

DAVID FRENETTE complete interview 3\_27\_2014

[David Frenette] Today is March 27th, 2014, and we're speaking from the Center for Contemplative Living in Denver, Colorado.

[Interviewer] Thank you. So what would you like to share with us, David, from the past?

[David] From the past ... Well, I wanted to talk a little bit about the live-in community, the residential community that we had the first years of Contemplative Outreach, which was called Chrysalis House. Actually it was first called just the Living Community, and then after a few years we came up with the name Chrysalis House, and I thought of speaking, trying to make this relevant to people, maybe who weren't ever at Chrysalis House, by talking about the little bit of the outer history, and then mentioning some of the deeper meaning, the inner meaning of what that experience was for us who lived there, and those who came there, and then just mention, perhaps, what its meaning might be for people who never got there.

The Story of This Experiment in Contemplative Living. Does that sound all right?

OK, good. So way back, a long time ago, when I was in my 20s ... Yeah, that's a long time ago. Well, we had this retreat in New Mexico, and Father Thomas Keating was

teaching Centering Prayer. And about a dozen people came on that retreat. I went on it. I traveled out from Berkeley, California, where I was living, and went on this immersion experience, intensive Centering Prayer experience, and it was an experience of community around Father Thomas's wisdom teaching on Centering Prayer, and after that experience, a few of the people who had attended the retreat were interested in putting together some kind of a residential or live-in community, just as the prayer communities were beginning to be formed, and Centering Prayer circles, so our format in Contemplative Outreach for many years has been the focus on local, accessible communities that are not residential, but that people can plug into in their church or wherever they're formed. But this inspiration was to augment that type of community experience with a residential living community that would be devoted to serving the retreats, which were burgeoning out of that first retreat experience in New Mexico. So a few of us had a little experiment for nine months in the mountains of Colorado, about a mile from the Snowmass monastery. Pat Johnson and her family, and then Bob Bartel, and myself. And a couple other people joined us in those nine months. Pat and Bob and I were all on the retreat in New Mexico, and out of that little prototypical experience of

our learning, we thought that we would continue with another experience on the East Coast. Somebody had been on the retreats and offered us their farm in northwestern Connecticut, because they were going to go off with their family for some other adventures, and they said, "You could use or rent the farm." Big, big farm building on 40 acres in West Cornwall, Connecticut. So Bob Bartel, Mary Mrosowski, and I joined in for this second phase of the experience, which became Chrysalis House. I just want to mention, for those who never got to meet Mary, she was quite an adventurous spirit, because Bob and I were both in our 20s, these kind of guys coming out of California and the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, and Mary was a very charismatic, spiritual mother, a great teacher who had been forming communities on Long Island, but she was in her late 50s, and a grandmother, and an accomplished businesswoman, and she threw her hat in with this little experiment with the two young hippie contemplatives. It was adventurous of her, because we decided things by consensus. That was part of our commitment, to decide things by consensus. And if we couldn't reach an agreement consensually with each other, we would submit the decision to Father Thomas Keating, whom we made a commitment to as our spiritual father. So Mary, instead of being in

charge, was one of the members in this consensual circle. We also made commitments to live simply. We got a \$100 a month stipend, along with room and board, and a vow of celibacy while we were there. So the idea is that instead of becoming a lifetime monk, with a vow, we made these commitments to the form of monasticism in order to be trained in Centering Prayer and service and community life, so that we could return to the world at some point. It was not meant to be a permanent community, and Father Thomas, as our spiritual father, he kind of left it up to us to come up with the inspiration for the daily practice and the lifestyle. But he would supervise it. He came around every six or seven weeks for a visit or something. And he said that our commitment was as serious as any monastery he had ever been through or been to.

So, anyways, we bounced around for a few years between different places and we started this retreat outreach. So we took groups for structured Centering Prayer programs, weekend, and ten-day retreats, and then began to develop other forms of retreat and programming to meet the needs of the people who were coming. For example, people who are committed to Centering Prayer, what do they need to sustain them on their journey? They found that they needed practices and programs that

brought the inspiration out of the sitting practice of Centering Prayer into their lives. And that was a central part of the work of Chrysalis House as it developed.

So we rented that place in West Cornwall, Connecticut, for a year, and we decided that while we were there in the community, it would be important to be celibate, and we went through some changes. People came and people went. Bob moved back to Colorado and California. There were other significant people. Kathy McCarthy came after, I think, two years, and she became a core part of the community. We ended up settling for a long time in this little town of Warwick, New York, because we were given a piece of property by a benefactor so that we could live there rent free, because part of our spirit was not to own property. We found that you kind of got encumbered with all the burdens of owning property, so that was really our charism on the external level. It was a serious monastic / semi-monastic commitment.

We'd get up at 5:00 in the morning in silence, and gather at 5:30 for Centering Prayer for an hour and fifteen minutes. Then we'd be in silence and solitude 'til about 9:00. We'd have a work meeting, pick up our breakfast on our own, and then work during the day with some conversation. We'd gather again at noon for an hour of

Centering Prayer, have a meal in common, lunch, a big meal, and then a little break. Go back to work 5:30 at night. We'd start this evening silence with an hour of meditation in common, and then be in solitude at night. And so we invited people to join us in that rhythm. They could have the prayer three times a day, and work with us if they wanted. And then the other half time, we were really doing structured retreats, teaching, and facilitating the group experience.

It existed from 1985 until 1996, so about eleven years, and I was there for ten of those years. Does that kind of make sense? Yeah. So that's what happened on the external level. And you might think, "Well, what happened? What happened to it?"

What happened to it? It closed. The more significant thing to me is on an inner level. The real work of this community had been accomplished after those eleven years. I feel, and other people say, that the real work of it is that it was a laboratory for intentional community and for the spirituality, of integrating Centering Prayer into life, which then flourished outside the community itself. In other words, this image of the Chrysalis, which of course is where the little larvae goes in order to be at rest and transformed, and then emerge from in a new way, like a butterfly emerging from a

cocoon. It was a very appropriate name, because that's what happened to the community itself. It broke open, and the people who lived there over the years were trained, and the retreatants were trained, and shaped, and found benefit. But, really, what happened? It broke open and a form of spirituality was offered to the wider network of Contemplative Outreach. What that means concretely is that one of the people, Mary Markowski, she was a rich teacher, as I mentioned, and amma. And out of her inspiration of how to relate to God, primarily out of her inspiration, came the Welcoming Prayer, a way of doing Lectio Divina in ordinary life, the Forgiveness Prayer, the active prayer, all these practices which were refined in this chrysalis by the community, the other people, myself, and Father Thomas Keating's wisdom. So I don't think those practices could have come to life very easily in any other way other than in this contained place. And people came there and they learned them and they contributed to it. And then after eleven years the Chrysalis broke open and those practices were shared more broadly in the network of Contemplative Outreach. So I think things happen for us on an outer level in our spiritual life. Our relationships and the places we live are an important part of our life journey. But parallel with that, there's

always this inner life that's happening, which we know that's the life of God and the inner meaning behind what's happening amidst the outer details of our life.

And so Chrysalis House was like that. There's a story that could be told in much more detail than I've told it, on the outside, about the people who lived there. We took three, four, or five people in residence at a time, and they stayed for some months, and if they felt they wanted to really make a commitment, they would commit to a year, and if they really wanted to make a larger commitment, they would commit to three years.

And interestingly enough, we lived at four or five different places, and we would get these leases. If we made a commitment to a year individually, we seemed to get a year lease on the building. When we felt that we wanted to make a three-year commitment, the core people then, all of a sudden, we got a three-year lease. When we were praying and discerning about making a five-year commitment, a couple of people there, all of a sudden, we got this gift into the future of a place that we wouldn't have to pay rent on, without any lease. So the commitments help shape the community experience.

People came, and they graduated, and they went back into life more fully grounded and fully rounded in the spirituality to live in ordinary life without having the

sense of going to a monastery, where you make a vow and the vow is about the spirituality of living in the monastery. Our spirituality was always about living in life, and we were there on a temporary basis. I was there the longest. I was there for ten years. I was on the remedial course.

So that dimension, the inner level, and the outer story are very important for all of us in life. And so it's been about twenty years since I've graduated. I've done some other things. I got married, I got my graduate degree. And I'm still listening to the way that the Spirit is emerging in my life from the inside out, and what that might mean, and where it might lead me. I think our commitment always is to the life of God, fidelity to that practice, relationship with Christ, and the emergence of the Spirit in the world. And the structures, the stories, the details, they change. That's always changing. So it's funny to tell a little bit of that story of what that part of my life was like from age 28 to 38, the best years of my life. In one sense, this moment and these last years, in a deeper way, are the ripening of that early training and formation. And so it's all about people, and I think of people when I tell the story, too. I think with great gratitude and love about the people that I lived with and that came there, I think of Mary Mrosowski, the great

spiritual mother of Chrysalis House; of Father Thomas Keating, our Abba, who's still with us offering blessings and prayer from the monastery this year; Bob Bartel, my spiritual brother, whose desire helped shape the seeds of this community; of Kathy McCarthy, my spiritual sister; Mary Dwyer; Gail; and Carl; who both became part of the community -- Gail Fitzpatrick-Hoffler, Carl Arico became part of the community without living there.

Sister Bernadette Teasdale came from Denver, and a lot of people came from Colorado, and we have this rich dialogue with everything that was happening here in Snowmass and in Denver. Steve and Pamela. And of many, many, many retreatants, we gave, we gave a lot of retreats there. And so I send blessings to all of those people. Faces from long ago and encouragement to all of us. You know, to continue to discern and live the life with God each moment of the day, and see how that takes shape on an external and internal level, and find joy in it, because it changes always, right?

Everything changes in life except God, and somehow the experience of God keeps changing. Now you know it's not the same. So you know everything changes. God alone remains. Amen.

The awareness of the love of God comes up moment to moment. The love I felt for God in a very devotional way at the early part of my spiritual journey is not there in the same way. I kind of lost a sense of relating to God outside, which was kind of hard ... a spiritual darkness, in order for God to come alive inside me. But I've captured that love of God in a new way, or it's recaptured me. I find that the love of God comes alive in the moment with other people, as long as I'm not thinking too much about myself.

[Speaker] How is Contemplative Outreach important in the world today?

[David Frenette] Contemplative Outreach has been amazing in the course of the 30 years. It's developed, and played a seminal role in recovering the contemplative life in the West, and in supporting its development in the Hispanic world, and other parts of the country, the world, the globe. It's been quite amazing to be able to develop this entry practice of Centering Prayer into the contemplative life and have it supported in these communities, adapted to the needs of the world, and then have retreat resources and books and things like that. However, I'm amazed when I think of the way the Christian contemplative life was represented in the world 35 years ago and the way it is now. It's like a huge sea change in 30 years, and that's been greatly shaped by the work, the

hard work, of people in Contemplative Outreach, the commitment to serve God. As you said, out of love, and let love transform them through a lot of experiments and success and failure, and then having that life enfolded by community. So it's taken to a new level with the community circles of Contemplative Outreach.

[Speaker] Thank you.

[David] Oh, yeah. Good. Thank you.