

MENDICANT

Ascending and Descending Religions

RICHARD ROHR, OFM

When it says, “He went up,” it must mean that he first went down to the deepest levels of the earth . . . to fill all things.
—Ephesians 4:9–10
Ken Wilber, whom I consider the foremost philosopher of religion

(among other things) in the world today, makes a classic distinction between two general strains in the history of spiritual thinking. Philosophies and religions are either Ascenders, pointing us *upward* (toward the One, the Eternal, and toward Absolutes) or they are Descenders, pointing us *downward* (toward the many, the momentary, and toward the earth), seldom both—and, even less, both at the same time.

However, Jesus *does* point us both upward and downward at the same time—in a most surprising, and still not usually recognized, way. He fully rests in one completely trustworthy Absolute (“God alone is good,” Mark 10:18), which is his *anchored self*. This is his only real *ascent*! From there, he is free to dive into a fully incarnate and diverse world—as it is. He can love this ordinary and broken world, honor and protect its endless diversity, and critique all false absolutes and idolatries at the same time. This is his very comfortable *descent* into the world of forms and earthiness. Very few spiritual teachers have succeeded at both ascending and descending so well, making them one complete movement.

Most of spiritual history, up to now, has attempted to get us out of this world of multiplicity, forms, worldliness, embodiment, and “sin” into the Transcendent Oneness that most call God, holiness, purity, or simply heaven. These Ascenders include almost all religions, except many Native ones, a lot of Hinduism, the creation spirituality we see among the ancient Celts, and early Franciscanism. (These were all not under the control of empire, which is always about ascending.) This rather universal desire for ascent

surely proceeds from our understandable, but nevertheless egoic, desire to flee this “vale of tears,” to “get saved,” and to feel superior and somehow above all this messy diversity and sinfulness.

However, this left us in an empty and disenchanting world that was hardly worth noticing because the Divine was always elsewhere and beyond. This is the largely ineffective Christianity with which most of us were raised, I am afraid. Why was it ineffectual? Because *it decided to go up the down escalator!* God, in Christ, clearly chose the downward path of incarnation and embodiment. We chose the upward path of spiritualization, flight, and world evacuation—the very world that God entered (John 1:14) and chose to love and not condemn (John 3:17).

Let me sum up our confusion in two discrete, concrete phrases:

Spirit always desires to incarnate itself.

Matter always wants to be God.

The Christ Mystery is uniquely saying that we *can* have it both ways! The Gospel communicated a most surprising, and totally counterintuitive, message: We should and we can trust the pattern of the divine self-emptying into matter. Further, if we would but “imitate God” (Ephesians 5:1) in this regard and say a loving and allowing yes to our embodied selves and this material world, in all its beautiful diversity, we would not need to flee it to find God elsewhere. There is no elsewhere that matters. There is only an ultimate Source that connects.

Then the Great Exchange, the Grand Reversal of Position we call the Incarnation, has happened in us and for us.

God initiated the movement . . . down, down, down . . . until the down is no longer down at all, but somehow everywhere and in everything. Until Jesus,

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Up is nowhere special at all, but hidden inside of down.

A Reflection: Spaces Where We Invite the Divine

REBECCA "PUCK" STAIR, CAC Events Manager

Why gather?

As the new CAC Events Manager, I ponder this question as I help design and implement our various CAC events, from workshops and webcasts to conferences and symposia. One would think that, in this age of internet videos and social media, such events would be fading. In fact, we are discovering the opposite—more and more people yearn to gather, in person or via the web, from the comfort of home and community gathering spaces.

Why gather? We are walking vibrations, standing waves in the universe. Like a box fan, we appear like solid circles only because of the speed and consistency of our vibration. When we gather together, whether in person or via the web, our vibrating souls ripple timespace and together create a single, large soul. We—not our egoic selves, but our permanent, deep selves—then subsume into this larger field, as water drops subsume into an ocean. During events, our egoic boundaries thin and disappear and we expand to our natural state as children of God.



So, we gather to create a community, in the root sense of the word: a place where communing happens; where we sit in our individuality but feel, from that place, our immersion into the wholeness, as leaves experience their tree.

As the new Events Manager, it is my hope to create spaces where we invite the Divine and then wait, together and communing, for the Divine to arise. In such spaces trauma can be healed, growth can occur, and the godhead can be known.

It is my hope that, afterward, the connections our hearts have made will be unaffected by distance or time. I hope that, once expanded, we will never return to our earlier dimensions. I hope that we will move forward from each CAC event, large or small, as empowered agents, a little brighter and more whole.

REBECCA "PUCK" STAIR served as an English teacher and diversity trainer in her native Washington, DC, before she moved to New Mexico in 2004. Prior to joining the CAC as Events Manager, she worked as a Hollywood location scout for fifteen years, creating blockbusters like *No Country for Old Men* and *3:10 To Yuma*. She enjoys paragliding and triathlons and savors reading with her wife, dog, and kitty cat.

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RICHARD ROHR, OFM

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no one had clearly communicated this to us—and we still largely missed this major transposition of place.

Up is nowhere special at all, but hidden inside of down.

Up is dangerous for the soul, while down is communal and comforting.

As the Ephesians epigraph states, God “first went down to the deepest levels of the earth . . . [precisely] to fill all things”! He “descended into hell” and earth precisely to undo hell and to reanimate the earth. Even conservative Pope Benedict makes this point in his commentary on the Apostles’ Creed,¹ summarized in his astounding line that, in Christ, “love penetrated hell”!

Jesus is saying, directly and indirectly, that what we thought was up is really down, because there is nothing up there (It has all come down!) and what looks like down is actually where God is both hiding and exploding wide open

(as dramatically symbolized by a fragile little baby lying in a cow trough).

We are not happily people of the Gospel until this change of perspective happens *in us*.

The pure spiritual genius of Jesus is that he succeeds in offering us a fully descending worldview—which is, ironically and surprisingly, even to us, the only real ascent.

This radical change of perspective offers the imperial ego no easy payoffs, no hiding places, and no “pie in the sky” rewards. True Christianity will always be the most natural of religions, the most universally accessible, and also the rarest.

“He came unto his own and his own did not recognize him . . . nor accept him” (John 1:10–11). He had come down too far.

¹ Benedict XVI, *The Faith* (Huntington, IN: Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2013), 84.

A Reflection: Into the Deep End

BRIE STONER, Living School Alumna and CAC Staff Member

It's hard to believe that in 2018 CAC hosts the sixth of seven CONSPIRE conferences. The anticipation has been building for staff as we design a meaningful and holistic experience around the theme of *The Path of Descent Is the Path of Transformation*. Early on, the team remarked that this isn't exactly a "sellable" concept: "Come to CONSPIRE and descend into the depths of your own death!" So, we were both shocked and pleasantly surprised at how quickly the in-person portion of this conference sold out.

As we all know, actual experiences of descent are far less exciting and attractive than the appeal of attending a conference on the same theme. Learning to die to what has been, welcoming the terror of the unknown, surrendering to what cannot be controlled, or finding the courage to throw off the weight of internalized oppression is serious heavy-lifting. For many, it requires a lifetime of rewiring and re-conceiving. Most of us would rather sprint away from that kind of destabilization and run toward anything that can happily keep us "skimming over the depths of our own lives," as CAC core faculty member Jim Finley likes to say.

Sometimes, however, God has a way of pulling the "skimming" rug out from under our feet and lovingly throwing us into the deep end. I imagine God watching with compassion as we frantically doggie-paddle until we remember to trust all this newly exposed depth of being—then learn to lean back contemplatively and float on the gift of new possibility.



However, in case I make this sound easy, let me state that I am frantically doggie-paddling. As a single working mom of two young boys, my life has become a daily dose of powerlessness, through a constant stream of small—and not so small—humiliations of descent. As I joked with a friend, it's one thing to go to the Living School and an entirely different thing to be *schooled* by its lessons. The ideas are one thing, but the embodiment is much harder.

After all, the true fruit of contemplation is not the insights we would hope to gain but rather how we might practice *together* to become more stabilized in the instability, more used to letting go and building anew, more comfortable with not-knowing and cultivating a wide-open imagination—to *co-create an entirely different kind of creative, healing, and prophetic presence in the world*.

I am looking forward to sharing the experience of this conference with all of you—whether you join in person, online, or in spirit—and I trust that, through our collective descent, we can also experience the contemplative gift of letting go.

GABRIELLE "BRIE" STONER is a musician and writer whose work has been featured in national and international television. She has published blogs for The Contemplative Society, Northeast Wisdom, and The Wisdom Way of Knowing websites. A designer for CAC's Programs team, Brie lives in Michigan with her two young sons.

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The Transformational Power of Loss

MIRABAI STARR

If someone dared to suggest that our periods of personal pain—resembling, as they do, a descent into the abyss—are actually trysts with the Holy One in disguise, we might assume that they were engaging in a “spiritual bypass”—that is, a way of using spiritual beliefs or methodologies to check out of reality so that we don’t have to actually feel it. Yet, on the other side of these dark nights of our souls, we are often compelled to conclude that it was in the depths of suffering that our souls were transfigured and the Beloved drew closer.



teaching college philosophy and religious studies, I always included the mystical masterpiece, *Dark Night of the Soul*, in my curriculum—and my students never got it. That was probably because the existing translations were a bit arcane for the average undergraduate sensibilities and attention span. So, when I was forty, I decided to translate it afresh.

On the day my new translation of *Dark Night of the Soul* was released into the world, my fourteen-year-old daughter, Jenny, was killed in a car accident in the mountains outside our home in Taos. Suddenly, I was forced to live into these teachings in a way I never could have imagined and

It is in the depths of suffering that our souls are transfigured and the Beloved draws closer.

According to my spiritual brother, St. John of the Cross, one of the defining features of the Dark Night of the Soul is that we cannot know what is happening while we are in it. Afterward, when the smoke from the fire that is incinerating elements of our false self begins to clear, we may detect what John calls “an ineffable sweetness” bubbling up from the ground of our being. Suffering has stripped us of petty concerns and lofty ideas and made us ready for a direct encounter with the Divine.

When I was twenty, I spent a year in Sevilla, studying Spanish literature, and I fell in love with the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross). Even at that young age, there was something about John’s holy relationship with silence and stillness that spoke to my soul. When I began

to which I never would have assented. It took another decade before I could begin to see, let alone articulate, the transformational power of this loss. At last, encouraged by my community, I wrote a memoir, *Caravan of No Despair*, about the coinciding of Jenny’s death with the birth of my translation of John’s classic teaching on descent and transformation of the soul.

MIRABAI STARR is an internationally recognized speaker, teacher, and certified bereavement counselor. The author of numerous books, her acclaimed works include translations of sacred literature by St. John of the Cross (*Dark Night of the Soul*), St. Teresa of Ávila (*The Interior Castle* and *The Book of My Life*), and Julian of Norwich (*The Showings of Julian of Norwich*). Mirabai, who lives in Taos, New Mexico, will be presenting at CONSPIRE 2018.

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A Reflection: A Different Kind of Darkness

GIGI ROSS, CAC Staff Member and Donor

I refer to my ninth-grade academic year as the worst of my life. Every school day I was teased, on the bus ride and during class, because of my perceived sexual orientation. I spent much of my adolescent years berating myself for not having the courage to kill myself so I could escape the painful and traumatic darkness in which I lived.

Seven years before I came to work for the CAC, I was ushered into a different kind of darkness. I lost my full-time job in Washington, DC. A year later, very much underemployed, I ran out of money and gave my landlord notice—before I knew where I would be living—that I was moving out of my apartment. Thus began six years of poverty, homelessness, and un(der)employment; of living another kind of darkness—a darkness of obscurity and liminality.

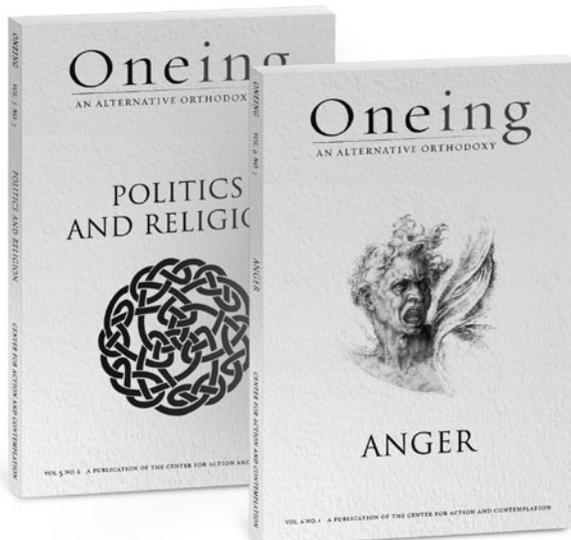
In this darkness, I learned to tap into the trust resonating deep in my core and to walk into the unknown in open-armed surrender. I also experienced more freedom than I had ever known, a freedom that came from jettisoning my need to be independent, admitting my helplessness and dependence, letting others serve me as God's hands and feet, and realizing that I did not need money to live a full life. During those six years, I always had enough to eat and never spent a day on the street. I was even given what I needed to fly to Michigan, to visit my birth mother twice during the last months of her life and again for her funeral.

Then, one day, a fellow parishioner, who was a student in the first cohort of the Center for Action and Contemplation's Living School, sent me the job announcement for my current position. I moved to Albuquerque with a suitcase full of gratitude: gratitude for the Washington, DC community God used to carry me and hold me through those dark years and gratitude for the opportunity to continue the work of nurturing and supporting spiritual transformation.

It is a privilege to support the core faculty and the rest of the CAC staff in realizing the organization's vision to awaken a more loving world. It is a privilege also to tend the container that is the Living School, in which students engage in the difficult work of consenting to be transformed. My financial support for the CAC is another way to be in solidarity with the Spirit's trans-

formative presence and to express gratitude for that presence and action in my own life.

GIGI ROSS comes from Washington, DC, where she spent ten years working at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. Between leaving Shalem and joining CAC, she spent six years learning about trust while living in poverty and dependent on others for housing. Gigi provides administrative support for the Living School as CAC's Administrative Coordinator of Education.



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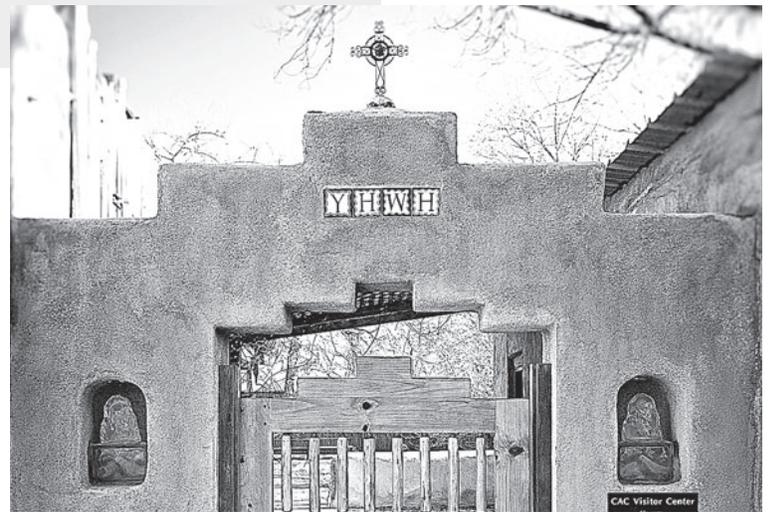
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