

# The Practice of Action and Contemplation

LAVERA CRAWLEY

Fr. Richard Rohr's informational video for the newly forming Living School was the first I'd ever heard of CAC. His message captivated me. At the time, I was in the throes of a midlife crisis, having decided to leave a longstanding career in medicine and bioethics to pursue a deeper calling to what Henri Nouwen called "radical servanthood." That call led to a new vocation in hospital chaplaincy, which ultimately required me to attend seminary.

Richard's video invitation to enter into a deep engagement with the Christian contemplative wisdom lineage

prayer or a myriad of other intentional forms of devotional and disciplined activity.

The link between action and contemplation is so simply and beautifully captured in the Franciscan teaching that faith begins in the *practice of everyday life*. This is the first meaning of the word practice. It begins with humility. In all the ups and downs—my joys and sorrows, my triumphs and stumbles—what I humbly face each day is the source of my deepest learning and growth. What also binds my actions and contemplation is symbolized in the Trinity, our divine interrelatedness and interdependency. This is prac-



tice in the second sense of the word—my practice of love, augmented by the practice of thoughtfulness, compassion, and solidarity. This is how I see and live the mission and vision of CAC. It is an invitation into a place and a practice for the transformation and healing of ourselves and of a world that so desperately needs it.

LAVERA CRAWLEY, Secretary of CAC's Board of Directors, has followed the path of "radical servanthood" as a physician on the Navajo Indian Reservation; an at-home mom; an empirical bioethicist at Stanford University, focusing on health inequities at the end of life; and now as a hospital chaplain, practicing the art of spiritual companionship. LaVera serves on CAC's Human Resources Committee and the Board of Directors' Nominating Committee.

through an "alternative seminary" was exactly what I was seeking. As a member of the inaugural class—of the appropriately named *Living School*—the teachings, faculty, and students became my companions through my chaplaincy training. For all the many meanings the school's name can evoke, one that speaks to me daily is that the teachings now *live* in me. I see this in every part of my life—most recently in my work as a member of the CAC Board.

The invitation to become an integral part of the Center for Action and Contemplation was an invitation into a deeper commitment to *practice*. As a verb, the word "practice" evokes humility, suggesting that I am *not there yet*—that there is a need to keep performing some skill to become more proficient at it. As a noun, it provides direction, pointing to an actual discipline, like contemplative

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## CAC: The Next Thirty Years [continued from page 2]

many places. In CAC's Living School, Cynthia Bourgeault and Jim Finley join Fr. Richard as teaching faculty and offer their own unique contributions to it, speaking directly to the spiritual hunger and disillusionment so many are experiencing. A case in point: While seminaries across the country close down, we can only accommodate one-fifth of Living School applicants and more than two hundred seventy thousand people now receive our Daily Meditations. I share this not to celebrate CAC or Fr. Richard, but to highlight the exciting opportunities at the heart of our future.

After a year of prayer and reflection, we are now launching into a new vision for CAC. Our aim is to help Fr. Richard's message and vision continue to have impact in the world for generations to come. We will continue to support his own teaching for as long as he offers it. However, with his guidance, we will focus on providing opportunities for transformative spiritual experiences and practices rooted in this alternative orthodoxy and not just the work of any single teacher. For the first time, we will also form other partnerships with teachers who live and teach from this same vision and broaden our programs and mediums to serve the aspirations of a new generation of seekers.

## A Reflection on the Living School [continued from page 4]

and dynamic faithfulness to its originating vision. Since all three of us core faculty are now in our seventies, it's perhaps a bit unrealistic to talk about being in it "for the long haul." But, with an amazing young leadership team now in place and fully co-creating this school, the future seems hopeful indeed. This is authentic Wisdom transmission.

<sup>1</sup> Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 106.

Jim and Cynthia, our amazing Living School faculty, have already signed on to join Fr. Richard as the inaugural Core Faculty for CAC as a whole. We have also begun assembling an expanded staff whose talent and passion will be instrumental in realizing this new strategy. Most of what we have in mind is yet to come. In all things, we will seek to maintain our founding mission of offering authentically Christian teaching that liberates individuals and communities for the work of love and compassion in our world.

We are humbled and grateful for the leadership and contributions of all who have shaped CAC's history before us, for the humility and generosity Fr. Richard has shown throughout this process, and for the ongoing support we receive from you. We hope and trust that the partnerships formed with each of you to help bring Fr. Richard's voice into the world will continue to give life and legs to his vision for another thirty or more years!

MICHAEL POFFENBERGER, Executive Director of the CAC, guides the Center's work of teaching contemplative spirituality. He is passionate about helping people connect with their sacred vocation in service to the needs of the world.

REV. CYNTHIA BOURGEAULT is a modern-day mystic, Episcopal priest, writer, and internationally known retreat leader. Cynthia divides her time between solitude at her seaside hermitage in Maine and global teaching to spread the recovery of the Christian contemplative and wisdom path. The founding Director of both The Contemplative Society and the Aspen Wisdom School, Cynthia is the author of numerous books.



A collision of opposites forms the cross of Christ.  
One leads downward preferring the truth of the humble.  
The other moves leftward against the grain.  
But all are wrapped safely inside a hidden harmony:  
One world, God's cosmos, a benevolent universe.

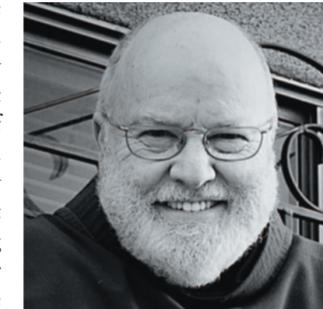
Center for Action and Contemplation

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# MENDICANT

## THIRTY YEARS LATER

On October 12, 1987, we set up an office in the old barracks at Holy Family Parish in Albuquerque. It was the formal beginning of the Center for Action and Contemplation. I had moved to New Mexico a year earlier and spent that year meeting with, visiting, and learning from other groups that were working for peace, social change, and on behalf of the marginalized.



ends meet through the conferences and private donations, but mostly through the generosity of the Franciscans. As a Franciscan, I cannot personally "own" anything, so all my book and recording royalties belonged to the Order of Friars Minor. Without much precedent, and at their initiative, they trusted us enough to hand over the royalties to support the Center. We are forever grateful, and I am forever grateful for the education, freedom, and support that I have received from my

beloved community. During that year, I was invited by the Archbishop of Santa Fe to establish an organization here. He even offered me several unused church properties in which to begin our work. However, I thought it best to align with my own Franciscan tradition by locating on the grounds of Holy Family, in a poorer part of the city. The mile-long Five Points Road has now become our own "holy land," with the main CAC building itself, the Visitor Center, a community garden a little further down the road, a Catholic Worker partner in the other direction, and now the three-acre vineyard called Tierra Encantada (Enchanted Land), which might just become our new Center, as we consider turning these other buildings into guest housing.

These physical spaces housed and protected a growing spiritual space for twenty years of internship programs, the publishing of various periodicals and the Daily Meditations, and the first classes of our Living School. From the beginning, we held large and small public conferences at various locations, most of them at the Hotel Albuquerque in nearby Old Town.

Our staff and board kept growing in "wisdom, age, and grace," to the present group of over thirty-five full- and part-time employees, along with a dozen highly qualified board members from all over the country. We made

beloved community.

If I had imagined, thirty years ago, that we would be in the position we are today, my imaginings would never have been this wonderful. Yes, we went through many trials as the staffing matured and the vision clarified. The basic vision has remained constant: To operate as a "school for prophets," an almost "underground seminary" to teach the alternative Franciscan Orthodoxy of both praxis and prayer, action and contemplation. Our name has held us to our vocation.

By the grace of God, we are still in a very structurally free position to be *on the edge of the inside* of institutional churches and religions—and thus free to see and say things that often cannot be seen or expressed from institutional perspectives. I hope we are also always at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus. Our orthodoxy is not right and theirs wrong. It is just alternative—and not as easily seen.

So we thank God for doing so much right—even while we did plenty wrong—in our process of growing up. We ask forgiveness from any whom we have disappointed or offended. We also ask for your prayers, that we can continue to do God's work for the healing of our suffering world.

*Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not.*

Thank You to All!

—RICHARD ROHR

# CAC: The Next Thirty Years

MICHAEL POFFENBERGER

Looking back on our thirty-year history, I am deeply humbled by the outsized impact Fr. Richard's teaching and CAC programs have had on the world. From daily e-mail meditations to immersive experiences with poor communities in Ciudad Juarez, hundreds of thousands of people have come for support and growth in their spiritual lives. Woven together as the shared grace of transformation in action, each of their stories and encounters comprise the tapestry of the CAC.

As Fr. Richard enters the twilight of his active life and we continue to support his work, we also face daunting

Fr. Richard's own body of work is the basis for this conviction. Over the years, his cumulative teachings have advanced the case for a paradigmatic shift in how we understand our Christian tradition. Recovering wisdom carried for millennia on the margins of the institutional Church, and following in the footsteps of St. Francis, Thomas Merton, and other modern mystics, his Christianity is more about developing contemplative seeing than professing "correct" dogma, more about participating in the sacredness of everything than joining a privi-



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questions about our future. We must ask: What legacy is he leaving behind and what does that mean for our work—today and in the years ahead?

Last year, we undertook a yearlong process of reflection and discernment about both our past and our future. We consulted peers and experts, conducted surveys and interviews with our followers and supporters, and mined the depths of our own history for insight. Our conclusions were clear. CAC has significant opportunities to continue serving and building on Fr. Richard's founding vision for many years to come—potentially even more powerfully than ever.

leged elect, more future-anticipating than past-worshipping. It is rooted in historical Christian orthodoxy and the life of Jesus, but can also see and honor wisdom from any denomination or tradition. He—and we—refer, in shorthand, to this way of seeing as the "alternative orthodoxy" of the Christian contemplative tradition.

Though the clarity of his voice and breadth of his synthesis are unique, Fr. Richard is far from the only one advancing this vision. Largely underground and nurtured in monastic communities, it seems to be bubbling up now in [continued on back page]

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# Connecting Through a Contemplative Mystical Heritage

JAMES FINLEY

My understanding of CAC, and why it's so meaningful to me, comes out of having been in the monastery with Thomas Merton. Through Merton, I was immersed in the contemplative mystical heritage of my own Christian faith—opening me to all the contemplative traditions of the world and prompting in me a heightened sensitivity to respond to suffering in the world, wherever it occurs. That kind of radical incarnate love in the midst of the world, through this ongoing inner awakening, was deeply meaningful to me.

When I left the monastery, I wanted to share that and wrote *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*. I started to give retreats around the country on this lineage and way of living. I was told numerous times that Richard Rohr liked my book. I was aware of Richard's work and saw that Richard was doing what Merton was doing, because Merton said that all renewal in the church is returning to the original fire of the founder. For Richard, it was going back to the original fire of Francis and Clare, which goes back to the mystery of love crucified.

I first met Richard when we were both on the circuit giving retreats. He felt very down-to-earth to me and we were very comfortable with each other. He invited me to come to CAC to give a weekend retreat. We kept in touch, and then I was invited to do a couple weekend programs and conferences with Richard.

Eventually I was invited to join the CAC as a member of the core faculty of the Living School, together with Richard and Cynthia Bourgeault. It was home

It's our turn to pass on this lineage of transformation.

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base for me. Merton was bearing witness to contemplative Christianity at the monastery; Richard was bearing witness to contemplative Christianity in the midst of the world. That's why I find it so meaningful.

Merton said that a lot of Catholics are losing their faith in church because the church is not bearing witness to its own mystical lineage. When you do start to bear witness to it, you see this huge response—this hunger in people. I think that's what CAC is all about. CAC responds to that hunger, bears witness to it, and then offers trustworthy guidance in how to follow that path and share it with other people. It's our turn to pass on this lineage of transformation. CAC is, for me, a kind of homecoming and a chance to share this with others.



JAMES FINLEY is a contemplative teacher, writer, and author and a retired clinical psychologist. He leads retreats throughout the United States and Canada, attracting men and women from all religious traditions who seek to live a contemplative way of life in today's busy world. Early in his life, James lived as a cloistered monk at the Trappist monastery of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, where Thomas Merton was his spiritual director.

# A Reflection on the Living School

CYNTHIA BOURGEAULT

This school would carry forward that impelling CAC vision of the seamless unity of contemplation and action.



competent, committed Christians who could carry the Gospel's revolutionary social vision forward into the world in a way that effected real change.

I was thrilled beyond belief when the Rohr-Bourgeault-Finley team was invited to reassemble as the core faculty of the Living School. We launched in 2013 and every year has just gotten better.

I won't go into all the wonderful and unique features of this school, but, speaking personally, I would say that the school represents a dream-come-true in my own teaching career. "Collegium" is a classic word for describing a university or seminary faculty, but all too often this "collegiality" rings hollow, marked by large egos and academic turf wars. Not so in our wee trinity; it's more like we finish each other's sentences! We seem to flow together with an effortless humility and cooperation, which is actually a delight in the uniquely precious piece that each one of us brings to the table. I'm sure this modeling rubs off on our students, but we're not really modeling—we're simply flowing with grace.

The Living School is a beautiful expression of the CAC's maturing identity [continued on back page]

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## CAC TIMELINE

Milestones in our 30-year history



1987

Richard Rohr founded the CAC to support the transformation of individuals who can transform the world. Through contemplative practice and living—letting go of the egoic or false self—we can transform rather than transmit our individual and collective pain. Fr. Richard chose New Mexico because of its proximity to those on the margins and its Franciscan heritage.

1988-2012

The CAC's quarterly publication, *Radical Grace*, illustrated how the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. In 2013, *Radical Grace* morphed into *Oneing*, a literary journal, and *the Mendicant*, a free newsletter.



1988-2011

Through 9-day and 9-month immersions in Albuquerque and the US/Mexico border, CAC interns studied contemplative practice and "the bias from the bottom," experiencing firsthand that "we don't think ourselves into new ways of living but live ourselves into new ways of thinking."



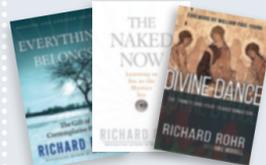
1995

After feeling called to minister in Africa, Fr. Richard discerned that his vocation and the CAC's mission was to remain in the US and teach the spiritual path of descent.



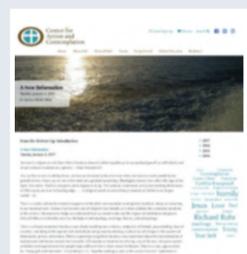
2002

Following Fr. Richard's study of masculine spirituality, CAC launched the Men As Learners and Elders (MALEs) initiation program. In 2012, Illuman was formed to sustain this work, offering rites of passage and other ways of empowering men's True Selves.



2003-2017

Fr. Richard released his most impactful books, including *Everything Belongs*, *The Naked Now*, *Falling Upward*, and *The Divine Dance*, reclaiming forgotten truths and helping CAC work to rebuild Christian spirituality "from the bottom up."



2008

CAC began sending Richard's Daily Meditations via email to just a few thousand friends and supporters.

2013

The Living School was born, a two-year program of systematic formation in Scripture, Christian mystics, and inner experience. Cynthia Bourgeault and James Finley joined Fr. Richard as core faculty. Together, they guide students through an "alternative orthodoxy" that emphasizes orthopraxy (right practice).



2015

The first Living School class finished. "Sendees" now live out their learning in diverse fields and communities, from Cleve McIntosh making anti-malarial drugs more accessible in South Africa to Teresa Pasquale Mateus founding the "Mystic Soul Project" to highlight contemplative healing practices from communities of color.

2016

After a year of study and reflection, the CAC adopted a new future vision aiming to "awaken a more loving world" in partnership with an expanded faculty of teachers rooted in the Christian contemplative tradition.



2017

Together at Snowmass Monastery in Colorado, Fr. Richard and other elder contemplative founders symbolically passed on the mantle of future leadership to a new generation of teachers and practitioners.

2017

More than two hundred seventy thousand people now receive our Daily Meditations.

270,000



2018 and on

With help from supporters, CAC plans to sustain Fr. Richard's founding vision, partner with new teachers, and serve the next generation of seekers and changemakers, all in service to a more loving world.