

**Summary and synthesis of participant feedback on the
Center for Whole Communities 2008 Retreat Season**

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Report Organization

Introduction

Part 1: Retreat preparation

Logistics and getting there

Did you feel prepared for the experience you had at the retreat?

What additional preparation is necessary?

Part 2: Retreat Content

How do you describe the overall retreat?

How did you experience the retreat structure?

What came up in the conversations about power and privilege?

White guilt and personal responsibility

Emphasis on race

Inadequate time to cover all issues thoroughly

Focusing on race is reflective of U.S. culture

Group composition drives the content of retreat conversations

Did the facilitation and structure allow for balanced conversations?

Use of caucuses

Use of quotes and written materials

Maintaining the integrity of the space

Managing other issues through the group process

Part 3: Take home messages

Were you able to connect the personal work to a broader context?

How useful was the four quadrant presentation in making the connection?

Was CWC's intention to catalyze, stimulate, create, and/or support a new movement clear?

What is your desire for connection to CWC?

Social networking

Supporting CWC

Part 4: Concluding thoughts

Appendix A: 2008 Retreat Protocol

Appendix B: List of interviewees

Appendix C: Interview transcripts

Introduction

Dear CWC staff,

Below please find a summary and synthesis of the interviews conducted for the 2008 retreat season. As always, it was a pleasure to do this work for you. The opportunity to hear and learn from alumni impressions and wisdom about the work Center for Whole Communities is undertaking is both edifying and deeply humbling.

The content of the report is organized around a set of four interrelated questions and sub-questions that were articulated in conversations with CWC about the 2008 Retreat season:

- ✚ Did participants feel adequately prepared for the retreat experience? What contributed to their preparation? What would have better prepared them?
- ✚ To what extent is CWC's work on power and privilege perceived as being focused on race versus broader systems of oppression? How do participants perceive the emphases as they played out?
- ✚ Were participants able to make the connection between the very personal internal and community work on power and privilege and broader organizational and professional contexts? What enabled or inhibited participants from transitioning from the personal to "professional" context?
- ✚ Was CWC's intention to catalyze, stimulate, support, and/or create a movement made clear? Is there a desire to be connected to this broader movement/network?

For the interview protocol, please see Appendix A.

A total of twenty interviews were conducted (for a full list of interviewees, please see Appendix B). Although particular attention was given to maintaining gender, racial, and geographic balance, as indicated by the table below, the interview group had over-representation from the east coast.

	20 interviews
Gender	
Women	10
Men	10
Race	
People of color	11 (6 women, 5 men)
White	9 (4 women, 5 men)
Region	
East coast	12 (VT, MA, NH, NY, NJ, DC, MD)
West coast	4 (CA, OR, WA)
West	2 (MT, NV)
Southwest	2 (TX, AZ)

Due to the tight timeline for the report turn-around, the report seeks primarily to organize, summarize, and synthesize the perspectives and insights shared by interviewees. You

will note, however, that analysis and recommendations were also drawn from the interview content.

While the report is rich with interview data, there is much additional data that could not be used. While not directly relevant for the report, this information may prove useful as CWC moves forward with planning the 2009 retreat season. For this reason, I am including in Appendix C full transcripts from the twenty interviews. I hope you will have time to at least scan through them.

Again, many thanks for the opportunity to do this work. I hope it will prove useful.

Sincerely,
danyelle

Part 1: Retreat preparation

Logistics and getting there

The protocol used for these interviews did not include specific questions about interactions with staff or logistical preparations, yet many retreat participants found it important to note how well “tended to” they felt before and during their week at Knoll Farm:

- ✚ *Whenever a question would pop in my head, I would get an email from Libby. We were really well thought about and communicated with ahead of time. The staff is really great.*
- ✚ *The mailings really prepared me. The manner in which they start communicating to you once the season starts – through mail and email. Their method of communicating was clear and concise.*
- ✚ *The timing was great. It started once the season started – March or April – so I had ample time to book my flight, starting emailing for logistics, etc.*
- ✚ *It was clear that the staff was there at our service. I’m so unused to having someone at my service it was an interesting dynamic. It was lovely, the staff was so welcoming and inviting.*

Did you feel prepared for the experience you had at the retreat?

- ✚ *Yes and no. The no is a good no.*
- ✚ *I wouldn’t have wanted to be any more prepared than I was. I wanted to go in totally open.*
- ✚ *I knew what they would try to accomplish, but not what would happen.*
- ✚ *I was open for whatever was going to happen and was looking forward to giving up control and going with the flow.*

Overall, participants felt “prepared” but not “preconditioned” for the retreat. They received enough information to orient themselves for the experience, but not so much as to create preconceived expectations. Many thought this was a good approach and appreciated it.

The website and advance materials were understood as “orientation,” rather than as road maps for the experience. *They got you primed a little bit and they gave me a sense of the possible for the direction.* No one interviewed said that they expected the retreats to track more closely the readings or to address them specifically, however two interviewees made reference to other participants in their groups who had these expectations.

Some participants did only parts of the reading, and a couple didn’t get to it at all, but this was okay because the general perception was that the retreat was less about the readings than about going into the experience open to it:

- ✚ *They gave you enough information as possible to prepare, but they also wanted you to be open to the experience – I found that approach helpful.*
- ✚ *There was more than enough material, I didn't even get through all the readings and even if I had, I'm not sure they would have even helped me.*
- ✚ *I also didn't want to read a lot of the literature provided only because I wanted to show up there and experience truly where my heart was leading me.*
- ✚ *I found them [the readings] to be informative and interesting, but in terms of actually preparing me for the retreat, I just think the retreat is so experiential oriented ... what prepares you for it other than just having the experience.*
- ✚ *I didn't read the assignments, but [my concerns about] that quickly dissipated because it wasn't about reading the assignments or completing a task, it was about the relationships.*

Although one participant noted that she found the website vague (*The vagueness of the website didn't allow people to be fully informed about what they're getting into. I would strongly suggest changing that*), others who mentioned it said they found the website helpful: *I read about the program on the website, which I found very helpful. The pictures are good and it gives a feel for the culture there.*

Despite the readings and other preparatory efforts, two interviewees reported going into the retreat assuming it would focus on traditional conservation topics and deliver “straightforward” tools for environmental stewardship. One interviewee was fine to cast off this initial misconception once his retreat was underway: *I thought we were going to a conservation conference, but upon being there for a few days, [I understood that] the whole take home message was that no matter what the issues, it's the people we're dealing with.*

The other interviewee expressed more difficulty in shifting his expectations and embracing the actual content of the retreat. In fact, in response to the question “Did you feel prepared for the experience you had at the retreat?” this interviewee responded, *“The two words would be: hell no. I felt ambushed.”* He went on to explain: *I thought I was going into a safe environment without fear of controversy or tears... I was going there under the premise that I would be meeting with like-minded folks to discuss delivering environmental services and improving environmental stewardship. That's where my expectations were ... It turned out to be a diversity training workshop, which is not something that I needed.*

This same interviewee, however, described the retreat as *painful but rewarding*, and when asked how the retreat was useful to his own work and life, he responded, *It helps me better appreciate who I'm talking to and how my message can be more effectively delivered and it keeps me from being arrogant about my message.*

What additional preparation is necessary?

We encountered some challenging moments. Some of the anxiety for everyone was charged. Some people weren't sure what they were coming into, particularly around the discussion about race ...

Although most interviewees said they personally were okay with going into the retreat open to whatever the experience offered, many pointed out that there was considerable tension when the conversations turned to power and privilege. Some thought better preparation, or at least more explicit communication, would have decreased the tension: *People were taken to a level that they didn't expect to go to. If people had been more informed up front, there would have been more buy in at the end.* One participant suggested advance notice that a substantial portion of the curriculum focused on power and privilege would have allowed her, as a person of color, to mentally prepare for the work she was required to do: *... I didn't get [from the materials that] the majority would be delving deeply with a group of strangers into challenging issues, particularly around race. I wasn't mentally prepared as a person of color to carry that load.*

While more information could result in more buy in and better mental preparation for some, for others, it could result in decisions not to participate in the retreat:

- *It would have been helpful to let people know what they were signing up for. Frankly a third of them wouldn't have come. They'd have been too scared about the emotional impacts.*
- *My druthers would be in the preparation materials that you make sure people know this is not a comfortable experience. My gauge was that people were not ready for what was coming out ... People should be prepared that diversity issues are going to come up. Participants should know that's going to happen. I would never have come if it had been made clear.*

Although losing potential participants is a definite disincentive, most interviewees still thought it important to be open and clear about the content and processes of the retreat particularly with people of color who will likely be called upon to serve as educators in the process: *... just because of how the culture works, you're going to meet with resistance from people of color about teaching white people about how the world has been cruel to them. Addressing that and being honest about it would make a lot of sense.*

Two participants who had been through diversity and/or anti-racism trainings thought a simple training prior to the retreat might be helpful as a way to familiarize people with the concepts to be covered and to provide a basic common language. These suggestions were made with a certain ambivalence, however:

- *I'm not convinced of this, though, because there's something about a dialogue and letting things emerge. You don't want to take that part away. It's a fine line.*
- *[It's a]tricky balance of how much do you want people thinking and analyzing about it and how much do you want people to respond from the heart.*

Most interviewees resisted the idea of a primer workshop to prepare participants for the retreat content – they felt it would be asking people to give up too much time and, perhaps more importantly, they held onto the idea that it's best to go into the retreats open:

- *What they had was perfect, some of it you can't be prepared for ... you have to be open and willing. You can over-program, and then people become attached to what they thought would happen rather than just being open.*
- *... every so often people got to be exposed to a blind date.*

Given, however, the perception by some that there were not equal levels of buy-in to the agenda by all participants (*I was willing to go with the flow, but I would say that my experience was diminished by skeptics that weren't willing to go there*), more transparency about the group process nature of the retreat and about the content of the sections dealing with power and privilege seem necessary. Some suggestions that emerged in the interviews included:

- ✚ More explicit information about the work on inclusion/exclusion in the invitation itself, on the website, and at the very beginning of the retreat. If this information is already provided, it was suggested that it be made clearer and more explicit, [*I read the website and materials in advance and I didn't get this, so if it was articulated and I missed it – it wasn't easily available.*]
- ✚ Lay out the specific history and trajectory of the retreats and the rationale for including the focus on power and privilege. Clearly explain the link between acknowledging and working on these issues and the ability to do the work (environmental, conservation, land, community work) better.
- ✚ Make a round of calls to each participants a month before their scheduled retreat to ensure that they understand that the retreat includes group work and work on power and privilege.
- ✚ Flag that the retreat is about group process, which can get intense, *... if you're not a group process kind of person it might not be for you.*

Part 2: Retreat Content

How do you describe the overall retreat?

- ✚ *The retreat gives you a lived and conceptual sense of how things might actually be linked. It gives you tools and a framework for starting to see greater numbers of people as potential allies and to develop capacities to make alliances.*
- ✚ *We're talking about a whole community ... how can you talk about the different pieces and make any meaningful changes in the things you care about if you don't know the people you're working with ...*
- ✚ *... awareness of people and their conditions ... it doesn't matter which issue you're dealing with, it's people who make or break a situation.*
- ✚ *Self care, connection, and the way that ... the integration of food and nurturing of our bodies along with the understanding more where it's coming from tied in with it perfectly.*
- ✚ *... a team building component, some self awareness, a lot of work in trying to understand issues around diversity with a very heavy focus on color ...*
- ✚ *Personal growth, personal peace. The idea is that when you grow we can share better. When you have greater personal strength, you're able to give back better.*
- ✚ *There was self exploration, relationship building, leading with values, value-based ways of working. It visualized and made it concrete what a unified and whole community looks like.*
- ✚ *Being more attuned not just to words, but to your space and what's going on in your head.*
- ✚ *Being aware of our own ... ability to influence in our organizations to create the change we seek.*
- ✚ *Inclusion. It is a connection to the earth.*
- ✚ *Forging relationships.*

How did you experience the retreat structure?

The dialogues – where and how they took place – allowed for connection with oneself and with others that surpassed other types of discussions many retreat participants had experienced. For example, one person talked about the “geography” of the retreat’s structure and how this created a natural flow for her: *When we went into the sacred space, there was certain level of sacredness and you left it there. That environment itself ... it's interesting that we encounter what we encounter at this level and not anywhere else. We were experiencing it, but the sacred space was where we were able to vocalize it ... the layout, the fact that we started at the top, the sacred space, and then come down. [It] helped me to be able to think, “I've dealt with it here, now we can go into the work part of the retreat.”*

Another person talked about the power of the circle process (or dialogue) as a means for simply (but powerfully) bearing witness: *Within the circle process, there are a couple of things in particular that are great. First, it's everyone's responsibility to listen deeply. So often you're at a meeting or a conference and you're thinking so much about what you're going to say and what your role is that you don't listen deeply to what others are saying. The second thing is that it's not an automatic role to fix everything that you're hearing. There is a power to just being present. Witnessing.*

Other comments on the structure of the dialogue included:

- *The whole structure of it moves you beyond posturing and superficial nicey nice liberalism. That was beautiful to behold.*
- *You talked at a depth that you wouldn't normally talk and you developed a level of affection with complete strangers that wouldn't normally be possible. A lot of what is powerful is the invisible curriculum.*

Not everyone had a liberating experience of the structure, however: *I felt constrained the whole time with the structure. There needs to be some structure, but maybe one that allows more freedom.*

Very important to some was the unstructured time that allowed open space and time for informal discussion and connection between and among retreat participants. One interviewee said that it was during the unstructured one-on-one time that he was able to make the broader connections between the very personal dimensions of the work and the broader (professional) level dimensions: *The structure allowed for people to be with one another of their own choosing, to make connections and share their own professional experiences around some of the issues that came up. That was really useful in helping folks plug it into a bigger context. Because of the diversity, you're hearing people with all the different experiences. There was down time to reflect and share about things other than our own personal stories.*

Another person said that the time to engage in physical activities created a space for him to process issues with other retreat participants: *The important one to me was the free time – doing sheep things or working in the garden with Helen. You're at work on an activity, you have your hands dirty and are allowed time to talk to someone while you're working alongside the person. It enabled a lot – it was better than just sitting with someone. You're working, the body is active, the mind opens up because of it.*

One person noted a distinct discomfort with the lack of structure during the down time: *I would have preferred more structured workshops after the sacred space. I thought it was too lax. I understood the making of the spoons and everything, but I would have preferred more ... if I'm going to be there for a week ... I would have preferred a workshop on "How Do You Encounter Racism" or a workshop to learn how to better deal with racism.*

What came up in the conversations about power and privilege?

- *It wasn't like we said, "Let's talk about power and privilege." We understood the context in which different people were speaking, and that made things personal*

and powerful. We understood who a person was – their upbringing, their racial experience. That actually made us face our own assumptions.

- *...you got to know the people in your group in such a way that you don't even know some of your family members. That level of learning about people gives you a sense of being not so quick to judge – when I heard the stories of peoples' personal struggles, it really humanized them. In our daily lives we don't have that kind of interaction, so we tend to live on a superficial level and make assumptions.*

The connections between Whole Communities → relationship building → inclusion → power and privilege were clear for participants who understood that creating authentic community requires work on issues related to power and privilege within a community. *It was an interesting moment when you realized that this is all about us being on the same page, if we're not it's not going to work that well.*

An experience of this integrated and organic relationship between community, power, and privilege wasn't available to everyone, however. Even among those who understood the intent to work on power and privilege as a means for achieving Whole Communities, there were participants who experienced the retreat work on power and privilege as separate from the broader Whole Communities work because they felt there wasn't an adequate "bridge" made between the two. *There were two types of discussion happening and there weren't the connections to really bring them together.*

White guilt and personal responsibility

It is possible that the link between the two discussions wasn't clear for certain participants because they were caught in processing emotions that had emerged in the power and privilege conversations. *You can't necessarily make those connections when you're still trying to figure out what's going on. People are reorganizing their way of thinking – before they can think at the broader level, they have to figure out their own foundation.* Guilt, in particular, came up for a number of white participants during the conversations about race, power, and privilege. The following quote from a white participant who self-identified as privileged (*I come from a middle class/upper middle class family, that sort of privilege .. My dad works hard, but it's privilege.*) speaks to how unprocessed guilt created, for him, a sense of separation, which worked at cross purposes with the ultimate goal of building community: *... it [the power and privilege] didn't feel like it was the most relevant piece of the retreat. It identifies you and singles you out in ways that aren't relevant ... There was a guilt that wasn't that helpful. Instead of being together, it separated us ...*

One interviewee commented that there was insufficient attention given to providing tools to move beyond the guilt: *... [white] people were stuck on white guilt because they didn't really understand how to use white privilege in a productive way.* While structured conversations about how power and privilege can be used in supportive rather than oppressive ways might be one method for helping participants process their guilt, some pointed out that unstructured time with fellow-participants was most powerful in understanding and dealing with the guilt and other emotions: *I wasn't sure how much guilt I should associate with the fact that I'm a white male. There were all kinds of things hanging out there ... Some folks troubled with it at first and then as we sat around carving spoons and talking to one another, we learned how to deal with it.*

Reckoning with white guilt entails stepping into the space for participation created at the retreats, according to one participant. Such an action is synonymous with taking responsibility to be in community with others: *There needs to be more emphasis on white folks learning how to be in community so that they can feel safe enough to talk about their own stories and their own fears ... Safety isn't the only issue – there's also the question of responsibility. Part of responsibly being in a community together is taking mutual responsibility for sharing the stories. It's critical to your own humanness.*

This same participant shared a brief story of how one of the white facilitators for his retreat stepped up to this “responsibility”: *It's always rare that the people in power find their own voice and their own stories to share. It did happen with one of our facilitators though – he shared something he rarely shared ... It was so powerful. All too often white people don't do that. They live off my stories and then I have to relive my pain so that they can feel okay.*

Emphasis on race

When asked, the majority of interviewees said that about the emphases in the conversation about power and privilege was on race. There were exceptions to this perception, however, and even within the same retreat group there were variations. For example, one person said his retreat focused on gender and covered race least of all, while two other interviewees from the same retreat group reported that race had been the focus.

For some, the focus on race was problematic, given the other issues of oppression in the United States, as well as other important topics that could be explored but weren't because time was taken to discuss race. Two participants (from the same retreat) noted a disturbing lack of analysis around the issue of class:

- *It's clear it was an anti-racism workshop. That's an important focus, but I think there are other huge issues around class that weren't touched on.*
- *I think class issues are huge and not well thought about in this country ... it's poorly understood and Americans have a hard time thinking about it because of our mythology as a middle class society.*

Most thought the retreat focus was a function of time limitations and the energy of the group. Below are comments on how these factors influenced the retreat content and dynamics:

Inadequate time to cover all issues thoroughly

One participant felt a full six days would be required to cover race adequately. Others thought the six days allowed for a thorough discussion of race, as well as less in-depth discussions of class, gender, and other forms of oppression.

- *It was plenty broad enough to catch the issues of power if we'd had more time to get into them. In our group the dynamic came out around race, but over time we would have seen it coming out in other things too.*

- *I don't know if you can do all the issues justice in the amount of time we had.*

Focusing on race is reflective of U.S. culture

Many participants linked the prominence of race in the retreat conversations to its prominence in U.S. culture. The fact that this issue has not been resolved in our own society gets reflected in our own communities, even intentionally created ones.

- *... let's face it, we live in the most racist culture on the planet and if we don't deal with it ... hopefully eventually we'll get to the healing and reconciliation and be able to move onto other things.*
- *It was mostly race. There was an intention to have things around class and gender, but in a typical American way, race overwhelmed it. And that wasn't surprising.*
- *Maybe we're stuck here because people of color aren't being heard, even among allies, so there's no real deep healing that can take place to enable us to move on.*

Group composition drives the content of retreat conversations

The focus on race was explained by some as being as reflective of the participant-driven nature of the retreats and the composition of the groups, which tended to be relatively diverse in terms of race, but less in other ways (for example, class). Thus, when the issue of power and privilege came up, race was a readily available topic about which the group had an actual lived experience.

- *It depends on the make up of the group what issues will come up more.*
- *Race dominated it because of the mix of people in the community ...*
- *I don't know if they intended for it to be race, power, and privilege, but because of the group that was gathered, that's what it was.*

One participant felt that her group was particularly unbalanced racially (with a quarter of the participants being people of color and one person of color on the facilitation team), and this seemed to create defensiveness and clustering among the people of color in the group. According to this participant: *There's a question as to whether CWC should go forward with the retreat when it's so out of balance. Maybe they should set a threshold so that people of color don't feel so alone or feel like they have to teach the white people. The composition of the group was definitely problematic.*

Did the facilitation and structure allow for a balanced conversation?

For one participant, the very imbalance of the focus on race in her retreat was what made the conversations about it "real": *Race and privilege aren't to be managed. They aren't balanced. You can't fix what someone is coming from, where they were born into. You can only gain understanding. Things don't fit into nice little slots. That's the nice thing about forging relationships first.*

From this perspective, even if the intention is for a balanced curriculum and facilitated conversations about different topics, the “community” may bring the focus elsewhere. In this sense, the retreat experience is perhaps less a “training” in the different facets of power and privilege, and more an exercise in building community, which inherently involves dealing with how power and privilege surface. The sentiment that, to a certain extent, the retreats have a life of their own was echoed by comments like:

- *I don't think you could change the structure or the facilitation of the retreat and make it matter because the retreat is driven by participants' experiences.*
- *There couldn't have been anymore facilitation ... it's hard for me to answer this ... understanding that in your world there should be something that could help, to refocus or re-center them as to what the retreat was for. I think things betrayed out [played out?] the way it was [they were] intended to.*

Others, however, felt that facilitation and structure played a strong role (and in some cases, could have played a stronger role) in determining the directions and emphases of the retreat conversations. For example, one person thought that questions for the privilege walk focused more on race than other things, *When we did the privilege walk, it seemed like the questions that were used were different from what I've used in the past and they were weighted more towards the distinctions around race. I recall in the past questions that put more distinction around economic class.* According to this interviewee, this focus on race in privilege walk set the tenor for subsequent conversations over the course of the week.

Another participant felt that one of the facilitators in her retreat focused the dialogues on race more than was necessary or helpful: *Overall the facilitators had strong skills, but as a team they struggled a little bit. It was two white people and a black woman, so they deferred to her [the black woman], who still has a lot to learn about separating herself as a facilitator. Her touchstone kept coming back to race, which meant that we were grounded in race ... [the facilitator] had a hard time staying a facilitator and when she jumped in, she jumped in as an African American opposed to any other of the other identities she carried.*

Whether due to factors outside of organizational control (such as U.S. culture) or factors more within organizational control (facilitation or group composition), the focus on race prevented some groups from getting to other issues and topics in any meaningful depth:

- ✚ *We didn't use it [the four quadrant exercise] as much as it was intended in the format because we needed extra time for the personal stuff with the race, so maybe it got the short shrift.*
- ✚ *There was blood on the floor, so it had to be tended to, it's not a bad thing that we stayed on race. I'm just not sure we would have needed to if the group had been better balanced.*
- ✚ *... at our story time ... people were still hooked on the idea of talking about race issues, [so] story time became a huge, heated discussion. [People didn't respect] the talking stone and the order of the way the circle was to be respected, it became disorderly.*

Use of caucuses

Caucuses, which were used in a number (though not all) of retreats received mixed reviews from participants. One participant (a person of color) expressed his dislike of the caucus because, from his perspective, the objective to build community should entail a group working through their issues together. This participant reached this realization in retrospect – during the retreat itself, he thought the caucus was a good idea. Another participant of color in the same retreat participated in the caucus, although he did not want to: *That became a huge burden on my part because I've never truly experienced that sense. For me, coming from where I'm coming from, it was difficult for me.*

On the other hand, one interviewee who was a person of color attended a retreat in which the facilitators did not make use of caucuses and was surprised at this omission. For this participant, caucuses offer the opportunity to move out what sometimes become combative environments and also to hear one's ideas reflected back to oneself in a group that might be perceived as safer and kinder. In the end, this person took it upon herself to call a caucus at her retreat.

One white participant found that the caucus created an opportunity for her retreat group to “move on” from a difficult place and the separate space had the effect of creating a much stronger bond among the entire group. *We were able to talk about some things that we probably wouldn't have said in the mixed group. Somehow the responsiveness and acknowledgement [that this stuff was there] in a concrete way allowed us to move beyond it fairly easily. It was the day we bonded in the group.*

Use of quotes and written materials

One participant expressed his discomfort with the way in which a quote was used in the retreat. His concern was not that the quote was used, but that there was little space allotted for discussion of the quote:

... there was one quote used by a trainer authoritatively, it was something like, “The days of struggle are over, it's all collaboration ...” I don't agree with that, and think it's misguided. If we really understand power and privilege, we have to understand that there is always going to be struggle ... It is a very easy place for middle and upper class white people to go to, “It doesn't require conflict, it doesn't require struggle.” ... There are activists who are all conflict all the time, and that's not helpful, but this “all collaboration all the time” is just the mirror image. My issue with the quote wasn't that it was used, but that it was stated as kind of a fact, authoritatively.

Maintaining the integrity of the space

The retreat dialogues create a space for participants to share fully and openly about their personal experiences and to listen deeply to others without judgment or assumption. When the latter part of the process is not fully respected, the dynamics the retreat seeks to dismantle risk being reinforced. The comments below suggest that the speakers did not necessarily participate in the dialogue circles with fully suspended judgment or assumptions:

- *... black people in the room clearly had the most anger.*

- *A lot of the black people there ... there was a lot of clear anger towards people who had wronged them. That particular sector of folks had their radar up.*
- *People of color never had the conversation because they didn't trust and didn't want to go there.*

Managing other issues through the group process

Various oppression issues and behaviors that came up in the retreat communities did not always get resolved, or even addressed. For example, one interviewee flagged that, until she herself brought it up, ageist behavior in the retreat she attended went essentially unrecognized and unaddressed:

There was a man who was the oldest ... he accepted it, but he wasn't really wild about it. And there was a woman who kept making comments about it. I felt like someone should say something about it and I wasn't sure if it was my role. I had to force myself into a place to kindly ask her to stop making those comments. I was surprised that the facilitators (or even the guy who was the target) didn't catch it. I felt like saying, "Let's talk about ageism, what is behind that, why does this person feel the need to keep bringing it up?"

Part 3: Take home messages

Were you able to connect the personal work to a broader context?

As discussed earlier, some participants experienced difficulties in making the connection between the very personal explorations around power and privilege and a broader context due to the need for time and space to process the experience. In addition, one interviewee suggested that more exploration in the retreat of the concepts of dominance and oppression might have created more capacity to make the linkages: *To successfully have the conversation, we have to understand the broader issues. We have to understand what it means to be an oppressed group or dominant group and how oppression and dominance affect status in the cross sections of different groups ... we stopped short of getting to the broader issues on power and privilege.* One missed opportunity for this broader conversation, according to this participant, was in the processing of the privilege walk ... *the discussion stopped too early, both in terms of time as well as the content ... We stopped at the point of, "What's going on for me"... we needed to go to "What does it mean in real life, in our organizations, in the broader movement."*

One participant pointed out that the model used to examine power and privilege is intended for people with pre-existing relationships (and often a shared institutional identity and a shared agenda) and without this it was hard to make the transition from the personal into a cohesive whole: *The model you're using is for co-workers or people who are involved in some kind of joint project ... people with a shared institutional identity and goals and relationships ... It doesn't really translate as well for people who don't have that clarity and what results is that they stay at the personal level. It's hard to make it work if there is no shared institution – it's hard to create a shared context ... I don't know if it's realistic to think the land will work as the glue to hold total strangers together to do this difficult work, particularly when for many of them it's the first time they are doing this kind of work.*

While the above is true, many participants said they felt capable of taking the personal work done on power and privilege and put it in a broader context of organizational and social change, at least intellectually. The retreat tools that helped people make the transitions to the broader context included the four quadrant exercise (discussed below), hearing the stories of other retreat participants, and having unstructured time for personal reflection and interactions with others. A number of people reported that they were already making these connections in their lives and work and the retreat played an important role in providing affirmation, reinforcement, and a sense of community in what many feel is a solo journey. On the other hand, some people

One person shared that even if the retreat hadn't gone further than the personal exploration, it would have been a powerful experience for him. Another, however, said that although the retreat had given him personal insights and affirmed him as an individual, if it hadn't made the connections to a broader context, it wouldn't have gone further than other experiences he has already had: *The value added with CWC is making the link. I've done diversity training and etcetera and they have been useful, but coming out of this with the framework that fits people doing social justice and doing environmental work is huge. And having others reflect on how they would make those links was also helpful. I don't want to say it would have been useless if it had been focused exclusively on the personal – it would have been deep, empowering experience,*

but for me, the real value came from the integration and the tools to make the connections.

Although people were able to put their personal work in a broader context at the retreat, a few participants mentioned their frustration at not knowing how to make similar connections in their day-to-day lives. For example, one person asked how, as someone not in an organizational position of power, she could influence the behavior of colleagues within in her organization: *I'm not sure I know how to bring it to an organizational level without having the people I work with go through the retreat themselves. I'm not ready to fully share what I learned with my organizational colleagues because it's personal, internal. I'm not really sure that's my role, really. I can improve my work and things I have direct control over, but I don't know how (other than just doing my work) I can influence other people.*

Similarly, another participant said that although the retreat was extremely powerful for him in lifting up critical issues, it fell short in helping him identify opportunities to apply what he had learned in his day-to-day life: *It didn't translate these conversations into this next step like I took it. I left Vermont really struggling with that. I didn't think I was prepared for – the "What now" side of it. What would have been helpful for this participant was to have had more time to talk about next steps and to think about possibilities, re-entry, and experiences from the retreat that participants might want to share with other people.*

Finally, four people referenced the powerful experience they had through the retreat of not putting the issues they had learned in a professional context, but rather of putting them in a personal context:

- *If the profession excludes oneself, you're not really doing anything real. It's an intellectual or philosophical exercise. Although things may seem professional, if one doesn't bring real being into it, it remains one dimensional. It's not as meaningful, deep, or sustainable. I had to shed some of that and had to bring myself into the mix. I had to really make it personal to have it resonate deep enough in order to bring these things back. That was the best way to bring it back and use it.*
- *For me, interestingly enough, it helped me put my political work in a more personal context.*
- *The personal is more relevant for me at this point in my life ... The retreat gives tools for centering and from that it gives us [we can take it and create] community action. I haven't gotten to plan B yet.*

How useful was the four quadrant presentation in making the connection?

The four quadrant presentation was extremely significant for some – four people mentioned that it was one of the most powerful aspects of the retreat: *It was absolutely terrific. It was amazing to me how much anger it inspired ... [But] the point is, here we are, how do we deal with it?* Two participants mentioned that they are now using similar tools in their own work: *I share that [the four quadrant presentation] as much as I can – in my work, people are looking for how to work non traditional and diverse partnerships. That exercise really hits home that we really need each other.* In particular, people said

the quadrant was helpful in articulating the tensions they were feeling in the retreat, as well as their own work and home communities: *It gave a language to speak about ... it ended up giving a framework for thinking about these issues and for seeing the dynamics in communities a little differently.*

One person said she was troubled by the four quadrants because she felt that they reinforced a status quo in a way that is unhelpful for the environmental justice movement. *It reinforced things, which is a problem for the EJ movement. It's important and we have to talk about the impact of environmental problems overly impacting poor people and people of color, but the way the quadrant presents the issues makes it seem like people of color aren't working on green space, aren't agriculturalists, or whatever. It wasn't helpful for me.* This interviewee, however, acknowledged that she wasn't clear on the purpose of the presentation and that perhaps with more time and explanation its usefulness would have been made clear. *I wasn't sure what the intention was. It's nice to have a visual and organizing structure, but I don't know what the big ah-hah was. If it's disproportionate negative impacts, there should be other ways to present that.*

A number of interviewees started out describing the four-quadrant presentation in a lukewarm way but eventually came around to a realization that the tool was helpful. Some pointed out that perhaps the full utility of the tool wasn't revealed at the workshop because there wasn't enough time or because the presentation needs to be refined.

- *... we struggled a little bit because the framework is almost artificial, so it didn't fit our experience a lot in some elements, but even having the language to deviate from the framework is useful.*
- *There may be ways to rethink it and do it differently because its point and purpose is good and it's great for visual learners to have something like that.*

Was CWC's intention to catalyze, stimulate, create, and/or support a new movement clear?

For one person, the four quadrant presentation highlighted CWC's and the retreat's progress towards a movement: *... it was a clear indication that the intention for the work was for it to be taken to a higher level.* Others recognized CWC's intent to contribute to, support, or create a different kind of movement, however, they were unable to say if this awareness from what was said or done at the retreat or if it was something that they knew already about CWC: *I don't know if that was clearly articulated while I was there, but it was something I understood about CWC before I went to the farm and I don't know if I got this sense of the networks CWC is helping to create from the retreat or from all the other ways I'm connected to the organization.* A number of people thought they themselves possibly brought the movement thinking to the experience, based on their own orientations: *Someone who hasn't been thinking about social justice since the age of 13 might not make the same linkages.*

A couple of people referred to the movement piece as organic in the same way that, for some, the power and privilege conversations were organic – it all fit together and made sense. As one participant said, *It was really in the background, it didn't jump out at me or distract me in any way ... When you go through those intentional steps you can see the power of it and how you actually come out of it with something bigger than you can imagine.* Along the same lines, one person mentioned that while he got inklings of the

intent for a movement, that it should be made more front and center in the retreat: *I got the context of that through the name of the organization and going through the website initially. I think that it's being reinforced there through the sessions and facilitators. But in the initial beginnings, more focus should be on that.* In fact, for one person, the movement intention was so understated that she didn't really get it until Peter (who was not a facilitator at her retreat) spent more time with her group: *The more time we spent with Peter, the more that was clear ...I looked at the website, but it hadn't really registered for me until I heard about Peter's history and aspirations for the Center.*

Movement building wasn't how that other participants would describe what CWC has to offer. One participant thought of "Blessed Unrest" when asked the question about movement, in that, for her (and for Paul Hawken), the connections already exist, it is not necessary to create them. *I don't feel a strong need to create that kind of linkage because the linkage is happening in the connections I make. What doesn't happen very well, because I get buried in my own work and the immediate production issues, is connecting with groups doing something completely different.* The latter part of the quote is where this participant saw the value added of CWC in her own work and life.

Another interviewee expressed negative associations with the word movement because, from his perspective, movements take too long. What CWC offers, he said, was a process that would catalyze action. *... we have the movement, it's just that it's taking forever. With the retreat, you've got a new group of leaders who are now able to advance the timeframe through their ability to listen and communicate with one another. We've got a movement, but it's got to go faster and the retreat is a bit of a catalyst.*

Although a different interviewee agreed with the need to move more quickly, she did not agree that the CWC approach was doing this. According to her, although CWC's work around inclusion, integration, and creating a new approach is on track, there isn't time to approach it in the way that CWC is approaching it. *It struck me that 700 [alumni] is really peanuts in terms of what really needs to be done ... it's good work and needed, but it's too slow. We don't have the luxury of this kind of time.* This interviewee felt that CWC should identify opportunities to ramp up the scale of its work, perhaps by delivering the message to "non choir members," for example, leveraging movements and initiatives already underway. Example she gave were the "Extreme Inequality" movement focused on class inequality, or the momentum the left has gained in its success with Obama's election.

What is your desire for connection to CWC?

As with most intense and time-bound experiences, retreat-goers reported a flurry of connections and emails for the first few weeks following the retreat which had basically died down by the end of the year. Everyone interviewed expressed a desire to be in contact with the people with whom they built community in their retreat and some were making concerted efforts to do this. The majority of people interviewed also expressed interest in being in connection to something bigger, to other alumni and individuals who are doing work that is aligned with the kinds of values expressed in the retreats. Some examples of the types of connection people expressed interest in included:

- ✚ *It would be great to have reflection ceremonies where people can share what they got out of the experience – what you're doing now, but with a group and a structured approach.*

- ✚ *It would be really helpful if there were affinity groups within the greater community to find ways to get connected in things that a small cohort is interested in pursuing.*
- ✚ *If there was more of an emphasis on the types of things we could accomplish.*
- ✚ *Something more localized, where we could meet face to face, over a potluck or something like that. Come from different groups and share experiences*
- ✚ *I'm interested in connecting with a bigger network as people are interested in doing that ... Peter and Helen have challenged us to think big, so I would welcome an opportunity to check in on what people are doing, it's nice to share successes and talk about the good work we're doing.*

A handful of interviewees had less need or interest in being connected to a larger network of alumni or to a movement:

- *I'm not sure I have a big need. Part of me wonders if this is a generational thing and it's going to solve itself in the next ten years or so. It seems, with the stuff I've participated in it tends to have a really strong age differential – the older people seem to get the most out of it. Those who are younger are halfway there, if not more.*
- *Do I need it for my work? No, I don't. I need it on a personal level, for what we share because these people lived this experience with me.*
- *I don't have a need to connect, I got the message that I needed to get.*

One person mentioned that although she had a desire to be connected to CWC, she attended a retreat that was conducted somewhat differently than others and during which Peter and Helen were absent. Consequently, she felt little connection to Peter and Helen (or, by extension, to CWC): *Peter and Helen were absent the week we were there. I'm glad for that because I don't think the book would have gotten thrown out if they had been there. But I don't feel connected to Peter and Helen.*

Social networking

Most people were familiar with, saw the value of, and had even signed up on, the social networking site, however, almost no one was using it regularly or was excited about using it:

- *I did sign up on the social network, but I haven't been too active. I was the first couple of weeks.*
- *I tried to get on the social networking group, but I have a hard time with that. Even with my work. I haven't gotten used to it. Even Face Book, I'm on it, but I have a hard time with it.*
- *I see the power of the social networking, but it's another thing I have to figure out. I can see how it could be another interesting and enhancing communication tool.*

- *I know that they are trying hard with the communication model via the internet, but there are just too many things to keep track of these days without adding another social networking thing. It feels bothersome.*
- *I'm signed up but haven't used it much.*

One person made the suggestion that an e-Newsletter of stories of alumni activities be have hotlinks into the social networking site to drive people into the site.

Supporting CWC

Most interviewees were excited and supportive of the work that CWC is doing and would like to support it in some way or another. For some, support will mean their continued participation in CWC activities. Of the people that talked about monetary support for CWC, one expressed interest in contributing on a growing scale as his own finances grow and another expressed a desire to help with organizational fundraising:

- *I am young personally and professionally, but I will try and contribute more financially, it will grow as I grow. I know that is really important for an organization and I have a few that I make that commitment to – a few that have really impacted me personally that I want to give back to. It's small now, but as I grow, it will grow.*
- *I would suggest that CWC really think out of the box about how alumni can be helpful with fundraising and in generating resources. They should use us in a proactive way because when you get people who have gone through it and had great experiences, they are the best ambassadors.*

One person took offense at the CWC fundraising that took place at the end of his retreat: *I was really taken aback in the last session when they asked for a donation. It wasn't expected, but since we received a fellowship to attend, it would be nice if we would support the organization. I don't mind being asked for donations ... but why not say that in the beginning? Basically they said, "We supply the fellowship, but please be aware that if you see that the experience was beneficial, please feel free to donate." I feel like a gift is a gift and there shouldn't be expectations to repay it. But if you do want to qualify the gift, do so in the beginning not as you're packing up to leave.*

Part 4: Concluding thoughts

It is well worth noting that the general perspective of interviewees on their retreat experience was quite enthusiastically positive. This may not be immediately apparent from this report simply because the questions we chose to focus on were critical in nature and designed to focus on areas for improvement. In this spirit, below is a brief set of bullets summarizing some of the “critical and actionable feedback” from the interviews:

- ✚ Provide more transparency about the group process nature of the retreat and about the content of the sections dealing with power and privilege. In particular, lay out the trajectory of CWC’s experience with these issues.
- ✚ Explore opportunities for helping white participants think about how they might make the transition from guilt to responsibility. Reinforce those opportunities that the retreat already provides (time and space for informal connection with other participants, unstructured alone time to process and reflect, etc).
- ✚ Help create a sense of closure for all participants.
- ✚ If a decision is made to continue focusing on race, lay out your rationale for this.
- ✚ If it is decided that conversations about power and privilege will follow the group “energy” be up front that the group can’t possibly cover all issues related to oppression in one week. Take time at some point early on in the retreat to name and recognize where the group is focused.
- ✚ Continue refining the four-quadrant exercise.
- ✚ Introduce more clarity about CWC’s relationship to the idea of movement and movement building.
- ✚ Keep exploring opportunities for connecting alumni with one another, particularly at the state or regional level.
- ✚ Keep passing along stories of new approaches alumni are taking to Whole Communities. Experiment with different methods for dissemination.

Appendix A: 2008 Retreat protocol

I. Getting there and preparation

Which retreat did you attend this past summer?

Did you feel prepared going into the retreat?

What contributed most to your preparation?

Did the descriptions about the retreat you received beforehand help to prepare you?

[[Letter, website, readings, conference call, other colleagues that have been through it.]]

What was most helpful? Why?

What was not helpful? Why?

Timing – when is it best to receive information packets?

From your perspective, would a primer workshop have been useful?

When you talk about the retreat to other people, how do you describe it?

II. Content and themes of the retreat

How would you articulate the main themes of your retreat?

I know there was some work related to power and privilege – how would you describe this part of the retreat?

Given your own work and life, how useful was this work on power and privilege?

Were the emphases right?

Was there a broad enough framework provided? Was the approach balanced?

III. Main take home messages

A lot of the work discussed above might be described as “personal work” – examining ourselves and our values. Did you feel like your retreat effectively helped you place this personal work in a broader (professional) context?

When did this happen for you? How?

Did the 4-quadrant presentation help with this transition?

If the transition from personal didn't happen, how was it for you to stay in the personal?

Was the intention to catalyze, support, or create a new movement clear to you?

Coming out of the retreat, what did you feel connected to? More to yourself? To your group? To CWC or a bigger network of people and organizations working on these issues?

Did you sign up on the website network?

Have you been in touch with others from your retreat group?

Do you feel a desire to be connected to CWC?

To support and promote the work?

Other?