

Living School Alumni Quarterly Newsletter
(Winter 2020 edition)

An Interview with the Honorable Darleen Ortega and Mark Longhurst

Mark Longhurst: [music playing] Hey everybody, this is Mark Longhurst, the editor of the Alumni Quarterly. This interview is with Darleen Ortega. Darleen is a recent Living School grad from 2019. She is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals, and she has a special interest in working with marginalized groups from a race, equity and belonging perspective. In this conversation, I asked her about a powerful ritual called "centering the margins" that she helped the Living School team create at the most recent symposium. I encourage you to listen in to hear us talk about that, about contemplative solidarity, about how the Living School is evolving, and more. As always, I welcome your questions and feedback at mlonghurst@cac.org, and I'm wishing you grace and peace on this day.

Hey Darleen, thank you for taking some time to speak with me and to the Living School alumni community. We're grateful to be hearing from you today.

Darleen Ortega: Thanks.

Mark Longhurst: First I want to ask a little bit about who you are and how you first discovered the Center for Action and Contemplation.

Darleen Ortega: I am a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals. I've been a Quaker and a contemplative my whole adult life and have a long-standing experience with contemplative practice. About, I want to say, maybe seven years ago, I heard Richard speak in Portland where I'm from. I think it was about seven years ago, *Falling Upward* had just come out. I and my partner, who was a pastor, were very struck by what Richard shared and we read *Falling Upward* together. Then shortly after that, my partner passed away real tragically.

It was very, very tragic circumstances for me and I ended up consuming, I can't claim to read everything Richard's written, but probably everything that he's written in the last at least ten-fifteen years. The books were really, really helpful to me. I was receiving the Daily Meditations.

In my world as a judge, I deal with quite a bit of pushback because of how I approach that work. Richard's writing was really helpful to me for that. So, it was in the context of that, that I connected with the CAC.

Mark Longhurst: What brought you to the Living School?

Darleen Ortega: I mean part of that same journey. I am working in a system that's not unique but maybe particularly difficult in terms of all the things that make systems really problematic. Richard talks about it in terms of it being "too big to fail." My calling also has involved a lot of work addressing racism.

Darleen Ortega: These are all things that don't make me popular within that system, because I'm asking questions that are just not meant to be asked. I don't generally have allies who are in the same location in the system. I have people that I'm mentoring and stuff that are very supportive, but they don't have any power. So, I've been on a quest regularly to find people that can support me and be in solidarity with the journey that I am on and that's what attracted me to the Living School.

Mark Longhurst: At the recent symposium in August, you had a leadership role in creating a ritual called "Centering the Margins." This was the first time such a ritual had happened in the Living School. For alumni that didn't have a chance to experience that, what was it, and what was your role in helping create that?

Darleen Ortega: Well, what the ritual was, we created it as a ritual meant to be like this is not like a performance. We're not doing something theoretical here. We're really meaning this to be a practice that we are all doing together, that we approach like we would approach other spiritual practices like Centering Prayer, or the Welcoming Prayer, or various other things that we do that are meant to help us experience temporarily a break from our default ways of reacting to being human.

As I think those of us who are on this journey learn to some degree or other, the cognitive route doesn't get us all the way there, because we're living in our bodies and we're reacting to things out of pattern, out of ego, out of our dualistic thought patterns, out of trauma, all of these things. So, we meant to set it up as a practice to help us get out of our default ways of being with regard to marginalized voices. A practice like this could be used to center other marginalized voices besides people of color, but we decided to focus this particular practice around marginalized voices who are people of color.

The reason for that is that what happens accidentally without any conscious intention being implied—in fact, sometimes even with conscious intention being implied—is that the white voices are centered. White voices set the agenda. White voices have an easier time being heard. The experience of people of color generally is, if we're brought in at all, we're in the minority, and we're trying to fit into a context that isn't built for us, and we don't experience it as really inviting what we have to say.

Even if that's not happening on a conscious level, you just learn. You're socialized to know don't say a whole bunch of things that are part of your experience. The practice arose out of a recognition that no matter what, how great our intentions are, that does not change without some conscious intention being applied. Just like getting out of our dualistic thinking doesn't change because we want it to. We have to practice that.

So, we set up a circumstance, and it was a period over months, it arose out of quite a bit of group process between me and people on the staff that were

Darleen Ortega: planning the symposium. It wasn't like I handed them this thing. In the course of our planning for the symposium, this idea came up.

When it first came up, I brought it up, and I brought it up like, "I am not suggesting we do this, but here's what's rising for me," kind of a thing. In the course of it, there was a lot of contemplative practice around doing this, and I did propose basically the outline of what we did and then as a group we worked it out. I coordinated the building of it.

We set it up so that we used something the Smithsonian uses. It's called the "long conversation" as a bit of a beginning point. And the long conversation, the way they do it, is they'll have a speaker and a questioner addressing the same question serially. I think they do it in maybe ten-minute blocks, or something. They'll have two people up there and one of them is asking the question and then fleshing out what the answer is saying for about ten minutes. Then the speaker goes off and the questioner becomes the speaker, and a new questioner comes on.

It's a way of seeing the variety of perspectives on a particular topic. So, we started with that and actually expanded it into a sort of a Trinitarian container, springing from a recognition that as Richard develops pretty well and also Cynthia and other writers that some of us have read, there's something about the Law of Three that can hold things differently; hold that energy differently. We set it up so that the speaker and questioner roles in the way we did the ritual were only fulfilled by people of color. There was a third role that we called "the witness" who was a white participant. The role of the white participant was not to just sit there and shut up at all. It was a very active role. In many ways, sort of analogous to the role of Spirit to hold space for what was happening.

And then we had a question or a category of questions that we wanted the speakers to address. They had seven minutes. So, we're doing this at the Living School. I think we had a total of an hour and a half time slot. The beginning of it, I and Kirsten Oates explained the framing of what we were doing. And then we had eight participants of color rotate through the roles of questioner and speaker. Then we had eight white participants perform that role of witness. The questions that we asked the speakers to address really had to do with as they do their contemplative work of working to become more deeply connected to what's true, to live in a more embodied way, the work of Living School students, what has risen for them in terms of their experience as people of color.

We explicitly wanted to recognize what these speakers are doing, we have not earned the trust for this, and it's likely to be very challenging for them because speaking from personal experience, and this resonated for the people of color who participated, we don't have any experience doing this, actually being invited to speak about that aspect of our experience and having that being held. That basically never happens in a predominantly white space like that.

Darleen Ortega: So, we named that in the beginning that this community has not earned the trust that it takes to do this. This is a spiritual practice for all of us and it requires spiritual work on behalf of everybody. This is not something the people of color are doing to the white participants, or something. It requires something of all of us. We're all altering what happens accidentally in a very intentional way in order, among other things, to help us begin, just barely begin to taste, what we're missing in our interactions with each other, in our default ways of being, which are systemic that no one of us created but we all swim in.

This does not happen. We are losing a lot in the quality of our interactions with each other in our ability to be in solidarity with each other, in our ability to hear each other, in our ability to have complete and nourishing conversations that include everyone's experience. We are all very hindered from doing that in the existing construct. We're not going to fix that in this practice just like no twenty-minute sit fixes our thinking. As we practice doing that, it opens up a hunger. It opens up some connection to what's possible that we don't even know to hunger for. That was the aim of the practice. And for some—I don't even assume it's everyone, but for some—I think it had that effect of awakening us to things we just had no idea were possible, and no idea that we're missing interactions with each other.

Mark Longhurst: I find that so powerful to think about centering the margins ritualistically as contemplative practice. That is right alongside our Centering Prayer practice, right alongside our *Lectio Divina*. I know this is a huge question, but why is it that we tend to think of some things as contemplative practices but not centering margins as a contemplative practice?

Darleen Ortega: Wow. I almost want to turn that question right back on everybody listening. I often say curiosity is a spiritual practice. In fact, the curiosity that is cultivated ends up being, can be a real superpower. It opens up all kinds of possibilities. The question you just asked, I can give some of my thoughts about it, but I wouldn't want any of my thoughts to close down the question because I think it's really an essential one. In normal life, and this is definitely true in the US but it's not only true in the US, we don't even tend to act like margins exist. We're very attached to the idea that in the "American Dream" everybody has a shot, and it's like a meritocracy that we're functioning in and that both gains and losses are earned.

And so, even the very idea that there would be margins to center, I think is challenging in a very spiritual way. The very topic is threatening to people, which may be a tell, right? Things that are that threatening like, "Why am I feeling so threatened?" That's often a sign that our dualistic thinking is involved, or our clouded perceptions are hindering us. I guess part of why I tumbled to this suggestion and felt very led to pursue it is because I know that, to use racism as an example, and it's only an example, but a very powerful one, racism exists in structures. Racism certainly includes like, "Oh, I hate black people."

Darleen Ortega: People who would believe that and say that, that's racist, but that's the tip of the iceberg of racism.

Racism I know exists in structures and so it involves all of us. I like to use the *Matrix* a lot. I think the film *Matrix* for those who have seen it is the perfect metaphor for this. The machine is telling us things, and we're believing them. Until we engage in a practice of pulling or allowing ourselves to be pulled out of the Matrix so that we can free our mind, we end up being stuck inside and enlisted to maintain systems of interacting with each other that are not true and that harm all of us. That does not begin to be altered without some practice around that specific thing.

Mark Longhurst: It goes along with what you've just been saying, but why might it be important for a white person to be a witness and to center a person-of-color voice? You've described the system that creates that need, but I just want to draw it out of you a little more.

Darleen Ortega: Yeah. No, I'm glad you asked that. What happens accidentally even with the best of intentions on the part of white people, is that their voices and experiences will be centered. It's not like because all the white people are so selfish, or something like that. That's what serves the existing systems of oppression. That's what serves them, and it also harms white people. It doesn't only harm people of color. It harms white people. It's not true. It keeps us from seeing what's true. It facilitates harm that we can't see ourselves doing and we think something else is happening. It's just illusion like so many things that we need to disconnect from. And so for a white participant in the ritual, as we set it up, it felt important to alter that dynamic of what accidentally happens in terms of whose voice and whose perspective is centered, and we know that silence is powerful. We know that when we say "silence," we don't necessarily in this case, we definitely did not mean just "shut up." We meant holding space.

Kirsten described this really well in the introduction and was the first white participant. This is powerful work to listen with that quality of intention. Things would come up for them like, "Why am I not talking," or "I want to say this," or "This makes me feel guilty," or "I want to fix this," or "I want to disagree with what this person is telling about their experience," and to go to the work of just holding that, to just hold that, that is powerful spiritual work and it's powerful practice, and I think a lot of times why our experience or interactions default to something other than that is because what rises is so often full of anxiety and then we default to what the culture tells us we can do with that anxiety. That obliterates often the kind of interaction that would be possible if we were really in community with each other. In the end, that harms all of us. It actually harms all of us.

And so, we're caught. We're just caught inside the matrix inside this way of viewing things that's not true, and we can't see our way around it. It's just like water is to a fish. It's just not perceptible. I think that practice had the capacity

Darleen Ortega: to unlock the white participants, including those in the audience. We did name them in the beginning. You're not here as a spectator. This practice involves those of you in the audience as well, and here's how we would encourage you to participate in that practice. It required some similar things of everybody in the room who was white, I think.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah. I'm reflecting on my experience being a witness from the audience and that teaching of Cynthia Bourgeault's about the power of Centering Prayer to help put our mind in the heart. I almost feel that we experienced a collective mind in heart as white people holding the voices of POC people. I didn't get a chance to debrief enough to hear if that was other people's experience, but it was my experience.

So, this edition of the Living School Quarterly is built around the theme of "Rhythm of Life." There is a new edition of the Rhythm of Life, which the CAC Living School staff are naming "contemplative solidarity" to change from "contemplative service." Why might contemplative solidarity be important to you, and how is this an example of contemplative solidarity?

Darleen Ortega: This being the Centering the Margins ritual?

Mark Longhurst: Yeah, or is it an example of contemplative solidarity?

Darleen Ortega: I've been involved in that aspect of the movement of the curriculum, too, and it's still moving, because I think we want to put some more legs around what that means for people. For now, what I'll say is this, contemplative service, service is really important but in the context of human interaction now, the danger of service often is that a more privileged person, or a person with more social capital, goes in and does some active help that may or may not be very helpful because it's not informed by the perspective of the person being helped. I am nowhere near anywhere close to the first person to make that connection. That's really pretty well documented from a lot of voices, particularly voices working on how to actually uplift oppressed communities.

So, there's a real danger inside the Living School. Those of us who are, and I include myself in this, those of us who are students in the Living School were necessarily a pretty privileged bunch or we wouldn't be there. Usually when we think of service, we're trying to think of somebody less privileged that we're going to help. If we haven't done the work of building meaningful connections with the communities that we're trying to help, we might or might not be very helpful. And as importantly, or maybe more so, we haven't done our own work, because in terms from a contemplative standpoint, acts of service should involve examination of our own location and a deeper engagement with what's true. To leave that piece out would be a real shortcut. It's a real danger for any of us who are operating from a position of relative privilege, because we will take those shortcuts without knowing we're doing it. We just don't know. We don't have the information.

Darleen Ortega: The idea of contemplative solidarity is really moving away from "Okay, now at your last six months of the Living School, find a service project and do it," because that doesn't actually allow enough time to do the amount of spiritual work that would really reflect even the ability to tell how to be helpful. So, solidarity involves really doing some contemplative practice around how we exist in relation to other human beings. From where I operate, I'll apply this to myself as an example. I'm a judge. My job, my work in the world involves administering the legal system. Well, the way that job is constructed, no judge is remotely or required to engage with members of the communities that are most impacted by the negative aspects of the judicial process. We don't have to at all even if we're people of color, as I am. We're in a position of relative privilege. And so, we don't even experience the legal system in the way most other people of color do.

If you go to a legal event, at every legal event, they introduce the judges, and we get applauded like, "It's amazing that we're judges." There's like no pressure on us to do anything other than stay in our little world, think great thoughts, answer big questions, entirely uninformed by those who are most painfully affected by our work. So, for me, the work of contemplative solidarity has involved, again, altering what accidentally happens, exposing myself to the perspectives of people who are affected by the system that I'm involved in administering in a listening capacity.

So, I'm not going there and raising money for legal services. I mean, I do contribute to that, but that's not contemplative solidarity, that's service. It's a matter of putting myself in a position to listen to currently or formerly incarcerated people, or listening to immigrants, or listening to refugees, or listening to children who spent time in foster care, or listening to parents whose children have spent time in foster care, and listening with curiosity and trying to understand what that experience has to teach me.

Now, what that kind of practice, I can say from personal experience, tends to do is awaken a lot of discomfort and a lot of anxiety. The impulse will be to excuse it, or to be like, "Well, that's really terrible they had an experience, but they should understand that the system is really fair, and we do our best," and all that.

So, I have to be like the white participants in the Centering the Margins ritual, I have to be prepared to just hold all that and listen anyway with curiosity. I think Spirit's resourceful and it must be possible to do this without the spiritual grounded-ness, but it would be a lot harder. I think it would be a lot harder to hold that anxiety and to build that capacity for discomfort. And then what I have found, and what I often tell people is, "The chances that you will learn what kind of offering is yours to make is much better after fifty occasions of listening to somebody's story and just feeling like, "I don't know what to do about that. That's really terrible. I feel guilty about that. That makes me feel awful." After fifty occasions of that, you might on the fifty-first occasion, see something that

Darleen Ortega: you could do that you never would have seen without those fifty occasions because you wouldn't have listened long enough. You would have gone right to what you needed to do to quell your own anxiety, which is not a very helpful gauge for what would be helpful to the person that you're trying to help.

So, that contemplative process of listening to where you sit in a structure affects other people with less privilege than you, and holding, just holding the information, holding your own anxiety, fear, guilt, whatever, from a place of listening is what can get you to the capacity to be in solidarity. So, the process is all around, "What questions should I be asking myself? Who might I build relationships of trust that I am building by listening so that I can alter what accidentally happens with the hope of beginning to see how I might be called to stand up for what's true, probably at cost? When I do that, it costs me pretty much always.

As I often also say, "Systems do not reward you for transforming them," pretty much ever. They're constructed so that's never going to happen. You're stepping outside how the system is constructed to work. Bayard Rustin who was a collaborator with Martin Luther King talked about it as he used the metaphor of putting your body in the gears of the machine. When the gears of the machine roll over your body, it hurts. So, you build the capacity to do that. Your body then makes it more obvious that the machine is operating wrong. The sacrifices that you make are what brings that truth to life. That's a long journey. You never do that in six months. That's like putting yourself on a different path. That's how we're thinking about contemplative solidarity.

Mark Longhurst: That is very powerful. One of my questions was, what difference does contemplation make to this work of diversity, equity, inclusion, solidarity? I think you just so beautifully knit both of them together so that they're inseparable in your response. So, I really thank you for that. I know that this is going to be very helpful and educational for our alumni, as we continue to evolve with the evolution of the Living School itself. We're very grateful, Darleen. Thank you.

Darleen Ortega: Thank you.