

Living School Alumni Quarterly Newsletter
(Winter 2020 edition)

An Interview with Father Richard Rohr and Mark Longhurst

Mark Longhurst: Thank you, Father Richard for being willing to speak with the alumni community and with me. The topic of this *Alumni Quarterly* is "Rhythm of Life" with a particular emphasis on solidarity.

Father Richard: I see.

Mark Longhurst: I wanted to begin our conversation by asking about the recent change in the Living School Rhythm of Life. The fourth category used to be service. I was at the symposium in August, they have described the change to be "contemplative solidarity" instead of "service."

Father Richard: That's it, that's it.

Mark Longhurst: My question is: To begin with, for folks who are not aware of this change in the Living School curriculum, can you explain why this is an important change in the Rhythm of Life, in the curriculum, to make?

Father Richard: Well, I'm disappointed in myself that I didn't recognize the pattern earlier. Now, what we saw was, and it wasn't that people were selfish, or whatever, but they always stumbled over this, "How should I serve? Where should I serve? When should I serve," guilty because they're not serving in some obvious social justice way.

As I saw the pattern in so many of our students, what really would have been a deeper, better, and maybe more convincing conversion for them would be what we used to call "voluntary displacement," to seek some way, maybe it's a single person of another race, another gender, another class, to find a way to form a friendship, a relationship, with somebody who isn't like you. I don't know what else to say.

Then let that act of friendship or solidarity lead you to whatever service might then come to mind, because then it's grounded, it's organic, it's felt, it's real, and it's not this Christian do-goodism that we're all subject to and then feel guilty if we don't do it, and feel superior if we do, do it. This bases it in relationship, which of course, as you know from the Trinity book, is what we believe is the heart of the whole transformative experience.

It was amazing; when I came to the Living School team, I guess I said it rather definitively, I wasn't even asking their opinion like a typical "one," I said, "Here's what we have to do." They just all immediately nodded, so I took that as confirmation from the Spirit.

Yeah, now we call our students to some act of voluntary displacement, if you don't mind the big phrase, that would lead them to solidarity or friendship; use either word. It might be as simple as friendship and then let that friendship say, "Okay, this is what I have to do." Everybody's seems to be quite happy. We've had no pushback on it. Yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mark Longhurst: I'd like to read some of your words back to you, which were used by Living School staff in the symposium to talk about solidarity and about this change. You said:

In the first five years of the Living School, we've emphasized some kind of service project as our desired outcome. I do not know how much of this has really happened. Maybe it has, but the projects that are easiest to trust and affirm are those that begin with some kind of solidarity walk with another group, class, race, gender, another part of town, or even in some cases, another part of the world.

I'm thinking we could achieve the lasting transformation of consciousness that we seek much better if we would ask of our students and ourselves some kind of journey or pilgrimage of voluntary displacement. Here, the service might happen organically, not in a top-down way, but in a friendship way, not, 'I'm helping you, but let's walk together for a little while.'

I wanted to share those words also with the students and the alumni so that we can all be kept abreast of some of the developments. You've said this. Would you have anything to add to those words that you've already said so beautifully?

Father Richard: To shows how much my ego is in charge, I'm sitting here saying, "Richard, that's really good." That's what I want to say, anyway, whether it's really good, I hope it is. No, I think I can let that stand, yeah.

Mark Longhurst: Great. You have also been teaching in the intensives about Paulo Freire and about something that is called "the five conversions." That is new material for a lot of the alumni, I think.

Father Richard: Yes, the early classes didn't get that, either. Yeah, we do keep evolving, but earlier students feel like they were sold short, but they probably got some things that now I'm not doing, or others are not doing.

Mark Longhurst: Oh, yeah. I think we understand that it's all in evolution, but I think it would be beneficial for the alumni and very interesting to hear: Who is Paulo Freire for people who might not know who he is, and would you be willing to share some of that teaching of the five conversions to the alumni community?

Father Richard: Oh, wow. That works well. I think you'll find it quite convicting. I had read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* years ago, but why I didn't pull it into the Living

School right away, I'm still not sure. I rediscovered it about ten months ago or so and said, "This, I could make it real clear." As you know, my job is to find the great thinkers and bring it down to earth so they can understand it.

Paolo was a Brazilian educator. Now, he was a man of the gospel, too, but his concern was the communication. He was a pedagogue, as the very title of the

Father Richard: book says. How do we communicate the gospel? He found out that he learned so much by working with the poor. Among many liberation theologians, he became the educator-in-chief who gave them a pattern, who gave them a style, why we often believe in the "preferential option for the poor."

So, I tried to summarize what he says much clearer and at greater length, but I'll give you the five conversions that he says we have to go through. Now, I'm assuming that those I'm talking to are, on some level, from a point of privilege just because I'm talking in America and most of our students are white, I'm sorry to say. The dominant group, this is what they need for their conversion. This would probably be a bit different, in fact, it is, if you're talking to a very poor person, even in America, or a black person, or perhaps a gay person.

Step one, the first conversion: basic compassion for the poor in general, at least that. The softening of the heart, which as we know, we don't even have this in America today, or maybe for one poor person, a basic sympathy, empathy, recognition of this person's pain. That's the first conversion. It's good, but it's rather ineffective for either party, just for you to feel bad for poor people, but it's a starting place; it opens up that heart space.

The second is where it will usually lead you if you stay in the relationship: Anger at the unjust situation that caused their poverty. So, our mind is beginning to do a little social analysis. You find out she isn't, he isn't just a person milking the welfare system, or whatever. You recognize, "Hey, she doesn't get a fair deal."

Now, that anger stage, like the stages of dying or stages of grief, is good, but it's dangerous to stay there too long. What it does achieve is the beginnings of social critique, which most people, at least in first-world countries, don't have. Now, we talked about it even when you were in the school: social sin, structural sin, institutional evil. The typical Christian thinks all evil is private. I've written a little monograph on this, which all future students will get now.

Third conversion: genuine admiration as you sustain this relationship with this person or this group, that they have some values and virtues that I don't have or my group does not have. I know every time I'd come back from a developing country, I'd preach to the New Jerusalem back in Cincinnati and I myself could recognize I was romanticizing it a bit, but not entirely.

That's the danger of the third conversion if you stay there too long: "Oh, they're all much more loving than we are. They're much more generous than we are."

Yes, but not always. You have to go through that but not get trapped there, because if you talk at that level, people will call you a romantic or a bleeding-heart liberal. "The poor have put it all together," when many times, of course, we both know they haven't. Maybe one or the other has.

Fourth conversion: This is the hardest perhaps to work through—a kind of disillusionment and disappointment with the poor when one sees they are

Father Richard:

socialized to a worldview of failure and scarcity; whereas, I, an educated Western white man, am socialized to a worldview of plenty and success. That makes you very judgmental because they seem to be—gosh, I went through this so many times in my life, especially as a “one”—saying, "Frankly, you're your own worst problem. Don't you see that you're causing this, or you're at least contributing to the cause?"

This is the hard one to get through. It's when many people leave their more open heart and close it down again, but he says it's a necessary stage, a necessary recognition to get to true solidarity. I think this is just brilliant. Now, this whole process of moving through the five stages he calls "conscientization." It's hard to pronounce in English, I don't know if it is in Portuguese, too.

Then that leads you to the fifth conversion: A choice to walk with them *anyway* and be taught by them *anyway* knowing everything you went through in the first four conversions. You're not naive, you're not romanticizing, you're not jumping on the communist bandwagon that "the bourgeoisie are always evil, and the poor are always sanctified." Your thinking is much more subtle, I think, much more capable of being gospel, that you don't dive in the work because you're the savior or they're perfect. You do it because you have to do it. Yeah, for the sake of the action itself, exactly as the Buddhists always teach, not because it always works.

I remember when I was first sent out here to New Mexico as a deacon in 1969, and oh, God, I had so much energy; I wish I had it now. I started collecting clothing for the poor Indians; and, of course, this made me feel very Franciscan and very generous. The very first day—for a long time I even remembered her name—this one woman kept coming back for more clothing, and more clothing, and more clothing, just stacks of dresses. I realized, "I'm being taken. This woman is not a poor woman, she's an opportunist."

It's funny that I remember this forty-nine years later. That was a severe disillusionment that this “poor Indian” was materialistic, was opportunistic. I'm not sure, and I never followed her up, that she wasn't selling those dresses herself. Oh, darn, that was hard for me to recognize in my late '60s idealism.

I think we all have to recognize that some people will use us. That's what I call my daily humiliation. It's okay, I can live with that, but I don't need to be continuously taken advantage of in that way, either. You become, as Jesus said,

"as wise as serpents and innocent as doves." You maintain that heartfelt space to love, but you learn to spot opportunism; manipulative people, maybe that's the better way to say it.

Mark Longhurst: I find that so powerful and helpful.

Father Richard: I do, too. Yeah.

Mark Longhurst: I'm thinking a lot of things. One thing I'm thinking is how for those of us, it's not lost on me, it's two white male "one's" on the Enneagram talking.

Father Richard: That's what you're stuck with here, folks. [laughter]

Mark Longhurst: Well, I guess I want to stay with the social, systemic critique for a minute, because for people of privilege to be embedded in a system that benefits us, it's the air we breathe, it's the fossil fuels that we drive on, how does that first step of seeing systemic critique unfold, would you say?

Father Richard: That's right. To some degree, maybe to a large degree, it depends upon a certain degree of education, but not always, maybe just a wise mentor or a wise friend. You have to be given some good information beyond simply feeling sorry for people, to recognize that we're all caught up in systems, and that's proven by the fact that it took us until the 20th century to even recognize there was such a thing as structural evil. All evil was projected onto the individual, which he or she had to carry.

It took civilization a long time. It took the Church a long time. I don't think it took Jesus a long time. The reason I say that is his non-interest in the system—I will talk about this in this new book on evil—just quiet, non-cooperation with it by living a simple life, by not scapegoating, living outside the game, let's put it that way, shows us that Jesus understood the game, but most of us don't. We have no eyes. When you were in the school, did I teach you the world of flesh and the devil?

Mark Longhurst: Yes, I think you did. You did.

Father Richard: So much evil has risen to the diabolical level, like all the monuments to war that every one of our hometowns has right in the center of town. What does that say? He's always carrying a gun or on a horse with a sword. We have romanticized killing. When you grow up with that romanticization, you don't recognize, not that he's individually a bad person, but he's a part of a systemic mind which says, "Killing is good."

Honestly, I just got an anonymous email, or a snail mail, this morning from a man in Michigan who's working with soldiers *still* from Vietnam with PTSD and the guilt they feel about the amount of people they killed, some of whom they saw their face before they shot them. It never leaves them, which is obvious.

Human beings aren't meant to kill. When we systematically legitimate that, I think we're dehumanizing people.

Again, let me repeat, the individual person is often quite moral, wants to "lay down his life for his friend," as Jesus puts it, but the collective so romanticizes a bad thing that they in the moment don't suffer any guilt and in the long run, feel heroism, but in the real long run, feel immense cynicism. Is that the best word? I don't know, but it's one major aspect of PTSD.

Mark Longhurst: Wow. Part of this step is identifying systemic evil, systemic injustice, is this educational mentoring, either some of us through reading books, lectures, *et cetera*, but then, as you said, it's easy to get stuck there and to become bitter and angry. What practices of the heart do you think come out of these conversion steps so that we do not get stuck in that angry, bitter place?

Father Richard: Yes. Well, first of all, I think you have to withdraw. You know the Gospels, that story where James and John, he tells them to leave their father and their nets. The way the family talks, frankly, the small, nuclear family very often, and the guys down at the office or the warehouse, those are the two worlds that confirm your worldview. I don't think that's a small point.

It's fashionable on TV to idealize "What do you believe in?" "I believe in family." Well, who can disagree with that? I mean, you believe in family. I do, too. Do you know what Jesus is really saying? Don't believe in family too much because often the systemic meaning of family is codependent, is filled with its own prejudices, its own defensive worldview. Jesus never once, I know you know this, affirms the nuclear family. Not once. It's always the spiritual family, the larger family.

So, in many people's lives, you have to withdraw your 100 percent allegiance from the way my group thinks at the bar, at the office, at the factory, whatever it might be. That's very hard for most people, especially when you have a large percentage of families being deeply codependent upon one another's approval, one another's emotions. The first emotions they learn were the emotions of their family, that "we all are Republicans and we all hate immigrants," or whatever it might be.

Boy, to beat your way out of that paper bag is major surgery. So, that's the big start, but once you can get clear of that, stop idealizing the small unit, then even Carol Gilligan says, "We move from self-love, to group love, to universal love." Most people get to group love, but if you look at the teaching of Jesus, it's pretty clear he's trying to get them beyond group love to universal love, because they all love their fellow Jews and apparently they're a nuclear family, but they hate Samaritans. Isn't it amazing that Jesus is so clear about universal love and his Church hasn't been?

Mark Longhurst: Yeah. It made me think of how Walter Wink translated "world" in the *Gospels*. He says, "My kingdom is not of this system," so the kingdom of God is this new identity, new realm that helps that separation process.

Father Richard: Yes. I use the word "system," too. It's excellent. People get it right away. We've all bought into systems that are barely true, if not evil, but they only become that fully at the third level, the demonic level.

Mark Longhurst: The final question for you is: How might this emphasis on solidarity and Paulo

Mark Longhurst: Freire, how do you see it already impacting the Living School curriculum and what are some examples that you see?

I've got a couple of ideas. I was really struck by the visual example of solidarity at the symposium with the four pictures of the border encounter.

Father Richard: Oh, thank you. Yeah.

Mark Longhurst: For alumni, this was four photographs of, I believe, a Guatemalan woman and her son encountering a Mexican-US border agent.

Father Richard: Yes.

Mark Longhurst: You had had scripture interpreting those pictures. I thought that that pedagogically, if I can use that word, really set the frame for the solidarity teaching that you were doing and that the symposium was experiencing. I guess I just wanted to pose that back to you and ask: How does this larger solidarity emphasis impact the Living School going forward?

Father Richard: I've been saying to classes and in homilies lately, I say, "I'm not going to ask you to raise your hand, but how many of you have a single friend of another race? How many of you have a single friend of another class, which is sometimes even more difficult, obvious difference in class?"

I think that shock, maybe, will start your walk out of what Paulo Freire also calls "circles of certainty." He says that both the right and the left ensconce themselves in circles of certainty where there's no voices to poke a hole in it. As long as you stay in that, you never have to suffer any self-doubt. You never have to enter into any self-criticism.

So, do you see how the notion of *conversion* actually becomes a misnomer? It's just confirming one worldview by the kind of church I joined, or the kind of church I was already formed in. Again, I want to say this convicts the left person just as much as the person on the right.

I think we're going to, well, I did, I hope, this past year, really invite the students after they leave to make sure they have one intimate relationship, personal relationship, mutual relationship where there's give and take. It's not where I'm always in charge and they're always the learner—at least one—then I can really trust that grace, God, will take it from there.

Another thing, we sponsor all these wonderful students from Denver who are from the Denver Urban Ministries and almost all of them have gone through the school now. Because they work for almost nothing, we give them a complete scholarship. And so, we're ending up having quite an influence in Denver, our teaching. One of those students, he has a rather large magnet that he asks everybody to put on their refrigerator. It looks like a tic-tac-toe design. He calls his process of conversion "neighboring." He says, "No one can say they can't do this." Your little house is in the center box of the tic-tac-toe board. It goes out, I guess, two in each direction—north, south, east, west.

He says, "Over the next year, can you commit yourself to learning the first name and something about each of your neighbors to the North, to the South, to the East, to the West? When you learn that, put a little X in the box." It's genius, I think. He says, "Who can say they can't do that?" Who can say? Almost every one of us in the groups I've talked to, I have to admit, "I don't know the names of people who live on all four sides of me," but to look for an occasion, to create an occasion.

So, the voluntary displacement doesn't mean you have to go to the inner city necessarily, although it might in some cases, but maybe just learning the peoples' names on my street, looking for an occasion, I think that is wonderful.