

# the Mendicant

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

◀ EMBRACING THE PAST, WELCOMING THE FUTURE ▶

## Nondual Spirituality:

### Bringing It to a Culture Addicted to Prosperity and Accumulation

VANCE BROWN

Raised in the Southern Baptist tradition of “fire and brimstone,” I embraced an American culture that glorifies power, prestige, and possessions. I had successfully followed the blueprint for the American Dream. As an educated, entitled white male and an unhealthy Enneagram Three, my addiction to achievement and wealth was magnified. The egocentric path I had chosen held intense fear, shame, and insecurity that I transmitted to others until my pursuit of peace and happiness inevitably failed. It took numerous small “deaths,” failures, and admissions of powerlessness, along with the wisdom teachings of Fr. Richard Rohr, to pull me onto a road of ongoing transformation.

In 2016, I attended a Rob Bell retreat that also featured Fr. Richard. A transformative moment for me was when Fr. Richard said that Jesus didn’t come to change God’s mind about humanity, but to change humanity’s mind about God. My Christian tradition had taught about a Zeus-like, white-haired God of wrath and retribution who would torture sinners for all eternity—without any hope of redemption.

A quote attributed to Albert Einstein reads as follows: “The most important question facing humanity is: Is the universe a friendly place?” At that time, my answer was “No.” I resigned as CEO of a 700-employee software company I had cofounded so that I could have time to face a difficult season of disorder in my life.



In 2018, I serendipitously met Damien Faughnan. I learned Damien was a c-suite business coach *and* he was on the board of the CAC. I told Damien that I had discovered Fr. Richard’s teachings and was going on a river cruise that summer where he was the featured speaker. Damien encouraged me to attend the Men’s Rites of Passage (MROP) at Ghost Ranch. I became an initiated man, but the liminal space into which I was ushered would continue for a long period.

In 2019, I was accepted into the CAC’s Living School. I experienced a lot of challenges during the program, including four surgeries (one for prostate cancer), a full-body rash for sixteen months, and the deaths of both my parents. And then there was COVID-19! The message of the paschal mystery gave me hope of resurrection during my many dark nights of the soul. The Living School is where I learned to embrace nondual thinking, shadowboxing, contemplative practice, detachment, and a universal communion with everything.

I know I continue to do so much wrong. However, I believe it is time for me to support the CAC’s teaching of the Franciscan Alternative Orthodoxy to a society that is addicted to the pursuit of financial prosperity. We need to share the gospel message of suffering, mercy, death, and resurrection to a consumer-driven, first-world culture that worships acquisition and accumulation.

It’s time for those with power to use it for the common good, to stand up to the establishment, and to follow Jesus

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# Stay Curious, My Friends

In the summer of 2015, I was in the most dangerous situation I had ever experienced. I was a pastor's wife, a youth leader, a lifelong evangelical Christian, and I wasn't sure what I believed anymore. I couldn't reconcile what I had been taught with what I knew about God. You can accuse me of hyperbolizing the danger of the situation, but at the time it felt life-threatening in every sense of the word.

In that same season, I was introduced to the writings of Richard Rohr. I eventually discovered the CAC's Daily Meditations, and I subscribed to what would become the



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daily healing salve and fresh water my sore and thirsty spirit needed. I began reconciling my uncertainty with the Christian tradition I thought I had to leave behind, and my initial fear grew into a wonderful curiosity. It felt like watching my own child delight in something that I had been taking for granted—like a rain puddle, where I was simultaneously both the splashing child and the gazing parent.

Reading those first meditations didn't answer all my questions and solve all my problems, though. Instead, Fr. Richard gently taught me that faith isn't about having all the answers and living a life free of trials. Rather, it is through the wondering and wandering that we find God, love and salvation, and our connection to each other. I've personally heard Fr. Richard state many times that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certitude. That's not New Age thinking; that's straight from the Gospel.

Over the handful of years after 2015, I would leave the church, sell my home in Tucson, and move to Albuquerque to work for the CAC. My spouse and I got divorced, and now we peacefully co-parent our two young daughters. I've learned to be comfortable with having many more questions than answers regarding my faith, and I'm also mostly okay with calling myself a Christian again. Perhaps following Jesus today means looking less like “a Christian” and more like the Christ. I find I do this by letting go of security blankets; being in loving relationship with others; healing and restoring; recognizing that while the law and the cultural norms may state one thing, we're invited to explore an alternative *and* holy path; and wrestling with really good questions.

I could be wrong, though. I'm trying to be less certain these days.

*Jenna Bourland has worked for the CAC since 2018, providing administrative support and project coordination across several teams. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico with her two daughters and a dog named Scruff. Jenna enjoys the exhilarating pastimes of reading, working on jigsaw puzzles, and going for walks in the desert sunshine.*

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## Nondual Spirituality [continued from page 1]

in proclaiming the Reign of God here on earth.

Damien recently gave me a second initiation. He invited me to “take a seat at the fire of the elders” and to be an *executive elder* to business leaders by helping them rediscover who they truly are. I accepted and am reordering my life. I believe that the perennial wisdom taught by Fr. Richard will echo through me as I hope to be a wounded healer.

In 2020, Fr. Richard seconded the motion and blessed me, just before COVID-19 disrupted everything. I purchased a Trinity icon in Santa Fe the week following Fr. Richard's blessing. This icon is a reminder of the most important

words to me in all of Fr. Richard's writings: “To sum it all up, I do not believe there is any wrath in God whatsoever—it's theologically impossible when God is Trinity.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016), 140.

*Vance Brown spent his first half of life dutifully climbing the corporate ladder as an entrepreneur, CEO, and lawyer. He is now an Executive Elder at Thrivers Leadership Institute and desires to help other business executives who are living in “quiet desperation.” To learn more about Vance Brown, visit <https://thrivers.com/vance/>.*

# Transformation and Identity

**I**t was 2019, and I was watching Super Soul Sunday with Oprah Winfrey and her guest, Fr. Richard Rohr. I had heard of Fr. Richard but had not been exposed to his teachings. So, when Oprah referenced the first chapter of *The Universal Christ* and said, “Christ is not Jesus’ last name,” I physically jumped off my chair and let out some sort of cheer. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! A Catholic priest was proclaiming a truth that I, a “recovering” Catholic, had come to learn but thought it to be heretical to common understanding and accepted dogma.

I bought the Kindle version of the book *immediately*. It was the beginning of an ongoing consumption of and love affair with Fr. Richard’s books, recordings, and podcasts that continues to this day.

In that interview with Oprah, Fr. Richard begins by saying he was “going for broke” in writing *The Universal Christ*. He said that he had nothing to lose and nothing to gain, and he had to say what his life had taught him. For myself, and the many thousands of others who have heard his messages, and for those who have not yet but will, and for those who experience change in their lives through his teachings, we thank him for his courage, wisdom, love, and life.

Fr. Richard’s life and gifts have created a foundation for us to build on through the wonderful organization he founded and nurtured—the Center for Action and Contemplation. The CAC will enable us to continue supporting his work to attain his vision and purpose and, more importantly, God’s mission, through him, for all humanity.

In my first conversation with Ben Keeseey, CAC’s Development Director, he asked me what words came to mind when thinking about Fr. Richard’s teachings. (Ben asks great questions!) My answer was immediate. Fr. Richard says, somewhere in his teachings, that “It’s all about transformation and identity.” Those words really resonate with me. They provide such clarity and opportunity for action!

Fr. Richard’s teachings have been a catalyst of transformation and spiritual evolution in my life, and they have helped awaken and guide me to my True Self, my True Identity. Having those as process and purpose, everything else seems to fall into place.

We stand on the foundation and platform Fr. Richard has built. We are his ambassadors, his emissaries, his mouth and hands. We are called! It’s time for us to be bold, to have courage. It’s up to us. Fr. Richard, in one of his many works, states that the second coming of the Christ is you and me. We must honor Fr. Richard by going out and continuing his work. And when we do, we can help accelerate the transformation and evolution of humankind and help bring about the promise of Jesus’ Good News of God’s reign.



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I am committed, in heart and in action, to the vision and mission of the CAC and to continue to learn and grow to help advance what Fr. Richard has created over his lifetime.

*Larry Baker lives in Carmel, Indiana with his beloved wife Patty and their fourteen-year-old Standard Poodle Deuce. His interests include the CAC, meditation, philanthropy, studying and learning, nature, travel, golf, music, and teaching. But first, and most of all, he is passionate about God.*

# Confirming What I Already Knew to Be True

I wish I could remember how I first “met” Fr. Richard Rohr. It very well could have been through *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent*, which I have read and shared many times, or maybe a reflection in another publication. I wish I could remember, because that unintentional meeting has had a profound influence on the direction of my life—both spiritual and otherwise.

The authenticity of Fr. Richard’s writing style and his voice—so personal and so clear—drew me toward more of his teachings. When his words and ideas challenged me, I felt secure in the knowledge that Fr. Richard was a priest of the same loving Franciscan order with which I grew up.

I discovered the CAC, the online classes, and the amazing faculty, including James Finley and guest teacher Mirabai Starr. I marveled at these beautiful truth-seeking souls and at God’s grace for allowing me to “bump” into them. But it was Fr. Richard’s book *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* that changed me and helped me to see the love of God in everything, everyone, everywhere.

I have learned that the Trinity is a constant flow of love—a perpetual giving and receiving of love. I can either go with this flow of love, which always includes me, or I can choose to be the boulder that blocks it.

From soaking in the words of Richard Rohr and interacting with the CAC, I have learned that contemplation is a practice that involves showing up and waiting for God, through patience and stillness.

I have learned that the only reality is the now, this moment, the place where God is present. This Presence is constant and real in each of God’s creatures, no matter how hard that may be for us to understand.

I have learned the paradox of being empty—by making space in my own heart so that God can fill that space with light, love, and “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).



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I have learned that after order comes disorder, which leads to reorder and a deeper relationship with God. This pattern is cyclical and certain.

So, my initial “meeting” with Richard Rohr now reminds me of the jolt of recognition I received each time I looked into the eyes of my newest newborn and saw someone I already knew. Fr. Richard’s teachings, for me, are not so much about learning something new as confirming what I already knew to be true.

*Malise O'Banion, a former high school English teacher, has been married for forty-nine years and is the mother of five children and grandmother to eighteen grandchildren. She enjoys walking, reading, and writing; is a constant crocheter; and considers herself an aspiring yogi. Malise and her husband make their home in East Texas but will never shed their Louisiana roots.*

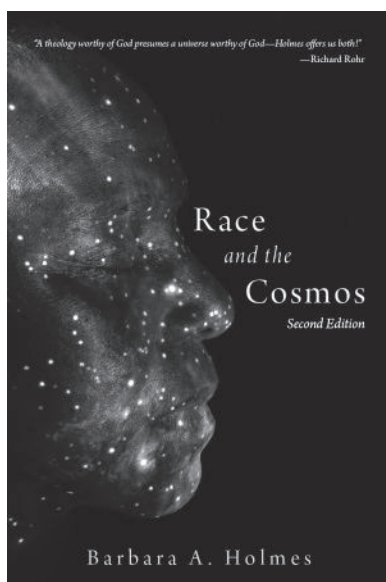
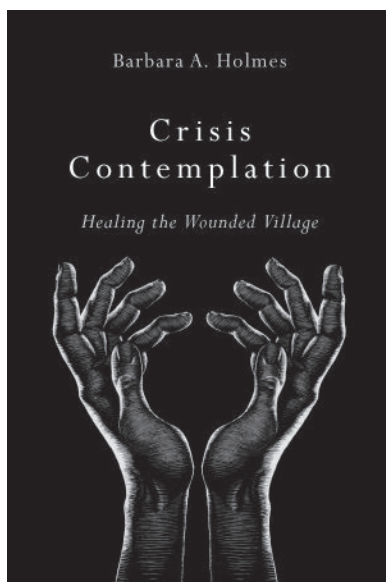
## A Note from Ben Keesey, Development Director

One of the biggest joys of my role is getting to know the incredible, humble, and kind people in our CAC community, like Vance, Jenna, Larry, and Malise, who graciously contributed to this issue of *the Mendicant*. Each one has a unique story of Fr. Richard’s impact on their life, and each has been inspired to “pay it forward” by helping others discover the wisdom of the Christian contemplative tradition through their support of the CAC. If you

also have been impacted by the work of Fr. Richard, you can partner with us in the expansion of CAC’s mission, which continues to impact generations of spiritual seekers. Your generosity—freely and cheerfully given—supports transformation through CAC’s vision and values. If you would like to connect and learn more, please contact me at [bkeesey@cac.org](mailto:bkeesey@cac.org) or [development@cac.org](mailto:development@cac.org).

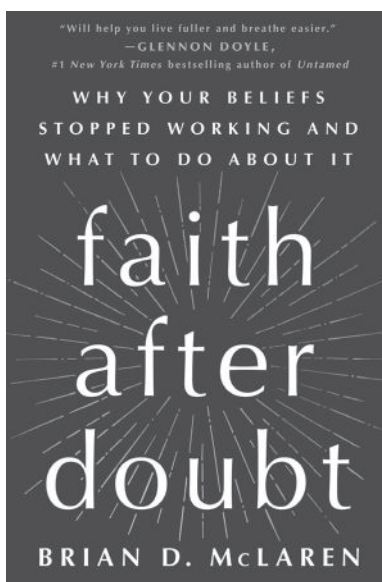
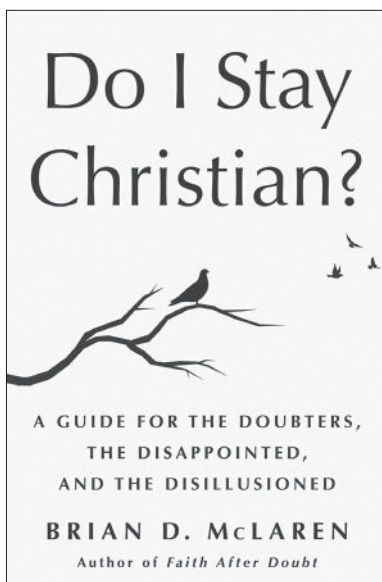
# Books by CAC Faculty Members

BARBARA HOLMES



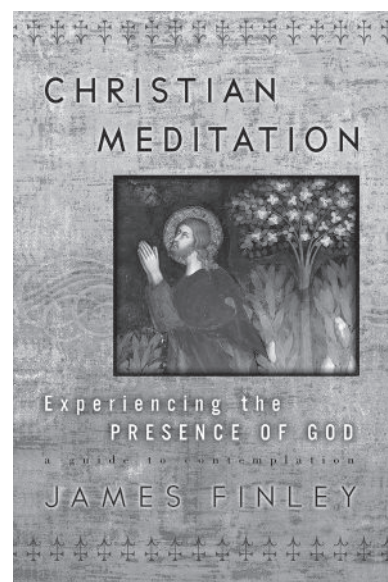
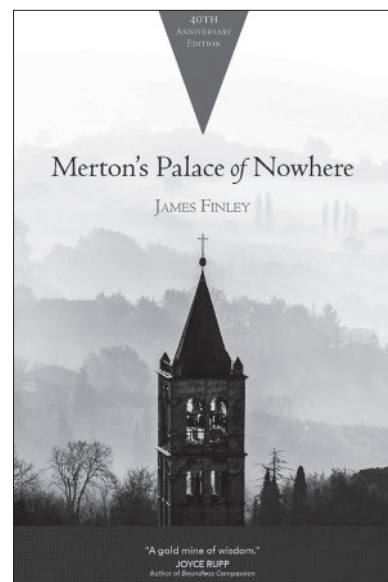
A scholar of African American spirituality and mysticism, **Dr. Barbara Holmes** reveals how the cosmos can expand our limited constructs of religion, race, and power. A faculty member at the Center for Action and Contemplation, she teaches how God's communal presence can inspire imagination and wisdom, especially in times of crisis.

BRIAN MCLAREN



Former evangelical pastor **Brian D. McLaren** is a champion for a more loving, inclusive, and contemplative Christianity. A faculty member at the Center for Action and Contemplation, he teaches ways to reconnect with the message Jesus lived and died for—unconditional love.

JAMES FINLEY



Student of Thomas Merton and clinical psychologist **Dr. James Finley** teaches how connecting to our Divine indwelling can transcend fear and shame and awaken us to our True Self. A faculty member at the Center for Action and Contemplation, he is the host of CAC's podcast *Turning to the Mystics*.

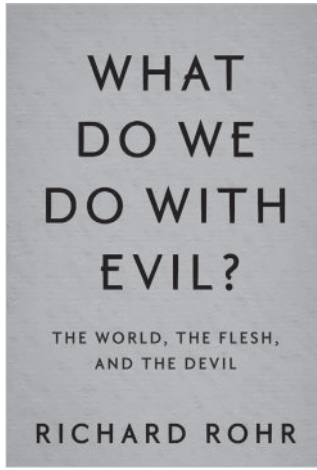
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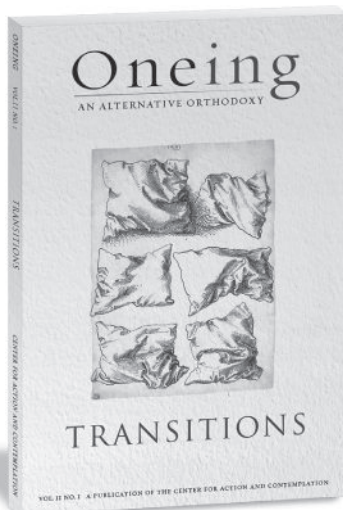
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## TRANSITIONS

ONEING: VOL. 11, NO. 1

Fr. Richard Rohr faithfully wrote the Introduction to each biannual issue of *Oneing* from its inception in 2013 through the Spring 2022 issue. As Fr. Richard transitions away from his many responsibilities at CAC, and the Center mindfully explores what it will look like when Fr. Richard is no longer its central animator, an issue of *Oneing* on this critical theme of *Transitions* made sense—especially during a time of multiple global transitions from peace to war, from democracy toward authoritarianism, and amidst major shifts in the earth's ecosystem, to name only a few of the many critical issues humanity is facing today.

CAC faculty member and well-known author Brian McLaren supported the Spring 2023 issue of *Oneing* by writing the Introduction and suggesting several of the outstanding contributors whose work illuminates a multiplicity of transitions. Thanks to Brian's brilliant collaboration, we offer yet another strong issue of *Oneing*.

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