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Living Inside a Benevolent Universe

In anticipation of the Feast of Francis (October 4), Richard Rohr offers the following excerpt from his new book, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*. Fr. Richard also spoke on this theme at the recent CONSPIRE 2014 symposium with Ilia Delio and Rob Bell.

Christ has something in common with all creatures. With the stone he shares existence, with the plants he shares life, with the animals he shares sensation, and with the angels he shares intelligence. Thus all things are transformed in Christ since in the fullness of his nature he embraces some part of every creature.

—Bonaventure, *The Works of St. Bonaventure*

There is no other teacher who takes the vision of Francis and Clare to the level of a total theology and philosophy, a fully symmetrical worldview, as well as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217–1274). In my view, he was to Francis what Paul was to Jesus. Both are less “radical” in some ways than those they interpret, but both help followers and thinkers to know what Jesus’ and Francis’ lives might be teaching us in a more systematic way. They both seem to say, “If this is true, then this is what it implies.”

Bonaventure’s vision is positive, mystic, cosmic, intimately relational, and largely concerned with cleaning the lens of our perception and our intention so we can see and enjoy fully!

He starts very simply: “Unless we are able to view things in terms of how they originate, how they are to return to their end, and how God shines forth in them, we will not be able to understand.” For Bonaventure, the perfection of God and God’s creation is quite simply a full circle, and to be perfect the circle must

and will complete itself. He knows that Alpha and Omega are finally the same, and the lynchpin holding it all in unity is the “Christ Mystery,” or the essential unity of matter and spirit, humanity and divinity.

The Christ Mystery is thus the template for all creation, and even more precisely the crucified Christ, who reveals

the necessary cycle of loss and renewal that keeps all things moving toward ever further life. Now we know that the death and birth of every star and every atom is this same pattern of loss and renewal, yet this pattern is invariably hidden or denied, and therefore must be revealed by God—which is “the cross.”

Bonaventure’s theology is never about trying to placate a distant or angry God, earn forgiveness, or find some abstract theory of justification. He is all cosmic optimism and hope! Once it lost this kind of mysticism, Christianity became preoccupied with fear, unworthiness, and guilt much more than being included in—and delighting in—an all-pervasive plan that is already in place. Bonaventure can help us move beyond the negative notion of history being a “fall from grace” and invite us into a positive notion of history as a slow but real emergence and evolution into ever-greater consciousness of who we are.

In Bonaventure’s world, the frame of reality was still big, hopeful, and positive. One reason he was able to do that,

as we can see in many Catholic mystics, is that he was profoundly Trinitarian, where the love always and forever flows in one positive and forward direction. Bonaventure’s strong foundation in the Trinity gave him a non-dual mind to deal with the ineffable mystery of God and creation. A dualistic mind closes down at any notion of Trinity, because it cannot process it. God, for him, is not an offended monarch on a throne throwing down thunderbolts, but a “fountain fullness”

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Saints Francis and Clare, Giotto di Bondone, Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi, Italy

We were created in unity, proceed forward insofar as we are in unity, and return to God’s full gift of final unity, according to Bonaventure’s reading of the Gospels.



Center for Action and Contemplation

An educational center grounded in the Christian mystical tradition

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- Write to us at info@cac.org or CAC, PO Box 12464, Albuquerque, NM 87195



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Welcome, seeker. We invite you to stop by the CAC Visitor Center when you are in Albuquerque to rediscover how inextricably connected you are with the world and that all is held within one Divine Reality. Open weekdays 9 a.m. – 12:00 noon and 1:00 – 4:00 p.m.

Turning Information into Transformation

The question for us is always "how can we turn information into transformation?"

How can we use the sacred texts, tradition, and experience to lead people into new places with God, with life, with themselves? — Richard Rohr, OFM

We seek to empower individuals to live out their sacred soul tasks in service to the world through:

- ◆ **Conspire Symposia:** Seven-year series of events following Fr. Richard's underlying themes
- ◆ **Online Education:** Self-paced, online courses connecting learners worldwide
- ◆ **Living School:** Two-year program, combining onsite and online learning
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- ◆ **Bookstore:** A comprehensive selection of books and recordings (many available only through CAC)
- ◆ **Daily Meditations:** Free daily studies sent globally by e-mail to over 115,000 individuals

BEING A GENERATIVE MAN: WATER IN THE DESERT

Friday, November 7–Sunday, November 9, 2014
Hyatt Tamaya, Santa Ana Pueblo, New Mexico

Teachers include Richard Rohr, Belden Lane, and Adrian Scott.

In an informal session on Saturday afternoon, Fr. Richard will speak to women who are accompanying men to the conference (no registration needed). Initiated men (who have completed a Men's Rites of Passage) are also invited to Soularize, November 5–7, 2014.

Learn more and register at illuman.org



Note: These events are organized by Illuman. Please contact Illuman directly for more information and registration.

Ripples in the World: CAC Multipliers

We are honored to share stories of friends who take teachings and turn them into palpable actions and blessings for others. These “multipliers” extend our reach much further than we could ever dream—both geographically and within the context of practical issues. Thanks to the many, in addition to those named here, who allow the ripples of love to cross the still surfaces of their souls and become waves of transformation.



Heather Vesey

When I married my husband, Nicholas, I was deeply committed to my evangelical perspective on Christianity. I came from a missionary family, and had been brought up in North India. I'd gotten baptized at the age of thirteen, and my whole spirituality was centered on the person of Jesus.

Nicholas, on the other hand, was much more interested in “the mystical nature of reality” and

Jesus as an expression of the “Christ nature.” How could we come together spiritually and find common ground? This was hugely important for me, and was a cause for much concern in our early years together. I was troubled, in that I couldn't embrace many of his ideas, and yet I also felt dissatisfied and frustrated by my own limited understanding. It wasn't enough anymore.

In 2008 Richard Rohr came to our church in Norwich, UK. This marked the beginning of a whole new thrilling adventure for me. What he did for us was to provide a common language that enabled us to really understand, respect, and embrace each other's spirituality. Since then, more and more horizons have opened up for me. I have developed an enormous interest in all things psycho-spiritual, particularly working with the Enneagram. Nicholas, on the other hand, has become much more centered on the person of Jesus, including a period of focus on Jesus in his daily contemplative practice.

Richard provided us with a language and an understanding that created a context and horizon that was greater than both of our more parochial perspectives. For that I'm truly grateful.

Heather Vesey is 37 years old and has lived in Norwich, UK for the last 13 years, where her husband Nicholas has been a Church of England priest. At the time this was written, they were about to move to Aspen, Colorado, with their two children, Samuel and Jessica, where Nicholas will become the Spiritual Leader of Aspen Chapel.



Michael Poffenberger

My faith is very much a work in progress, and that unfinished nature has become the conviction I feel with greatest clarity. The mantra I often use when I pray is simply “I don't know.”

Ironically, for the past ten years I have made my living by convincing others that I do in fact “know” things. After returning from four months studying in Uganda, I co-founded an organization that researches and advocates for policy solutions to a violent conflict that started in northern Uganda. To build support for what we believed could help bring about peace, our team was totally dedicated to the task of convincing influencers in Washington, DC that our proposals were credible and urgent.

Despite my efforts, this same confidence never seems to extend to my faith life. Sometimes, it even feels like fixating on things I do know—like the injustice of the mass abduction of children—is a means of avoiding the difficult uncertainty that underlies most everything else.

Yet with guidance from Fr. Richard's teaching and the good work of the CAC—including a Men's Rite of Passage in 2009 and numerous events since—I have begun to see this unknowing as a gift, a gateway through which I can more honestly hear, and experience, how God is at work. Beginning my prayer practice with an acknowledgment of my own unknowing feels more honest and powerful than anything else. It loosens the grip of my own feeble attempts at explanation and creates space for a deeper and more intuitive awareness to arise.

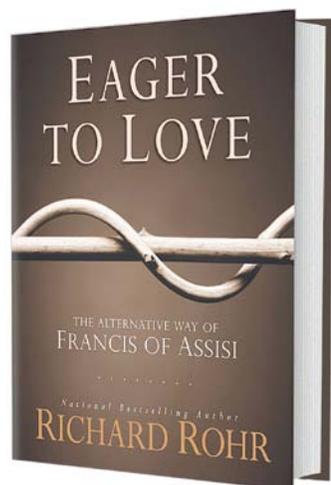
As Fr. Richard teaches, “Life is about discovering the right questions more than having the right answers.” My hope is that honest questioning will lead me closer to God, and that it may even help me discover the resources needed to support peace half a world away.

Michael Poffenberger is 31 years old and lived in Washington, DC for 10 years, directing an organization focused on preventing atrocity crimes in Africa. In June, Michael accepted an invitation from the CAC Board of Directors to undertake a summer consulting project for CAC.

Living Inside a Benevolent Universe *continued from front cover*

that flows, overflows, and fills all things in one exclusively positive direction. Reality is thus in process, participatory; it is love itself, and not a mere Platonic world, an abstract idea, or a static impersonal principle. God as Trinitarian Flow is the blueprint and pattern for all relationships and thus all of creation, which we now know from contemporary science is exactly the case.

I am personally attracted to Bonaventure because of his strong sense of cosmic wholeness, what some called “the Great Chain of Being” and maybe today we would call ecosystems, or the circle of life. I am



also drawn to his strong sense of paradox. After reading Bonaventure, the crossed lines of the crucifix henceforth become a geometric metaphor for all the seeming contradictions in the world—which, if held with compassion, create deep wisdom in the soul. The right angles of the cross can be seen as the eventual “cross purposes” of almost all of reality—and there Jesus hangs, and from

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there he teaches. Bonaventure was clearly a non-dual thinker who could see in wholes.

Bonaventure described the Great Chain of Being both in a historical and linear way—but also in terms of cosmic connectedness *along* the way! He was following Paul in Colossians: “In his body lives the fullness of divinity, and in him you will find your own fulfillment” (2:9–10), or “There is only Christ: He is everything and he is in everything” (3:11). We were created in unity, proceed forward insofar as we are in unity, and return to God’s full gift of final unity, according to Bonaventure’s reading of the Gospels. It is

grace before, during, and after.

For Bonaventure creation is quite simply the mirror and image of God, and he uses metaphors like footprint, fingerprint, effigy, likeness (*vestigia Dei*) to make his point in different contexts. Did his big God beget an equally big and generous cosmos? Or did his big cosmos imply a very big God? You can start on either side. For many in our time, an initial reverence for the universe leads them to then revere whoever created this infinity of Mystery and Beauty. As Francis said while looking at the stars one night, “If these are the creatures, what must the creator be like?”

Excerpted and adapted from Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi (Franciscan Media, 2014), available at store.cac.org. Used with permission.

Getting to Know our Donors

I was first introduced to Richard Rohr in the early 1980s when a friend gave me a set of Richard’s cassettes to listen to. I liked the spiritual information on and clarification of “religious issues,” but, as Republicans, my wife and I struggled with the social, political, and economic challenges Richard presented.

We then listened to the first set of Enneagram cassettes, which Pam and I both enjoyed, and, although we don’t generally believe in typing people, we discovered that I’m a 3 and Pam is a 9. Richard’s explanations helped us understand the false self, the ego, the shadow, and



the addictive natures of our Enneagram types, but we realize we still have to work on patience, understanding, and “holding the tension.”

I spend a lot of solitary time on a tractor, so I’ve listened to many of Richard’s cassette tapes over the years. Pam and I have attended several CAC-sponsored events in Albuquerque, viewed webcasts, and read his books. Although our spiritual journeys seem to be slow, dry, and uneventful, we do believe what Richard teaches—that spending time in contemplation is beneficial.

Randy and Pam Hruska own six Ace Hardware stores and run a cattle ranch seventy miles south of Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

LIVING SCHOOL *for* Action and Contemplation

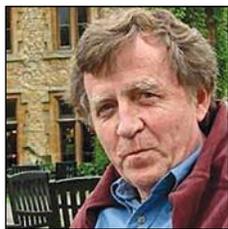
Living School core faculty reflect on their experience leading and participating in the program.



Without a doubt, my favorite part of this whole adventure has been the absolute joy of working with Jim and Richard to put together the courses and ponder challenges and opportunities during our monthly faculty phone calls. It's the way life ought to be!

Without any of those dreary personality turf wars and issues, we simply listen, spark off each other, and cross-pollinate. I've loved it, and I can't tell you how blessed I feel by the opportunity to work with these two extraordinary spiritual beings as friends and colleagues. When it's right, it's really right!!

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, PhD

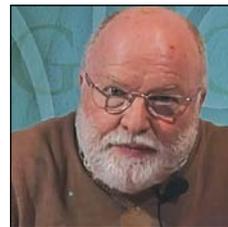


Gratitude is the word that best describes how I feel as I look forward to gathering for the Living School Symposium this September. I'm grateful for the fact that we are not gathering together simply for a few days that will quickly end, for our decision to be in the Living School expresses our

sincere commitment to return to our homes with a renewed and ongoing desire to live in the habitual experience of God's oneness with us in all things. I am grateful for the mysterious ways in which the mystical heritage of the Christian faith has, down through the centuries, continued to live on in the minds and hearts of those who have been awakened and responsive to its call. And I'm grateful for the fact that now it is our turn. Now we are the ones who have been

awakened to this call to surrender ourselves to God, who, in each breath and heartbeat, in each moment of our lives, is completely surrendered over to us.

James Finley, PhD



We have almost completed the first full year of the Living School. Beginning with the first symposium in September 2013 and continuing with online courses and five-day intensives in Albuquerque, our first 180 students are almost halfway through their program. I laid out our methodological foundation of the full integration of good Scripture, solid tradition, and honest inner experience, which always leads to creative action in our unique and specific worlds.

The quality of the faculty—Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault and Dr. James Finley—the spiritual direction of Rev. Carolyn Metzler, and, to be honest, the high quality of our students, have made the first year a quite wonderful experience, and we are looking forward to another cohort of 180 students joining us for the second symposium this September in New Mexico.

We are now also accepting applications for the 2015-2017 Living School program (the admissions period closes September 30, 2014). The process of applying in itself is an experience of learning through discernment, deepening awareness of the soul's longings, and the particular task to which one is called.

Richard Rohr, OFM, Academic Dean

Read Fr. Richard's full reflection at cac.org/richard-rohr/rr-articles

Staff Picks

"Fr. Richard's newest book, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*, challenged my comfortable view of the jolly, 'bird bath' saint. Knowing the real Francis calls for a selfless and courageous response through a life that is heartily engaged with the world, a life that is delighted and committed to loving." —Joelle Chase, Director of Messaging

"Three integral recordings that I thoroughly enjoyed and would highly recommend in anticipation of the Feast of Francis are 'In the Footsteps of Francis: Awakening to

Creation,' 'Franciscan Mysticism: I AM That Which I Am Seeking,' and 'Francis—turning the world on its head: subverting the honor/shame system.'" —Chris Spatz, Resource Center Manager

"In *Dancing Standing Still*, Richard reminds us of how important the 'and' is in 'action and contemplation.' For me, the impulse to choose one over the other is held in check by Richard's call to embrace the paradox and mystery found in between these modes of life." —Lee Staman, System's Librarian

Admissions are now open for the 2015-2017 Living School program!

Study with master teachers Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, and James Finley.

Explore from your own unique place and vocation.

Live out your soul task in service to the world.

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Learn more at cac.org/rohr-inst

(Application packets available through September 16; applications due September 30, 2014.)

ONLINE EDUCATION SELF-PACED, IN-DEPTH COURSES

Immortal Diamond:

A Study in Search of the True Self

September 24–December 3, 2014

The Franciscan Way:

Beyond the Bird Bath

October 1–November 19, 2014

Engage in conversation and study from your own home, in the company of seekers worldwide.

Register at cac.org

(No application needed! Registration closes September 17 or when course reaches capacity.)



NEW AUDIO TEACHING FROM FR. RICHARD!

St. Paul: The Misunderstood Mystic

Paul is perhaps the most important and yet misunderstood teacher of the Gospel. Many interpretations of his writings give the impression of a misogynistic, moralistic man. Yet Richard Rohr invites each of us to read Paul contemplatively, with a non-dual mind, and discover rich and mystical meaning in his teachings. In this brief talk, Fr. Richard introduces us to the Paul we never knew!

Order at store.cac.org

(Available as CD and MP3 download.)

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