



# **EVERYTHING BELONGS**

The Future of the Work

Paul Swanson: It is always great fun for us to sit down with Richard and catch up on what life looks and feels like for him today. The thing about Richard, and I'm sure you've noticed this, is he doesn't like to talk about himself. He naturally steps away from talk that feels focused on him and leads into conversation on theology, spirituality, and issues of justice.

Today, we are back in Richard's living room. Mike and I pick up where we left off, widening the conversation to Richard's transition from the teacher in the spotlight at the CAC to joining a circle of teachers, and a staff, being empowered to carry these teachings forward alongside all of you listening. We also talk about how the CAC's evolution as an organization, with all of its gifts, foibles and obvious growing edges, conserve the world in supporting transformation and inspiring loving action.

Mike Petrow: From the Center for Action and Contemplation, I'm Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Mike Petrow: And this is Everything Belongs.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, originally, one of the themes we've been talking about that's coming in this conversation is the center and circumference, and that you in particular are making a movement where you're going from the center of the CAC and the CAC's work to the communal circumference. How does that feel for you after 30-odd years of being at the center of things at the CAC?

Richard Rohr: Just tremendous relief that I've done what was mine to do at the Center, and now I don't need to keep doing it. It's nothing but relief. I don't have... I think I'm being honest about myself. I don't have a lot of control needs. I got used to being in control, and in that sense I do, but otherwise I don't. So to be freed of it and just to give advice if it's wanted or asked for is so much freer.

Michael will come by and ask my advice, but he fully knows he doesn't need to follow it, and doesn't always agree with it, and he's usually right. Because he reads the contemporary world much better than I do. I don't know how to read the world of organization and management today. It's so sophisticated, and I mean that as a compliment, just the language of development of organizations and leadership people. It's an art form.

Mike Petrow: On campus, there's a life-size cardboard cutout of you that just kind of moves around. You find it in different places, and I've bumped into it at least three times, and it has scared me half to death every time.

Richard Rohr: I've jumped at it. Oh my God. Because it's perfectly life-sized, and when you see the silhouette, "Oh my God, someone's in my office."

Mike Petrow: And you're like, Richard's watching over our shoulder wherever you are.

Richard Rohr: But when I go, you can bury that with me.

Mike Petrow: I'm going to sneak it into people's showers just to scare them. But what's great is, I'm so impressed that it doesn't feel like you're looming over everyone's shoulder. How does that feel

to be able to step back and really not feel like you need to keep an eye on everything?

Richard Rohr: Relief. No other word comes to mind. Relief. To the point, as I said right at the beginning, that I feel irresponsible. I've still given up responsibility. I feel irresponsible. I still have my damn thoughts and opinions, but I don't feel a need to communicate them or to have anybody agree with me. Michael's disagreed with me enough, and I've seen he's right, that I don't trust myself the way I used to. Now, I'm grateful that I did trust myself when I was younger, but I don't need that anymore. An excessive trust of Richard's thoughts.

Paul Swanson: Wow, what an expansion of trusting others' gifts. That's part of what I hear in this is, your gifts were so central and so we're so grateful for them and how they've...

Richard Rohr: Aw, thank you.

Paul Swanson: Offered so much to us and the world, and what I hear you saying now is just the deep acknowledging and respect of other gifts and how that can actually weave together for more impact potentially in the world as we seek to do our work.

Richard Rohr: There's just a lot of people a lot smarter than I am. I was smart in one gifted area, that was gift, but outside of that, I'm not. And I'm just stupid if I don't recognize that. Most practical things, mechanical things, scientific things, I don't know beans. So I looked always... Because I was top of my field, I looked smarter than I was, I think.

Paul Swanson: Well, the rest of our conversation is focused on the people who are smarter than you. I'm just kidding.

Mike Petrow: There's three of them here in this room.

Paul Swanson: Just kidding. You know I'm kidding.

Richard Rohr: Aren't they terrible? This is the way I've been treated for 35 years.

Paul Swanson: I think as you've got more playful, we've all gotten more playful around you.

Richard Rohr: You have, yes.

Paul Swanson: That's true. Goodness, goodness.

Richard Rohr: How wonderful.

Paul Swanson: But I do want to talk about somebody who is a part of that communal circumference is, Mike brought up Brian and the role that he's playing. I would love to hear your further thoughts on what specific gifts you think Brian is going to bring as Dean of the CAC faculty.

Richard Rohr: You know, he's such a gentleman in every sense of that word. He treats the person in front of him like they matter. I think he's a better listener than I am. He's got a brilliant teacher's mind, could take complex ideas and develop them into a very convincing conclusion. He's a gift from God for the CAC. It's people like him and Mirabai and Dr. B coming on the scene that really tell me the CAC and the Living School is in the plan of God, it's not just our idea, because these gifted people, like you three right here, keep appearing.

We've had a lot of people appear on the scene who are not called to build with us, and they recognized it, thank God. But there were always enough like you guys and the new faculty that said, "Where did they come from? How did they get it so easily and so well?" So it gives me sincere hope, sincere hope, that what we're doing approximates truth, and might just be around for a while, for as long as God wants. And when it's time for us to go, it's time for us to go. I hope we never feel we have to make it last. If we're speaking the truth with love, with love, then we deserve to last. Otherwise not. Did I answer your question?

Paul Swanson: Amen to that. Yeah, you definitely spoke to the gifts of Brian and what he can do, and then...

Richard Rohr: Oh, Brian.

Paul Swanson: I think, too, as we think about the other core faculty of Cynthia Bourgeault has now become emeritus faculty, and now the core faculty that's helping build this future CAC with James Finley, Dr. Barbara Holmes and Brian McLaren, they bring these unique set of gifts within engaged contemplation to help bring this mission into the context of today, and it's a gift to see how that is coming together.

And I'm wondering, how are you seeing students responding to their particular gifts and their particular voices within these contemplative traditions?

Richard Rohr: You know, those who do it, which appears to be a good percentage. We don't see a lot of them because they're out doing it. Do you understand?

Paul Swanson: Uh-huh.

Richard Rohr: They're not trying to hang on to the CAC or even the Living School. They've taken on projects and ministries and acts of service that fully occupy them. So I keep hearing about it, but they're not reporting in to us, and they shouldn't need to report in to us.

Like they say about a good parent, a good parent makes themselves unnecessary. It breaks their heart when their kid just is all excited, when Ebba just can't wait to get to college and away from you, that's going to break your heart. "Why do you want to go to college? I'm your daddy." But she will. And she'll find her college friends much more fun than you.

Paul Swanson: Yes. I think she already does find her friends much more fun than me, but that's so true.

Richard Rohr: It is, yeah.

Paul Swanson: Always trying to work ourselves out of jobs.

Richard Rohr: Out of a job, that's the way it is.

Paul Swanson: Whether you're a spiritual teacher or a parent.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: I think that's really beautiful.

Richard Rohr: CAC should work itself out of a need for an alumni association. That's why we made, even our diploma at graduation, somewhat fanciful and facetious, to know that this isn't a graduation. It's just a continuation of life. That's why we call it the Living School. We want to just help you live a more full life according to your gifts.

Paul Swanson: That's great. It's more of a bookmark than a diploma.

Richard Rohr: Ooh, that's nice. See, this is why you guys can take over. You're all coming up with good phrases.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. I'll tell you what, we just finished the syllabus for the next phase, the one-year program that's going to launch, and it's amazing.

Richard Rohr: Is it?

Mike Petrow: And two of the things I love about it... Oh, it's so good, yeah. We'll sit and look at it. What a gift to work with a faculty.

And I love this idea, two things we talk about that is this idea of recognizing the curriculum of your life and recognizing that the Living School is applied in your life with it as the curriculum. And then now we're asking the question from your writing, Richard, what is my lever, and what is my place to stand? What is my work to do in the world? Which is great. It's great to get to ask students to think about that.

Richard Rohr: That makes me very happy. Thank you.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. I have to say, gosh, Brian, amazing.

Richard Rohr: He's so good.

Mike Petrow: Oh, goodness gracious. What a communicator. What a thinker. What a leader. What a teacher. And Jim Finley and Dr. Barbara Holmes. Wow.

Richard Rohr: I know.

Mike Petrow: Just what profound...

Richard Rohr: I just finished Jim's memoir, and how he traversed through trauma... I don't have any big traumatic story to tell, and we need people, because that's so much of the world.

Mike Petrow: Jim has enough for both of you, I think.

Richard Rohr: Poor guy, yeah.

Mike Petrow: And maybe a few of us.

Richard Rohr: But he's a happy guy.

Mike Petrow: Oh, goodness. The healing and the integration and the love that's manifest in his teaching in his life.

Paul Swanson: And I think it, too, about Dr. B's book, *Crisis Contemplation*, the way that...

Richard Rohr: Just that word, yes.

Paul Swanson: Yes. What it brings to the conversation of the now, of what our current context is, and the grounding of how contemplation can be such a necessity and a rise in places of trauma and communities on the margins, and just when life overwhelms in such a way that there is a contemplation that has to arrive for survival.

Richard Rohr: For survival.

Paul Swanson: And I think...

Richard Rohr: Then we stop playing church anymore.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. I have to learn a different way of seeing to get through tomorrow.

Mike Petrow: And it really strikes me as thinking about what we were talking about earlier with the path of the prophet. What I see in Dr. B's teaching, especially on crisis contemplation, is a communal holding of anger into sadness and sorrow and the importance of grief and lament.

Richard Rohr: I think so.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: I think so, yes.

Paul Swanson: That pain and trauma has to go somewhere, and the way that she beautifully writes about the flowering life that can come from lament, and it is into the unknown, from the mystery into the unknown, but into embodied action, into how one can heal and be a part of a healing community. It is the best of Christian theology, I think.

Richard Rohr: We're so blessed.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. That's so well-said, Paul.

Richard Rohr: I just see so many young people, and I say they feel like, as Jesus put a sheep without a shepherd, who is going to teach these millions of young kids that movement from anger to tears. Tears and compassion are almost the same thing.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: How will they get there if they don't have good teachers or guides? It doesn't have to be

teaching. Models, good models.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, as we think about the way that the CAC is, to use a Mike phrase, moving, grooving in the world today, there's a bunch of names and books and authors that are not only folks who are guests on our CAC podcasts or showing up at online courses or the daily meditations, these are folks who have been influenced by you over the years and are now taking your work and contextualizing it, wrestling with it, nuancing it, and the articulation of engaged contemplation in new ways.

What is it like for you to look at the landscape and know that you played a role in that, but are now standing shoulder to shoulder with these teachers who are emerging as kind of the next generation?

Richard Rohr: Who've gone way beyond me. I thought of that with Greg Boyle a few months ago, who's doing such marvelous work with the street kids of LA, and he came to speak here in Albuquerque, and I was in the front pew grinning up at him.

And with the most soft voice he said, "And my spiritual teacher is here," and he looked at me. I just... Come on, you're five times better than me. Why are you saying that? I really was embarrassed by it. I never knew I had any influence on him, but if that's how God is able to use me, to teach the teachers, I'm most grateful.

Mike Petrow: It's wild. When you think about the sort of conversational universe that we live in, one of the things I appreciate is my friends who've grown up in other spiritual systems. Like, they haven't deconstructed Christianity, they have nothing to do with it.

And I will hear them sometimes use your phrases and talk about their sort of construction and deconstruction of their particular spiritual path or their particular faith tradition, or even, they might quote you talking about the Enneagram or something, and you realize how far and wide your influence has gone into the perennial conversation, and also how many really good teachers it's brought.

Richard Rohr: Are out there, yeah.

Mike Petrow: Back to us. Yeah. What a gift.

Richard Rohr: Are out there. Yeah, the evangelical world, because it gave you passion, it gave you fervor, is producing a lot of them, I think. Because they keep the passion, but they bring the mind to it now that's different. And you're living, all three of you are living examples of that.

Paul Swanson: Richard, when we look at the staff at the CAC today, knowing it's 40-odd folks gathering around this mission and seeking to serve it in the world, and these expertises that are as varied as one can get. Some are theological and spiritual, some are in podcasts and broadcast, some is in engagement with our constituents. It's the whole field. What do you think about when you see all these people coming together to serve this mission for this next evolution of what the CAC is becoming? How does that stir your heart and mind for what the CAC seems to be called to do in this next evolution?

Richard Rohr: Mostly I... This is going to sound terrible. Mostly, I don't think about it. I can't. It's beyond

me. It's bigger than me. I can't think about it. Because I don't know what to do with it if I do think about it. So I go over and I meet all the pleasant people, and they are, they're pleasant to me, pleasant to the world, and I take satisfaction in that present moment. But as to where this is heading or what this means in the grand scheme of things, I don't have a clue.

Mike Petrow: Richard, who's your favorite person on staff? I'm just kidding. Totally just kidding.

Richard Rohr: Oh, my. There's this young guy from Pennsylvania.

Mike Petrow: No, no, no. I think about, there's so many amazing people that work there. I've never met a more intelligent group of people in my life. If you had a blessing or a hope for everyone there, what would it be?

Richard Rohr: That they wouldn't become cynical. Because that's the normal path of people who are passionate. They can't get other people to work with them, or they can't achieve. What's the goal that you achieve? It's just like Jesus. In the end, we're all limited good. So I can't think about it, and I don't think about it in any grand direction.

That is truly in the hands of God, and that includes closing down two years from now. If that happens, I'm fine.

Mike Petrow: Seems like a big stretch, though, for an Enneagram One to be able to let go of it that completely. That's something.

Richard Rohr: Wow. Does it? I guess it does. No, I don't do that anymore. Try to hold it together, even in my mind, what it's supposed to be. I hope I've offered enough tools, many of them from other people, by the way, things like Ken Wilber and Rene Girard. You know, they aren't all my ideas. The only thing that gave me the conviction to believe them is if they were my ideas, and this is going to surprise you, good Protestant boys, was the Bible, that I found what I was trying to say was biblically warranted and validated.

Now, most people don't see that, but my first great love, my first cassettes, were scripture. And I sincerely believe that what we're teaching is scriptural. And so that allows me to let go of it, because then I know it's going to happen on its own time schedule, on its own terms, and not by me pushing it or putting my name to the bottom of it.

Paul Swanson: There's a name that's come up a couple times in our conversation, the other Michael, Michael Poffenberger, our Executive Director, and you've been talking about how you no longer feel like you have to hold it together.

Richard Rohr: I don't.

Paul Swanson: And I think of Michael and his position, being that one who's holding it together organizationally, that is part of where his gifts reside. And seeing the two of you, and you have a very close relationship and you tease each other, you sharpen each other, you dream together, and you obviously love one another. Do you know what it was about Michael that first allowed you to wholeheartedly trust him in this season of transition at the CAC?

Richard Rohr: Well, first I have to admit that I was impressed by his clearly good mind, that he would



just... His little ticking mind would take a new idea and search for objectivity. This is not just a sentiment or not just a feeling. And I think he got that from his good education at Notre Dame. He got the best of Catholic social teaching, so I knew we were on the same wavelength. But he got it from another source other than me, and all I was doing was validating it.

Then, as a one, the people I'm drawn to are sevens because they're what I'm not. I don't know how to be happy-go-lucky until the last couple years. Maybe some of that's rubbed off from him, I don't know. But it was... His mind is somewhat hidden spirituality. Most people, when you first see him, wouldn't think that he's that spiritual a person, because he makes light of so much. But taking long car trips with him and in-depth conversations, I really know he is.

In fact, he showed me a picture that was online yesterday of his confirmation picture. He's this fat little boy, and he's got a bishop putting his hand on his hand, and that he would even keep that, the moment he was confirmed. It still is meaningful to him. The Catholic skeleton holds him, even though he doesn't care much about most of the specifics that most Catholics are concerned about. And I see myself in him. I'm the same way.

I'm not Catholic at all, and yet I'm overwhelmingly Catholic, and you know that. It probably gets to be too much. I can't think except inside of that big fleshy skeleton that was given to us. And of course, the reason I'm Catholic is precisely because it is very often Catholic, universal. And my life has been a search for universal truth. Truth that applies everywhere, not just to white people or gay people or straight people or black people or any specific group. So yeah, I think it was his mind.

But his ability to let me challenge and correct him, if I did, showed me his humility. And when you see a very smart person who's also humble, that sold me. He's the kind of leader we want, because he's not going to get stuck on himself. I've seen too much pride in the clergy of all denominations. And so this ability to be lighthearted, allow correction... Very early on he told me, "What is it you want the CAC to be? I've come here to serve that." So he had the humility to honor my gift and to trust his own at the same time.

Honor mine, trust his own, and ask questions like, "Richard, do you take any responsibility for the fact that some previous directors left angry?" And I'd have to say, "Yes, I do." I'd have to face my own faults. But that ability to receive correction, not just from me but from the tradition. And for him to see that his millennial American bias was a great big bias too that had to be overcome. He makes fun of millennials around me more than I do. He says, "If it isn't about us, we're not interested in it." That isn't true, but... Am I answering your question?

Paul Swanson: You are. I think you're offering a great snapshot of Michael's leadership and the gifts you see in it, and just the humanity you see in it. And I think that's part of, I'm wondering as we even expand out beyond Michael too, if staff and those listening to this right now, your friends near and far, and this is a phrase that Mike has come up with, which really is at the centerpiece of this podcast of... How do you think that all these folks, staff, listeners, friends, can live your teachings forward? As you move to the circumference and more folks start to take on this work, how can we live your teachings forward?

Richard Rohr: All right, the phrase that just came into my mind, I don't know if it's the best or right... Stay close to the bottom. Now understand bottom on about 10 levels there: the earth, the poor, your own shadow self. Stay close to the bottom. Don't get pulled into flights of anything, flights of anything. Icarus flying too close to the sun.

And I think especially, so much of my work for years was men's work. I especially want to say that to young men because what I've seen again and again is men are, by nature, ambitious. They're career-oriented. They want to make a flash. I probably did too. My way was to be a priest. So if you could stay close to the bottom, your shadow self, keep looking at the dirty earth beneath your feet. Remember, human and humble come from the same root, it's "humus". Those will be people who will sustain whatever it is I tried to teach, not just people who quote the Enneagram or Spiral Dynamics or Ken Wilber.

And the primacy of love. If our justice work is not loving, it isn't justice. That's the way God justifies us is by loving us at ever-deeper levels. So that's the way we got to love the world, and bring justice to the world, not by anger, but by love. But anger that... I mean, love that might've been first elicited by anger, the mistreatment of black people or the humiliation of gays or whatever it might be. You start with that anger and you let it be softened, let it be balanced, and you get to the love. Then you're a prophet.

Mike Petrow: Love that, Richard. I think about our whole conversation and what you just said there and the connection of human and humus and humor, and all of that from that word humus, which means, does it mean "ground"? "Earth"?

Richard Rohr: Earth.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Humus is like... Yeah, soil.

Mike Petrow: And the earthiness of that and the groundedness of that, and telling us to stay grounded.

Richard Rohr: Hard to [inaudible 00:31:50], isn't it?

Mike Petrow: Yeah, stay grounded.

Richard Rohr: Can't go wrong. And now here it's the very earth of which we stay on, that our future is depending on.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, and the encouragement to stay grounded in love. And I appreciate the buoyancy and the humor that's come out in the gravitas of this conversation.

Richard Rohr: You guys bring that out of me.

Mike Petrow: Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Paul Swanson: Two months have passed since our conversation in Richard's living room. At this point, we thought we'd bring you into our conversation with the CAC Executive Director, Michael Poffenberger, which was recorded in the staff break room at the 2023 Living School Symposium. Here, Michael joins us to expound on the imagination of what is institutionally

possible with the direction we are headed while seeking to stay grounded in humility, wisdom, and joy.

Mike Petrow: So Michael, who or what was your introduction to Richard, first of all, and then eventually the Center for Action and Contemplation?

Michael Poffenberger: Yeah, so I was in my twenties working in a field of human rights, doing policy work, essentially, focused on trying to prevent different forms of mass violence against communities in East and Central Africa. And I grew up Catholic, had studied some of the mystics and been part of the Catholic Worker when I was in college. So I was formed by the contemplative and social justice traditions of the church. But to be totally honest, when I left college, I think I was left with all these different questions about what kind of spiritual path I wanted to follow and really made my work my path. And to me, what was most real in the world was encountering this form of suffering and believing that it's inherently a meaningful act to try to move in the world in ways that heal suffering. And I thought, at least, I thought it was that simple.

But we talk about these different stories that bring people to CAC, and mine is, there's many different versions of it. But essentially it was what Father Richard in his men's work talks about sometimes as this crisis of limitation, and coming face-to-face with learning that I could help and do things that positively contributed, but also at the end of the day, these realities were not things that I could stop myself.

And that seems really obvious, but for me, coming from my background in my 20s working in DC, it was this real, "I don't know how to grapple with that, because this is my identity, this is my purpose." And it was a moment of a real kind of crisis about that, because I could feel just how attached I was to this idea that I had to try to solve this, that a mentor, a real trusted mentor, a guy named Bob Sabbath, encouraged me to attend the Rites of Passage, this wilderness retreat that Richard helped design for men.

And it was there that I realized in some ways my work had become a defense against the reality that I don't have control over so many of these things, that there's aspects of life and what Richard calls initiation into the reality of our own powerlessness that's part of our path of growth and transformation. And it was so fresh and so different from anything I had ever experienced before. And I look back, and I don't think I really knew it at the time, but that was one of those before and after moments in my life where I had come into contact with a form of wisdom that drew on a tradition that I thought I was familiar with, but in fact was very different from anything I had ever experienced. And that just drew me right in.

So I hadn't yet met Richard in person, but started organizing with a group of other guys in the DC region these wilderness retreats for other men, and leading other men on these experiences of initiation. Started a small group, a centering prayer group in DC, with some other activists who remain close friends and allies in this work to this day. And through that got to learn about the CAC, and eventually, a few years later, got to meet Richard in person.

Paul Swanson: That's so fun to hear that background and all that groundwork that was laid before you came to the CAC and joined the staff, which, correct me if I'm wrong, is it 10 years ago now that you became Executive Director?

Michael Poffenberger: Yeah, well, nine years. Almost.

Paul Swanson: Nine years ago on 10. Can you recount what you were thinking and feeling about Richard and his work when you first stepped into that role at the CAC?

Michael Poffenberger: Yeah. As I'm sure many people in our community can relate, there's just this electric feeling when you meet something that is so real that it kind of reveals the disillusionment that you didn't even recognize was there in relationship to what you knew in the past. And that was my experience of meeting Father Richard, becoming part of the CAC.

I was on the board as a volunteer. I remember sitting in those first board meetings, and you just have this sense of, "I don't know what this is or how to describe the gift of what this person is trying to bring forward in the world, but it's real, and it touches the ground in a way that I didn't know how deeply I needed." And so getting to be part of the organization in the early days was just this constant experience of that overwhelm, in a sense, of... I remember the first symposium I was at in the Living School, and seeing Father Richard and our two other faculty members teach, and being around people who are asking these big questions about what's working and not working, and how we can be agents of love, and how we can practice this path of surrender in the world.

And it was just electric, and it felt like such a privilege. That's all I remember. It was very humbling to be in that room.

Paul Swanson: That's so fun to hear. And almost 10 years have passed. How do you feel about that now?

Michael Poffenberger: How do I feel about which part of that?

Paul Swanson: I guess all of that. I mean, the work and Richard's continued impact on the world, how has that shifted for you in these 10 years now that you've been such an insider into the work that Richard has brought to the world?

Michael Poffenberger: I have had the chance to build an actual, what I consider, I don't know if Richard would say the same, but meaningful relationship.

Paul Swanson: Of course.

Michael Poffenberger: A meaningful friendship with Father Richard, and to accompany him through a period of both of our lives that has been significant. And yeah, I think there was a period where it's like that initial, it's almost like a romantic relationship. You fall in love with something and there's an infatuation phase where it's just like, "Oh my gosh, this is incredible." And I think that was the first probably two years of my time at CAC.

One of the great gifts of this place, it just gathers really exceptional people. So there's always just this energy of people who are coming, who want to be part of this, who always bring something interesting to the table. And it's such a joy. It's, I think, the best part of the work. And then there were years of really having to ask these deeper questions about "What is this project? How do we really understand what Richard was trying to do when he founded the CAC? How do we mold this organization, this community of people, in such a way to keep serving that vision and mission with integrity as we move forward?" And that's been tough.

The man's legacy and his teachings... He doesn't like that word, the L-word, "legacy", but the breadth and depth of the teachings are so wide and so deep that learning to discern, "What is in this for the organization? How do we keep moving this forward?" It's so hard when the person is larger-than-life in the way that Father Richard's larger-than-life. So there were years, I think, of really trying to sort through that and trying to construct the conditions for a shared conversation within the organization. And I'm really grateful we had that experience. It wasn't always easy. It hasn't always been easy. There's still days, of course, when it's not easy. But to be here now, where I think we have answered some of the foundational questions, and I think we've answered them in ways that will continue to set this mission up for the future, is really an exciting moment to be in.

And of course, to do that with Father Richard here... I mean, when we were first embarking on that work, asking these bigger picture questions about the future of CAC, Richard was going through these multiple rounds of health crises where we thought we were only going to have him for a couple years. And so the gift of being where we're at now and moving this work forward, and that we still have the joy of our founder walking alongside us in that, and getting to go on occasional road trips with him where we get to hash this kind of stuff out, it's like the best-case scenario.

So we've moved through the infatuation to the reality check of, organizations are organizations, and there's a lot of work there that we've got to do to figure this stuff out, to now what I think is a really pregnant moment for all of us as we look to the future. So I'm just grateful for that, and of course, so grateful that Richard is still with us here to be along for the ride.

Mike Petrow: So Richard, hearing Michael talk about this, I would love to pose the question for you. So 10 years, so much has changed at CAC. So much has changed in the world, so much has changed in our audience.

Richard Rohr: So true.

Mike Petrow: So much has changed in the lives of our audience. Yeah, it's been highs and lows, rises and falls, blessings, I'm sure some things that have felt like backbreaking transitions, wounds and wisdom, all of this. What's your experience been of all of that, and how would you describe the direction that Michael's leading the CAC through all of this and into the future? It's a big question.

Richard Rohr: You know, it has been an overwhelming period in human history. Just the politics of the United States being so infantile, the planet seemingly... I mean, now all the corals are bleaching in all of southern Florida, just a symbol of... My God. And then accompanying Michael, I hope accompanying him, as he'd go through different trials, and I'm an inside-outside person, even before I retired. I'm here, but I'm not here.

So I hope it gave me some bit of objectivity. But I say that because among the many things I admire about Michael, one is his ability to be objective in situations where I'm caught up in feeling resentment, judgment, and he'll bring me back to a sort of calm. I mean, he's a thinker on the Enneagram. I'm a gut person, so he has to put up with my gut, and I'm calmed by his thinking. So I very much appreciate his good mind.

But he never plays the good mind card. He just has it, and he offers it. So I feel he came to us, was given to us, at the right time, when the Center itself was going through a major, “What are we going to do after Richard?” The culture was collapsing in so many ways, and the church is collapsing in so many ways.

Mike Petrow: It’s interesting. Throw the both of you a wild card for a second, the way you describe that, and you showing up 10 years ago, I also can’t help but notice that about 10 years ago you published the book *Falling Upward*. And the way you talk about the Center asking a lot of these hard questions as the moment in the culture has become increasingly more dire, and we know we’re always trying to go back to the original intent of the Center, go back to the contemplative Christian tradition in its roots, and look forward to the future in the Christian contemplative movement.

Does it feel like Michael has come along in sort of the “Falling Upward” moment of the Center for Action and Contemplation as it moves into that second half of life?

Richard Rohr: You know, I think... I haven’t applied it that much to him, but I think what you say is true. I mean, there were times when I’m sure you must’ve felt like quitting, or “Am I up to this?” I don’t know how you felt it, but there were some difficult decisions, and you do feel stronger on the other side of those now.

Mike Petrow: It’s a very interesting moment to be alive in this culture. There is a lot at stake. And how do you feel about the direction that Michael and the team are taking the CAC into the future in this moment?

Richard Rohr: I trust it. I do trust it. As a one, I have my moments of doubt, like, “Are we active enough? Are we engaged enough? Are we integrated? Is the ‘and’ doing its work between action and contemplation?” But I find when I can back off of my judgments and trust that Michael is setting in motion, along with all of you, some processes...

And I think that’s how he attains a lot of his objectivity. He holds to the process of how he decided, who decides, and I think rightly, reminding me I am not the decider anymore. But when I can do that, the result has been good.

Paul Swanson: Michael, I was going to ask you, talking about this direction the CAC is going, do you have a two-minute elevator? How do you share it in a short amount of time, the direction that we’re going as an organization to those who don’t know?

Michael Poffenberger: Well, let me start by saying the animating question for us at every step has been, as Jim Finley, one of our core faculty, he gave us this quote in the way that only Jim Finley can. “For many years, CAC has been about Father Richard, but Father Richard’s not about Father Richard. So how can the CAC be about what Father Richard is about?” And the change processes that you’re hearing us talk about are really the growing pains of an organization moving from a founder era to a real mission, and what we call movement-driven organizational strategy and culture.

And so the process that we went through, and that we’ve been continuing to work through, I think, really started, though, back to that founding vision, right? It’s the reanimation of the fire that was present at the beginning of the CAC when Father Richard loaded up his truck,

moves to New Mexico, and he had this vision of a school for prophets. How do we give people the spiritual resources from which to engage in loving action, loving right action, in the world in ways that provide healing and positive transformation?

And so to go back to that and then to trace forward 37 years now of, “How has that actually had impact? What are the ways we’ve been useful? How do we relate to other kinds of efforts in the broader landscape?” And so it really was, “How do we be about what Richard’s about?” From beginning to end. And where that has landed us is this idea, our mission is to introduce Christian contemplative wisdom and practices that support transformation and inspire loving action. And we do that in service to people working together for a more just and loving world, just and connected world. That’s our vision statement.

So this idea of, there is this renewal of the contemplative dimensions of our tradition that’s underway now, where the shift is from Christianity of conformity to beliefs to Christianity that frees people from the depths of their own inner resources to show up in the world as folks of courageous and free loving action. So how do we be a part of this renewal that’s happening, and then see ourselves as a place of formation, a place of education?

So Richard called it a school for prophets. We’re an education institution. We’re equipping people with these tools and practices that many of them have not had access to before that can have a very impactful presence in people’s lives and communities. But it’s also just one piece of the puzzle. So we think of ourselves as this entry point into this broader contemplative renewal, contemplative movement, that we see as underway around us, shifting from these kind of pioneer founding figures of the contemplative Christian recovery, the Thomas Mertons and the Richards and the Thomas Keatings and others, who were really putting these pieces together for us.

Now, how do we piece together the broader movement that forms around those teachings, captures what’s the best from our spiritual tradition, in service to what the world needs today? So that’s really, I mean, you think about that in terms of we do daily meditations and we do online courses and we do the Living School and we have these podcasts and we do these events, and we partner with groups to help move our people out into action in the world. But all of it is part of this broader project, that we see ourselves as having this incredible opportunity to be serving in this moment in history.

Paul Swanson: Dang, that’s very inspiring. I feel like that’s so much of the culmination of this podcast, too, is how do we live these teaching forward, and how do we showcase those who are doing it in different avenues that are alongside the CAC, or the CAC’s alongside them? That it is a multitude that’s working on this, not just one single organization, but we have our piece to do. So thank you for articulating that so well.

Richard, when folks listen to that, what do you hope they’re feeling or are responding to in that direction that we’re headed as an organization?

Richard Rohr: Well, I hope they hear the fervor and the intelligent commitment in Michael’s words, because it is going to be important when I’m gone that you know there’s something to trust, and it doesn’t have to be re-quoting me all the time. But there’s something that Michael symbolizes that I can bless.

And, you know, you can have more than one center point. Let me explain. That's what monotheism did for Western civilization. To have several center points is a contradiction in terms. If it's a center point, it's got to be one, or it's not the center. And that's the only advantage to having a founder still alive, that you don't have to say, "Okay, should we follow Meister Eckhart? Should we follow Dorothy Day? Should we follow whoever, Jesus?" Well, I hope I said we're following Jesus.

And yeah, I gave it my unique interpretation, but that gives you a center point that keeps you together, instead of people two years after I'm in the grave saying, "Well, Richard was weak on this," which he was. "Richard was faulty on that," which he probably was. But you're sort of stuck with your founder. It's the same way we are with Francis. We now realize Francis was neurotic about poverty, just neurotic, but he was still Francis. And you already know my neuroses. Don't mention them all in one phrase.

But one center point gives a group a way to hold together.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. And we can bring that quote out, the Richard quote of, "Don't quote me. Don't always just go back to my quote."

Richard Rohr: "Richard says, 'Don't quote me.'"

Mike Petrow: Richard's most famous quote is "Don't just go back to my quotes."

Paul Swanson: That's fantastic.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting. Hearing all of that, I can't help but wonder, what does then success look like five years from now, 20 years from now, with or without Richard, Richard here physically or in spirit, what does it look like if CAC actually successfully moves into what it plans to do?

Michael Poffenberger: Yeah, I'd love to hear Richard's answer on this one too. We always come at these questions from such different angles. One thing I want to say, we were talking about that whole idea of the institutional "Falling Upward" moment in the midst of what's happening on our planet. And I do think that's true, that the inklings that we had 10 years ago now in terms of what the need was going to be for this work have only grown.

And you see that in our Living School. People come to us hungry for more, and sometimes they come to us because they want us to meet this set of needs, but it's become more and more acute, the sense of decline of traditional institutions, the recognition that the ways that we have functioned to date are no longer working. And you can apply that in so many different contexts, in politics and economics and the way that we really, ecologically, and especially for us in our religious institutions.

So we're in the midst of this collective "Falling Upward" moment, and then institutionally, CAC working through some of this. And I would say for me, there's a personal piece of this, too. I was driven for so many years by "How do we find the right answer to what the identity should be for CAC, and how do we clarify that?" And I think that energy helped in some ways, because we needed to figure out that path for CAC moving forward, but also, there's a personal piece for me in this of recognizing that we want to set goals, we need parameters, we need a vision that's animating us, and then we also need to make room for the spirit, to



use maybe an overused term, and to be attuned to our environment, to each other, to allow room for the communal discernment to help shape how we co-create this with each other and with our broader landscape and environment as we move forward.

And that's been a huge learning curve for me, to balance out that drive for clarity that sometimes tilts over into, I think, a need for control, with the surrender and the recognition that everything is always a work in progress. There is no completion here, there is no success here, you know? So I'll just say that's something I'm working on as a leader, and that I think is going to be an integral piece for us as an organization.

And we have some concrete goals and things that we really want to get after, because we think we have something meaningful to offer. I think we have a lot meaningful to offer. But just on a few practical things... So one, we talk about ourselves sometimes as a front door. We're really good at introducing people at scale through these teachings that have such an impact in people's lives. So five, 10 years from now, how do we think about contemplative Christianity not as a niche thing that people discover after they've connected 10 other dots, but actually as an established and accessible pathway of spiritual growth and transformation in our broader landscape that's recognizable, that people can actually access and participate in meaningful ways?

Our top-line goal for the next five years is to reach a tipping point in how many American and Western Christians are participating in a contemplative path. There's social science research that talks about 3.5% is this tipping point of popular participation before you have these seismic shifts in attitudes and awareness towards any number of different topics throughout history. So how can we help foment the conditions for this catalytic growth of a contemplative Christian path in our broader landscape?

To do that, I'll just say there's two things that I'm really focused on. I think our team is building out some amazing, amazing programs that I'm just super excited about. How do we offer this wisdom in ways that are helpful, relevant to people's lived experiences, greater diversity of lived experiences? Break out the box, so to speak, of where we've been as an organization.

But two things that I want to name in particular that I think are key to that. So one is continuing to build on the partnerships with our faculty. Father Richard has handed off the baton formally now, he's no longer the Dean of our core faculty. We're starting to establish a broader faculty that is more engaged in the day-to-day life of the organization, who are all firmly grounded in Father Richard's vision and teachings, but also bringing their own gifts to the party. And I think continuing to grow and diversify that faculty is going to be just integral for we want to go in the next few years. Wisdom is arising in so many different contexts. This isn't about the Catholic wisdom and the Baptist wisdom. It's about people drawing on that idea that the mystics speak the same, have more in common with each other than they do with many folks in their own individual tradition. So you'll see just a great amount of diversity in the teaching and lived practice of our faculty. I think that's key.

And then secondly, as we continue to deepen and broaden into our own programming, how do we build relationships that help people who are moving through our programs and want to engage in different ways with other partners out in the broader landscape? When we talk

about our contemplative movement, it's still in early stages. It's still in that, Richard has this five Ms framework from, forgiving the gender-specific language, man to movement. We're in that, trying to build out this ecosystem so that folks can have a local community of practice, can take engaged social action, can be part of communities that are really working to apply this wisdom out in the world.

So those are two things that I think are going to be critical for really seeing the full impact of the programs and core mission that we have as an organization take root and flourish out in the broader world.

Paul Swanson: Dang, that's awesome. You said you wanted, you're curious to hear Richard's take on that as well.

Michael Poffenberger: Yeah. Richard, how would you define, what does success look like for you five or 10 years out from now?

Richard Rohr: You know, it has much more to do with the energy and the attitude. I'm writing this book, as you know, on the prophets, and it's probably going to be interesting, that's my last book. Of course, I said that before, didn't I? But this one here...

It struck me that you can't be angry and happy at the same time. And even the prophets had to learn that. What enchanted all of Europe with the Franciscans in the first 10 years, I mean, we were, in all European countries, was they were called the joyful beggars, that they maintain joy. And that is not a quality you find in most progressive, liberal people. Most progressive people are cynical and distrustful, for a hundred good reasons.

So if, however many years from now, whatever our shape is, whatever our numbers are, doesn't matter as much as that we haven't lost our joy, our joyfulness in God, first of all, and in nature, which is God's creation, and human beings, which are God's leaders of creation, at least we were supposed to be. So if whatever you do after I'm gone keeps you still happy, and your anger at injustice, because that isn't going to go away, doesn't override the happiness... And I do mean happiness about spiritual things, not just, "Oh, CAC can throw a good party." I don't mean that.

Michael Poffenberger: But we can.

Richard Rohr: You know what I mean, yeah. To maintain spiritual joy is different than just normally what we call happiness.

Michael Poffenberger: Richard... Oh, go ahead.

Richard Rohr: That's all that's coming to mind.

Michael Poffenberger: Richard, I've heard you talk before about one part of that, which is how we learn to relate to our own failures or learning experiences, and can we, even as an organization, in a sense, laugh at ourselves, or with ourselves, along the way? I've seen that in you, and especially as you've gotten older, just...

Richard Rohr: Gotten more neurotic.

Michael Poffenberger: Just the tragic absurdity of things is...

Richard Rohr: So true.

Michael Poffenberger: At some point, you've got to find it funny.

Richard Rohr: That's sincere in me. The absurdity of it all doesn't anger me, it just makes me want to laugh at it.

Michael Poffenberger: You said that... I don't remember, you probably don't remember, but you said that at Conspire.

Richard Rohr: What did I say?

Michael Poffenberger: That you hope that we can laugh at our own mistakes and shadow. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: So interesting to hear you two talk, and you'd already named this, Michael's bringing his intelligence to this, his mind, and you're instinctively talking about the energy from the gut, and I just think that it's such a compliment the way that you two riff off one another.

Richard Rohr: Good.

Paul Swanson: And I think there's already so much heart in the room that gets brought into it, so it's fun to watch these angles. Yeah, exactly. These angles come together, and one might call it the body of Christ, even, the way in which the diversity of the body can come together.

Richard Rohr: The eye cannot say to the hand. Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And I appreciate, one of the things we talked about in a previous episode, Michael and Richard, is the idea of thinking of CAC and the teachers that we work with as sort of this contemplative laboratory, where we're trying to find things that work that we can pass onto people. How do you take contemplation, that's an ancient practice that's existed in monasteries, and give it to people who are trying to be still in a chaotic world? And so I love the permission, in any good laboratory, you need to be allowed to try things that aren't going to work. They're going to blow up in your face, and the permission to be able to not take ourselves too seriously and laugh at that and own that we will try some things that don't work, and that'll put us closer to things that do work.

Richard Rohr: That's good.

Mike Petrow: And hopefully have something to pass on.

Richard Rohr: Thank you.

Michael Poffenberger: I think that's part of what's difficult about working in Father Richard, your wake sometimes, because over a lifetime of practice, to put it bluntly, you are really good at what you do. And so I think there's a temptation towards a perfectionism within the organization for us to have the space to learn and grow, and to make sure that's part of the picture, even while we want to continue to hold just the standard of excellence, because you role model that.

You have this total integrity to your vocation in the world. I mean, it is profound. I see it in everything about the way that you live your life. So how do we hold that in relationship to... We'll never live up to that. I figured I could say it that bluntly. We can never live up to that.

Richard Rohr: And if you think we can or we have to, that's what makes you cynical and unjoyful. Cynicism is so devious how it gets in, especially for smart people. They're the most subject. And you're all very smart. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Gosh, thank you both for sharing the story of this professional evolution we're in the midst of. The way that you both are showing up personally and professionally to dig in deep and support one another, and the vision that's been cast, and how do we step and live these teachings forward, and what is ours to do as a part of this contemplative movement. So thank you so much.

Richard Rohr: Thank you.

Mike Petrow: And thanks for the clear trust that exists between the two of you, and the way that you compliment each other's gifts and insights is palpable, watching the two of you interact. So thanks for sharing that with Paul and I and with the listeners.

Michael Poffenberger: Thank you.

Richard Rohr: Hallelujah.

Paul Swanson: We hope you enjoyed catching up with Richard, how he is doing, and what is enthralling him these days, and insight into the CAC's direction under Michael. One major step of that direction is this: How we at the CAC are introducing Christian contemplative wisdom and practices that support transformation and inspire loving action through the expansion of our core faculty.

In our next episode, we'll be joined by Richard and introduce you to our new dean of CAC faculty, Brian McLaren, where we talk about our faculty and the unique role spiritual teachers play for those who call themselves students on this path.

Corey Wayne: Thanks for listening to this podcast by the Center for Action and Contemplation, an educational nonprofit that introduces seekers to the contemplative Christian path of transformation. To learn more about our work, visit us at [cac.org](http://cac.org). Everything Belongs is made possible thanks to the generosity of our supporters and the shared work of...

Mike Petrow: Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: Paul Swanson.

Talitha Baker: Talitha Baker.

Mikel Chevriet: Mikel Chevriet.

Izzy Spitz: Izzy Spitz.

Megan Hare: Megan Hare.

Sarah Palmer: Sarah Palmer.

Barb Lopez: Barb Lopez.

Brandon Strange: Brandon Strange.

Corey Wayne: And me, Corey Wayne. The music you hear is composed and provided by our friends Hammock, and we'd also like to thank Sound On Studios for all of their work in post-production. From the high desert of New Mexico, we wish you peace and every good.