

## **TITLE: The Literary World(s) of Mary Caroline Richards**

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### **Contents**

- **A Roundabout Introduction**
- **Entering the Literary World(s) of M. C. Richards**
  - RIFF 1: centering*
  - RIFF 2: the crossing point*
  - RIFF 3: moral imagination and the prophetic*
  - RIFF 4: wholeness*
  - RIFF 5: teaching and learning*
  - RIFF 6: the daimonic, fire, and transformation*
  - RIFF 7: mystery, paradox, and negative capability*
  - RIFF 8: karma and destiny*
- **By Way of Conclusion**
- **Sources and References**
- **Acknowledgments**

### **A Roundabout Introduction**

How shall I approach the task of assessing M. C. Richards' literary career? This essay could have been composed from a scholarly perspective. Such a discussion would have focused on each of her five books and 18 essays, summarizing key themes that are interwoven throughout her writing from 1964 when *Centering* first appeared, to 2014 when *Backpacking in the Hereafter*, a posthumous book of poems, was published. It would have included more investigation of her intellectual lineage and sources. I am wary, however, of turning M. C.'s poetic reflections into prosaic and mundane academic explanations. I therefore attempt neither to analyze and evaluate her literary output, nor to compare her work to other philosophers of the arts. For me the process of writing this essay has been less about making judgments regarding M. C.'s work, and more about contemplating her themes and their interrelationships, thereby making sense of what she wrote, for myself and hopefully for others.

In essence, this essay is a dialogue with M. C. Therefore, descriptions of her ideas, in her own words or in direct paraphrase, are interwoven with personal musing—RIFFs—about her primary themes. I have always been fascinated by the visual and literary forms of M. C.'s writing. For instance, her essays include cycles of five "Prayers," nine "Easter letters," five "Runes" and eight "Bouts"; her own and others' poetry is interspersed within prose narratives; and color and unique formatting (capitalized, italicized, and bold-face letters and words) are used. In this essay I do not intend to mimic such literary devices, but to engage them.

RIFF is a musical term that came into English usage in the 1930s, perhaps related to "refrain." In jazz and popular music, it means a short repeated or improvised phrase, sometimes played over changing chords and harmonies, or used as a background to a solo improvisation. Here, I use the word as I reflect upon and enter into dialogue with particular themes in M. C.'s oeuvre. To use such a musical term is especially fitting, given M. C.'s many comments about music. Near the

end of *Centering* she asks herself what she has learned the most from in all of the arts, and she answers, “poetry and music” (127). Cultivating the listening ear is crucial to both of these artistic forms. Poetry, of course, is a natural response for M. C.; she was, after all, a poet for most of her life. Although she was neither a musician nor trained in music, music was crucial in her education. Learning about elements of music such as pitch, duration, timber, volume, rhythm, harmony, counterpoint, atonality, serial composition, indeterminacy shaped her life, art, and writing. Yet, how well do we actually hear? “If we can hear, we have a better strength to maintain balance in a world which tempts us into making ignorant choices” (C, 128). So, “study in depth! . . . Listen!” (C, 129). And, in a poem written for her 80<sup>th</sup> year, M. C. asked how she might celebrate that transition. “I hope there’s music up ahead, / of course there is, / where else would it come from— / All my years I have spent / coming toward music, / emergent to music, / baffled, blended, immersed / in this intrinsic ballad . . .” (OME 184). My RIFFs are an attempt to listen to M. C. with both my outer and inner ears.

I have known M. C.’s writing since I was a young college student, and I read everything she published as it became available. My understanding of the intersections of art and life developed as a result of reading her writing and getting to know her. My concept of the vocation of the artist developed as a result of reading M. C.’s definitions of art, craft, and prophetic imagination, alongside our in-person conversations. My willingness to embrace the darkest sides of my psyche developed as I heard about her life and read her books. At the outset of *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America*, M. C. used the image of living process in describing her approach to Waldorf education in the United States: “[t]here is a creative way to write and to read, Rudolf Steiner said, which keeps the faith with living process, and which does not tend to congeal and rigidify ideas. He asks the readers of his books to follow them as an unfolding process, not to seize upon points here and there for momentary stimulation. We must try to keep a sense of the whole at all times” (3). I ask you, the reader of this essay, to keep faith with the process of my writing about M. C. Richards’ literary career.

M. C.’s life and work reflect an unusual set of values about creativity and the arts, and about living in community. Her values provide a fresh and courageous counterpoint within our highly commodity-driven world. She had a multifarious career and might therefore be called a renaissance woman: a brilliant teacher, a fine potter, a spirited and well-respected translator, writer, and poet, an engaged abstract painter in the last years of her life, and an ardent advocate of community. Her creativity crossed traditional boundaries within the arts and sought to connect art to life. And she brought this “cross-over” into her teaching in various contexts in the United States, Canada, and England. She was fearless in exploring the unknown, including the experiences of living with and caring for others, then aging in community until her death. She lived for many years at Kimberton Hills, an anthroposophical community that supported disabled adults, and in this way gave deeper form to her values of care, kindness, and compassion. She *lived* the values about which she wrote and spoke.

M.C.’s first published work was a translation of Antonin Artaud’s *Theater and Its Double*. This book provided germinal ideas that revolutionized American theater in the 1960s and 1970s. As Susan Sontag put it in reviewing the book, “The course of all recent serious theater in Western Europe and the Americas can be said to divide into two periods—before Artaud and after Artaud. . . . [he] changed the understanding of what was serious, what was worth doing.” In *Centering* especially, M. C. repeatedly reflected about Artaud’s ideas in discussing the themes of transformation, metamorphosis, and alchemy. One of the chapters of his book is entitled “The

Alchemical Theater.” There, he suggests that the theater, like alchemy, has a spiritual double. Just as alchemists were trying to make matter into gold, “so the theater tries to make spiritual gold in a poetry of space” (CP, 60-1). The theater and alchemy are virtual arts, like a mirage in Artaud’s view; and they are practices of “virtual efficacy,” where apparent deeds are not actually, literally, acted out (OME, 36).

Of her four nonfiction books, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* formed her reputation and remains her most well-known and influential work. M. C. explored the relationship between the cognitive and creative, the visible and invisible worlds. To speak of art and the creative process as radical presence is to question traditional boundaries between art and life, as well as the assumption that creativity should result in marketable products. *Centering* is impressive for its synthesis of thought, plain speech, and incantation. It became an underground classic, pulling together ideas about perception, craft, education, creativity, religion and spirituality, arguing for the interconnection of art and life and the creativity of every person. In that book, M. C. described art as a Moral Eye that opens and closes, helping us to see truly what is around us. At the center of her vision there was no product to sell, no “specific object” such as minimalist artists touted in the 1960s, but instead a process of becoming a whole person.

*The Crossing Point: Selected Talks and Writings* is a collection of essays, nearly all of which began as talks. Written between 1964 and 1971, these texts extend her investigation into the realms of literature, philosophy, and depth psychology. The central image for *The Crossing Point* comes from studies in projective geometry and plant growth, in particular the lemniscate and the meristem. The lemniscate resembles a figure eight or Mobius strip, where what is enclosed turns into what is open and lifting up. The meristem is the growing tip in plants. She linked these forms not only to the archetypal image of centering clay, but also to inner processes. We move inward toward the self, and outward from the self into the world with our own growing edges. Essay topics include fire, transformation, and metamorphosis, medieval alchemy and the self as alchemist, and a number of other concepts such as conscience, moral imagination, karma, and reincarnation. As with her central image of centering, M. C. considered all of these themes crucial to the disciplines of pottery, poetry, and the quest for personal wholeness.

*Toward Wholeness* documents with earnest feeling the development and expression of Rudolf Steiner’s educational philosophy. If there is a pervasive dialogue partner in all of M. C.’s writing, it is Rudolf Steiner. Following his interest in questions such as “what is the child?” and “who is this child?”, Steiner initiated the first Waldorf school in 1919, in Stuttgart, Germany. Based in Goethe’s concept of metamorphosis, Waldorf schools were an expression of anthroposophy, which M. C. describes as the inner language of anthropology. The central question for anthroposophy is “what is the human being?” The arts formed the basis of the curriculum: eurythmy, painting and drawing, music and voice athletics, poetry, handwork of various kinds. Often performed with music or spoken poetry, eurythmy is not dance movement or personal expression, but a vocabulary of movement, like the alphabet we use in verbal language. In Waldorf schools, students develop writing out of painting and drawing. Handwork, such as knitting, crochet, sewing, and cross-stitch, is introduced when students are quite young. Later as students mature, master craftspersons teach weaving, woodworking, pottery, sculpture, basketry, bookbinding, and other arts. Education, in this model, should be understood as a lifelong process, not confined to a few years in elementary and high schools, but extending through the span of life. Consequently, the training and inner life of the teacher is absolutely essential.

M. C.'s comprehensive personal appraisal of Steiner education mingles philosophy, description of the schools, and poetry. The book took four years to write, and its nine major chapters cover a range of themes addressed to “parents, students, teachers, philosophers, pilgrims, and question makers” (xii). The book also includes a directory of Waldorf schools, institutes, and adult education centers, and a brief chronology of Rudolf Steiner’s life and his works. This is the only book written by M. C. that contains a bibliography.

*Opening Our Moral Eye: Essays, Talks, & Poems Embracing Creativity and Community* contains eight essays addressing a range of themes—from her autobiography to philosophical and sociological concerns. “Toward M. C.” was the result of a series of conversations in 1985 with Gerry Williams, editor of *Studio Potter Magazine*. “Black Mountain College: A Personal View of Creativity” was given as a talk in 1992, during a celebration of this educational experiment. Here she discusses many of her formative influences, including her parents, experiences at Reed College, the University of California, and Black Mountain College; her early work translating Antonin Artaud; important individuals such as Robert Turner, John Cage, David Tudor, Charity James, Seonaid Robertson, and Paulus Berenson; particular clay series, such as the seven “I AMs”; her experience with Rudolf Steiner’s ideas and Waldorf education, and the decision to live at Kimberton Hills. Other themes of these essays, such as the role of imagination, activism, community, agriculture, and right-livelihood, informed the last quarter of her life.

Besides including her poems in each of her books, M. C. also published two books of poetry during her life: *Imagine Inventing Yellow* and *Before the Beginning*. Collected and edited by Julia Connor, *Backpacking in the Hereafter* was published in 2014. I am neither a poet nor poetry critic, therefore I feel ill-suited to discuss her poetry. That said, I will allude to a few of her poems as they pertain to the themes that follow.

To me, the question of audience provides a useful lens for looking at M. C. Richards’ literary career. Why consider audience here? How we view audience is intimately related to the ways in which we understand ourselves and the creative process, to the ways our ideas take shape. Other persons are an aspect of our own creative processes: we are formed by self-other relationships. Essays were M. C.’s primary mode, “occasional” writing addressed to particular audiences, born of unique invitations and contexts. Even *Centering* began as a talk and was expanded to include other topics.

M. C. Richards spoke to diverse audiences, including writers, artists and craftspeople from many disciplines. She taught at a number of schools both private and public: the University of Chicago, Black Mountain College, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Pennsylvania State University, Swarthmore College, Rhode Island College, Antioch College, Central Washington University, Colby College, University of Oregon, Oakland Community College, Rudolf Steiner College, Institute of Creation Spirituality, and Schumacher College, to name but a few. She also gave numerous talks to organizations, which appeared later as essays in her books. She spoke to the Association of Occupational Therapists, and to conferences such as the American Craftsman, the Washington State Art Association, and a Friends (Quaker) conference. She spoke to Unitarian Universalist women, and to a large conference of women artists. And, of course, she spoke to other groups of craftspeople, including pottery guilds in different locations. After leaving fulltime teaching, she taught for short periods in the curriculum laboratory of the University of London, Goldsmiths College, and at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada.

As I end this roundabout introduction, a few further words about myself. I met M.C. Richards in many settings over nearly thirty years; experienced her teaching multiple times; read all of her non-fiction and poetry; helped to pack her art for a comprehensive exhibition in California in 1986; then found a publisher for and edited her last book of essays, *Opening Our Moral Eye*. My experience editing this book gave me a new appreciation for the creative ego, both hers and mine. M. C. was prickly about her writing. I had already published two scholarly books with Cambridge University Press, and thought I knew something about writing. But she did not want me to edit any of her language. And although I had suggested the book's title based on a sentence in *Centering*, M. C. wanted to call the book *Communion of Worlds* (private letter, July 4, 1995). The editors at Lindisfarne Press, however, preferred the original title, and the book appeared in late 1996. Subsequently my own life revved up, with my first university administrative position, then a major move to undertake a more complex administrative position with the prospect of building a new visual arts complex at a research university. Our correspondence continued, but I did not see M. C. again until I joined others to sit beside her body during the days after she died in 1999.

### **Entering the Literary World(s) of M. C. Richards**

#### *RIFF 1: centering*

So, back to the beginning. In early 1971 I was a college undergraduate at the University of Oregon, majoring in ceramics. A particular book was urged on us. Originally published in 1964, the first paperback edition of *Centering* appeared in 1969. Our teachers read it with excitement and invited us to read it too. Here, in the humble guise of a book written by a poet and potter, was a philosophy of creativity and a philosophy of life. If books such as David Green's *Understanding Pottery Glazes* and Daniel Rhodes's *Clay and Glazes for the Potter* might be said to provided the body of ceramics, and if Gaston Bachelard's *Psychoanalysis of Fire* and Guy Murchie's *Music of the Spheres* provided the intellect, *Centering* articulated its spirit. In her book Richards spoke in a poetic language about the connections between life itself and our work as potters who center clay and create vessels that must withstand the ordeal by fire. She talked about the hard work of bringing into being—through our speech, our gestures, our acts—a self capable of responding in life, as well as in art, to other persons. Here, for the first time, I encountered a vision and articulation of the moral dimension of artistic work. “How do we do it,” she wrote, “how do we center in the moral sphere? how do we love our enemies? How do we perform the the CRAFT of life, *kraft, potentia*?” (C, 5-6). The German *kraft* means power or strength; and we must use that power to form not just the pot, but ourselves.

One of the most prescient statements in all of M. C.'s writing concerns life and art. “Life is an art, and centering is a means. Art is a mode of being in which elements of form and content; style and meaning; feeling and rhythm – all the living perception may be imaged forth in a way that does not sacrifice the moving character of the world. Every person is a special kind of artist and every activity is a special art . . . All the arts we practice are apprenticeship. The big art is our life. We must, as artists, perform the acts of life in alert relation to the materials present at any given instant” (C, 40-1). I have always felt tremendous resonance with this statement, because life *feels* like an art to me. Both demand grace, wisdom, and skillful means. We learn about intention and aspiration, about limits and possibilities, about success and failure. We learn *how* to live by working with clay or marble or paint on paper, or by playing music, singing, dancing, and performing. I love her assertion that everyone is an artist. So said Joseph Beuys too.

M. C. used the experience of centering clay on the potter's wheel as an activity with deep implications. It is "a law by which one comes into such a relation with the world and with oneself that one feels the whole in every part" (CP, 177). The potter must bring the clay into a perfect equilibrium, such that there is no difference between the inside and outside of the vessel. The center, then, is everywhere—a quality of equilibrium and balance.

Richard's writing appealed to me because it is vivid and personal. This was no disembodied abstract philosophy, but one that stimulated the senses. She told jokes, and talked about how we tear and swat and push and pinch and squeeze and caress and scratch and model and beat the clay. She related philosophical ideas to her life as a poet, author, teacher, an "odd bird" in both academic and craft worlds. She talked of the paradox of the human longing for union and separation, and of the pain and suffering that accompany our attempts to live and to love. At the center of all our yearning and urgent activity is mystery and paradox. For M. C. the practice of centering is a non-dual practice because of the way it challenges all dualisms.

M. C. called *Centering* her spiritual autobiography. She described the book as like a bush from a single root, with many branches, leaves, and twigs—all the same plant. And this is a good segue to RIFF 2, because M. C. repeatedly returned to metaphors and analogies taken from plant morphology.

#### *RIFF 2: the crossing point*

Plant physiology is a fascinating process whereby growth proceeds by metamorphosis (C, 36). A seed grows into a root, and then it sprouts. A seedling leafs, and from those leaves, the stem grows. Then branches from the stem, then flowers, which seed. The plant dies, the seed falls, then another root and sprout. This is a process of transformation. And yes, we human beings also grow from seeds that mature and ripen. That said, it is crucial to remember M. C.'s humorous exhortation that "the human being is not a plant" (CP, 48). We are dynamic responsive organisms that interact in complex ways with our environments.

Unlike plants we also grow in capacities, for love, compassion, conscience. We act in and change the world. We have stories to tell, *our own stories*. M. C. wrote so vividly about this in "The Gulf War," a poem from her series *All Our Relations*. Paralyzed by the violence and hatred of that war, she could not sleep, could not create, until she realized that this was not *her* war, *her* story: "We should try to remember the stories we are stewards of, and tell them in whatever ways we can . . . We do not need to fight. We need to sing, to sing out, to speak from an innocent place, a place of freedom. A place of vision in our souls. Let our true stories be part of world history" (OME, 170).

Just as we have developed our capacity for rational thinking, so we need to develop the faculties of intuition, imagination, and inspiration. "We need to develop a crossing point from one order of awareness to another . . ." (CP, 105). I find this a beautiful use of the image of the crossing point, a way of acknowledging that all these ways of knowing are actually interdependent.

And yet, the image of the crossing point is also a distinctive part of plant geometry; it is the lemniscate, from *lemniscus*, which means "ribbon." As she suggested in the essay, "Toward M. C.," take a ribbon, and make a figure eight with it. Hold it upright. Then, put your finger on the outside of the top loop, and follow the ribbon to the crossing point. Here you will find yourself on the inside of the bottom loop. "What you have is a form with continuity between the outside and inside" (OME, 50). In a plant, this crossing point where the root moves down and the shoot

grows up is sometimes only one cell wide. And the analogy for us is the human heart. We are rooted by gravity and never lose touch with the earth; yet we grow up and out into the world through our senses, imagination, and intuition.

“Life is not an achievement course, it is a continually changing insight. Nothing fails like success, because success is quickly obsolete, the goal once satisfied changes. In every practical solution there must be growing points. All living organisms have one. In plants it is called the meristem” (CP, 140). I find the most poignant expression of the meristem in M. C.’s poem, “Evening Primrose”:

Sitting in the roofless tent, listening...

See all natural forms, he said, not as forever fixed  
but as expressing a tendency toward another form

I saw you last night, evening primrose, preparing to open:  
In an instant you changed from bud to bloom,  
pulling back the outer sheath as the petals expanded and  
became flower. And the tendency then, barely visible,  
to lose moisture, to wilt, to droop, to shrink, to drop,  
to become earth.

I feel in myself the growing tips of age:

to travel without an agenda, to seek a new furniture  
of emptiness and silence where I can voluptuously sit  
as in a pool of warmth, living toward dying,  
blooming into invisibility.

Written August 24, 1997

When I first read “Evening Primrose,” as well as the poems collected in *Opening Our Moral Eye*, I was reminded of Giambattista Vico, an Italian writer who lived in the seventeenth century. Many of our linguistic metaphors are drawn from bodily and erotic life, as Vico observed in *The New Science*. The head is the top or beginning. We speak of the shoulders of a hill, the eye of a needle, the lip of a cup, the teeth of a rake, the tongue of a shoe, the bowels of the earth, and so on. Fields are thirsty and willows weep. Numerous other examples could be offered. Vico’s “vision” involved hands that are not afraid to touch the earth and yet remain capable of reaching out to embrace other persons.

M. C.’s poems collected in *Opening Our Moral Eye* reflect a similar sensibility.

A naked corn cob is “cool, sweet, intimate, smooth, like skin I’m holding.”

“This hand flickers at my lips, / this hand falls to its knees and bows, / two hands drum time out of silence. / Like flowers they open and close.”

“In the garden the wild mind buds and swells / with words that cannot rest, cannot be spelled, / that turn this pink, this lemon yellow . . . .”

“I have painted the female hills / stretched and piled against the sky. / They are sleeping. / I have given them golden haloes. / They are saints. / They are sleeping.”

In a more humorous vein, M. C. used the image of a cabbage to describe the nature of the human being, whose experiences in life and art help her or him to develop kindness and compassion. “Now for Mr. Cabbage. He grows a big heart. Out of his heart come leaves. As the leaves grow, the heart grows. The cabbage gets its leaves from the inside, where there aren’t any. Cabbages grow from the inside, from the heart. And by growing they create their hearts” (CP, 172). We, also, create big hearts by growing from the inside out.

“Through the crossing point the flow goes both ways: and there is that instant/point where we rest in the quiver of the double realm.” This threshold may be experienced as a door that opens into the unknown world. And, in that moment “the whole world is our religion” (CP, 244-45).

*RIFF 3: moral imagination and the prophetic*

In M. C.’s writing, the imagination is a sense organ that perceives spirit and matter. Imagination is a concept with a long and vivid history. The word is derived from Greek and Latin words, *phantasia*, *eikasia*, *imagination*—fantasy, evolution, and imagination, respectively. It refers to the image-making capacity in human beings, which can be as varied as dreams, fantasies, illusions during daily life, reverie, artistic creativity, mystical visions, and the ability to envision others’ lives or a better world. The vocabulary of imagination is slippery, and therefore it might be considered more of a myth than concept. Like a myth, it has a complex history full of diverse interpretations.

I believe that imaginative activity must be gauged by and experienced in the world. As the poet Wendell Berry once put it, the truth of the world’s lives and places must be proved in imagination. Certainly, imagination for its own sake has a role in individual lives, but the greater work of imagination proceeds in relation to the world. Imagination is not a special domain of the artist, but a capacity shared by all human beings. I agree with M. C., and with a host of other writers going back to Aristotle, that imagination is a faculty through which we experience the activity of the spirit in the world. I think that artists are under a strong injunction to develop and use this imaginative capability to its fullest prophetic and visionary potential.

Through the crafts and arts such as poetry, we develop our moral imagination. On the one hand, moral capacity is “the ability to be guided in one’s speech and action by the standards of quality to which one gives allegiance” (C, 62). On the other, by envisioning and eventually creating what is not yet present, we exercise moral imagination (C, 92). Centering in the moral sphere, we learn to handle, skillfully, personal preferences. Not to do this can lead to indifference, or worse, prejudices that shape our actions toward others. As M. C. suggested, the prophetic artist should study the laws of polarity and “participate in that from which he [or she] feels most separated” (C, 132). And conscience plays a powerful role in this process.

Always, for everyone, life offers challenges and can seem like a full-fledged battle. “One is brought to a crisis of conscience. The world stands stubbornly before one. It will not yield. It refuses my concern. I will not withdraw. It stands at a distance, I wish to approach” (C, 133). Sometimes we are brought to a crisis of conscience by our hunger for union, sometimes by our hunger for freedom and separation. When we begin to grasp the concept of metamorphosis as it applies in our lives and consciousness, we understand that we cannot make this yearning a foundation for permanent values. Certainly, its meaning and significance may seem permanent, but it is actually ephemeral and impermanent.



Fostering the imagination should be one of the primary goals of education. As Wordsworth describes it, “to be affected by absent things as if they were present; . . . expressing . . . especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement” (C, 115). M. C. said that imagination is the ability to behold living images that are not perceivable by the senses. Yet the senses also play an extraordinary role.

In *Opening Our Moral Eye*, M. C. Richards wrote passionately about the renewal of art through agriculture. As a result of living in an agricultural village, she became a practitioner of biodynamic agriculture, the principles of which were defined by Rudolf Steiner. Both art and agriculture develop the powers of the imagination and are dependent on careful observation of living processes and intuitive improvisation. How might we enhance our powers of imagination? Through carefully observing how all things live and how they die. Time can be experienced through color, especially the changes of color associated with different times of day and year. Both farmer and artist watch the sky and learn to read it, through clouds, light, shadow, and stars. Tending plants and observing the world, we learn meditative attention. Finally, as a result of developing the ability to imagine, our capacities for inner and outer vision develop, as does our compassion for the suffering of others.

In the end, moral imagination is not a capacity we develop for its own sake, but is related to the prophetic. M. C. suggested that artistic imagination “creates what has never before existed.” Artists in all disciplines register and prophesy the expansion of human consciousness, thus giving voice to and acting as guardians of the world (C, 94). This is a grand vision, a worthy goal of our humble creative efforts.

#### *RIFF 4: wholeness*

Wholeness is a crucial concept for M. C., in art and in life. “To bring universe into personal wholeness, to breathe in, to drink deep, to receive, to understand, to yield, to *read* life. AND to spend wholeness in act, to breathe out, to give, to mean, to say, to *write*, to create life. It is the rhythm of our metabolism and may not easily be put into words” (C, 65-6). This, I think, is M. C.’s definition of the purpose of life. Committing ourselves to the goal of fostering our own and others’ integrity and spiritual unfolding, we work diligently in this life. As artists, we work in solitude and in community with others, toward wholeness. I agree with M. C. that it is hard to put this process into words, for it is an inner decision and commitment that may take various outer forms.

Rereading M. C.’s books and essays, I have been struck by several fascinating meditations on the threefold nature of the human being. The human being, she said, has three ears: the outer organ, which we call the ear; the inner ear which connects to the brain and the rest of the body; and the whole person, who hears the meaning of what particular sounds are saying. “It takes a golden ear to be empty enough of itself to hear clearly” (C, 59). Listening is therefore a profound centering discipline. It is related to the weather and seasons, to moonlight and stars, to the history of humanity, to the history of the individual, to nature, evolution, and to all of our relationships.

Each person is also a threefold being of body, soul, and spirit—or, I might say, body, mind, and spirit. We act, we think, and we intuit the deepest connections. Further, the human organism has a threefold functioning. The “nerve-sense” system functions mainly through the brain and nervous system. We reflect, think, and meditate. The rhythmic systems of breathing and blood circulation are centered in the chest and connected with feeling. And, we each have a metabolic

system that digests and transforms what we take in. We use our limbs and will to act in the world. Through thinking, feeling, and willing, we thus learn in a threefold process (CP, 147).

M. C. encouraged the cultivation of a strong and centered inner self that can move confidently into the public sphere. She spoke of the essential self and the evolutionary development of consciousness and the spirit, ideas that are also articulated by Carl Jung, Eric Neumann, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Sri Aurobindo. Like these writers, she believed in both an individual and the collective consciousness, a creative unconscious. Like Rudolf Steiner, she affirms the existence of an inner self that is free of cultural programming, suggesting that knowledge is possible free of the gendered body. This is not the place to rehearse arguments about essentialism that continue to rage in both academic and popular literature. But here I simply would note that writers argue about whether human beings are constituted by essential biological categories, or whether language and culture are more determinative in establishing gender and selfhood. There is the further question of what the self or ego actually is, a question that is taken up in great depth by Buddhist philosophy and psychology. Such questions bear further reflection.

On the one hand, working to attain wholeness involves training the self not to respond in anger to events and people around us, to develop virtues that Buddhists call the Four Immeasurables: lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. On the other, the actual process of becoming outraged at something or someone can be radicalizing in a positive way. What outrages us? What threshold do we cross? What prompts action? How long must we wait, passively observing, learning from what transpires around us, before we are moved to act? And especially, how shall we act as teachers and students?

#### *RIFF 5: teaching and learning*

M. C. discussed her views on education, pedagogy, institutions, teachers, and students in at least nine essays and in her comprehensive study of Steiner education in America. A number of pertinent questions pervade her reflections. What or who is the teacher and what is a student? What is intelligence, and why do our intelligent and well-educated psyches still result in national and international messes? What are our institutions now, and what might they become? She wondered how institutions come into being, and how we can work to free ourselves from the ways in which they bind us. She thrilled at the unique strengths of Waldorf education, for its focus on the inner life of the teacher and the possibilities for educating students through the visual and performing arts. As she mused at the beginning of *Toward Wholeness*: “Where do you begin? Where do you stop? What do you include? What do you leave out?” (TW, ix). Here I can only point to the richness and complexity of her philosophy and pragmatic concerns. Inevitably, much is left out, and I therefore urge the curious reader to explore M.C.’s own writing about education and pedagogy.

The word education comes from the Latin *educare*, which means to draw out or to lead out. Pedagogy is a formidable name for the craft of the teacher; it comes from two Greek words meaning *child* and *to lead* (C, 97). Consider the breadth of her definitions of education:

“Education is a process of waking up to life” (C, 15).

“We teach all the time, by what we are and what we do. We learn all the time by what we see and feel and think and do” (C, 97).

“To foster a sense of life at its profoundest depth and in its sacred value! Is this not the premise of our pedagogy?” (C, 129).

“Education is the art of inner enjoyment” (CP, 43).

“Education is an art of healing and making whole” (CP, 117).

“Education is an art because it relies upon that combination of know-how and inspiration, of enthusiasm and dedication, of ability and restraint, which the artist has, and which is awakened in the artist-teacher. The teacher, like the artist, is in touch with inner sources, with creative imagination, and with the unconscious world of the archetypes” (TW, 69).

In “The Public School and the Education of the Whole Person,” M. C. articulated her ideas about wholeness and education. Originally published as a booklet by Pilgrim Press, it appeared simultaneously in 1980 alongside *Toward Wholeness*. This essay became an underground classic. Public education was already in crisis, a crisis that has not abated in these many subsequent years. In fact, the crises may be even more extreme now. The challenges of cultural pluralism are ongoing, and include the basic problem of language when students are increasingly diverse. Nevertheless, the public school has a significant double role: to provide continuity in the transmission of culture, and to stimulate creative change and transformation. In the past decades since both her essay and book were published, the impact of new technologies, especially the computer, television, and smart mobile devices, has become an even more potent shaping influence on education, including home schooling and the proliferation of charter schools.

The question of pedagogy, of *how* we educate, was profound for M. C. Not only did she experience a range of public and private schools as student and teacher, she spent decades investigating Rudolf Steiner’s educational philosophy and Waldorf schools as they had developed in the United States. She offered detailed stories of her introduction to anthroposophy, of finding a school for her stepdaughter in New York City, and later participating in Waldorf teacher education. Following the Waldorf model, M. C. recommended that teachers should stay with their students over years, fostering respect for the individual gifts of each child. Moral imagination should be cultivated alongside cognitive knowledge, while the creative power of the individual hand should be fostered through all of the arts. The individual art disciplines themselves should be infused with the broader disciplines of will, sincerity, and wholeness.

M. C. saw education as a path of initiation and a sacred art. She was both an inspiring teacher and a committed student. She insisted that teachers must not only practice what they preach, but they must listen carefully to what another person actually means. “You must be able to enter again into a dialogue with all senses alert to the human meanings expressed, however implicitly. The experience of the potter listening to his or her clay strengthens this capacity” (C, 21). She suggests that all teachers should practice an art as they prepare to teach. “I’m a student on the path” (CP, 223).

#### *RIFF 6: the daimonic, fire, and transformation*

When *The Crossing Point* was published, I eagerly read and reread the chapter “Wrestling with the Daimonic.” Written as a series of eight “bouts,” this essay describes M. C. challenges with the inner impulses that are the source of both human creativity and destructiveness, the “light” and “not-light.” The root of the word *daimon* means destiny and knowing, the character of our lives and an epistemological standpoint. The daimonic “stands within, unfolds as fate; something about knowing stands likewise within, perceiving things and beings . . . (CP, 190). It is a fine kind of knowing of both the inside and outside of what is perceived from the place on which we,

quite literally, stand. Yet, this is a shifting ground, for everything changes and we are called to evolve and transform ourselves through both painful and joyful experiences.

In all of her reflection about transformation and metamorphosis, M. C. took her central image from firing of the kiln. Transformation has many aspects, including that even a fired pot will disappear: it will be sold or given away, and certainly broken in time (C, 34). “It is especially difficult in our day to give up the picture one has of oneself and of truth and to keep ourselves open to transformation” (CP, 55). M. C. asked herself how transformation comes about, but she never answered this question simply. Instead, she returned to some of the images from *Centering*. For instance, she affirmed again that centering is a spiritual discipline working through the body: a dialogue between clay, hand, and person. Fire is also archetypal, and there is a way of looking at inner development as an art of fire, of transforming the self through experiences of strong emotion, pain, and suffering (C, 56).

In all of her writing, M. C. described the arts as alchemical traditions, processes of transmutation that use matter to awaken an inner realm (CP, 180). The arts of pottery, of clay and fire, are therefore related to transformations of the person and of society. “When we say that life is an art, that life can only be understood if it is approached as an artistic process, we mean that, as in theater or alchemy, something is deeply infused through its physical forms. And to understand the physical forms accurately, it is necessary to see them with a double eye. This way of seeing is a need in all disciplines” (CP, 181). It is for this reason that M. C. urged everyone to practice an art, and to regard even livelihood and professional work as an art. I think she used this image of the double eye to speak about the outer and inner eyes that look, in turns, out into the world and toward the heart and mind.

Fire is an inner process. On the one hand, she mused, “I do not want the fire. Though I am burning in it, I deny it. For I am afraid to think what will become of me. I will be consumed. I will not know myself. All the familiar apparatus of my life, all my supports, will they not be melted away? I cannot risk everything” (C, 133). On the other, “I was born to be happy, of this I had no doubt. Strangely unawakened to the dark powers, insensitive to evil. I did not come face to face with Fear until I was nearly 40 years old. Time and again my life contracted into an agony of cross-purposes, confused aims, frustrated love... And I entered into the first fire of the first darkness. Seven years later I was brought to another crisis, and I entered into the true fire of the true darkness” (C, 135).

Each of us, of course, has our own such experiences and challenges through which we learn what fire is and what heat does. We must learn to undergo the fires of our own psyches. We have to undertake transformation, to proceed through the unknown. And yes, she acknowledged, it is difficult to say what we are doing when we are doing this kind of work (CP, 21). Encountering the daimonic, we enter a mysterious realm where personal biography meets mystery and paradox, karma and destiny.

#### *RIFF 7: mystery, paradox, and negative capability*

Mystery and paradox are recurrent themes in M. C.’s writing. “Mystery sucks at our breath like a wind tunnel. . . . Let us pray, and enter” (C, 8). Creativity itself is mysterious. Artists, poets, makers of all kinds, and scientists—all work from inspiration, a mysterious process of creation. The artist and poet is a person whose destiny as a human being is not to amass wealth or influence, but to perfect ourselves (C, 94). “The facts of life are hard. Many forces are at work besides our devotion. A mystery is at work. . . . It helps, I think, to consider ourselves on a very

long journey: the main thing is to keep to the path, to endure, to help each other when we stumble or tire, to weep and press on” (C, 140-41). My own life path is evolving through mysterious processes. I try to name them, but cannot. I try to see what they portend, but cannot. How does one speak of the ineffable, except to acknowledge that it exists?

Alongside mystery, we cannot escape paradox. We face the paradoxes of life and death, the paradoxes of the physical world that is invisible, inaudible, immeasurable, supersensible, and unpredictable. Yet we live in this world, making choices, centering ourselves as we center clay. Human beings are hungry; we are born hungry and seek satisfaction throughout life. We hunger for food, love, erotic pleasure, money, power, truth, pleasure, and approval. “We hunger for freedom and hunger for union” (C, 34-5). We must let go and in yielding we lose, and we gain.

One of the greatest human paradoxes concerns our opposing desires for freedom *and* union, for separation *and* connection, for solitude *and* community. I have always felt a strong resonance with this insight, perhaps because I feel the tension between my own longings for separation and solitude *and* my wish to be deeply and actively connected with others. Certainly, each of us has the freedom to choose, assuming that we practice discerning self-reflection. In her talk titled “Insight 1969,” M. C. offered a long poetic reflection on freedom. We grow out of diverse processes, such as the freedom to participate or not participate; to be independent or dependent; to change direction and feel that one is not losing the path; to reject or to sustain the freedom to say yes or no or maybe. We experience the freedom to change things or to conserve; to care about or come to conflict with; not to know what one is doing and yet to do it. We have the freedom to despair, to love, to develop insight, and to take the consequences for all of our thinking, feeling, and action (CP, 125-26).

M. C.’s writing is full of dynamic oppositions, two of which are another kind of crossing point. First, she describes the tension between our failures—so vividly felt in the toxicity of our present environment—and the rediscovery of life sources and the sacred. Her life work might be defined as a sustained attempt to reframe “the sacred” in terms of the natural world, the arts, and crafts. Second, she identifies the tension between our practical and visionary capacities. We need to recognize our failures alongside a sense of the possibility of renewal of the sacred in the world. We must exercise our conscience and moral imagination in order to be whole and centered human beings.

Holding such powerful paradoxes in one’s mind and heart requires “negative capability.” I first heard this phrase when I met M. C. in 1971, and she had written briefly about it in *Centering*: “The craftsman experiences Form as a continuous force [that comes] unsummoned . . . Once we know in our flesh that the world is imbued throughout with formative energy, we begin to experience how alive the world is, the air is, the earth is, we are . . . It is this Negative Capability which John Keats was so struck by . . .” (C, 115). And, once we begin to grasp how illusory our certainties, uncertainties, and doubts actually are, we can begin to enjoy them.

Keats coined this phrase in a December 1817 letter to his two brothers. A great admirer of Shakespeare, he wrote: “At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Negative capability means to be able to live amidst uncertainty, mystery, and doubt. It means to face the mysteries and paradoxes of life, and especially the impermanence of all phenomena, without grasping for something solid. And that is

a challenge without parallel, a challenge I accept every time I reflect about the inevitability of aging, illness, and death.

*RIFF 8: karma and destiny*

“What do I do, when I can do whatever I want to do?” M. C. asked (C, 52). What each person wants, she said, is to be born into the body, with the freedom to pursue our creativity. “Our studies of Eastern philosophy teach us to let go, to drop it. To surrender our attachments, our mentation. To free ourselves from ignorance and suffering. Our studies of Western philosophy teach us to surrender our minds to perception. . . . There is only the moment, and yet the moment is always giving way to the next so that there is not even NOW, there is NOTHING. True, true. There is nothing, if that is the way to understanding how much there is” (C, 53). We learn about the suchness of things. Later, M. C. quoted a saying (identified only as from “the Orient”) that “transformation is the aim and purpose of all practice” (CP, 24). Through our practices—of the arts and crafts, meditation and prayer—we are transformed, and transformation has distinctive karmic dimensions.

Each person’s personal biography and personal destiny are not the result of impersonal forces. Instead, they are connected with where we are in our lives, and with our karma. M. C. defined karma as reaping what one has sown, of experiencing the consequences of past action, even from our past lives (CP, 7). Beyond this, “karma is the complex and subtle fabric of our inner forming, its causes and purposing. In my own life and study I have found that one does not go very far into one’s deep wrestling with the daimonic without developing a sense of journey which is bound neither by birth nor death” (CP, 193).

Usually we know and experience life as a stream of likes and dislikes that form both our personal attachments and what we reject. And these are karmic: what we carry with us as inner patterning from the past may be related to a family pattern or to our racial past. M. C. acknowledged that to try to talk about karma is indeed complicated. Nevertheless, we should transform our karma through initiative. Ultimately, everything we do makes a difference and everything therefore is important (C, 42). This is a matter for deep contemplation and, ultimately, for action.

M. C. identified reincarnation as a form of re-embodiment. It means taking up a new visible form through an inner process of growth, development, and change. It means rebirth (CP, 110). And she again found a powerful metaphor in the plant world, especially in the cycles of the seasons, and the process of a plant’s growing, flowering, bearing seed, and dying. Although the words karma, rebirth, and reincarnation are in common parlance, most of us do not talk much about their deeper implications. This may be changing now under the influence of Hindu and Buddhist teachers and practitioners within our culture.

In *Opening Our Moral Eye* and in *The Fire Within*, a film based on her life and work, M. C. recounted a formative dream. She was standing in her vegetable garden. About fifty feet away, on the compost pile, stood a Being with a strange smile and three eyes. The right eye was the sun, the middle eye a diamond, and the left a huge human eye. Its front teeth were crooked, and it had a large benign countenance. In her dream she was asking this Being a question, a life or destiny question such as “when will I . . . when will my time . . . what is my destiny? She could hardly find words for the questions. But this Dream Angel answered her immediately: “I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you.” She went into the studio and made this figure.



M. C. Richards, *Dream Angel*, 5" x 8", Collection of Deborah J. Haynes

I reflect about questions of my own destiny too, nearly every day. I never felt that I did enough for M. C., given all that she taught me about creativity and courage, art and life. This essay therefore begins to repay what I experience as a “karmic debt,” a phrase that she had used in a letter to me dated June 12, 1978. M. C. had been working diligently on *Toward Wholeness*, “trying always to discover how much of my own point of view I should express. My other books have no other ‘subjects’ than my point of view, my access to intuitive ‘truth’ . This is a different ballgame. Many tricky aspects. Often I wonder why I am attempting it. One day in Florida when I asked myself that question, an answer unexpectedly came: it is a ‘karmic debt’ . Hmm’m. I wonder.” Writing this, I am nearing the end of 100 days of solitude, a retreat during which I have stabilized my dharma and art practices after a multi-year period of trauma, loss, and transition. Now, so many years since her death, she has joined me again in the studio. Day by day, I make new sense of her life, and of the profound values that guided her writing and art.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

I hope that my effort to engage M. C. Richards’ literary career contributes in some small way to the ongoing dialogue about her significance as a twentieth-century renaissance woman of arts and letters. This essay is, at the very least, an expression of care.

For M. C. caring defines the intersection of writing and handcraft. The artist and craftsperson care about the vessel, the ornament, the tool, the table, the stool, the symbol, the food, the room, the others working in the studio. To care expresses our capacity to respond humanly. And from what does this capacity emerge? It comes at least partly from the natural pleasure of handling materials, of choosing and participating, and thereby being connected to materials, and the greater world. “To respond to the life in nature and each other. To be given a chance to say Yes and No, to speak for ourselves, to hear our own voice in the vast mosaic of our culture” (CP, 22). Caring comes from the body and bodily sensations, and it comes from the heart. It comes also from the spirit and from conscience, from the sense of what it means to live as a human being in a world with others (CP, 23).

M. C. acknowledged that, while the handcrafts may be an anachronism in our time, they are basic to spiritual life. We walk a path of the crafts, indeed of all of the arts. Through these practices we learn to extend our caring “from the center through all the parts. This does not happen of itself. It is a discipline of inner plasticity and shaping. It is craft without end” (CP, 25).

The work of caring is profound; and it involves affirmation, healing, teaching, supporting and attending, concentrating on the needs of others. M. C. cared *for* others throughout her life, and was, in her final year, cared for *by* others. Following serious illness, during the last few months

of her life she remained at home at Kimberton, under her physician's injunction to rest. "Now I am quiet, slow, a bit unstable, and in good spirits. I like this new planet I am on—this new way of being. . . . I have enjoyed coming to know the mystery and secret joys of REST—not diversion, not entertainment, not 'relaxation' nor change, but REST: no sensory content, inhabiting myself as BEING, experiencing Being" (privately circulated "Notes from an Experience of Illness and Aging"). This sentiment was also powerfully expressed in the final lines of her poem "Dying," published posthumously in *Backpacking in the Hereafter*:

"Ready to experiment, be creative, serve  
 be beautiful, be real, be nowhere  
 be no one I already know  
 be birthing myself  
                   waves and particles  
 backpacking in the hereafter."

M. C. maintained her capacity for centered presence until she died. In concluding this essay, I therefore return to this theme. Early in *Centering*, M. C. mentioned Paul Reps' now well-known book, *Zen Flesh Zen Bones*. Published in 1957, it is primarily a collection of Zen stories, koans, and commentary on a series of woodblock prints. The last section of the book, which Reps called "Centering," is a transcription of three ancient Sanskrit texts that are reputedly between 3000 and 4000 years old: *Vigyan Bhairava Tantra*, *Sochanda Tantra*, and *Malini Vijaya Tantra*. These texts are related to the Trika school of Kashmiri Shaivism (followers of the Hindu God Shiva). Reps suggested that the 112 aphorisms may well be the roots of Zen Buddhism, though this has been questioned. For instance, in an early review of the book, Christmas Humphries denied that this text has anything to do with Zen Buddhism. Such a comment notwithstanding, in subsequent decades, this text has enjoyed an ongoing popular audience. As a result of studying world religions for decades, I have been curious about how such a document might have transmogrified as it traveled east through Tibet, China, Korea, and finally to Japan. A fascinating book by Sam van Schaik, *Tibetan Zen: Discovering a Lost Tradition*, explores such regional transmission along the Silk Road.

In exploring her theme of centering as a physical and metaphysical process, M. C. quoted several of these aphorisms. These are certainly studio instructions, but they are also profound spiritual teachings.

"Wherever your attention alights, at this very point, experience" (C, 25).

"Wherever satisfaction is found, in whatever act, actualize this" (C, 25).

"Just as you have the impulse to do something, stop" (C, 28).

Finally, I acknowledge that even though much is left out of this narrative, I must stop. The Dream Angel speaks to me, as it spoke to M. C.: "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you."

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#### Additional Notes on Sources

M. C. Richards' archives are now housed at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Her archives reflect many of the critical ideas that influenced American culture and art in the twentieth century. For instance, she had a life-long correspondence and interchange of ideas with such leading figures as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Charles Olson, and R. Buckminster Fuller. URL: <http://archives2.getty.edu:8082/xtf/view?docId=ead/960036/960036.xml>

The following is inevitably a partial list of the sources and references in M. C. Richards' books. Because she seldom identified particular books or articles, this is simply a list of names.

For a bibliography of Rudolf Steiner's books, see *Toward Wholeness*, pp. 199-210. As mentioned earlier, M. C.'s writing reflects a continuous dialogue with his work.

Philosophers: Sri Aurobindo, Owen Barfield, Martin Buber, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, E. Graham Howe, Ernst Lehms, Friedrich Nietzsche, Plato, Emanuel Swedenborg, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Psychologists, mythologists: Roberto Assagioli, James Hillman, E. Graham Howe, Carl G. Jung, Laurence Kubie, R.D. Laing, P. W. Martin, Erich Neumann, Wilhelm Reich.

Historians: Mircea Eliade.

Scientists: George Adams, David Bohm, Albert Einstein, Norwood R. Hansen, Hans Jonas, Olive Whicher.

Artists, dancers, musicians: Paulus Berensohn, John Cage, Sister Corita, Merce Cunningham, Margaret Israel, Bernard Leach, Marisol, Warren McKenzie, Isamu Noguchi, Daniel Rhodes, Lucy Rie, Rosanjin (Fusajirō Kitaōji), Mary Scheier, Henry Takemoto, David Tudor, Peter Voulkos.

Poets: Dante Alighieri, William Blake, Andre Breton, Norman O. Brown, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Hamlin, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Keats, Stéphane Mallarmé, Charles Olson, Ezra Pound, John Crow Ransom, Rainer Marie Rilke, Arthur Rimbaud, William Stafford, Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas, William Carlos Williams, William Wordsworth.

Writers from other disciplines: Edward Albee, Antonin Artaud, James Baldwin, Fred Blum, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Norman Cousins, Martin Duberman, Gustave Flaubert, Suzi Gablik, Thomas Hardy, Homer, Ivan Illich, George Leonard, C. S. Lewis, John Milton, A.S. Neill, Laurens van der Post, Sir Herbert Read, Paul Reps, Seonaid Robertson, Gertrude Stein, John Neihardt.

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