2007 Grail National Meeting

Towards Shared Spiritual Practices

June 26 – July 1, 2007
Grailville
Loveland, Ohio

MEETING REPORT
Writer/Editor Carol White
Editorial Support Mary Gene Devlin
Kate Devlin
Photography Beth Wasmer
Lucy Jones
Photo Editing and Layout Kate Devlin

Cover photo shows Tovis Page and Elise Gorges, taken by Beth Wasmer

National Meeting of the Grail in the US Grailville June 26 - July 1, 2007

Because this meeting was focused on *process*, and because its intended "product" was simply "moving toward" shared spiritual practices, this report will not be a chronological account of events. Instead it will attempt to tell stories—stories of the groups, large and small, that we met in, of the activities we did (or tried to do), of Grail women encountering one another in both old and new ways, of frustrations and serendipities, and—finally—of where we arrived at the end.

Carol White is telling the story, using the mountains of data from newsprint collected, sorted, and recorded by Mary Gene Devlin and Kate Devlin, and in consultation with Simonetta Romano and the US NLT.

If you participated in this gathering, we hope the story sounds at least familiar to you. If you couldn't be there, we hope you'll get a taste of what went on and, more important, a taste for what is to come!

The original mandate

The GA of 2005 accepted the Spirituality Team's proposal for a National Meeting in 2007 focusing on shared spiritual practices within the Grail. The goals of the meeting were to be:

1. *to experience and affirm the spiritual core at the heart of the Grail vision and mission,*
2. *to begin the work of strengthening our collective spiritual foundation in order to ensure the well-being and viability of the Grail in the future,*
3. *to experience and affirm the Grail as a faith community that honors our differences,*
4. *to provide time and space for Grail members to deepen in their individual practice,*
5. *to experience and affirm the need for collective spiritual practice,*
6. *to begin the work of identifying and experiencing spiritual practices which Grail members might hold in common which could be a basis for collective practice,*
7. *to provide a basis for unifying Grail rituals in the future.*

So how do you do that?

In approving this proposal the GA also agreed that the best hope of getting the widest participation was to use the "popular education" method, both in the planning and in the actual meeting. Volunteers came forward to help, during and after the GA. They gathered at Grailville in April 2006 to begin the process, and teams were

formed to carry out the tasks necessary to prepare the Grail in the US for the meeting in 2007. Mary Gene Devlin became the Process Coordinator and Kate Devlin the Administrative Coordinator of this project.

Part of the work was to grow ourselves into the popular education method. Simonetta Romano has explained the method this way:

> Literally, “popular education” means education by the people, with the people, and for the people. The term refers to an approach to adult education that specifically aims at positive social change….
>
> [T]he fundamental participatory principles of popular education are now widely used in meetings, training sessions, workshops, and other group activities aimed at supporting community-building, problem analysis and the search for collective solutions in any kind of social situation.
>
> It is an approach that values highly the lived experience of ordinary people, and stimulates a process of action/reflection. People are empowered to reflect upon their own experience and its meaning, identify critical issues, explore possible solutions, and take actions to work on the identified problems.

How we began

In the Oratory, Mary Gene welcomed all and reminded us of our mandate in a style that was both optimistic and realistic. Here are some excerpts from that talk:

> I think the Grail in the United States has moved in waves, like the waves of feminism, like the waves of immigration to the United States since the first English arrived here. I’m using this metaphor to imply a fluid experience, with no clear beginning and end—one wave coming up on another as it happens in the ocean, sometimes rapidly, sometimes with spaces in between.
>
> In the early days it was a wave of a collective culture, a communal culture, a particular kind of Catholic culture. The Grail in the United States, with her center here at Grailville, was a utopian community with a vision of the transformation of the world, and the individual was absorbed into the collective, like a village in the 2/3 world where the collective is most important. They lived a life that sang the great hymn of the Catholic Liturgy each year—the fasts and feasts, the processions and psalms…. The City Centers were like satellites to Grailville with a similar collective culture, but in urban settings. Even those Grail women who no longer lived in Grail communities still circled the years with the song and art and something of a simple lifestyle in their days….
>
> As in any culture, a shadow side existed: In a collective, hierarchical culture, individuals can be hurt and there was pain. There were things one didn’t talk about—deep things—and with the striving to be women who fit the Grail model, there was a silencing of energies that found their way out

in hard work, sometimes to exhaustion, and in secret sorrows and tears. But mostly memories eliminate the shadow and linger on the glory, and glory there was.

And then came a second wave—a rough wave, sometimes a wild wave, coinciding with the post-Vatican Council years—when the Year School morphed into SAG, and the doors and windows of the Grail in the United States were flung open like those of the Church with whom she had so identified. She opened up to Christians who brought new perspectives to this place. Her newfound Protestant ministers took their turns presiding here where only Catholic priests had stood behind the altar before. The culture shifted, too: the hierarchical form moved into lateral leadership and Grail women found their structures allied with their non-authoritarian perspectives. In 1975, the vote to open the Grail even farther to women of faith beyond the Christian, to those who'd found themselves outside a faith they'd had before, and to those who were seekers of some way to open to the holy, changed the culture even more. Many women thrived on this, and new members joined us. How amazingly daring it was for the Grail to challenge herself to move to a new culture! But what exactly was it?

The shadow side rose up in confusion and distress: some members began facing the damaging results of blind adherence to hierarchical systems; some felt their beautiful Grail world pulled out from under their feet. "You mean we cannot open the GA with a Mass?" And "Why do we Catholics seem to be second class citizens now? Catholic doesn't mean 'backward'!". However others said, "You mean you think the Grail is really Catholic and the rest of us, whom you invited in, are second class citizens? What is *our* place in the Grail?" A cleft appeared between the culture of the early days and the culture of these days of openness to a variety of traditions. A fuzziness in our spiritual identity arose—how could it not?

We struggled not to offend, to be accepting and tolerant of each other's beliefs or doubt. Yet sometimes, when it came to expressing ourselves communally, we felt we were just being safe: accepting a least common denominator. We learned to say "I'm OK and you're OK"; we joined many a secular tide of work for peace and work for justice and work for the earth. Still, even as we worked along, our souls cried out for something more to share—for something deep and holy—something sacred to inspire the purpose we still have: to transform the world. We've truly wanted to love each other even through our occasional shouting outbursts at a meeting. We struggled to define ourselves. No longer a communal culture, a collective culture; more and more an individual culture, a diaspora.

And now, I think I sense a third wave, one that has been coming from far out in the ocean of the Grail in the United States for quite some time. I may be wrong, but I think it is gathering strength and building. The struggles of the second wave have pulled us to a new structure, still a

youngster only four years old, that seeks to bring order to our movement, wrenching out through trial and error a way to do things in our organization, stretching towards community from our individualistic selves.

Actually, the Grail in the United States is standing on her head—we've done a mighty flip from those early days when Lydwine's voice rang true. We're learning to listen to all our truths and this is as difficult and demanding a work in its own way, as bringing in the hay and baking hundreds of loaves of bread each week. Even Grailville is reinventing herself—a symbol of a new culture growing. Transparency has become a major goal. We've been learning to post our disagreements on the listserv with passion but also with more civility and awareness of views other than our own. And we've come here, recognizing our individuality, our specificity, our complexity and our ambivalence. We've come here to go *deep*, individually and with each other.

We came here freely, spending a lot of money and energy to get here. Eighty of us have come here to use these days to do soul work together. In our vision statement we say that we are "called by our spiritual values". We have trouble with exactly what this word spiritual means, but at this meeting we want to practice those values dearest to our hearts. We want to embrace those whose practices are similar to our own, *and* those who have other practices. We want to let the Spirit move us and see what arises and whether this elusive element—this Grail soul—will speak in words and actions we can do together.

And what of the third wave's shadow? Ah there's the rub: it's hard to see your shadow when you're in the midst of the day, or at the crest of the wave. We can't predict exactly what it will turn out to be—maybe fear to trust ourselves, maybe fear to let the Spirit move us to outrageous love and oneness with each other. Maybe just plain negativity and doubt. The thing is, we are much more conscious now than we were, and hopefully we also realize just how unconscious we are at the same time… and how it's what we're not conscious of that mostly holds us back, that forms our shadow.

We've told you before that this meeting is not dedicated to theology or inter-religious dialogue as such, although we will be immersed in these at times. It's not a therapy session, although we may have some breakthroughs in our relationships with ourselves and with each other. It's not a time to try to smooth us all out so that we are the same and can produce a ritual that reflects our sameness. On the other hand, it's not a time to concentrate only on our differences. It's a time to practice what is dear to us, to stretch to what is unknown to us, to discover something that resonates among us even as we treasure our individual selves. It's a time of listening to what is *under* the wave, to what is in the depths of the water we are riding.

Just by being here, we have begun.

Mary Gene's opening talk was followed by short introductions from other members of the planning team and a playful-serious ritual in which each of us chose one piece from a splendid assortment of colored ribbons, which ended with all the pieces tied into one huge variegated circle. Fran Frazier also led us in a short libation ceremony, remembering and honoring all our US Grail ancestors, many of whose pictures were hanging on the Oratory walls. Then the multi-hued circle of ribbons was placed in front of the big altar, a sign of hope for the work we were beginning.

The warm-up day and finding our practice partners

The first full day was almost entirely devoted to orientation to several aspects of *process*: expressing our hopes and fears in group skits; establishment of ground rules we could all agree upon for our ways of working together; intensive *listening* practice; the explanation of, formation of and, in the evening, the first meetings of our Spiritual Practice Groups.

Our groups

We worked in two quite different types of small groups. The *Spiritual Practice Groups* were intended "to provide time and space for Grail members to deepen in their individual practice", as it said in our mandate. The groups formed around a practice they wanted to work with in this meeting and they consisted of:

Centering Meditation	Chanting of Mantras
Celebration of the Eucharist	Choral Singing
Walking the Land	Sitting/Walking Meditation
Journal Keeping	Centering Prayer (Keating)
Praying with Natural Elements	Zen Meditation
Praying alone at home using Psalms/Scripture	Those who don't have a particular practice

Here's a description of Pauletta Hansel's experience of her Practice Group:

> Although there were other spiritual practice groups that were tempting (singing, walking the land) I knew that the most honest choice I could make was to join the Journaling Group. My daily writing is as close to a spiritual practice as I have ever come: regular, intentional, a leaning inward toward the Divine.
>
> Five of us gathered in the newly cleaned Library beneath the Caravansary. Though none of us had written together regularly, and some of us had first met a day or two before, the space we created among us was trusting,

> open and sacred. I wrote and shared deeply in response to the deep sharing and listening that others gave me.
>
> However, it was not until I sat with my sometimes contentious Process Group that I could articulate to myself how the process of writing, and particularly writing in community, might hold common ground with other, more traditional forms of spiritual practices. Not everyone in that Process Group would agree. But for me, writing is the way in which I open my mind and my heart. Sitting with others who practice writing with the same intention can be, I believe, a form of communion. Together, our individual intentions are transformed and we invite a presence larger than ourselves, we become greater than the sum of our individual selves. I am playing with the term “practicing community” as a way to describe this to myself. I am not sure if it fits; first, I need to write about it for while.

The eight *Process Groups*, on the other hand, were deliberately designed to include maximum *difference* in spiritual practice: the lists were made by randomly taking one name from each spiritual group and putting them together to form these new configurations.

Process Group members were asked to begin by saying only who they were and naming one emotion they were in touch with at that moment. Then, after a brief outline of the plan, the groups were led via a guided visualization to imagine at some time in the future a great gathering of Grail women in the Oratory, engaging in some form of communal spiritual activity in which all could whole-heartedly participate, and which was an authentic expression for the Grail. Next came sharing in smaller groups about each person’s “vision”, while the rest used the listening skills worked on the previous day, striving to respect one another’s experiences. Participants were asked to take note of commonalities or images or actions they found important among the visualizations.

From these lists, the following step was an invitation to work together to produce for the whole National Meeting a 5-minute “enactment” that *they* could all participate in and recognize as being a potential way of connecting with the Holy. (Note: The neutral “enactment” was chosen by the Planning Team in order to avoid words such as “celebration” or “ritual”, which might carry various kinds of baggage. See the following section on Language.) The hope was that these enactments might provide elements which could eventually lead to common spiritual practice(s) that might be used in communal gatherings of the Grail in future.

After the presentations in the Oratory, everyone was asked for written evaluations; some oral comments were offered as well. (See **Oratory Evaluations** section for more on these.)

Language

It seemed that everyone who came to this meeting was already aware that language is a problem area. Words that some folks find helpful, fruitful, even humorous, may turn out to be offensive to others. For example, the word “spirituality” itself: for those who use it familiarly it is a self-explanatory generic term, yet for some it conjures up images of crackpot cults. And those who jokingly refer to themselves as “recovering Catholics” have caused acute pain to others who, however critical they may be of certain aspects of the institutional church, continue to find their most profound connection with the Divine in the Catholic Eucharist. Occasionally people were coming from such different places that they needed to explain *why* a particular word or phrase was unacceptable to them. However, it was touching to observe the considerable efforts people made to be respectful of these potential minefields in their use of language.

The Red Tent and other magnificent decorative items

Inspired by Anita Diamant’s book about the ancient Hebrew custom of reserving a place where women gathered during their cycles of birthing, menses, and even illness, where secrets might be shared and healing and reconciliation could take place, a talented team (led by Fran Frazier and Bobbi Gill) transformed St. Brigid’s into an exquisite and welcoming space. Lavish red drapes, lovely banners, comfortable chairs and plenty of cushions, candles, art supplies, music and silence—all this was available for anyone who wanted peace and refuge, alone or with another.

The banners were also to be found in the Link, the dining room and the Oratory. Each was a joy to the eye, but also to the spirit because they all bore powerful sacred texts from different spiritual traditions. Beyond this were the kinds of decoration with fruits and flowers that we almost take for granted at Grail gatherings.

Open Spaces

As usual, we arrived with much more on our minds than the mandate of this meeting. In order to allow interested parties to gather and discuss such issues, the Planning Team designated three early morning and two evening free times. Anyone could post a topic or activity and a contact person, then those who wanted to pursue that item could sign up.

The groups that formed were:

Mornings 7-8-ish a.m.

Topic & Short Description	Contact Person
Planting peppers, eggplant in kitchen garden	Mary Lu Lageman
Mass in Oratory	Marian Ronan, Audrey Sorrento, Meg Bruck
6 a.m. bicycling on Loveland trail	Ann Steffy

Thursday – Start 7 p.m.

Topic & Short Description	Contact Person
Grailville Program Story Circle—An opportunity to help shape future Grailville programming through exploring its past	Pauletta Hansel
Roman Catholic Womenpriests' Request – update on what's been done – assess where we are on decision-making – summary of issues – ideas for reaching closure – opportunity for face-to-face discussion	Maureen Tate Rose Mary Clark
Singing—from songs can come rituals—hope you can harmonize also—the music takes us, together, into prayer	Fran Martin
Grail Resident Possibilities at Grailville—Chance for sharing different hopes & visions both on Ecovillage & maybe other ways of living at Grailville. Does it make a difference if land is sold to Ecovillage or if land is kept in Grailville hands? Meant mostly to be "personal" sharing & we can learn more re: G.V. plans Friday. Some thoughts on elder housing here at G.V.	Elisabeth Murphy, Lenie Schaareman, Trina Paulus, and Shirley Beaupre

Friday – Start 7 p.m.

Topic & Short Description	Contact Person
Grailville Comprehensive Planning—Updates and time for discussion	Beth Barr
Justice/Solidarity/Spirituality—Global South	Marian Ronan, Marian Schwab, Peg Linnehan, Rosa Ruiz
The Sufi Path in the Chishti Lineage of Hazrat Inayat Khan and Vilayat Inayat Khan	Anne Hurley
Discussion of a ritual Agape type for both Catholics and others—using some traditional Grail elements & others	Jackie DiSalvo

As these gatherings were self-organized and self-facilitated, they are not covered in this report. Anyone desiring further information can get in touch with the contact persons.

So what happened?

People entered into the process with good will; the Hopes and Fears group skits and Intensive Listening practice both proved useful (and the skits were fun). Establishing the ground rules for our work seemed to take an extremely long time and many

suggested in the evaluations that this was unnecessary. Some proposed that in future meetings the Planning Team could offer a draft of such norms (based on ones used previously) and that discussion and amendments could then be made, rather than starting from scratch for every large gathering. On the other hand, some folks felt the struggle was worth it: they said we often agree to ground rules and then don't observe them. The fact that these were worked out so thoroughly seemed to keep them clear in people's minds as we set about our work. (This will be a nice one for the planners of the next large meeting to decide!)

The Spiritual Practice Groups were a great success. Nearly all rated them highly in their evaluations and many suggested that this kind of activity could be fruitfully repeated at other national meetings. Although everyone had been urged to join a group focused on a practice she was already engaged in, a few people chose to go to a group to *learn* about a practice. This, too, seemed to work all right, and presents another possibility for the future: opportunities to "try out" a practice that others are doing regularly.

It is perhaps worth noting that the group "With no particular practice" also found its meetings rewarding. It was clear that these people were not there because they didn't feel the longing for some way to regularly find spiritual nourishment—just that they hadn't *yet* found a path that suited the need. Some participants also became aware that they *were* regularly engaged in activities that might be called spiritual practices even though they hadn't previously regarded them as such.

It was no surprise that the Process Groups presented more challenges. However, 80% of the evaluations rated these groups as "Good" or "Excellent", so obviously the effort put into intensive listening and respecting differences paid off. The crunch came with the invitation for the Process Groups to create the 5-minute enactment that they could all participate in and recognize as being a potential way of connecting with the Holy. (In other words: move from reflection to action, as a group.) This, of course, required negotiation as well as creativity because of the (sometimes widely) varying approaches of participants. Indeed, one group's presentation was actually a humorous/serious questioning of what we were trying to do anyway, and another group felt unable to present anything as a group at that moment.

Oratory evaluations

After these presentations in the Oratory, all were asked to do written evaluations there and then; there was also an "open mike" opportunity for anyone who wanted to address the group. The oral contributions were transcribed as best possible by three note-takers; the written comments have all been typed up by Kate and Mary Gene. All this material will be available as needed by people who are going to develop this process further in future.

For this story about the meeting, though, I will try to summarize the most striking written points made—"most striking" either because so very many focused on the same ones, or because they seem to suggest possible ways forward for us.

- Certain themes, symbols and actions (singing, silence, water, Grail cups, etc.) were used by several groups, suggesting a measure of commonality in these, at least.

- All group presentations were “concelebrated”—that is, no one person had the role of leader or priest(ess).

- As is probably normal, the very items that some people liked most were the ones other people liked least! Most of these, however, were not major issues.

A number of the evaluations also looked to concerns more fundamental than the questionnaires had asked about.

- Several queried the terms of the original mandate: should we even be striving for any form of “collective [spiritual] practice”?

- Is the desire for communal rituals/celebrations/liturgies not a vain harking back to a time when our thoroughly Catholic identity made such experiences possible? Can we not seek instead to create celebrations that include elements from various practices? And/or do our sharing in “undiluted” forms by sometimes joining in a Eucharist, sometimes in silent meditation, sometimes in chanting, etc.?

- “Unity” or “shared spiritual formation” are not what we should be seeking now; we should be identifying and nurturing “what makes us at home in today’s Grail”.

Then there were three voices recorded from the oral comments that I’d like to quote directly. I have shortened them a bit but otherwise used the words the note-takers transcribed. Unfortunately, the written version can never convey the intensity with which these words were spoken.

- “We can’t do it all in such a short time—these meetings bring up things we can’t anticipate…. Each of us has a human history, a journey that has brought us here today…. All through this week the word “practice” has come to mean the work we do together, but it means so much more: the attitude about your own journey, about money, about your life. What are the seminal feelings that go along with any practice that we do together?”

- [The following was from a woman in a Grail process:] “I have to take a moment. It was kind of hard up to now to express, and I love you all, and I have something to share and it’s difficult because you have such tradition—taken from your history and your ancestors—and I want to share mine. We have to be receptive to each other—not frown at each other and make faces—and it’s been difficult for a person like me to express the deepness that I have, and I won’t be able to take this journey unless I can have honesty. I have to offer my divine self and you have to offer your divine self. Most of the people

I'm around need healing and energy. The love of God is light, energy. We need to offer that love…."

- "I want to say something that has been very close to my heart and my gut from a long, long time…. I have been in hard places and in war in Central America, seen destruction, and have worked with poor people with no hope, no insurance, no job—all along my life and work as a nurse with refugees and those that have experienced much violence…. and when we do these rituals, I feel emptiness, meaninglessness. They need to touch something of the lives of those people….

  Our trouble in finding a common ground is that somehow we need to get naked—go to the core, to the marrow of our bones, without being ashamed to hide anything, without the fear of 'She's not going to like me any more because I'm going to say what I really think and what I am'.

  When I come to a Grail gathering I try to be careful not to say the wrong word. I am walking in a minefield and I ask 'Am I going to be blown to pieces?' or 'Am I going to hurt this person so much?' I don't want to be on tippy-toe. We need to say what is real and what we are feeling. I don't want to hurt anyone.

  In Nicaragua, after an interview with mothers of child-soldiers who were killed, talking to those mothers who had lost their children, they called us into a Mass in a poor dilapidated church. At one moment when the priest spoke the words "This is my body, this is my blood"—after we had just seen people blown to pieces—as a Catholic this was the first time it made sense to me!

  We need to be awake to the 'ah-ha' moment. If the rituals feel a soul or a spirit—if we can reach our core—we will never be afraid because we will be coming from the same fountain of life."

Changing course

The feedback from the Oratory experience convinced the Planning Team that they should not proceed with their original plan, which was to ask the Process groups to rework their enactments, based on what they had experienced and what they had seen from the other groups. This could have meant that some groups would join together, others might add or subtract elements, etc., all in the service of the mandated goal of "providing a basis for unifying Grail rituals in the future". The popular education method requires planners to revise according to what emerges from the group, and this clearly seemed to be the time to do that.

After much consideration of the feedback, and possible ways to respond to it, the Team decided they had to ask the entire group something like "Where do we go from here?" Eventually they came up with two questions to put to the Process Groups the next day:

- What did you see and hear yesterday? What is your response?
- What are the most important things that need to happen to further the spiritual work of the Grail?

After discussing these, the groups were asked to list their answers to the second question and bring these to a plenary session. The Process Groups brought in an impressive array of points; the Caravansary was wall-papered with the newsprint sheets! And many of the items were communicated in colorful language and images. Again, everything from these sheets has been typed up and is available in its complete form to anyone who wishes to consult it when working on further development. However, for the purposes of identifying concrete tasks and people to do them, during the break the Planning Team attempted to draw out the main *themes* that had emerged (i.e., were often repeated) from this multitude of points. Here's what they came up with:

- Participating in spiritual practices that are not our own
- Sharing personal stories
    - importance of telling our own stories
- Addressing racism and classism within the Grail
- Get naked with each other
    - become known to each other
- *Celebrate* together
- Become authentic in small groups
- Sharing pain and humor
- Strong need to be close to each other
- Participate in Agape
- Regional meetings
- Dialogue/conversations to re-discover, incorporate [spiritual work of the Grail]
- Be sensitive to language
- Social justice work as spiritual practice
- Find a way to talk about Catholic traditions in the Grail
- Deepening in our own spiritual practices with other Grail women
- Use of water, Grail cup in rituals
- Connecting with the suffering of the world

Next the plenary group identified some more themes they felt were important:

- Respect and reverence for each person's traditions
- Our desire to be in the presence, loved by and loving The Divine, The Holy, The Mystery
- Understanding our differences before we can arrive at what we have in common (= don't suppress conflicts; work with them)
- The work of the Grail, the reason we come together as Grail, is to transform the world
- Our spirituality is the basis for our work
- We are in the presence of the holy and we *are* the presence of the holy
- Emerging themes have come from a historical context of a communal Grail and the individuals participating
- Those who have a history in the Grail may have a need to mourn
- We are part of an international movement that is in the middle of an international process around spirituality that has to be and will be "in dialogue with" what we have done at this meeting, as we move toward a New International Vision Statement

Getting practical

There followed a discussion about which themes the people present felt were the main priorities. Volunteers then came forward, willing to help nurture these "Next-Step" processes. The following is a list of What's & How's, and some Who's; the When's and Where's will, we all hope, soon emerge:

Some What's & How's	Some Who's
Workshops on other people's traditions and culture	Cincinnati & Grailville – Alice Dougan, (also later: Vivian Corres, Abiellyah Dafetta)
"Who's Who in the Grail" Book—Spiritual Stories (on the web & hard copies)	Audrey Sorrento
What constitutes healthy conflict—skill building—skills for Grail members	Meg Bruck
Skill building on dealing with racism and classism	Meg Bruck
Regional meetings to practice the same things we are talking about nationally, especially celebrations (before this meeting is over)	Recommendation from this meeting asking National Council to coordinate
Centering Prayer Group in New York City	Kate Twohy and Laura Kaplan

Spend time in appreciation of what the Grail is & who the members are—intentional appreciation	All of us
Intentionally spend time—we are reaching for the same thing or direction—no matter what the differences are	Make a part of all Grail gatherings
Regional Retreats where women are initiated into the spirituality of the Grail	Recommendation from this meeting asking National Council to coordinate
Interactive Forum—set up 2 points of view and allow people to come into the discussion—dialogue or journal, e.g., Catholics & Non-Christians in the Grail	Jackie DiSalvo, Elizabeth Murphy, Bonnie Hendricks, Carol Siemering
Agape—each take back to our home base what we have learned here, experiment and report back, and by General Assembly 2008 we are ready for a next step	Cornwall (Sharon, Simonetta, Cay), Pilgrim Place (Eva), Boston (Mary F., Carol S.), Dayton (Rose Mary), Michigan (Shirley), Bronx (Margarita), Philadelphia (Maureen)
People coming in—formation program—communicate in the best possible way where we are here (at this meeting) to people coming in—relating this spiritual work that we have begun & where we have been	Recommendation from this meeting asking National Council to coordinate
Connection between U.S. Grail process (Cross Roads Newsletter) and Spirituality Forum process participation on the web site	Mary Gindhart, Cay Charles
Telling our stories in a deep, naked way	All of us
Spirituality Team	3 people stood up and showed interest in this group—Vivian Corres, Audrey Sorrento and Abiellyah Dafetta. After they did this the whole group had a discussion and decided that the Responsibility for a Spirituality Team lies with NLT, to make sure it's happening—take note & elicit members for specific tasks. Later Vivian and Abiellyah asked to join the Workshops on other people's traditions and culture group (so their names were added there).

Yes, we had fun, too!

There were the simple joys of old friends meeting again, and new friendships beginning. There was a well-patronized bistro every evening, and Froggie and Bluebird made a couple of welcome appearances, thanks to Fran Martin's hand puppetry. Fran and a zealous mini-choir also launched most of our plenary sessions with song, a feature much praised in the evaluations.

Then there was the Silent Auction, described here by Joyce Minkler:

> One of the very quiet highlights of every major Grail gathering is a Silent Auction, faithfully organized by Lyllis Ling and friends. The obvious

purpose is fundraising for the Grail, but it is, in fact, an experience of sharing the “stuff” of our lives with each other… our jewelry, clothing, lamps, shoes, art pieces, gathered objects of beauty that we instinctively recognize as belonging to our common international Grail culture.

This year was no exception. Lyllis and her crew worked tirelessly before and during our meeting, encouraging us to bring our contributions to Grailville, and then sorting, labeling and displaying the objects of our lives. There we all were: in the Reception Room, in Sursum, and in the front hallway, spread out before each other in all our beauty and vulnerability. Who will want me? Who will take me home? For days before the Auction we wandered the tables, sensing what called out to us and bidding in great good humor against one another. Such fun and such a revelation to see who is drawn to the same things you are!

A very special table held treasures from the troves of Catherine Leahy, Mary Kane and Mary Imelda Buckley. There was a certain reverence at this table as we shared those things that had been loved and cherished by these very special Grail women. Lives shared, the beauty of the ordinary, deep respect for the daily things of life, possessions put at the disposal of the community… all of these values that I learned in the Grail made manifest at the Silent Auction. Thank you all.

On our last evening we had a party, which included a slide show of Nancy Cooney’s Croning Celebration in Ireland and a series of delightful party pieces contributed by various participants. All of this was skillfully MC’d by Sharon Joslyn, who additionally offered us some clever light verse of her own. (See Appendix IV for a sample.)

The Closing

On Sunday morning we met in the Oratory to affirm and welcome the formal commitment as Grail members of Margarita Cabrera, Jan Weinkam & Kate Devlin, then ceremoniously closed the gathering with song, prayer and movement. The circle of multi-colored ribbons we had created together at the opening was presented to those representing the US to take along to the International Spirituality Forum in Portugal, and all of us were given the opportunity to choose another snippet of ribbon (color of your choice!) to take home as a remembrance. Finally we returned to the dining room for a traditional Grailville Sunday Brunch, where a good time was had by all.

Conclusions

Obviously, the “Next Steps” agreed by the group are the primary outcomes of this National Meeting. Still, it seems appropriate to ask “What did we *learn* this time around?” This is by far the most difficult section to write, because everyone who participates in such a meeting has her own unique set of experiences and her own reactions to them.

I have here every word of commentary written on all the final evaluation papers that were turned in, supplemented by a marvelous set of pie charts made by Kate Devlin which display the numerical ratings. (I can tell you, for example, that 46% of respondents gave an “overall rating of the meeting” as Excellent; 47% rated it Good, leaving only 7% expressing some general dissatisfaction.) Besides these forms we received a few comments from participants later by e-mail, plus fairly extensive analyses of the whole process from some members of the Planning Team, written in the weeks after the meeting ended. I have read all of this material at least three times, highlighting certain passages, noting agreements and disagreements, looking for insights that might help us understand ourselves better now and keep improving our meetings in the future.

As I have noted previously, all of this material will be available for anyone who needs more detail for further reference. Meanwhile, here’s what yours truly extracted from it.

General points

First, the question many people wrestled with was whether we had done what we set out to do (or even if we should have been trying to do it). Regarding this, someone pointed out that our mandate was “to **begin** the work of identifying and experiencing spiritual practices which Grail members **might** hold in common which **could** be a basis for collective practice” and “to provide a **basis** for unifying Grail rituals in the future”—in other words, we certainly weren’t meant to come up with a definitive unifying ritual. Some were nevertheless disappointed that we didn’t accomplish more, though a number of those added that we had apparently gotten as far as we *could* get at this time. Others seemed to have the same feeling, of getting as far as we could get, but with more of a glass-half-full than half-empty attitude. In this group were those who actually rejoiced that we are now so much clearer about what is needed.

Within this self-questioning about what we should be aiming for came some interesting efforts at clarification. One person said: “I still wonder about the distinction between an *expression* or celebration of our diverse spirituality and the sharing of a spiritual *practice*. I believe we can and do *celebrate* together but I don’t believe we can actually ‘share’ a spiritual practice, if that is understood as a something that is held in common and practiced on a regular basis.” Someone else suggested that we should be comfortable in continuing to share diversity in Grail expression, and see that very sharing of diversity as a base of our unity.

Spiritual Practice Groups and spiritual practices

According to the Evaluations, enthusiasm for these groups was just one person short of unanimous. There were many eloquent descriptions of experiences and thanks for including them in the program, and many recommendations that similar activities be built into other large Grail gatherings. The following three citations provide some *analysis* of this general feeling:

This was the first meeting where we were attempting to do all of the following: 1) to publicly declare a spiritual practice that touches our own hearts deeply; 2) to look around to see if anyone else shared that practice; 3) to sit down with a few other people and find a bit of ourselves reflected in someone else's spirit; 4) to realize that it was perfectly fine to choose one practice and stick with it for a while and this didn't mean that it was the only practice we have, but we *gave ourselves permission* to focus on just one practice and to share with others for the duration of the National Meeting; 5) we also *gave everyone else permission* to choose her own practice and it didn't matter if it wasn't the same as our own, or if it did or did not hearken back to what might have been viewed as traditional or historical Grail practices; and lastly 6) to see if we could work towards a shared spiritual practice amidst our diversity. This was no small order!

*****

At a structural level, I think that the practice groups were wildly successful, and that it might have worked better if we hadn't been so eager to get to a common practice so fast. I think many of us were really absorbed in the experience of being able to share our practices and that that might have been enough. A number of us in my [process] group felt hurried by the need to arrive at some common understanding. I think we would have moved to this gradually—perhaps not at this meeting!—but a number of us felt we had just begun.

But I wouldn't make too much of that. There was something quite wonderful about how respectful and cooperative people were with one another; it felt like a new beginning to something, and perhaps it was even more significant than whatever progress we made on spirituality per se.

*****

I think we learned that spiritual practices don't really have much to do with what "religion" a person might subscribe to. So that even when we were "practicing" with like-minded women, there was great diversity in our groups.

The Pro's and Con's of the Popular Education Method

It is well known that if your goal is quick decisions, an absolute dictatorship is your best bet. At the other end of the speed spectrum is popular education, in which *process* reigns supreme because that is the way you can guarantee opportunities for everyone to be heard, and to be taken seriously. Allowing time for all this process means very little happens quickly. (Fortunately, it also gives space for spontaneous creativity. Example: the moment when Simonetta started a plenary session by speaking to us entirely in Italian. She then gestured to Lenie Schaareman, who began chattering in Dutch, then came Spanish and German and so on. Thus no

facilitator ever had to deliver a sermon about how we all come from different backgrounds and may not always understand each other because of these differences—the message was spectacularly, and humorously, clear.)

Aside from the inevitable feelings of tedium that sometimes set in, there was another critique of the way this particular Planning Team worked: a few people said they felt "manipulated" and/or "treated like children" because the schedule for the five days was so unspecific. Slots were assigned to the two kinds of small groups and to plenary sessions, but with no indications of the subject matter of these gatherings. These critics "didn't know where they were going" and resented it.

The absence of such labels was due to the fact that, in a certain sense, the Planning Team "didn't know where they were going" either. There was no way to foresee what might develop in the course of the days and they were aware that the activities they had on their own tentative schedules might well change—as indeed they did. Thus it had seemed wiser at the beginning not to define the sessions. In future, it would probably be a good idea for facilitators of this type of meeting to explain this point more clearly when they give out the meeting schedules.

In general, both the method and the facilitators got high marks from participants, but there were some definite criticisms as well. Once again, we failed to achieve perfection….

The role of the past in the present

An interesting set of questions arose around the role of Grail history in the Grail of today.

First, there is one function of the past bleeding into the present, in not one but *two* negative ways, and that is the resurfacing of old conflicts, some of them dating from decades ago. For one thing, the conviction that particular individuals or groups stand for certain beliefs or attitudes may simply be incorrect after the passage of many years. Further, whatever the source of the original problem might be, it is unknown to newer Grail members who may suddenly find themselves in an inexplicable field of tension in some group. Certainly where such situations exist, we need to help each other move toward healing. The Red Tent was meant to be a place where reconciliation could occur. And it would appear that some of the Process Groups brought about new clarity between certain people. Presumably this is an on-going concern.

However, suggestions that we should now try to "put the past behind us" evoked a considerable outcry from those who regard our past as our heritage. Rather than putting it behind us, these voices were calling for more ways to pass along our history so newer generations will understand where we came from and where we've been on the way to where we are now. The Next Steps to which this meeting committed itself involve several kinds of sharing of personal stories; hopefully these will be embedded in our Grail history which will thus also be shared.

What holds us together anyway??

One person wrote: “What we’re working on here is not to replace Mass or earlier formation—it’s to identify what makes us at home in *today’s* Grail.” Someone else wrote: ”We can feel that there is something we share; we sense that there is something that binds us as Grail, even if we can’t fully name it.”

This theme appeared in various forms, again connecting past, present and future. Someone else wrote:

> I do not believe we should create any *common* (US or International) “liturgy.” Yes, to similar elements such as the Grail cup, many names of God, silence, agape suppers, etc. But “liturgies” grow from the experiences of the “people” on each occasion. They grow from the needs of the People of God…. I don’t think we can replicate the liturgical living and depth that the early Grail was able to live. But the Grail has always been on the Crest of the Wave—around the Elbow in Time. The old ways of religion are gone (except in fundamentalism). It’s scary out here. I have no authority to comfort the ones who have lived deeply. [I do have] a comment from my conversation partner: “We can have depth without certainty.”

Although only one Next Step referred to this, many people commented that our “spiritual work” must not become individualistic piety but always include a focus on social justice, ecology, problems of racism and classism, both within the Grail and within the wider community. Hopefully those who made these comments will bring their awareness to whatever Grail activities they are involved in.

Dorothy Rasenberger offered an eloquent statement of her personal vision:

> It comes from my understanding of the Grail as a vessel of Healing; a Spirit-filled "source" that awakens in us our power to love and embrace the world, or "the other" who is ailing. Being in touch with this source is our spiritual practice.
>
> The Grail was born out of the Hebrew/Christian traditions, the Prophets, the Psalms and particularly the Gospel of the life of Jesus. This fact we celebrate particularly at Holy Week, but we are not, as a group, formally tied to these traditions. The Grail is a way of being-in-the-world, relying on the Divine Spirit and the particular charisma of women, but always alert and adapting to the conditions of the times; gaining new knowledge of what's causing the world's ills, seeking the positive forces for change. Looking back in our history we can follow this pattern.
>
> As we celebrate our various spiritual practices, learning from each other, we celebrate also our deep caring for the world, grateful for the different abilities among us, our researchers and activists, who show us the methods of healing we can contribute.

Are we still a "community"?

The history discussions brought up the contrasts between earlier times when Grail women received "formation" in communal living situations, then often went on to live and work in other Grail centers. Since the Grail in the US no longer conducts extended formation programs and there is very little communal living these days, we obviously need a different kind of experience that maintains the community element of Grail life. The strong emphasis on telling our life stories and our spiritual journey stories to each other, plus sharing spiritual practices, seem to be elements that were identified as essential to this process. (Of course, the "telling" must be met by *hearing*. One person wrote: "I remember reminding myself to listen, just listen. I remember being able to hear things that I had not been able to hear before. There was a level of vulnerability and openness to each other that was patient and kind.")

It seems that we need to become more clear about the nature of this "glue" that holds us together as Grail. It cannot remain unarticulated, either for ourselves or for potential new members. One person said that "women are coming to the Grail in Philadelphia because they are attracted to the integration of the spiritual, the political/social, and a women's community." That sounds like a clue, and also a key to community: integration of all those elements.

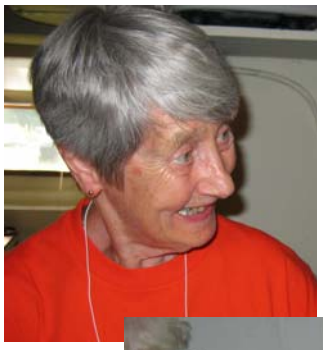
Someone else said: "We bravely went where no Grail meeting has gone before... and where it goes from here is yet to be known...." and another added: "The biggest thing I think this meeting accomplished was facing the fact that we could not YET accomplish what we had set out to do. This may sound negative but you can reframe it as having the courage to face truths about our situation, accept those truths, and start working on those Next Steps."

One of the newer members wrote this:

> What was really important about the struggles that we had was that we made them together. Struggling together also had a leveling effect—it meant that even if you hadn't been a Grail member for the last 30 or 40 years you were part of the current struggle. This was not a meeting where you could easily drop in and out. Everyone was invited to come and participate in every part of the meeting. Everyone was needed. We needed to work and struggle together, focus as a group and get to know each other by rubbing elbows so to speak.
>
> These are no longer the times of the Grail year school or SAG, when we literally worked together for days, weeks, or months. These are times when all of our members are scattered across the country. Really listening and hearing what another person says is sometimes hard when we don't interact on a daily basis. This is not to say that while living communally this sort of listening and hearing always happens; it doesn't. This was a meeting to try to come together and rub elbows, get to know each other at a deeper level and see where we could meet on a spiritual level (all in less than a week!).

Fortunately we have our Next Steps, and real people who have committed to getting them in motion. Therefore, the last words of my story of the National Meeting of 2007 are: "to be continued…."

PHOTO ALBUM



932
OPEN

POLITICS

Called by
our spiritual values...
Be
a full bucket
pulled up the
dark
way of a well
then lifted
out into
light.

Appendices

Please don't skip over these! At least don't miss the first and last ones or you'll miss some real delight.

Appendix I: a letter from Tovis Page

As many of you know, I have been doing research at Grailville for my doctoral dissertation off and on for several years now. So I have learned quite a few things about the U.S. Grail and particularly about Grailville. (For example, I know what the "lilies of the field" were). But I have only recently had the pleasure of *experiencing* the Grail at Grailville. For me, this National Meeting was a chance not only to be at Grailville when it is pulsing with Grail women, but also to actually *participate* in Grail celebrations and "processes" in this special place. I have learned much this past week, not only about the Grail and Grailville, but about myself. I learned, for instance, in my "spiritual practice" group, that I can't mentally focus on both my breath and my footsteps at the same time, even though I do them simultaneously all the time without thinking about it. (That may not seem spiritually significant to you, but it was to me! And, after this week, I know you'll respect my spiritual difference… right?)

I discovered that the cozy little room in which I stayed on the third floor of Joy, and in which I had stayed during my first visit to Grailville some five years ago, was Dorothy Day's room when she visited Grailville in the 1940s. I learned that Meg Bruck was the same person as Meganne Root (a name I'd seen repeatedly in the archives just days before), that Debra Schak's pre-Grail name was "Betty Jean", and that the woman whose nametag read "Margaret" was actually "Angela". I had the joy of seeing firsthand one of Fran Martin's famous puppet shows, and I learned how to bake enough cookies for some 80 spiritually and emotionally charged women each day. (Hint: store-bought, pre-formed, frozen balls of dough…. I know, I know, in the old days, *everything* was made by hand, so I shouldn't complain.) I am very grateful to have been so warmly welcomed by so many of you. It was a joy for me to put faces to the names I have been hearing and reading about for the past few years and to experience the spirit, wit, integrity, curiosity, humor, commitments, and love that hold you together.

Warmly,
Tovis Page

Appendix II: Participant List

Joyce Asfour
Elizabeth Barr*
Shirley Beaupre
Margaret Bisel (Angela Miller)
Judith Blackburn
Teagan Blackburn
Meg Bruck
Ann Burke
Margarita Cabrera*
Cay Charles
Ruth Chisholm
Rose Mary Clark
Mary Clifford
Vivian Corres
Marguerite Coyle
Theresa Czerwinski
Abiellyah Dafetta*
Ria de Groot
Kate Devlin
Mary Gene Devlin
Jackie Disalvo
Mary Divito
Alice Dougan
Mary Farrell
Eva Fleischner
Frances Frazier
Ruth Gallant
Joy Garland
Barbara Gibbons
Bobbi Gill
Mary Gindhart
Peggy Goederer
Marian April Goering
Elise Gorges
Carolyn Gratton
Pauletta Hansel*
Una Hargrave
Martha Heidkamp
Bonnie Hendricks
Becky Hill
Cherie Holman
Mary Hughes
Anne Hurley
Renee Jackson
Lucy Jones
Sharon Joslyn
Janet Kalven
Laura Kaplan
Mary Lu Lageman
Lyllis Ling
Peg Linnehan
Mary Kay Louchart
Judy Markle
Terry Marshall
Frances Martin
Carol McDonnell
Frances McLaughlin
Anne Mercier
Joyce Minkler
Gertrude Morris
Elizabeth Murphy*
Nina Naberhaus*
Tovis Page*
Trina Paulus
Dorothy Rasenberger
Simonetta Romano
Marian Ronan
Rosa Maria Ruiz
Lenie Schaareman
Debora Schak
Marian Schwab
Carol Siemering
Audrey Sorrento
Ann Steffy
Susan Sumner*
Maureen Tate
Sharon Thomson
Stephana Tikalsky
Kate Twohy
Kathleen Walzer
Beth Wasmer
Jan Weinkam*
Duanne Welsch
Carol White
Jean Wilson
Teresa Wilson

** denotes in-process, staff, or participant/observers*

Appendix III: Planning Team

A wider group met in April 2006 and kicked off the planning that led up to this year's meeting. Amongst those brain-stormers were: Shirley Beaupre, Peggy Goederer, Janet Kalven, Fran Martin, Audrey Sorrento and Jean Wilson.

Regional Meetings helped prepare participants and informed the planning team throughout the year.

The Planning Team that worked through the year consisted of:

Mary Gene Devlin, Process Coordinator

Kate Devlin, Administrative Coordinator

Simonetta Romano, "Producer" and Facilitator

Judith Blackburn
Fran Frazier
Lucy Jones
Sharon Thomson
Carol Siemering
} Facilitators

Late additions to the team were:

Beth Wasmer, NLT Advisor & Facilitator

Carol White, "Consultant"

The Administrative Team that worked to make sure the meeting came together:

Fran Martin, Transportation Master Coordinator and Hospitality

Many drivers!

Jean Wilson, Grailville Liaison and Point Person

Terry Marshall, Finances

Heather Jobson, National Office Liaison / Registration / Instantaneous Copier of Documents

Kathleen Walzer, Snack Coordinator

Ann Steffy, Bistro

Chris Cromer, Chef

Doris Johnson, Kitchen and Housekeeping

All Grailville Residents and Neighbors

And many others who volunteered and assisted during the meeting!!

Appendix IV: Light Verse

This was one of Sharon Joslyn's unique contributions to our Party Night. It seems an appropriate last reading here:

A Hymn to Spiritual Practice

'Twas the night before leaving and all through the Grail
were women preparing their spiritual ale.

What is the question—where, how and when?
All must be answered, we won't leave till then.

The Planning Team's anxious to call it a day,
to put all their codes and their questions away.

The groups both of Practice and of Process, too,
were all gathered together for a final "adieu".

But then in a moment we heard such a clatter,
we sprang from our buzz groups to what was the matter.

The moon rising over the Grailville hill
heard echoes of all, saying, "I do" and "I will".

We raced to the windows and saw in a wink
a visual image: a New Grail (I think.)

So new and so radiant that some of our group
decided to join us to be in the loop.

We said not a word but went straight to our task—
We signed them all up and remembered to ask:

Are you set for the journey?
From the Cup take a sip.
Merry pathway to all,
and to all a good trip!