



**Leadership Spotlight:
Interview with CAC Executive Director
Unedited Transcript**

Mark Longhurst: Hey everyone. This is Mark Longhurst, your Living School Alumni Newsletter Curator, and this is an interview that I recorded with Center for Action and Contemplation's Executive Director Michael Poffenberger. In this conversation we discussed topics such as what led him to work with the CAC, how he encountered Fr. Richard's work, the CAC's future state vision, and the new DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) process. I also asked about what mystic he is learning from, and Michael shared some poignant reflections about Fr. Richard and his upcoming book. I hope you enjoy. So, hey Michael, thank for doing an interview for the Living School alumni community. I'm so glad to talk to you today.

Michael Poffenberger: Thank you, Mark. It's my pleasure.

Mark: Well, I'm sure that most of the alumni community knows you, has likely met you, but part of the goal here is to give a sense of where you come from, what you're excited about with the CAC, and what your leadership is like, and also to give alumni a picture of what's developing for the future of this organization that we all care so much about, the Center for Action and Contemplation. First, I'd like to jump in and ask about you. How long have you been at the CAC and what brought you to this position?

Michael: Well, I've been here four years now. I packed up my truck June 1, 2014, and drove across country kind of at the last minute to start off as a consultant to the board. We were going through a transitional period and I had been on the board and they had asked for some help. So that's when I arrived. I became Executive Director a few months later. I realized when I arrived here just what a huge and inspiring vision, you know, Richard for this place, and I knew it'd impacted me deeply at a personal level, but I really thought that that sense of the vision and the scope of what was possible for the future. And so when the board asked if I'd be interested in applying for the job, you know, I did. It was really exciting. To me, the only real question was whether I'm actually fit to work, because I think it's such a big and important work right now. Before I packed up my truck I'd run an organization, a human rights organization in DC that that did policy work for the decade prior to that. Richard's men's spirituality work had really become my primary spiritual community for that. But I was really much more oriented towards seeking structural change in our world. But I've had a long fascination with the mystics. I grew up in a mixed Catholic and Protestant family and when I was in college I took a spring break in my freshman year. At the last minute I had a trip that was canceled and some friends invited me to take a road trip to Gethsemani monastery in Kentucky where Thomas Merton had lived. So I spent a week at Gethsemani and was really, really impacted by Merton, and then I've maintained a standing interest in studying of the mystics since then.

Mark: You mentioned that you were familiar with Richard Rohr's work before you came to the CAC. Can you give an example of how his work touched your life before coming?

Michael: I've known of Richard, you know, probably I don't know when, but I'm sure some time during my college experience. I was really involved in communities kind of at that intersection in the Catholic world that's kind of the spirituality and social justice. I was involved with the Catholic Worker in town and other kinds of programs like that. But when Richard's work really came to the fore I had—I was in DC and experienced this real kind of just the—I reached the end of my own

capacities to be an agent of change based on my own willpower. And I felt just absolutely dried up. I mean a classic case of burn out, when you realize that the world is not going to change to your demands of it, you know. And a really close mentor of mine, who was one of the founders, and is still on the staff at the Sojourner's community, this guy Bob Sabbath, encouraged me to look into the Men's Rites of Passage. And so I did that, and, you know, and I think it really gave me two things. It gave me, one, a reintroduction into kind of the discipline of contemplative practice and contemplative practice in community that I became more dedicated to after that. I started a small group of some friends and really drove down that road. And then two, I think Richard's work on—particularly with the male journey, I think, around how we deal with power and powerlessness, and I think, you know, in the activist community, and particularly, this is one of the wounds that is hidden and needs to be healed around, because power is an instrument of pursuing the things that we care about. And so how you marry that to the spiritual path of descent and this capacity to own and integrate the reality of our own finiteness, of the reality of our own powerlessness ultimately. You know, I think Richard's men's work teaches just beautifully on that, and I could feel how much that was a balm that I needed to be working with much more deeply. And so those are the teachings that really got me started and since then, obviously, I've been inspired by the whole broader scope and range of his—almost impossible, I would say, scope of the work that he's done over the last 40 years.

Mark: Could you share about what the future state vision is and what you're excited about?

Michael: Yeah, absolutely. You know, when I came into the position, the board really tasked me with the primary question of discerning what's the future, if any, beyond Fr. Richard. And so we spent a really dedicated year-and-a-half process of discernment and consultations focused on that question. I think the danger within the organization as tied to its founder as we are—is that we can't think past our founder in the sense that our future is just tied to the person of the founder and not tied to the animating spirit and vision that really has inspired Richard for all these years. So that's really what we tried to unpack and understand more deeply through that process. What is that vision and what's the relevance that it has to the world that we face today and to the Christianity that we face today? And so where we landed is really locating CAC's work within this kind of unique historical moment for Western Christianity. You know, Richard has been saying this, but to really own the CAC is about a new reformation. I mean that's been in our vision statements all along, and I don't know that we've ever institutionally really kind of grappled with what that means. But he really envisioned and we really envisioned that we are on the verge of these massive disruptions in terms of how Western Christianity is taught and practiced. And we think that's a very good thing and then we think that drawing on the mystical dimensions of Christianity as Richard and our other faculty have done is the key to our future. And so the future of our Christianity is more about half of transformation than a system of beliefs, to put it, you know, succinctly. And so what we're trying to do with the future state vision and vision for us is to provide one embodiment of that. You know, there's going to be a massive landscape of experimentation and innovation that's needed to carry this tradition into the future to protect the jewels of Christianity's impact on the world, the potential impact on the world and to see that realized in new ways. But our vision is for a kind of faculty of teachers. So not just Richard but partnering with a faculty of people who not only study and understand the same kind of depth of Christian history and practice that Richard does, but are living embodiments of it, you know. The kinds of people that we want to learn from, because, you know, we catch as much as we, you know, vision is caught, not just taught. And you know folks like Jim and Cynthia who we have been partnering with really more of with this process. And then also, quite meaningfully build not just a platform for teaching kind of didactic insights and theology, but really a path of transformation and a community of students who are committed to that path. And so building the infrastructure that we could integrate our teachers into and provide as a community of

learning, a community of transformation for a broader community of our audience and our students. So that's now what we're trying to build, to lay the groundwork for. And I think within that CAC has this unique kind of—Richard is a—Ilia Delio, one of our other guest teachers, referred to him as a “vernacular theologian,” which is her kind of academic way of saying, “He is able to take these insights and drill them down at a level where they're really accessible and they're really relevant to people who are earlier on in their journey of understanding this path, understanding the mystics.” And so I think at CAC we really have a responsibility that that's part of our role that we want carried forward. That there's going to a whole infrastructure, a whole ecosystem and efforts that's needed to help people deepen down the path, that how can we be an amazing front door to that path, an amazing connection for people who are yearning for that—whose hearts long for that depth of that path and just need the right first step into it. How can we give them that first step and then orient them towards the depth of journey and community with other students. And so that's what we imagine our future role would be that we're trying to now occupy more directly and that we think Richard's work has really been—no, we don't think—I mean Richard himself is saying that's what his work has always been about.

Mark: For our alumni who are listening what role, if any, do they and we play in how the future state vision unfolds?

Michael: The Living School started what we refer to as an experiment in a formation experience grounded in the mystics. Richard has called it an underground seminary, but I think we're realizing it's less a seminary; we're not trying to train pastors. It's more of an underground kind of monastic formation. I think Richard was really humbled—Fr. Thomas Keating, the father of Contemplative Outreach, said that Richard Rohr, in a recent conversation that he thinks that the Living School is the only true kind of systematic teaching of the contemplative tradition for laypeople that exists that he sees out there. That we're not just trying to get people one part of the pie. Not just the theology, not just the theology, not just some other practices, not just the history, but all of it, in a kind of comprehensive formation experience that really sets people up to be living on this path in their own context. So, I think from the beginning what first and foremost helped our alumni is that they feel equipped by their experiences in Living School to sustain that path in their lives beyond the Living School experience, and to do that in a way that helps them to be more effective agents of change or agents of awakening love in our world in each of their contexts. And that through their relationship forming and this form of relationships within the alumni that they can find a community of support, you know, like-minded peers on the path, people who can be sources of encouragement and further wisdom, and even concrete resources for the many incredible initiatives and the great work that many of our alumni are engaged in in the world. And so there's a certain infrastructure to that we still want to build, but our first and foremost hope is just that Living School alumni are equipped with the knowledge, the practices, and the relationships to be on the sustained path of transformation that helps them serve our world more effectively. So I think that's the first hope. And there's definitely a role for us as an institution to just create the connectivity that enables that to happen. But it's a very limited role, you know, and it's up to the alumni in a lot of ways to take that initiative and to be on that path themselves. Because the secondary piece that I think is becoming clearer as we start implementing the future state vision. We've waited to organize a really formal structured alumni program out of a kind of fear that it would become captive to what the alumni immediately wants, which is it tends to be more teaching, more contact with the teachers as opposed to what we think is actually most needed in the broader landscape. And those two things are obviously not mutually exclusive, but we want to get clearer on ends and means before we really try to build the structure of it. So what we are talking about is that, as we were saying earlier that if we take this idea that our institution is about a new reformation, a historical moment of renewal for the Christian tradition, then how can our alum also be equipped as kind of incubators or innovators or leaders of

the diversity of efforts that are going to be entailed in that. So we're looking at kind of concrete frameworks of leadership development. So, for those alum who really do feel called and equipped to be concretely trying to develop communities of practice or embodying different forms of leadership that are going to be necessary for this broader ecology of the new reformation to arise, I think that that's the one piece that we're now taking more seriously in how can we build the structures that help—for those alum that do feel called into that, how do we help them do that. And I think once we get a little bit clearer on that then I think we're going to feel much more confident about launching the alumni program structurally. I don't want to get ahead of myself, but I'm going to anyways and just kind of tip off that we're almost finalized on the decision to make CONSPIRE 2019, which is the final CONSPIRE conference in the seven-conference series. So, the seven conferences are all about the seven themes of Richard's alternative orthodoxy that he taught in the Living School. And so the final one is on non-dual consciousness. And so what we're talking about is instead of just having that be a normal CONSPIRE where we invite everybody, we actually start by making it a pilgrimage for our Living School alum, invite them back to Albuquerque and really pass the vision in a much more practical way for where we see this work going beyond the lifetimes even of our existing faculty and invite alumni as participants in that, as contributors to that, as embodiments of that, as the agents of change that we've always been about. And so just to put that on people's radar to think about CONSPIRE 2019; it's in September, and it will be anchored by our core faculty. So you come back really organized around that and have that be a moment of unveiling of our future, an invitation to our community to be a part of that co-creation process.

Mark: I'll see you in September 2019 and I hope others will too. Under your leadership the CAC has recently started a DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) process. CAC as an organization is going through this process of looking at practices of diversity and widening the scope of inclusion. So, can you quickly express what that is and what your hopes for that process are?

Michael: Yeah, we're really excited about this. We think it's—like, in a way we don't want to try to move aggressively into a future without doing this hard work first. Without being on a serious learning journey around diversity, equity, inclusion. So I would say even though, you know, one of the bedrocks of mystical teaching is this idea of the underlying unity of all faiths, the reality is that I think we haven't done enough to ask ourselves the hard questions of why even though we teach that our community tends to resemble very specific people with very specific kinds of life experiences, you know, and especially those that resemble in some respects the social location and context of our teachers. And so to get more specific about that, you know, mostly baby boomer generation, overwhelmingly White and surprisingly wealthy, you know, upper middle-class wealthy types of folks tends to be our average audience. And I think it just provokes us to ask—we have to be asking these hard questions about why is it that the work appeals—or is it appeals or is it mostly accessible to people, you know, you come from those experiences, and what does that have to say about what's working and not working in our teaching? To what extent are we living into the embodiment of what we're saying about the nature of reality and to what extent are we not? And I think as we began to ask those questions our sense became increasingly that though we teach that—and there's a natural way that—we don't have to apologize for it. In a lot of ways people are drawn to teachers who share their own context and can speak to that context's native place. So, there's a certain degree in which that's just being a natural evolution of our work. But I also really want to be clear in acknowledging that we have massive institutional blind spots and teaching blind spots that are leading us I think that unintentionally reinforce the structures of privilege and oppression that we're participating in even as we teach in a way that tries to undermine them. And so as we really have come to terms with that acknowledgment what we did is we searched for a set of outside partners who could help us do a really rigorous kind of from the ground up learning journey about how we think, talk, and participate in the structural issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and beyond our journey of transformation as an

organization. So we did. We did that. We went on a six-month search process. We had an incredible set of consulting partners apply and that we vetted and we have incredible partners now, all three of them are graduates of Divinity School. Two of them describe themselves as students of Richard and the CAC and whose full-time jobs are focused on organizational transformation around issues of equity and inclusion. And so my hope is that, you know, that our lived reality that our lived embodiments reflects what we teach that people experience us a place that celebrates God's location in everyone and everything, and in that way that we really embody a level of inclusivity that I think we haven't, and that our work helps people develop critical lenses and be agents of this work themselves, and that's the equity piece where we want people to come out of our work being more equipped and not just reinforce in their existing lens and ways of perceiving things.

Mark: So, who's that mystic that's inspiring you today, whether an ancient mystic or a living mystic, and here you are working with three of the most exciting mystics in our country I think? Who's inspiring you?

Michael: Yeah, I think the reality is that the demands of this job and me being a new dad—my daughter's two-and-a-half years old now—keeping up with our existing faculty and then a reading list of, you know, helping maybe from the organizational management side, is about the extent of my reading time. And so, yeah, it's really, really Richard, Jim, and Cynthia, and the latest that we've been working through. We had an internal team work through the manuscript of Richard's next book in preparation kind of how do we think about supporting it and really as an organization getting behind the message in the book. And I have to say I am more excited about this piece of work than anything Richard has ever done before. I think it's going to be a really defining part of his legacy that he's leaving behind. So, the book title is still kind of to be confirmed. It's *Another Name for Everything: The Universal Christ*. And it's Richard's master synthesis of Christianity; to be a Christian is to see the sacredness in all things, that the Christ as a coherence of matter and spirit that has been there since the big bang for 13 billion years, and just the radical implications that it has for how we understand our tradition and Jesus' significance in that context. So, it's a brilliant piece of work. Penguin Random House is publishing it, and it gives us this amazing foundation for—a brilliant encapsulation of the theology that we want to be about as an organization as we move forward. And he wrote it in a sense—you know, you'd think it's a very heady topic, but he did a better job on this book that I've ever seen him do, leading you into it from the standpoint of experiencing it to invite you into a dialog that reflects on your own experience as you're reading the text. He, of course, as he always does brings in a historical and the exegetical and the scriptural, and uses that not just for argument, but really locates it within the context of people's own life spiritual journeys. It's such an exciting project. We have huge plans around how to support it and it was really impactful for me to get to read it first. But I now know that how I'm learning from them, I think, you know, the thing that everybody always wants to know is what's it like working with Richard, and of course, you know, there's the parts of it that we're just running an organization and there's the moments when, you know, it does break through that you're sitting in the presence of somebody who just has this lens on life and the world and their own experience, and you see it in real time in ways that are really impactful. And it's an insane—I mean it's just an enormous privilege to be around. Richard, I think, as everybody knows has been going through a series of health challenges. His prostate cancer, he had a heart attack over the Christmas break. And all of our teachers are in this advancing age, but to be up close, and especially with Richard who's here, you know, in our offices most days, as he comes to terms with his own mortality and his own limitations, his own fears, but also just this sense of courage and peace, and you know, really allowing—it's that spirit of allowing that I see, just whatever it is, is and it is to be welcomed, you know. He's really embodied that. It's been a really sweet and kind of vulnerable process that he's been through and to be up close to that is something I know is going to be something I'll be reflecting on probably for the rest of my life.

Mark: Well, I know, I speak for many of us when I say we've been so touched by his ministry and his presence and his teaching as well as Cynthia and Jim, but it's very moving to hear you reflect on that, and working so closely with a living teacher/mystic. So, thanks for sharing that Michael.

Michael: Thank you, Mark. Thanks to all the alumni who've, you know, been basically carrying out his work in their own context. It's so inspiring to hear from many of you, and your work is what gives us hope and energy for ours. So, thank you to everybody and for all the good work to come, you know, just I'm so excited for what's still ahead.