

MENDICANT

Engagement and Community Engagement

CAC's Past and Future A Reflection on Its First Thirty-Five Years

BRANDON STRANGE

After I had been engaged for fourteen years in a community of committed members, I deliberately wanted to do something different in New Mexico. Our main intention was not to found a community, but to gather people who had a vision of service to the world, to train them and make them qualified for this work. We were confident that, in so doing, another kind of community would come into existence as a by-product.¹

—Richard Rohr

“You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

—John 15:16 (NJ)



In 1986, Richard Rohr left behind his community of New Jerusalem and moved to New Mexico to start a “school for prophets”—and, a year later, the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) was born.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to consider this move a good decision, but I doubt this was the case at the time. What madness could have possessed such a popular, successful, and much-admired person to leave everything behind and start over on the other side of the country—in the desert, no less?

Simply this: “I felt called.”² And this: He *responded*.

The CAC was founded to provide spiritual grounding for a movement of contemplative activists and prophetic leaders by teaching the path of praxis and prayer, or action and contemplation. And, as Fr. Richard has said on many occasions, the most important word in the CAC’s title is neither action nor contemplation, but the word *and*.

In English grammar, “and” is called a coordinating conjunction, and it is used to connect two words, phrases, or clauses together—much like the year 1986 seems to connect the first and second halves of Fr. Richard’s life. I like

the word *coordinating* because it does a good job of describing how things are brought *together*, which is a bit like a call and a response.

But to respond is not always easy. First, we must listen for the call, and this demands a certain degree of stillness, quietness, attention, and receptivity. A response is also, by definition, something that happens in reaction to something else, and this presents us with a second difficulty: The form of a response is necessarily dictated by what we are responding to—it requires a certain degree of acquiescence, an experiential loss of power, given up as the cost for coordinating with what initiated the call in the first place.

Then a third difficulty arises: What if our response is the wrong one?

Fr. Richard came to Albuquerque during a very challenging time in his life: “I didn’t want to get up in the mornings. I woke up with dread. . . . I didn’t want to keep going through the motions.”³ His rising star had given him a case of what his spiritual director at the time had termed *success guilt*. “I knew I was not the saint people thought I was. I felt like a phony, a hypocrite. It tore me up. My public image was so inflated that it made me feel all the more like a fake.”⁴

And yet, he *responded*.

Now, we must be careful to not mistake this movement as heroic—at least not on Fr. Richard’s part, nor in the way the world tends to understand its heroes, which are rarely still, quiet, receptive, or acquiescent. “I think grace eventually leads us into some situation that we can’t fix, that we can’t control or even understand. That is where I was and that’s when real faith begins.”⁵

So, if we are to consider Fr. Richard heroic, let us do so because of his faith. Hebrews 11:1 (NIV) describes faith as

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Transformation Over Transaction

SARA PALMER

Transformation Over Transaction has been the grounding philosophy of CAC's Engagement Team since 2017. As marketing and communications professionals, we hold a complex and, at times, controversial post. We all know the digital world casts a large shadow, which is why our engagement campaigns prioritize audience experience over transactional metrics like clicks, leads, and sales.

We hope that simply by interacting with a post, email, or advertisement, someone can have a transformative experience. They don't have to click a link or buy a book to rest in a moment of hope and healing. For those who want to go further, we make the option as easy, accessible, and readily available as possible.

We offer different ways for audiences to embark on their own spiritual adventures, and we walk that path alongside them. We align our engagement strategies to CAC's four pillars of organizational strategy so that we stay rooted in our mission to support transformation and inspire loving action.

Pillar 1: Meet Audiences Where They Are

This book is revolutionary! It has helped me unpack all my frustrations, fears, and disappointments and filled me with hope.

—Cindy B., CAC social media follower

Questioning has long been stigmatized by many religious communities. While promoting Brian McLaren's newest book, *Do I Stay Christian?* we designed campaigns to help audiences see that questioning is not shameful. To meet audiences where they are and show them they are not alone, we launched a Facebook group where readers can connect and share in a community read-along.

Pillar 2: Invite Audiences to Experience Our Traditions

This is such a timely study for me as both an individual and as part of a greater community. Thank you.

—Jennifer M., CAC social media follower



We think and rethink ways to encourage our audiences—and ourselves—to be fully engaged on the path of transformation.

#WisdomOfSophia, a monthly social media campaign, spotlights women mystical teachers from various faith backgrounds. Audiences experience the depths of our traditions by exploring the power of the divine feminine to transform our lives. Mainstream religion often turns its back on spiritual wisdom from women. Yet, by sharing teachings from these past and present mystics, we can broaden our experience of Spirit, drawing us closer to oneness.

Pillar 3: Encourage Audiences into an Embodied and Engaged Practice

The more I learn about the Franciscan Way, the more I feel held and reassured, but also frustrated that the world still latches on to a violent notion of God.

—Aline L., CAC social media follower

Our multi-channel engagement campaigns for online education invite audiences into embodied online practices based on the primary teachings of each course. We make it simple to sign up for an online course

that can help further spiritual growth and inner work if that experience is moving and the timing is right.

Pillar 4: Connect Audiences to an Expanding Movement

When I am willing to let go of my opinions, my needs, and my judgments, and simply see the person, I can love more fully.

—Annamarie F., CAC social media follower

We Conspire is a new monthly email and web article series featuring stories from the emerging Christian contemplative movement. With guest contributions from partners such as Spiritual Directors International and the Poor People's Campaign, *We Conspire* gives audiences

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Community Engagement

DAWSON ALLEN

Community Engagement (CE) structurally sits on the edge of the inside of the CAC. The CE team primarily responds to and engages with our broader community—connecting seekers to our programs and resources that support their journey of transformation.

Sometimes that happens through a book recommendation in response to a heartfelt question from a constituent wrestling with the complexity of our current moment. At other times, it might mean helping a donor receive their daily meditations or sharing information about an upcoming event. With more technical questions, the work of the CE team can easily feel more like traditional customer support. However, times like these can become mutually transformative moments rather than simply transactional interactions.

Fr. Richard states that “A mystic sees things in their wholeness, connection, and union, not only their particularity.” Another way to say it is that every opportunity for the CE team to engage with the broader community is an invitation to connect with someone who is seeking the transformative wisdom and practices of the Christian Contemplative Tradition in the hope of inspiring loving action.

For me, the great gift of being on this team for almost three years has been to listen and be present to our supporters on their individual journeys. Whether that has been through



Relationship and partnership with the broader community will continue to be a critical bridge between our mission and our vision.

a visit to Tepeyac House (CAC’s bookstore), an email exchange, or a phone conversation, we hear countless stories of how the teachings of Fr. Richard and our faculty are helping turn word into flesh as our constituents embody the wisdom of the Christian Contemplative Tradition in service to a more loving world.

Fr. Richard has often said that the most important word in the title of the Center for Action and Contemplation is “and.” As “the CAC seeks to be about what Fr. Richard is about,” relationship and partnership with the broader community will continue to be a critical bridge between our mission and our vision. Thank you for your willingness to hold the tension of the *and* as we partner together in trying to realize a more just and connected world.

DAWSON ALLEN has been with CAC’s Community Engagement team for two and a half years and is currently a student in the Living School. He serves as a board member for New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light, a local interfaith environmental group. Outside of work, he enjoys spending time outdoors and traveling with his wife, Taylor.

Transformation Over Transaction [continued from page 2]

opportunities to learn about other people and organizations in this movement and discover their place among them.

Transformation Over Transaction can be a very difficult balance to strike, but it is a challenge that absolutely invigorates us. CAC’s Core Principle “The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better” is our anchor in a consumption-based, always-on digital world. We think and rethink (and sometimes overthink) ways to encourage our

audiences—and ourselves—to be fully engaged on the path of transformation.

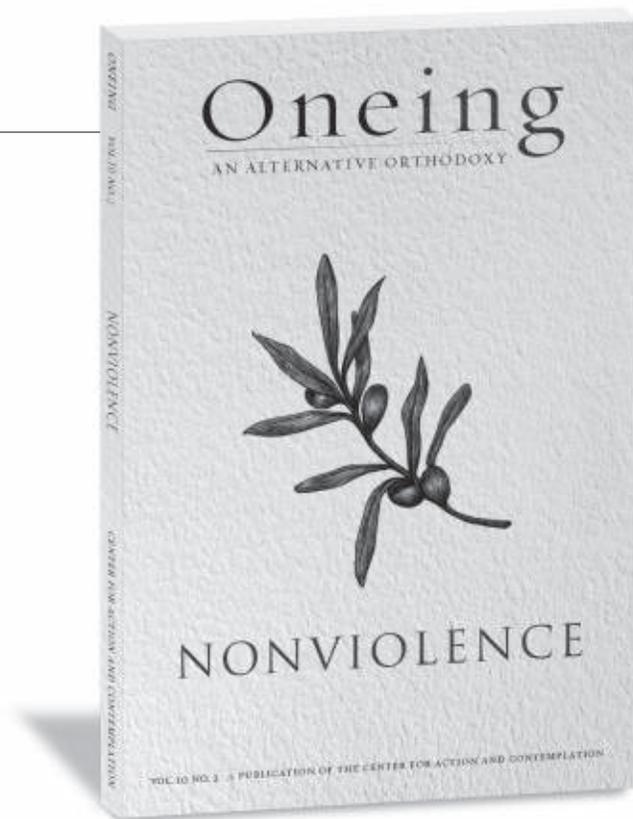
SARA PALMER is the marketing manager at CAC. She has worked in non-profit marketing and communications for more than fifteen years on causes such as animal welfare, justice action, spiritual well-being, and education. Sara lives in Memphis, Tennessee with her husband, daughter, an exceptionally perfect dog, and two deeply unsatisfied cats.

the Mendicant

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FALL 2022 ISSUE OF ONEING
NONVIOLENCE
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Every day, we look for Jesus' and God's reign in our hearts, in our personal lives, and in our local communities. But our common goal, to interpret the Gospel mandates, is to relieve suffering and to help end war, racism, poverty, injustice, the nuclear threat, and environmental destruction—that is, to welcome God's reign of justice and nonviolence here and now on earth.

—John Dear

The choice of the Nonviolence theme for the Fall 2022 issue of *Oneing* arose following a conversation with the Rev. John Dear, one of today's great social activists for peace and justice and a contributor to the Spring 2022 issue of *Oneing*. John Dear is a Roman Catholic priest, activist, lecturer, author, and longtime friend of Fr. Richard Rohr. With Fr. Richard's blessing, he wrote the Introduction to the issue, which includes contributions from peace and social justice activists and other critical thinkers from various faith and cultural backgrounds. We look forward to exploring this important theme with our readers!

—Vanessa Guerin
Director of Publications

Greetings CAC Community and Readers of *the Mendicant!*

This issue of the CAC's newsletter caps off a year-long editorial journey offering you an insider's view into the evolving and expanding work of our six core programs. We imagine that some of you may be surprised by how many team members and work functions contribute to the mission of CAC.

In addition to the CAC faculty, we have forty-five fulltime staff members who support five main departments, including Program Design, Production and Outreach, Digital Products and Information Technology, Finance, and Human Resources and Operations.

All this work is necessary to advance CAC's mission *to introduce Christian contemplative wisdom and practices that support transformation and inspire loving action*—a lofty mission that is made possible through our partnership with generous people like you.

As CAC marks its thirty-fifth anniversary on October 12, 2022, it is not an exaggeration to say that the work of nurturing contemplative consciousness in the world is more important now than ever. By introducing more people to the Christian contemplative tradition, our hope is that CAC can become a catalyzing force for a change of consciousness in the world. With your ongoing partnership, we will continue playing our part to grow and expand these efforts.

We hope that our work supports your journey of navigating the difficult and complex issues we face today. I recently reread the wonderful book by Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*. As his classic three-word opening sentence reminds us, "Life is difficult." He wrote the book in 1978, but it continues to be relevant today! We hope your contemplative practice, community, and support from organizations like the CAC are helping you stay on the less-traveled path.

Finally, CAC is excited to release a digital version of our **2021 Year in Review: Me/Us/The World** annual report—a comprehensive view and curated selection of our "greatest hits" from the previous calendar year. This web-based report offers videos, data, and stories from our leadership team, internal operations, and the broader community to give you a holistic view into the integrity of our work.

Thank you so much for your faithful support and partnership.

Until we meet again in 2023,

Ben Keesey

Development & Partnerships Director

To view the **2021 Year in Review: Me/Us/The World**, visit cac.org/AnnualReport.

CAC's Past and Future [continued from page 1]

"confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." And here we find the way through the third difficulty: "The great and merciful surprise is that we come to God not by doing it right but by doing it wrong!"⁶

As we approach the thirty-fifth anniversary of its founding, the CAC finds itself in an extended moment of transition—caught between its current life with Fr. Richard and its future life without him—and I am reminded of 1986, the year of its gestation. This fills me with hope, because while Fr. Richard is still very much with us, his gradual withdrawal from the day-to-day organizational and public life continues. And yet . . . from within the growing space of this creeping absence, I have begun to hear the call—Have you?—to carry this work forward.

Fr. Richard once wrote that "God always uses unworthy instruments so we can never think that it is we who are accomplishing the work."⁷ What is the work? It is to discover that we must listen for the call. For, despite the burden of challenging times or our own feelings of inadequacy or fear of being wrong, it is enough for us to simply respond with *yes*.

There is a great need right now for such unworthy instruments—people on the path of praxis *and* prayer, action *and* contemplation. We each have a part to play in this work: a whole body, a whole community, a whole movement of people.

And though I do not know what the future of the CAC will look like, I am filled with hope in the promise that we will discover it *together*.

1 Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go* (Chestnut Ridge, PA: Crossroad, 2004), 37.

2 Richard Rohr, "Justice Close to Home," *Center for Action and Contemplation*, June 22, 2018, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/justice-close-to-home-2018-06-22/>.

3 Richard Rohr, *Essential Teachings on Love*, ed. Joelle Chase and Judy Traeger (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), 145.

4 Rohr, *Essential Teachings on Love*, 145.

5 Rohr, *Essential Teachings on Love*, 145.

6 Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (Chestnut Ridge, PA: Crossroad, 2003), 21.

7 Rohr, *Essential Teachings on Love*, 258.

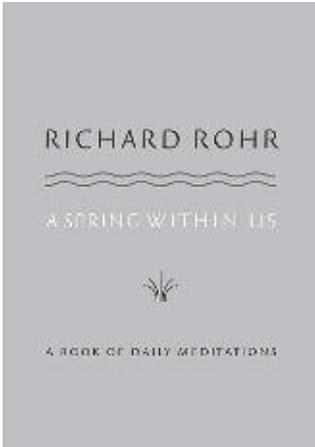
BRANDON STRANGE is the Director of Engagement at the Center for Action and Contemplation, where he has worked since 2019. Born and raised in Oklahoma, he now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico with his wife Erin.



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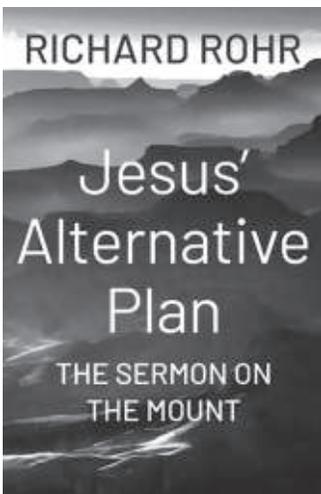
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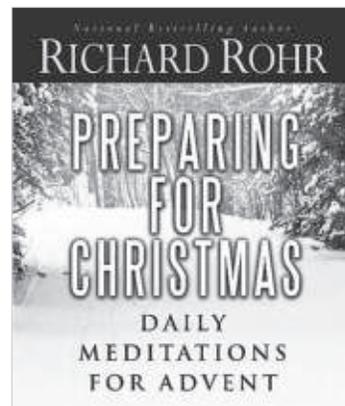
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When Jesus talked about the Reign of God, he was talking about an utterly different way of relating to one another. He lays out a blueprint for this alternative lifestyle in his best-known teaching, the Sermon on the Mount. This updated, newly titled edition of *Jesus' Plan for a New World* will inspire those desiring a transformative understanding of Jesus' alternative plan. Richard Rohr explores the implications of Jesus'

vision, explaining the historical and cultural context and offering guidance for what it means for humanity today.



A beautiful edition for gift-giving or as a personal mini-retreat during this Advent season and for years to come. This book is designed to accompany the reader through each day of Advent with reference to the Scripture readings for the day and concluding with a scripture-based reflection by Richard Rohr. The mature

insights shared by Fr. Richard will inspire you to deepen your openness to adult Christianity, "making your entire life, and the life of the church, one huge advent."

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 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.

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