Centering: In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person
by Maria Popova

Looking back on the first thirteen years of Brain Pickings, I termed my thirteen most important life-learnings “fluid reflections on keeping a solid center.” But how exactly do we locate our center and master its osmotic balance between fluidity and solidity?

That is what poet, potter, and manual philosopher M.C. Richards (July 13, 1916–September 10, 1999) explores in her 1964 counterculture classic Centering: In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person (public library) — an inspired inquiry into “how we may seek to bring universe into a personal wholeness,” “to feel the whole in every part,” which popularized the now-commonplace notion of “both... and” as the non-dualistic, parallelistic alternative to the dualistic, perpendicularist “either... or” mindset.

After graduating from U.C. Berkeley, Richards was offered a tenure-track position at the University of Chicago, but was soon disillusioned with the hyperfocus on standardized achievement, competitive and vacant. Just after World War II, just before her thirtieth birthday, she made a radical leap of faith and joined the English faculty of the experimental Black Mountain College.

Mary Caroline Richards at Black Mountain College (Getty Research Institute. Photographer unknown.)

One of the school’s most beloved teachers, she founded Black Mountain Press with her students, teaching them the fundamentals of typesetting and publishing, and soon rose to head of faculty. She forged close friendships with John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and the famed Black Mountain Poets. Many decades before neurologist Oliver Sacks extolled the healing power of gardening, she lived with mentally handicapped adults in a working community based on biodynamic agriculture — the precursor to organic gardening and farming.

In the 1950s, she returned to Black Mountain College not as a teacher but as a student — of pottery. The beautiful consonance she found between her two arts inspired a larger inquiry into the creative process, in a work of art and in the work of personhood.

M.C. Richards: Four Virgins of the Elk Dance (Courtesy of Black Mountain College)

Governed by her conviction that “poets are not the only poets” and that artists don’t leave their art at the studio, Richards explores the poetry of personhood through the metaphor of centering, drawn from the craftsmanship of pottery — a potter brings the
clay to the center of the wheel, then begins the process of giving the amorphous spinning mass the desired shape. She writes:

Centering is a verb. It is an ongoing process... Centering is not a model, but a way of balancing, a spiritual resource in times of conflict, an imagination. It seems in certain lights to be an alchemical vessel, a retort, which bears an integration of purposes, an integration of levels of consciousness. It can be called to, like a divine ear.

[...]

Centering... is the discipline of bringing in (i.e., of sympathy or empathy) rather than of leaving out. Of saying “Yes, Yes” to what we behold. To what is holy and to what is unbearable. But my experience tells me now that there is an important crucial stage of saying Yes to a No. For resistance also must be embraced. Not only accepting resistance but practicing it.

This non-dualistic assent to other universe in all of its expressions is at the center of centering; it is also the lever by which we turn the negative into a generative place, in our individual experience and our collective aspirations. Richards writes:

The hardest and most rewarding lesson has been to learn to experience antipathy objectively, with warmth. For antipathy follows a gesture of separating, and the goal, which is to be both separate and connected, requires that one move inwardly in opposite directions. Toward self-definition and toward community. Toward ethical individualism and toward social justice. It is this fusing of the opposites that Centering enables.

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In centering the clay on the potter’s wheel, one centers down, yes, and then one immediately centers up! Down and up, wide and narrow, letting focus bear within it an expanded consciousness and letting a widened awareness (empathetic) have the commitment to detail of a focused attention. Not “either... or,” but “both... and.” You can perhaps feel the inner movement of a Centering consciousness that plays dynamically in the tides of inner and outer, self and other, in an instinctive hope toward wholeness.

Art by Bhajju Shyam from Creation — a collection of illustrated origin myths from Indian folklore.

In its active practice of non-dualism, centering is thus a deepening of our understanding of reality, consonant with Nobel-winning physicist Frank Wilczek’s observation that “you can recognize a deep truth by the feature that its opposite is also a deep truth.” And yet, Richards cautions, centering must not become an item on the checklist of existential achievement — the moment it ceases to be a practice and becomes an object of striving, it becomes subject to corruption and distortion:

“Center” and “centered” have come to be fairly widely used. They tend to imply a
connection with the navel, with one-pointedness, on the way to bliss, realization, and inner peace. But these are not the goals of the Centering process. For it is a continual engagement with experience, not a withdrawal from it. It begins with pain and ends with paradox. It wrestles with evil and the daimonic as it does with angels and repentance. It is an activity of consciousness, not a stage of spiritual achievement.

[...]

I have found that Centering, like clay, ... bears the future within it. For it contains a space for ongoing development and differentiation. In other words, it proves to be an open image, a vessel, holding a content that is life itself.

Art by Olivier Tallec from This Is a Poem That Heals Fish by Jean-Pierre Simeón.

Writing in the early 1960s — an era marked by the scar tissue of WWII and the new-growth optimism of civil rights and women’s emancipation, of space exploration and the decoding of life’s helix — Richards sees in the notion of centering an emblem of cultural evolution, as relevant to her own time as it is, after a half-century turn of the cultural wheel, to ours:

We find on so many fronts now, political and artistic as well as religious and economic, an imaginative thrust that goes not toward competitive violence and adversary motifs, but toward new social forms. Imagination is more and more recognized as a form of cognition.

Richards defines the creative mind as the “mind that makes connections between things ordinarily thought to be different” — an embodiment of “the highest human capacity”: the capacity for metaphor. Echoing the stunning speech on poetry, power, and freedom that John F. Kennedy delivered in 1963, just as she was finishing her book, she writes:

This is what fires our hearts, is it not? To feel ourselves free to love and to live. Unbullied and unbullying. Unhaunted by a conscience made guilty by social pressures and expectations. To act from source freely.

The moment we begin to act freely, we come into contact with the unknown — contact that can be a shattering shock if we are hardened, or a shape-shifting revelation if we are fluid enough to embody new forms of understanding, of meaning, of being. Centering thus becomes the locus of fluidity:

Centering... brings us what we don’t already know... We may find, yes, that yesterday is over, and we do not perpetuate old confusions. We do not cling to the savagery of nationalisms, or the shame we feel for being as we are. We stand on the shore of an ocean and the pure wind blows us fresh and we wake out of an anguish of inner conflict into a deep breath that lets us rise to our feet and in a new levity we dance. It could be said that fidelity to the processes of Centering is a path to full breathing, to a balance
willingly at risk.

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The deeper we go into these realms, the more contact we make with another’s reality. The sharper the sense of pain and bliss as they interweave through the heartbreak and luck of life, the more the line between self and other may dissolve.

Art by Lia Halloran for The Universe in Verse. Available as a print.

In a sentiment evocative of Wendell Berry’s short and lovely poem about how to be a poet and a complete human being, Richards considers what drew her to the metaphor of centering and what it reveals about the poet in each of us:

I am an odd bird in both academic and craft worlds, perhaps because I am a poet, and thus, by calling, busy with seeing the similarities between things ordinarily thought to be different, busy with feeling the sense of relatedness grow through my limbs like a smoke-tree wafting and fusing its images, busy with the innerness of outerness, eating life in its layers like a magic cake made of silica sounds shapes and temperatures and all the things that appear to be separated stacked together in transparencies of color, and it is perhaps my vocation to swallow it whole. The expanding universe. The resilient appetite. The continuous play. The changing, changeful person, mobile and intact, finding his way on.

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For life — I am sure of this — is not transforming energy, but transforming person. Energy is the means. Being is not what but whom. It is Presence in whom and before whom we show ourselves. Let us ride our lives like natural beasts, like tempests, like the bounce of a ball or the slightest ambiguous hovering of ash, the drift of scent: let us stick to those currents that can carry us, membering them with our souls. Our world personifies us, we know ourselves by it. Let us then speak to each other in our most intimate concern.

Centering is an intimate, universal, revelatory read in its timeless totality. Complement it with Susan Sontag’s astute distinction between being in the middle and being in the center, then revisit Richards’s close friend and collaborator John Cage on the inner life of artists and their contemporary E.E. Cummings on what it really means to be an artist.