame erupted and the shovel that had been used for the groundbreaking for that beautiful sanctuary and the adjacent three-story educational building was brought forward holding the mortgage which was then burned to ashes. It was not only a dramatic, aesthetic event but I can assure you it was also safe. Remember that where there are Baptists, there are baptisteries—and thus plenty of water at hand in case of a mishap!

That congregation could not imagine in 1949 that in 2007, in the southern California region on any given Sunday morning, in the American Baptist network of churches there are 131 different ethnic groups each meeting in their own expression of worship, and that seven of those congregations now find their home in the building that had the burden of the mortgage lifted so that the mission and purpose could go forward in a less hobbled way. That congregation was faithful to their moment, not knowing what their moment would make possible for future generations.

By the time I graduated from college, my parents had served in five different congregations. Each congregation had its own particular “gap” that needed to be addressed. But when I look for what they all held in common, it was this: Whenever my parents went to a new congregation, they knew in their hearts that there was a gap between how people loved and cared for each other and their world and how they *could* love and care for each other and their world. I learned early that big things are asked of us, that we can step into gaps that seem overwhelming, and that together we can all be agents of transformation.

Working the gap – the Whidbey Institute at Chinook

By the time I was seven plus twenty more years old, I was a soul and a heart prepared to meet Fritz and Vivienne Hull, the founders of the Whidbey Institute and Chinook. In 1969 they knew and articulated in powerful and compelling ways that we live in big-gap time. We live at one of those threshold times in history, a hinge time, a cusp time, a time of great turning. They were not afraid to ask big questions, and at the core of those big questions was a question something like, “How, *now*, must we live?” They were prophetically asking what it might mean to be faithful to the call of a new time, and what it might mean to provide leadership in the formation of the kind of imagination and faithfulness that is now needed. They convened a circle of about a dozen or so of us and began what has become after more than thirty-five years what Victoria Castle recently described as “a more compelling conversation.”

That initial circle established the Chinook Learning Center. The first tag line was: “For the integration of religion and life.” We knew that there was a gap between what we said we believed and how we lived. Many of us here in this room are forever changed because of the conversations that we have shared in the Farmhouse on the Chinook lands—whether as a part of a workshop, a conference, a retreat, a workday, or simply a lingering late night bit of “working the gap.”

After another twenty or so years, as the work and times evolved, that work was laid down, and inspired by Thomas Berry and others, Fritz and Vivienne convened another circle on the Island of Iona off the coast of Scotland (where they are this evening), which led in 1993 to the founding of the Whidbey Institute—for Earth, Spirit and the Human Future. Then the *now* was defined by the environmental challenge.

Interdependence – an ethic

As we are steadfast in affirming, the environmental challenge orients the work of the Institute, not because it is a favorite issue among others, but because the environmental challenge touches everything else. It asks us to rethink how we understand health, education, business, law, agriculture, government, religion, architecture and all the rest, casting everything in a larger frame. In whatever sector we are located, we know that we are now being asked to work the gap between what is and what is now needed, and it has set all of us on a very steep learning curve. In every domain we are learning the interdependent reality that we are, as relentlessly we keep discovering that as John Muir said, “everything is hitched to everything else.” It is fitting that the Board of the Institute has recently articulated the aspiration that as an Institute we will become a center for the understanding and practice of interdependence.

We all know that this is long-haul work. We are a society that has placed enormous value on the individual, and that has not been misplaced. But we have done so in a way that has eclipsed the truth of our independent reality. When we do take that interdependent reality seriously, we discover an ethic embedded within it. Indeed, it has been

said that ethics is how we behave after we understand that everything is connected to everything else and that everyone belongs.

Integral to an ethic of interdependence and a part of the maturing of the environmental movement as a whole is a call for a transformation of our economic arrangements. The word *economy* is rooted in two words, household and management—meaning, the management of our collective household. Locally, nationally and globally we are learning that we can no longer afford to be out of alignment with “our whole household”—the more-than-human-world as well as the whole human family. There is a still small but rapidly growing recognition that we need to learn the artistry of how we can work the perceived gap between the creation of profit and prosperity on the one hand, and the creation of a culture of peace on the other. We are learning that not only the claims of justice and the claims of the environment but even our own economic and political security is dependent upon our willingness to work these gaps.

A spiritual challenge

When we begin to think this way, we confirm the deep conviction at the core of the Institute from its founding. That is, that at the heart of the environmental challenge is a deep spiritual challenge, if we are going to have the psychic energy—the soul energy—to do what must be done.

A few weeks ago a number of us were invited by the Board to consider a site plan and the ongoing development of the facilities that are now required to serve the work of the Institute. As we took time to clarify the deep purpose the Institute does and can serve, the contractor for Thomas Berry Hall, Greg Gilles, quietly said, “Our society may be facing a series of significant crises, and we will continue to need places where thoughtful people can meet, talk, and work together—and they must be able to do this within a broad spiritual frame that enables them to hold steady and provide worthy leadership in the midst of buffeting forces.”

A spirituality or consciousness that can respond to the currents of profound change, whatever forms these may take in our future, seems to

ask nothing less than the re-formation of conscience and the willingness to learn new dimensions of competence—beyond what has heretofore been asked of us as a species. Such spirituality necessarily both draws upon and transforms all of the great religious traditions as we have known them. Thus, one of the key questions at this time of great turning is: What are the hallmarks of a spirituality for our time?

I have enormous respect for the hard-won wisdom that is present in this room in response to that question. Further, each of us knows best the terrain of our own spiritual frontiers. I can only be suggestive as I explore the frontiers of my own soul and seek company with yours. These are a few of the thoughts that are working me these days.

Who do we want to become?

Across the years I have had the grace of receiving appreciation for my teaching. The single affirmation that I most cherish came in a comment from Cathy Whitmire as she reflected on her studies at Harvard Divinity School when I was teaching there. She said: “In the courses we took at the Divinity School the essential message was, ‘There are some things you ought to know.’ In your course it was clear that there were things we ought to know, but there was another message: ‘There is someone you can become.’”

In mid-April of this year I was invited to give a plenary address in Vancouver, British Columbia, for the national meeting of the University Continuing Education Association. There were two plenary addresses that preceded mine. The first was given by Juan Enriquez, the founder of the new Harvard Business School Life Sciences Project. He presented a dazzling array of images by which he elegantly conveyed that in our time two powerful new languages have been born. One is the digital language, which has so dramatically enhanced the speed and scope of the acquisition of knowledge and the communication among us. The second language is the genomic language, unlocking the DNA of all life and the extraordinary revelations it opens to us.

The other plenary was given by Wade Davis, an explorer in residence at the National Geographic Society. He presented an equally

spectacular array of images depicting the diversity of cultures that our species has created over time. Then he told us that in just our lifetimes, 3,000 human languages have died. Every month an elder dies and a living language is lost along with the culture it holds. Significantly, he went on to remark that the purpose of his message was not to determine for us what is right and what is wrong, but rather to pose the question: *Who, now, do we want to become?*—individually, as a people, as a species?

Suffering and Wonder – a larger embrace

There are manifold ways to orient human becoming in these times. I have suggested, for example, that in this bioregion we might ponder how our culture is going to evolve in right relationship with both the salmon and the computer chip. But a yet larger and deeper orientation for our becoming that also addresses today's challenges of scale and scope is to orient our becoming to the *suffering* and the *wonder* of today's world, an orientation that requires of us a great stretch of soul.

No generation before us has had the access we have to the suffering of our world—especially the wasteful suffering. Three-thousand languages gone, and thousands of species gone as a part of the great extinction precipitated primarily by one species—our own. An ice shelf the size of California rapidly melting in the western Antarctic, polar bears stranded, thousands of children orphaned by AIDS half a world away, another school shooting on the other side of the country.

At the same time, no generation before us has had such access to the luminous wonder of our world. Whether we follow Larry and his field lens into the microscopic land of moss or a lab-coated technician into the labyrinth of DNA, or a social psychologist into the world of human emotions, or an atmospheric scientist into the mapping of vast ocean currents—we live in a time of extraordinary access to wonder. Given these realities we are, I believe, called as citizens and cultural artists to a spirituality that is manifest in the capacity for a large embrace and thus requires the practice of a courageous imagination.

I recently read a new biography of Joan of Arc. I must confess that what I knew of her life before I read this biography could dance on the head of a very small pin. I knew that she had been a shepherdess who became a warrior, played a key role in the history of France, and was burned at the stake. I learned much more. I learned that when she died more was known about her than was known about any other person who had lived up to that time because of the court records that were kept during the last two years of her life. I learned that there have been more literary events—plays, books, etcetera that have been done on her life than almost anyone else. And I also learned that she is the only person in the history of the Christian church who was condemned and executed as a heretic and later canonized as a saint.

George Bernard Shaw, as you may remember in his play, “St. Joan,” has her inquisitor say to her, “Your voices are not voices from God, your voices are merely your imagination.” She responds immediately, “Yes, that is how God speaks to us.” Among those who have agreed with her, Samuel Taylor Coleridge understood imagination as the highest power of the human mind and was fascinated by the German word for imagination, *einbildungskraft*, the power of shaping into one.

The power that shapes into one—that manifests the capacity for a larger embrace—was certainly present in St. Joan’s life. Interestingly, her biographer makes two final observations as he reviews what happened with her: First, that she was declared a heretic, in part, because no one could quite come to terms with “the ingenuity of God,” meaning that it was unbelievable that God could actually work through a girl 17 to 19 years of age, a girl who could not read or write, a girl who could serve as a inspiring warrior and strategist. She could only be a witch. Second and perhaps most significantly, her biographer observes that at the time France was really just a collection of loosely affiliated provinces. And then he quotes Nash Marshall who observes that Joan of Arc taught her people to rise above their petty concerns and provincialism and see that there was a larger unity that needed to be made out of the provinces of France. And she proclaimed that the larger unity was a sacred thing, that it was a response to a divine calling.

As we dwell in the gap between the suffering and wonder of today's world and we find ourselves on new moral and ethical frontiers, I believe that like her we are asked to have the courage to imagine our citizenship individually and nationally within a larger frame—within a new planetary commons, and to hold a reverence for that larger life—that capacity for a wider embrace—as a sacred thing.

Two essential practices – contemplation and community

A courageous imagination that can serve that stretch of soul, depends upon many skills and practices. But surely there are two that are central. One is that the process of imagination requires a practice of contemplation. Yet we are a society of people gone busy, driven, in part, by the acceleration of a digital economy and its attendant anxieties. But after we have recognized the complex dissonance manifest in the yawning gaps of our time, we know that there can only be movement toward transformation if there is a time of pause—sometimes short, sometimes long. The gift of the contemplative pause is the “aha,” insight, revelation, a new wholeness, or as Quakers sometimes express it, there comes a “leading,” that is, a sense of what we are now asked to do.

As Terry Tempest Williams and Mary Oliver try to teach us, however, perhaps the prior truth in the light of today's environmental challenge is that our first contemplative duty is simply to behold. It has been said that the appropriate posture of a human before the universe is simply awe and gratitude. Contemplatives know that authentic contemplation, wonder, awe, and gratitude in the presence of luminous beauty can move us into a new sense of right relationship and more fitting behavior.

Paradoxically, the contemplative beholding of suffering also can move us into right relationship and more fitting behavior—though the portal of compassion.

In our study of the formation of commitment to the common good that we describe in the book, *Common Fire*, the critical finding was that all hundred people at sometime in their formative years had an empathic,

transforming encounter with “otherness.” In that encounter, “us and them” had become “we,” and their world had grown larger—their soul had been stretched into a larger embrace. Contemplation awakens us to our participation a larger world and is an essential practice of cultural artists.

The second practice that is equally vital for the practice of a courageous imagination is perhaps the one that I have learned most profoundly through my years with the Whidbey Institute at Chinook. The call to working the gap between what is an what can be is necessarily a call to the practice of community.

Many are familiar with Jane Goodall’s pioneering work with the chimps in Africa, and her current work in which she remarkably nurtures hope even in the face of the great loss of habitat for those chimps and other species—including our own. One of the times when she and her staff were at the Whidbey Institute on Chinook lands, at the end of their time together they chose, as we often do, to walk by the Great Bell, each one of them giving it a ring, with whatever meaning or intention they personally held. At the time, Jane Goodall’s mother was dying, and as you may know, when Jane was a very young woman and first invited to go to Africa, live in the bush, and study the chimps this was not deemed a proper thing for a young woman to do, and declared impossible. But her proper British mother said simply, “I’ll go with you,” and did live with her daughter in the bush for six months. As Jane rang the Great Bell, someone nearby heard her whisper under her breath, “None of us does it alone.”

Like the chimps, we too are profoundly social creatures. It is rarely fully truthful when we say “*I changed my mind.*” We learn, we change change our behavior, we work the gap, and we become more faithful to the call of our time only in the company of others—in a community that can tolerate good questions, a community of comfort and challenge, a community that can contemplatively and creatively work the gap.

A few months ago while attending a conference, I was pleased to be invited to a dinner in a private dining room in a well-established San Francisco restaurant. Ten of us were there gathered around a single table

and served excellent food. We included a pioneering educator, a few foundation officers, a physician who is also an educator and author, and so on. We had barely finished our delicious appetizers when our host indicated that this was not going to be just another lovely time of chit-chat. He asked that we consider together how we saw the future unfolding and its implications. Thus as our meal continued we soberly shared some of the dangers that haunt us and also some of the signs of hope that hearten us. By the time we had pretty thoughtfully surfaced our best working assessment of *now* and what it may portend, we were having dessert. Then one of our number candidly observed that he did not see any of us yet really making significant changes in our lifestyle—changes congruent with the facts at hand, remarking particularly on the travel that he and his wife were planning, nevertheless, in the coming year.

In my own soul I was keenly aware that the kinds of changes to which he points are difficult for all of us. It will require sustained practices of contemplative community expressed in the practices of hearth and table and the building of a new commons to move us to the places we hadn't otherwise planned to go.

When we are at our best as an Institute, we provide a place where the practice of hearth and table occur regularly—in the Farmhouse, in the dining room, in the sanctuary. We are a place where the building of a worthy trust takes place—sometimes on the ropes course, sometimes in Thomas Berry Hall, in great and wonderful gatherings of community and commitment, a new imagination of the commons, there or here in this gracious space at REI in Seattle or elsewhere. We have learned that in the conversation that becomes communion, we are formed into seeing hearts, informed minds, and enough courage to work the gap.

I close with this account. The “last book I had to write” is *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*. It tells the story of the work of Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, who over more than twenty years have been asking what we mean by the word “leadership,” and more, how it can be taught in ways that will matter for today's world.

Over a period of ten-plus years, I invested a significant part of my life in describing, assessing and interpreting that work. If you are a professional in your own right and you decide that you're going to spend time interpreting someone else's work, you think about it long and hard. If you make that choice, you want the story that you tell to reflect your own integrity and commitments. Yet in this study of Heifetz's work, there was a boundary that had to be maintained. The voice of the book had to be primarily his rather than my own.

Near the close of a direct interview with Heifetz that is published as Chapter 7, I asked him: In light of the difficulty of teaching in this way, there must be some deeper motivation than simply the desire to be innovative in teaching leadership. What is that? Heifetz who was initially trained as a physician responded: "I think there is some sense in which I am still being a doctor. I am trying to make people's lives better—healing wounds, wanting people to have the capacity to generate healthier patterns of life. Leadership is a way to describe the activity of persons engaging in the mobilization of people around them to make progress on the important challenges of their place and their time. . . . The world is full of wasteful, wasteful pain."

When the publication was about to go to press, though he could not control the writing, it was nevertheless appropriate that he be able to see what was going to be published about his work. He returned the manuscript with changes only in matters of fact—dates, spelling of names and so forth. Except in the seventh chapter, in the last paragraph he had crossed out "the world is so full of wasteful, wasteful pain." I made corrections and sent the manuscript back for a final check, expect the last paragraph of Chapter 7 was still intact as I had first written it. Again, he crossed it out, and substituted something really lame like: "I'm teaching leadership because I want to make the world a better place." So I got on the phone and I said, "Ron, your statement about you're doing this work because the world is full of such wasteful, wasteful pain is for me the ethical taproot of this work. You said it, I have it on tape, it's going in the book." He said, "Okay, but let's cool the rhetoric. Since you re-quote it in your concluding comment, let's

make it just one “wasteful.” So the book reads: “The world is so full of wasteful pain.”

Everyone in this room tonight is here because you are someone who cares about that wasteful pain. In differing ways each one of you is working a gap between what is and what is needed. Whatever I have been and whatever I may yet become is dependent upon the grace of your good and faithful company as you have been and are for me a contemplative community of comfort and challenge, creativity and commitment—and together we continue to work the question: How, *now*, must we live?

Gratitude—thank you.