

# MENDICANT

CAC's Living School, Library, and Online Education

## The Evolution of the Living School

PAUL SWANSON

flash back to a moment in the Fall of 2013, when Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Jim Finley ascend the stairs to take the stage at the first Living School Symposium. It was electric: superstar mystics, who could not care less about their status and could not care more about passing on the lineage that animates them. Students and staff alike were abuzz with the question: *What is this Living School we are now a part of?* Thousands of applications had been read, reviewed, and sifted, resulting in the invitation to these 180 students. The curriculum outline was drawn, but not filled in. Due dates for final projects were slated, but not explained. Starting a school is no joke—and starting a school that emphasizes a prophetic and incarnational mysticism in the Christian traditions in the belly of the American empire is nuts.

Nearly a decade later, I am shaving my beard looking for the right wrinkle to tell the story. The needs of the world were apparent, the CAC's positioning to rise to the occasion was undeniable, and Richard's casting of a vision was at the ready. In a thousand years (or ten), I never would have guessed we would be at this new chapter of the Living School.

The Rev. Dr. Barbara A. Holmes and Brian McLaren have joined as CAC Faculty members. Their presence and teaching contributions have expanded and reified the potential of



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the Living School. A Living School staff of skilled and gifted contemplatives encourages the evolution of the Living School in service to its prophetic vision.

And then we have the students, the beating heart of the program. Living School students are powerful change-makers who show up ready to be participants of transformation for themselves and in service to their communities. The goal of the Living School has been to create the conditions for that flourishing, in and with the Divine, for the sake of the planet and her kin. In its best moments, I have seen the Living School expand into an educational circle of empowerment, a community of learning embodying the blurred exchange between the roles of student and teacher. The Living School has always been an educational institution in motion, and credit (plus gratitude) goes to the feedback of students and alumni on how to create more opportunities for this flow. Thanks to them, the Living School has begun to sing new songs and pour new wine into new wine-skins. May it continue.

The ongoing evolution of the Living School is what keeps the learning edge sharp enough to cut through the illusions blocking or hiding new arisings of God in our times.

In this spirit, the CAC continues to keep an open ear to the

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# Adaptation in Pandemic Times

GIGI ROSS

**O**n March 9, 2020, the Living School began an Intensive at a local retreat center. In the middle of the week, the first COVID-19 case was diagnosed in New Mexico. On the last day of the Intensive, Fr. Richard taught students from his hermitage over Zoom. That very same day, CAC staff learned the CAC campus was closing; everyone would be working remotely until further notice.

This abrupt transition was an invitation to adapt. Since Richard's Zoom lecture that March, the Living School has held seven online Intensives and six virtual Symposia. Each one has taught us about what fosters connection and encourages deeper integration of the content. We have also learned about working within the limits of the technology and of our staff capacity.

This year, the Intensives featured Richard teaching in person and through video and audio clips. Before listening to or



watching the clips, students were led into a practice to ground their listening and attention in their bodies and hearts. Journal prompts were given for deeper reflection. Faculty and staff led "expansion" sessions, placing Richard's teaching in context and expanding on its relevance. Also new were breakout sessions for students to introduce themselves in randomly selected small groups, encouraging connections that may not have happened otherwise. As always, there were practices and circle processing.

The online Intensives are a recent example of creatively learning to continue what Richard began. Next, we turn to preparing for our first in-person Symposium since 2019 and revising the Living School program to better serve student learning and transformation.

GIGI ROSS comes from Washington, DC, where she spent ten years working at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. Gigi is the Manager of the Living School.

## Prophecy: The Beating Heart of Our Curriculum

MIKE PETROW

**F**r. Richard often reminds us that the CAC's Living School was conceived of as "a school for prophets." For him, this idea is the beating heart of our curriculum.

One thing that has become clear to me in conversations with our faculty is that while prophecy is often defined as "speaking truth to power," this is an *incomplete notion*, being merely social criticism. Prophecy is speaking truth to power *on behalf of a divine vision of wholeness*. This vision comes from contemplation and the love it reveals.

Tracing our alternative orthodoxy back to its roots in the prophetic tradition, we see that action and contemplation are, in fact, inseparable. They are the inhalation and exhalation of divine love. Contemplation calls us to active love. Our Jewish family identifies this as the *tikkun olam*, or the fixing of the world. The early church termed it the *apokatastasis*, or the restoring of all things.

The Living School teaches that this begins with us individually. If it is true that hurting people hurt people, then it



must also be true that *healing people heal people*. Origen (185–254 CE) claimed the *skandalala*—the scars and scandals in our lives—dig out the deep meaning. Our hurts become "health-bestowing wounds," the source of our individual spiritual genius, which shapes the unique work we are called to do in the world. It's our wounds that lead to wisdom and teach us, ultimately, how to love and heal the world.

Like *Kintsugi*—the Japanese method of repairing pottery using gold, silver, or platinum to fill in the cracks—this doesn't hide our brokenness but makes it beautiful. Thus, we all work to repair the world in a similar way.

DR. MIKE PETROW, a CAC content specialist who works with the faculty on the Living School curriculum, has degrees in mythology, depth psychology, and religion. He is certified as both a spiritual director and a grief and trauma counselor. He previously worked as a pastor, a counselor with at-risk youth, and a chaplain in a tiny Times Square theater space in New York City. Mike currently lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

# Cataloging a Legacy

SETH WILMOR

**C**an you believe it? Lee Staman has just entered his tenth year as the CAC's Library Director! In 2013, the CAC embarked upon a very ambitious journey: the Living School. Thankfully, CAC leadership knew that if they were going to start a "school for prophets" they would need a prophetic librarian. A sojourner on the contemplative path, a student of many mystics, and conveniently degreed in both theology and library science, Lee was probably the only qualified person for the job.

Fr. Richard was once hailed as "the cassette-tape preacher" because he, with the help of the New Jerusalem community and the CAC, has recorded a great deal of his prolific teaching career. When Lee came on board, many of those tapes and disks were in the process of being digitized and his job was to organize them. CAC staff and Living School faculty, however, quickly discovered what an intellectual legend Lee is and began pulling him in a thousand other directions. Alas, he has spent most of the last decade offering research and reference support to projects for *Richard's Daily Meditations*, the podcast network, CAC publications, online courses, and, of course, the Living School. Lee quickly found that his original goal of organizing the digital library would take a very long time at that rate, so in 2016 he enlisted the help of Therese Terndrup, a research librarian who offers her expertise as a cataloging contractor.

I had the great honor (and impostor syndrome) of joining these brilliant minds as a contractor in 2019, during the final year of my own library science education. Lee hired me on as the CAC's cataloger/archivist in 2020, and now I spend my days helping the team do what I love most: steeping in wisdom and bringing order to chaos. Every CAC



Every CAC teaching that has been recorded will eventually find their way into the digital library.

teaching that has been recorded, from Fr. Richard's early cassette tapes to the lectures given by Living School faculty today, will eventually find their way into the digital library. Now that Lee is free to focus on supporting projects across the CAC, Therese and I are taking on the cataloging and archiving: We track down these recordings, listen to them in full, take copious notes, meticulously research citations, and organize them using as much descriptive metadata as possible.

Thanks to the continued support of our generous donors, Lee is no longer alone in building this system for preserving Fr. Richard's legacy and the wisdom of so many extraordinary teachers who have graced the CAC over the years. The library staff has grown into a powerful team and the CAC's incredible technologists have begun moving the entire digital library into a new database where we can more freely organize it. Our cataloging enables us to dig up teachings old and new for access across the organization . . .

and for you too: If you read the spring issue of *the Mendicant* closely, you're as excited as we are about a new podcast series in the works featuring Fr. Richard's teachings straight from the archives.

Thanks to your support, we get to make this vast body of Christian contemplative wisdom accessible for generations to come.

SETH WILMOR is the CAC's Archivist and Cataloger. Born and raised in San Diego, California, he traveled around the United States fundraising for social justice organizations from the ages of 18 to 23, moved to the Bay Area for college in 2013, and received his Library Science master's degree from the University of Washington in 2020. He now lives in the Great Pacific Northwest with his wife and two cats, where he enjoys forest bathing, playing drums, and the endless hunt for the best burrito in town.

## the Mendicant

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# Expanding Online Learning Experiences

MARGI AHEARN

In 2012, CAC staff began exploring ways of making Fr. Richard Rohr's teachings as globally accessible as possible. In 2022, we are excited to be celebrating ten years of offering online courses to constituents worldwide who are seeking to learn about the Christian contemplative tradition.

Fr. Richard's recorded *Breathing Under Water* presentations became the foundation for CAC's first online course, based on the book of the same title. It remains one of our most popular courses. Video recordings of the *Franciscan Way* retreat became the teaching modules for the next course, followed by a book study course on *Immortal Diamond: The Search for the True Self*.

When Cynthia Bourgeault and James Finley joined the Living School Faculty, they brought with them a wealth of teachings and content for CAC to develop into new courses. Cynthia had many recorded teachings available from her *Wisdom School*, together with other critical topics. CAC staff worked with her team to create the following courses: *Introductory Wisdom School*, *The Divine Exchange*, and *Mary Magdalene: Apostle to Our Own Times*. James Finley had been offering retreats on St. Teresa of Ávila's *Interior Castle*, so one of those recorded retreats became the foundation for an online course. This course also draws from the work of CAC friend and inter-spiritual teacher Mirabai Starr.

In March 2022, CAC was honored to pilot a new online course which seekers have been anticipating for a long time: *Mystical Sobriety* with James Finley. This course offers a new and deeper level of engagement and vulnerability than other courses and lends itself to CAC experimenting with some new student engagement features.

In addition to the production team recording Jim



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Finley's teachings with state-of-the-art video technology, the creative team beautifully enhanced the visual presentation of the online pages. The finance and digital products teams developed a registration process implementing the Gift Economy Model, part of CAC's financial philosophy, which offers tiered pricing that allows for all who are interested to sign up for a course—thanks to the generosity of CAC donors. "Guardians"—who receive guidance through live calls and support from James Finley and CAC's program designer Paul Swanson—have replaced traditional teaching assistants in facilitating listening circles that offer support and affirmation to students on their journey of transformation.

Due to the advanced nature of the material and the new learning elements, the pilot *Mystical Sobriety* course was designed to test the delivery and student experience. Three hundred eager constituents registered and offered feedback during and after the course. CAC's engagement team is compiling these comments and suggestions and the online education team will discern what to incorporate into the next offering to provide an even more meaningful and transformative experience for students.

An interdisciplinary team is also exploring emerging technologies that continue to offer even more new ways to engage students and enhance their learning experiences. We look forward to continuing to refine our current courses and create new ones that offer students around the world exciting opportunities to explore and deepen their understanding of the Christian contemplative tradition..

MARGI AHEARN is the CAC's e-Learning Specialist. She is tickled that her passions for education and technology have merged so she can support CAC's teachers and students on their learning journeys. Though a longtime Midwesterner and believer that Hoosier hospitality is contemplation in action, she now enjoys the weather and natural beauty of the Land of Enchantment.

# Honoring the Past and Supporting the Future: Leaving a Gift for the Next Generation

*We're caught in the rigidity of an old system that's no longer appropriate. So, I say the work [we are called to do together] is to hospice the death of the old structures and systems that no longer serve us, while we midwife the new structures and systems that are consistent with a sustainable, just, fulfilling, and caring future we all want.*

—Lynn Twist

When we look at the world and the prospects for our collective future, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed. But at the same time, seeds of a brighter and more loving future are also visible, as CAC friend and author Lynn Twist reflects in the epigraph above.

We have been working hard for many years with Fr. Richard, CAC's board of directors, and our faculty on a long-term plan for CAC to play our part in nurturing the emerging contemplative consciousness and spiritual movement necessary for the healing of our world. We hope you are noticing some of the early fruits of this work highlighted in recent issues of *the Mendicant*.

It is core to our belief that the contemplative mind helps us trust that the reality of disorder always gives way to the hopeful possibility of reorder. *This is true wisdom knowing, which elders have the opportunity to pass on to the next generation.*

I'd like to share with you a short story about a CAC friend and donor named Charlie.

Charlie was inspired to make a gift to CAC after reflecting on his life's journey and the support he received many years ago from a wonderful couple. Morton and Barbara Kelsey supported Charlie on his spiritual path for many years and Charlie wanted to honor their impact on his life by making a gift to support spiritual students through the CAC.

Following is an excerpt from the letter that Charlie wrote about his support.

The older I get (I'm now 78), the more I reflect on my life and the more I realize what a blessing Morton and Barbara Kelsey were to me. The love and guidance that Morton and Barbara provided set me on a course that would allow me to continue to grow and lead me to embrace the writings of Fr. Richard and the work of the CAC.

*The thought that I could help provide spiritual support for someone else by making this gift to CAC in Morton and Barbara's names resonates deeply within me.*

If you, like Charlie, are inspired to contribute to CAC and support the spiritual lives of future generations, consider whether there is someone you want to honor who has been deeply significant in your spiritual life. Please consider writing us a letter to tell us about who inspired you. Through this cycle, we *honor the past while paying it forward into the future.*

If you would like more information about making a gift in your will or trust, please reach out to me at [Development@cac.org](mailto:Development@cac.org) or indicate it on the envelope you received with this issue of *the Mendicant* and we will be happy to send you some resources.

I appreciate all of you who contribute your ongoing time, trust, and generous support to make the work of the CAC possible today, tomorrow, and for many years to come.

In gratitude,

Ben Keesey

*Development and Partnerships Director*

## The Evolution of the Living School [continued from page 1]

ground for practices, learning modalities, and teachers that are making a rumble in the wider world and that might be partners for the next season of the Living School.

God willing and the Rio don't rise, I will still be around in another ten years. If so, I fully expect to be rendered speechless at the beauty of the latest incarnation of the Living School,

its faculty and staff, and the students who live out the alternative orthodoxy.

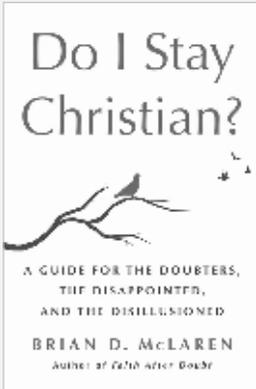
PAUL SWANSON is Lead Program Designer at the CAC, where he supports contemplative education and formation. He is a jackleg Mennonite and member of Our Lady of the Tall Trees. Paul lives in New Mexico with his wife Laura and their two feral children.



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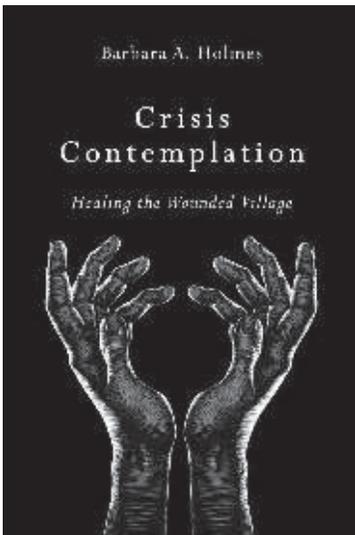
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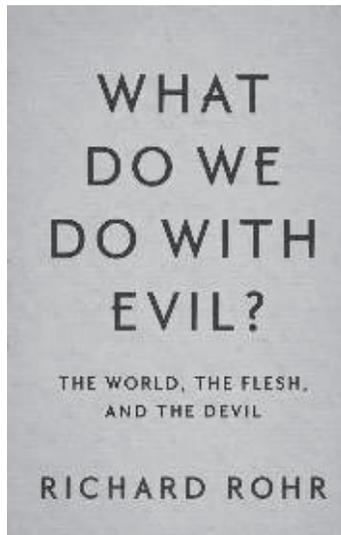
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Acclaimed African American scholar the Rev. Dr. Barbara Holmes examines two entry points into contemplation: crisis and community. Weaving together historical and current events, she uses prophetic vision and poetic prose to examine how crisis contemplation manifests in communities of color, offering a roadmap for spiritual connection and healing from trauma.

*Crisis Contemplation* by Barbara Holmes



Addressing the three traditional sources of evil, Richard Rohr describes how Christianity has focused on the individual, “flesh” level while “the world and the devil got off scot-free for most of Christian history.” Challenging readers to look beyond personal moral failure, Rohr draws on the teachings of Jesus and Paul to “increase personal responsibility and human solidarity.”

*What Do We Do With Evil?* by Richard Rohr

## SUPPORT THE WORK

The Center for Action and Contemplation is a nonprofit educational organization. Please consider supporting our work by donating securely online at [cac.org/support-cac](https://cac.org/support-cac) or by sending a check, payable to CAC, to PO Box 12464, Albuquerque, NM 87195. We also invite you to remember CAC in your estate plan. For more information about making a charitable contribution, including stock transfers and bequests, please email [development@cac.org](mailto:development@cac.org).

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