



## "Mercy, within Mercy, within Mercy"

—Richard Rohr, OFM

This lovely line from Thomas Merton is quoted so often—for reasons still intriguing to me. Is it merely poetic diction, or was Merton naming something he had personally experienced—and for which we long? Pope Francis has declared this the Year of Mercy, for the worldwide church and for some very deliberate reasons and needs. Theologians are saying, "The very name of God is Mercy," as if it were a new discovery. The Vatican states that ten thousand symbolic Doors of Mercy are being built and swung open all over the world. I hope so, and I hope many can pass through them, or at least know that they are welcome.

What might be the reasons for this sudden popularity of the lovely notion of mercy? I believe it is because we live in a world that is finding itself bereft of human mercy and not sure it even needs divine mercy—certainly at the corporate level, but often at the individual level, where it is much harder to sustain. We have tried to create a watertight social system so that mercy is not needed, nor even attractive. *Mercy admits and accepts that not all problems can be solved by our techniques, formulas, and technology.* The "superfluous" opening of the human heart that we call mercy is essential for any structure or institution to remain human and humanizing.

Mercy is now left to isolated, somewhat rare, transformed believers. It is the exception worthy of the evening news or CNN's Heroes of the Year awards. Without social support, many would-be mercy-givers often crumble under the loneliness of "charity fatigue." It is no longer cool to be merciful, and in America it is often called "bleeding-heart liberalism." When this phrase is spoken, usually with disgust, many join in with a harrumph of self-satisfaction and even moral superiority. I suspect this is because we are all

afraid to "bleed," which is not very American, and therefore not at all acceptable.

In recent decades, as the world grows desperate, crowded, and fearful, doors of mercy have been forcefully shut rather than nudged open. Mercy still seems to be the exception rather than the rule, even among Christians, who believe that their religion is the imitation of Jesus. It seems that the concept of mercy is from another era, and the cardinals and bishops confirm this by seeming to say,

"Our laws and our customs are all we need." The Pope has to convince them that this un-earnable notion of mercy is not an option, but the very heart of the Gospel. He said in one of his addresses that, if we fail in mercy, which is at the top of our value system, the entire moral system of Christianity will fall like a deck of cards.

Jesus, in his opening remarks, rather forthrightly said, "Those who show mercy will have mercy shown to them" (Matthew 5:7). Yet it seems that many political and clerical patriarchs are so ensconced that they have no need for mercy, for themselves or others. *When you do not know you need it yourself, you become stingy in sharing it with others.*

We now live under the weight of so many unhealed memories, painful human woundings, political posturing and condemning, the need for power and control, a penal and judicial system which thinks

of mercy as an affront to justice, craven fear of—and even hatred for—anything outside ourselves, and centuries of legalistic religion, that the very word "mercy" seems newly introduced into our vocabulary—as if it were from a language other than our own, a truly foreign concept. It refuses our calculations.



*We live in a cold time, and we must now pray for the warming of hearts and opening of minds.*

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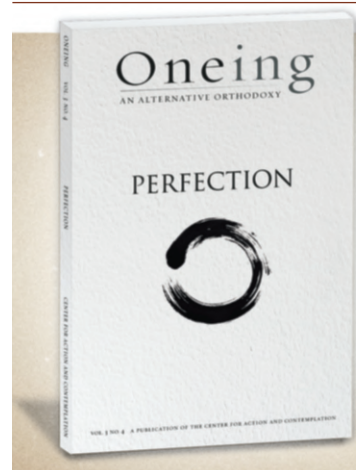



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—Richard Rohr

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## Getting to Know Our Donors: Jeanne S. Jemison

I was introduced to Richard Rohr through a gift copy of *Everything Belongs*. His writing resonated so deeply with me!

I grew up in an Episcopal church. As a teenager, I came to have a personal relationship with Jesus and later joined an evangelical church. I developed many close relationships and faith became central to my life. In my twenties, I began having lots of questions. I read broadly. The writings of Swiss physician Paul Tournier on the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—influenced my nascent medical practice. Biblical understandings of gender in Paul Jewett's *Man as Male and Female* guided me as I struggled with conservative teaching in my own church. During trying times and depression in my thirties, I was introduced to Anthony de Mello's work and contemplative practice through a Catholic retreat center. I grew into an awareness that there was nothing I could do to make God love me more and nothing I could do to make God love me less! What freeing, transformative knowledge that was for a high achiever trying to combine a medical teaching career with being a good wife and mother!

The breadth of my spiritual life and awareness took off; I learned from so many. But it was reading Richard's work that enabled me to grow into a "both/and" understanding. Instead of reacting against what I saw as the confining limitations of conservative Christian beliefs, I could relax and grow into more of a "yes/and" person.



That was major for me, for my marriage, and for my life. When Richard's book *The Naked Now* came out, I read it, paragraph by paragraph, over many months; then I read it again. On my third reading, I slowly and purposefully read the Bible verses referenced frequently throughout the book. It was like the Red Sea parting; I could see deep truths there that had been obscured by the tapes in my head from early fundamentalist Bible teaching. Such deep joy; it was like the Bible was given back to me.

Richard Rohr's both/and faith and understanding connect people from different vantage points, something our world desperately needs. His book *Falling Upward* has resonated with my husband, who loves and participates in our evangelical church. He's been able to give away that book and to articulate Richard's teachings to many in the evangelical fold in ways that have been warmly received.

Giving to the CAC is a joy; it is sowing seeds that can help transform our world!

*Jeanne S. Jemison, formerly a practitioner in general and behavioral pediatrics, recently became credentialed in palliative medicine and hospice after completing a fellowship at age sixty. Though having moved her practice from one end of the lifespan to the other, she continues to see her work as an opportunity to focus on the whole patient and family. She and her husband, Frank, have three grown children who are each making the world a better place.*

## "Mercy, within Mercy, within Mercy" continued from page 1

We've almost imploded as a nation, rather starkly revealed in most of the candidates we consider worthy of public office. (I am not sure if this is as much a judgment on their delusions as it is on the spiritual and human maturity of the American electorate itself.) Western culture really has become all about the self. Somehow, there is a huge disconnect between our self-image and our behavior. It defies understanding.

The rejection of or opposition to refugee women and children on US borders, and entire Syrian families fleeing for their very lives into the richest (per capita) continent of Europe, has suddenly brought the need for mercy into sharp and urgent focus. The unloving, glaringly self-centered, and even cruel behavior of so many Christians, Muslims, and Jews has become a form of full frontal nudity for all of the world to see. We live in a cold time, and we must now pray for the warming of hearts and opening of minds.

I began with Merton, and I close with a stanza from one of his poems:

Make ready for the Christ, Whose smile, like lightning,  
Sets free the song of everlasting glory  
That now sleeps in your paper flesh.<sup>1</sup>

May we grow tired of such sleeping and ask for flesh that feels, weeps, and even bleeds for the immense suffering of our world today.

Thank you for letting me speak so strongly, dear friends of the CAC. I do so because I believe you know our present situation demands it. In the words of Jesus, "the very stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40) if we remain silent!

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, "The Victory," *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 115.

## Schoolwork: A Reflection by Living School Student Andrew Breitenberg

I've been thinking about the relationship between what I "do for a living" and the Living School for Action and Contemplation. School has fostered a deepening and development of my contemplative life, so it's really a question of the relationship between my job and my faith journey. At first I thought the new purpose and direction filling my work was a result of the lessons and practices I've been learning at school. But I think it's more accurate to say that my "work life" and "faith life" are simply merging into one great stream.



I'm a creative. This term houses all the jobs—street artist, writer, book designer, app maker, and more—that (sometimes) help me pay the bills. My creative process makes neat ties to the Living School and its evolving syllabus of readings and practices. I practice intentional silence, breathing, situational awareness, opening a creative flow. But my studies have also shed purpose on the "non-creative" parts of my workday. There is paperwork, laundry, dishes, and cleaning up after my angelic-hellion two- and four-year-old children! The Living School has taught me that intention, love, and personality are all brought to bear upon every type of work. These brutally mundane tasks, when taken as "conscious labor,"<sup>1</sup> are suddenly found to be doing the priceless work of detaching me from my ego—and my ego is the culprit in convincing me to see things as separate, finite, and somehow "mine."

This merging—walking on an unboundaried path that begins to unify all the types of work I do throughout the day—has been an obvious side-effect of the Living School experience. But if I take it a step further, having seen the

unification of the different types of work, I realize I've been treating my whole life as a bunch of compartments (e.g., work and faith) to be brought together, rather than simply seeing it all as a single, flowering field. My ego has been trying to have an experience of God or have a career, and this only reinforced in me the false sense of ownership over my life, a strange and finite separateness between things. "I lay the pieces of my life on your altar and watch for fire to descend" (Psalm 5:3, MSG). I think of putting my piecemeal, mine/yours thinking on the altar alongside everything else.

There is a reconciling energy that illuminates possibilities in the here-and-now and teaches me how to say "yes, and" in the present moment. This unifying view or "third eye" has shown me that, after all, work and faith are part of a single fabric; the lessons from one, applied to another, are of a single wisdom; the energy in each piece springs from the same Source. It's a big, unfolding, luminous map, where the lines of the road are constantly appearing just beneath our feet as we walk along, let go—and offer thanks.

*Andrew Breitenberg lives and works in Virginia Beach, Virginia, with his wife, Mariab, and two kiddos. Please send feedback to breitenberg@gmail.com*

<sup>1</sup> "Conscious labor" is work undertaken without thought for reward or the "fruits" of the labor. When we undertake the task without regard to the fruits of the action, this deepens an inner posture of letting go—being content with sowing seeds that others will reap. For more, see George Gurdjieff.

## What is a Living School Intensive?

As the Director of Education for the Living School for Action and Contemplation, and an alumnus of the Living School program, I have been able to witness the powerful transformative process that takes place as our students participate in an on-site intensive. What is an intensive? Why is it important? This article will articulate some responses to these questions.

The on-site, small-group intensives, held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, occur during the second year of the two-year Living School program, with students attending one of four intensives. These intensives include the opportunity to learn in person with Fr. Richard Rohr, whose teachings

help students understand the ongoing dialogical relationship between the sacred scriptures of all the world religions, the universal wisdom traditions, philosophy, psychology, art, and poetry. All of these contribute to the wisdom way of knowing and help create the foundation for discerning key wisdom themes. In addition, students participate in teachings on spiritual discernment and are offered the option to spend time with a spiritual director. This is an opportunity for students to focus on integrating the Living School teachings into their lives.

Throughout the intensive, students engage in various contemplative practices that allow time for personal as well as group processing and engagement. Every day begins with

*The Living School Intensive is a plunge into clarification. That which is untrue and unsustainable in me could be seen in new ways while, simultaneously, fresh depths of self materialize. Both became recognized and held through trustworthy theology, personal experience, and deep relationship.*

—Anna, Living School student

# Teaching Contemplative Prayer to Prisoners: Ray Leonardini

In the fall of 2015, Ray Leonardini shared his story with Fr. Richard and the CAC staff. A former lawyer, Ray practiced government and nonprofit law for nearly thirty years. After his retirement, he turned toward his foremost area of interest: the Christian spiritual journey. For the last five years, as a volunteer chaplain, he has led prayer groups and taught contemplative prayer and the spiritual journey at Folsom State Prison in California. He is also the Director of Prison Contemplative Fellowship (PCF), an association of current and former prison inmates committed to reaching out to prisoners and their families.



new awareness of the Divine presence in their midst. Volunteers feel privileged to be able to sit with prisoners as God works profoundly in their lives. Praying in solidarity with prisoners opens volunteers to a new understanding of why Jesus spent his time with the lost and marginalized. He was not simply trying to be inclusive. Jesus experienced an increased knowledge of God's mercy and love through the lives of these "favorites" of God.

Those with a contemplative practice who volunteer in prisons and jails discover that the incarcerated are a hidden-away, fertile audience for the contemplative gifts of the

**W**hile they generally have limited education, most prisoners bring with them profound experiences of life's complex challenges. They carry deep stories of suffering, emotional trauma, early childhood abuse, abandonment, betrayal, and memories of the devastation caused by rampant addictions, their own and others. Living in prison is a daily experience of suffering and violence that must somehow be brought into their prayer practice.

When prisoners have a contemplative practice like Centering Prayer, surprising things happen. Those without any formal religious affiliation find a way of relating to the Divine, as they see themselves and their world from a new perspective. Those who never thought of prayer as a means of discovering the deeper self, find themselves now praying in silence as a daily practice. Those who carry early life trauma and abuse begin to heal.

Prison volunteers who witness these enormous changes are themselves transformed. They seem to "cross over" into a

Divine. Prison Contemplative Fellowship was started out of this sense of contemplative wonder, and in solidarity with prisoners.

PCF sends materials, in English and Spanish, at no cost, to volunteers, prison chaplains, and directly to prisoners, to assist them in fostering and sustaining a practice of contemplative prayer. As of December 2015, three hundred and fifty prisons, and nearly six hundred prisoners, have received Finding God Within, Contemplative Prayer For Prisoners and other related materials. Many of these prisoners want to start a contemplative prayer circle in their prison, but no volunteers are available.

*To learn more about Prison Contemplative Fellowship, please visit [USPCF.org](http://USPCF.org), which provides a wide range of information for prison contemplative prayer practitioners in prisons and jails. You may also write to PCF, P.O. Box 1086, Folsom, CA 95763-1086 or email [Office@USPCF.org](mailto:Office@USPCF.org).*

a contemplative teaching and practice led by Fr. Richard. Additionally, students participate in a silent lunch, quiet time, walking meditation, chanting, Tai Chi Chih, and the creative arts. They also meet within small-group circles, facilitated by members of the Living School staff. The small-group circle provides a safe and comfortable place for students to speak and listen from the heart. Each day ends with one of the small groups leading a Vespers service. The purpose of these practices, including community-building activities, is to allow students to integrate a contemplative practice with their learning experience. The final day of the intensive ends with a Eucharistic service and a celebratory meal.

Students often say that the intensive is the most important part of their Living School experience. Many have forged

ongoing relationships during their experience. It is the hope of the Living School faculty and staff that the Living School experience, including the intensives, will bear fruit in the lives of the students, so that they can then share that fruit with their families and those whom they are being called to serve.

—Tom Eberle

*My experience at the intensive gently empowered my process of discovering God and myself. Like drinking water that flows freely, my soul was refreshed with old and new insights, cleansed in a vulnerable and loving community, and restored to the contemplative practice that reminds me of who I am.*

—Marcos, Living School student

*Tom Eberle received a PhD in Education with a focus on Institutional Analysis from North Dakota State. He has been involved in Catholic education for thirty-three years, most recently as teacher and principal at St. Mary's Central High School in Bismarck, North Dakota. He and his wife,*

*Andrea, have two grown children. Tom is administrative director for CAC's two-year Living School program, digital Living Library, and self-paced online courses.*

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The Center for Action and Contemplation seeks to teach a contemplative way of knowing and living. Unitive consciousness—the awareness that we are all one in Love—lays a solid foundation for social critique and acts of justice.

I believe it's especially important for those of us who are comfortable and privileged—whether we are white, financially secure, male, or have some other social “advantage”—to nurture a contemplative mind. Only through the eyes of the Divine Witness can we learn to see that to which we are mostly blind. Only when we are listening from the True Self, not the protective ego, can we hear the truth about ourselves and the unjust system in which we participate.

Christena Cleveland, one of our CONSPIRE speakers this July, wrote recently about how hopelessness is actually a privilege. Those of us who are well-off and at ease have the luxury of feeling despair. It's easy to look around at our dysfunctional politics, endemic racism, the unbalanced distribution of wealth, and climate change and become overwhelmed . . . and then disengaged. But those who are oppressed or connected intimately with systemic suffering have the greatest capacity—and sense the most urgency—for hope and for compassion.

As a white, educated, American clergyman, I realize I'm privileged on so many counts. From my own experience, I know I need a contemplative practice to rewire my mind. Some form of the prayer of quiet is necessary to touch me at the unconscious level, the level where deep and lasting transformation occurs. From my place of prayer, I am able to understand more clearly what is mine to do and have the courage to do it.

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I hope you will let God show you how to think and live in new ways, ways that meet the very real needs of our time on this planet.

Peace and Every Good,

Richard Rohr, OFM

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# CONSPIRE 2016

## EVERYTHING BELONGS

FRIDAY, JULY 15–SUNDAY, JULY 17, 2016  
IN PERSON, ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO • LIVE WEBCAST WORLDWIDE



RICHARD ROHR • CHRISTENA CLEVELAND • JAMES ALISON • MIRABAI STARR

*“Give people a common enemy,  
and you will give them a common identity.  
Deprive them of an enemy and you will deprive them  
of the crutch by which they know who they are.”*

—James Alison

When we realize that everything belongs, when we discover who we truly are as God’s beloveds, there is no longer any reason to scapegoat or exclude anyone. Rather than directly fighting evil and untruth, we must bring them into the Light of Love.

Learn more at [cac.org](http://cac.org).

Register soon for the in-person conference (limited seating)!

Webcast registration includes access to the video replay through August 21, 2016. Scholarships are available.

### 2016 CAC Webcasts – Save the Dates!

- April 12: Kathleen Dowling Singh and Richard Rohr  
(*Register soon!\**)
- May 2: Christena Cleveland and Richard Rohr
- July 12: James Alison and Richard Rohr
- August 25: Mary Evelyn Tucker
- December 6: Cynthia Bourgeault, James Finley,  
and Richard Rohr

Register for as little as \$1 for each webcast!

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\*Register no later than 4:00 p.m., US Mountain Time, on April 12, 2016, to participate in the April 12 live webcast and/or to view the replay.

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