**Steve Spilde:** Today it is my great pleasure to be with Audrey Lucier. Audrey is the director of the Franciscan Spirituality Center, serving in that role for the past nine years. Welcome, Audrey.

**Audrey Lucier:** Thanks, Steve.

**Steve:** From your perspective as director of the Franciscan Spirituality Center, this has been a strange year. How has the pandemic affected the FSC’s programs in the past 12 months, 18 months?

**Audrey:** As so many people have said, it’s been both a blessing and a curse. I’ll speak to the pandemic in just a moment, but I think what was uppermost in the minds of those of us who work at the center at the time that things were unfolding were the renovations that were taking place in our physical space. St. Rose Convent was undergoing a massive renovation that was going to take three years to complete, and it was in progress. It wasn’t in our part of the building yet, but it was coming that way and we were worried about how we were going to manage to stay open and how we could greet people during that time – [there were] a lot of concerns about that. And then, boom, this pandemic happened. It was a feeling of, life as we know it is forever changed, and we didn’t know where it would all end. I hoped it would be done in a month or two, and then it went on forever. One thing that I will always be just amazed [by] and grateful for is the way the staff stepped up. Many of our staff are not quite as old as me – one of us is maybe older – but none of us are really young, and we all had to learn how to use technology very quickly because we were all united in the belief that our services were needed more than ever during this time. There was a lot of anxiety and even sometimes despair and a lot of fear about what would happen. Hope was something we talked a lot about – how to keep people hopeful and keep them centered and grounded in their spiritual lives, where we find hope.

We all learned how to put everything online quickly. Spiritual directors like yourself meeting with people – a little bit on telephone, but mostly through video conferencing. And [it was] the same with our programs. The wonder about that is … again, our demographic is probably a little older, many people had to teach themselves how to use something like Zoom, and they did. Many of them adjusted very rapidly. Not only that, but people started sharing with other people where you could go online and be in a community [and] where you could get some support and maybe learn some resilient skills to get through this time and, most importantly, stay connected. We actually had a lot of people participate in our programming here. We did the statistics for the year that ended June 30th. That was entirely a pandemic year, and we had almost 5,000 people in our programs coming from 37 different states [and] two different countries – we just picked up Australia too after July 1st. It was surprising to me how we actually grew during that time. And as staff, we had to do the same thing. It was really important that we continue to see each other even though physically we couldn’t be in the same space. We needed to talk, share ideas, and personally talk about how we were being impacted.

I remember when I first became director it was kind of a struggle to get people to set aside time to meet as staff – we were busy people, and nobody wanted to set aside time for that. And now, staff were even saying, ‘Can we meet more than once a week?’ We finally ended up meeting on Zoom twice a week. For me, it was really important as we were all working at home at the time.

**Steve:** In your response, I hear a couple of themes. One is adaptability – some of the things we had always done, we had to adapt and learn new things with technology. With the renovation we had to adapt. Flexibility. There was also the community piece – even though we couldn’t be in the same space, we just really needed to stay connected with each other. How does that fit with your understanding of spirituality? How does flexibility fit into that? Resiliency. Adaptability. Community. [Those are] a lot of words there. Do those all fit within your spirituality?

**Audrey:** Those are great spiritual themes – and yes, very much so. I’m steeped in the Christian tradition, and that’s what I know. But I think this is true of all spiritual traditions: the belief that so much is out of our control, and to just let that go, the need to control, and to connect to something bigger than yourself. Often, we become aware of that through other people, but also through all of creation. You know how people really took to being outdoors and in nature. Part of that was it was safer to be outdoors – it’s been safer to stay outdoors – but also to see that this is the presence of the divine, too, in the created world. It’s very restorative. It’s very soothing. And we realize that we are a piece of the whole – it’s “For Whom The Bell Tolls” is what I think it’s called. [It’s] the idea of when something happens to one of us, we’re all impacted, for better or for worse. We need to comfort each other. We need to sustain each other, and we need to encourage each other. I think that trust is a huge spiritual theme. I know as for me, I kept noticing in Scripture or in stories that people were sharing themes of trust, it will be OK, it will be all right. It’s a bit of a freefall – it still is – [but there is] the idea that we will be all right in the end. That is very much my spirituality, as you know, Steve and I are Enneagram teachers together. I’m a 7 in the Enneagram, which means that I really am an eternal optimist. The big secret for a 7 like myself is that we’re constantly trying to push down deep fears and insecurities, and the desire to control outcome and to plan for it and to somehow do a workaround [of] bad things that are on the horizon. We don’t like to admit that to ourselves, but that’s kind of what’s going on.

It’s been my spiritual work to work with themes of trust and to be OK with adaptability and change, and to realize that, in a phrase that I just love – I read this one time – we don’t truly know the end of the story, and so to be open to what is coming, and to know that you have the strength to do it. You will be all right.

**Steve:** I think you’ve landed on something. I think one of the things that has made the pandemic so painful for us – and maybe some other sources of conflict – a lot of spiritual teachers talk about how the definition of faith has really become distorted in the recent past. I can think of Brene Brown as one, but I think there are many others as well. In our current society, faith has been equated with certitude; If I have faith, I have all the answers [and] I’ve eliminated all doubts. That’s a distortion; that’s not what faith is. I hear you talking about trust, [and] that faith is really trust and I don’t have all the answers, but I do trust in a creator or a loving force or a higher power that’s basically at work creating good, and I trust that. I can’t point to it without doubt, but I do trust that that’s the reality. What’s your experience with that tension between faith as certitude and faith as trust?

**Audrey:** That’s really an interesting point, and I would totally agree that there has been a distortion of that. In my childhood understanding of spirituality, which is very much connected with religious practice, if you did the right things, if you didn’t have any missteps along the way [or] if you had a misstep to quickly confess them and then start doing the right things again – the right practices [and] the right observances – you would be rewarded by having a good life [and] you would ultimately get to heaven. It was very important not to question, just to do, just to obey. That is that certitude. A lot of it is based on doctrine and dogma. It’s never made sense to me. As a child, I certainly did those things because I didn’t want to risk the consequences. But as I grew older – I was probably into my 30s and 40s when I really started to do my own discernment around that – I realized that spiritual practices are wonderful, and that they keep us mindful and intentional and somewhat centered in how we approach each and every day – and each day is a new day. I also think that religious teaching can be very helpful, a great foundation, a great inspiration for further thinking on your own. But I’ve never felt that one shouldn’t question or even critique what is being said to us. We are all human beings offering our best thoughts on these things.

I know there is tremendous individuality among people – a lot that binds us together, but we’re all so different. Each of us has to discern our own spiritual path and know that we will stumble. [We need to] understand there are periods in our lives when we feel like we’re floundering, that we don’t have the answers and everything we expected is not coming to pass, but to stay on the path and see what’s around the corner. That’s the beauty of having a mature spiritual life, I think. I don’t claim to be an, “I’m all done with this,” but I feel like it’s so much more of a useful place to be and a useful spirituality than the spirituality of my childhood.

**Steve:** Wouldn’t you say that that’s a fair description of who we serve at the spirituality center: people who are really kind of on that journey of moving from a place of certitude to moving into more of an expansive spirituality where questions are allowed and there is room for doubts and there is room for struggle? I’m thinking of some of the groups that meet at the spirituality center, people who struggle with depression, people who are recovering from divorce, people who are going through grief, people who are struggling with mental illness. It’s not the place where people have it all figured out. Like you were saying, at that young stage, if you do it all right, life will be a smooth path. People who come to the spirituality center oftentimes have discovered that in spite of their best efforts, it can be a rocky path at times. And then, a spirituality that allows for questions and allows for the struggle. And then perhaps out of that, community becomes so much more important. If I’m going to get through the pandemic, we as staff need to be meeting at least once a week because I’m not going to make it without my teammates.

**Audrey:** Right. It feels to me like you’re working without a net if you don’t have your team. We can see sometimes how, if it’s been a long time between a really deep, good conversation between teammates, there’s almost like a little bit of an estrangement that sets in. You don’t really know what’s truly going on with that person. It’s important to have opportunity and enough space to make that connection. Some will say it is not extremely productive. I say it is so productive and so important for our creativity. I have heard people say, “The kind of people who come to the Franciscan Spirituality Center tend to be seekers.” I’m not real fond of that word “seeker” because it sounds like they’re out there and they have never formed a spiritual life or have done things already, that they’re shopping around for a new church or they’re shopping around for a new way of thinking about things – and I think some are. But more, it’s a recognition of feeling constrained or even bored by what they’re doing right now. It’s truly exciting when you get engaged in deep conversation with someone who is equally spiritual or interested in that life. And people feel like a warmth in themselves that they’re being heard and understood. It may not change at all their religious affiliation or their practices, but there is a heart-to-heart connection. You realize that is truly God’s presence there in that moment. It so fits with the Scripture about “where two or three are gathered.”

It’s hard to even explain to people because it’s not like it’s magic, like you can come to a program and then it happens. It has more to do with your showing up and having an open heart able to enter into that space. Like, if it’s the divorce group I facilitate, people are often in a world of hurt. Just to show up there and put yourself in that space where you’re going to be vulnerable and think about these terrible things again, that opens you up to the divine presence being there in the midst. It’s not that the words that are said or a teaching that happens is the magic. It’s just making yourself emotionally available.

**Steve:** You can feel the presence of Christ where two or three are gathered. You can actually feel that presence.

**Audrey:** Yes, and I have seen how it’s healing. That presence heals. It’s healing through the people who are there, but it’s a divine healing that’s happening. I really like that. And all of that is possible because of our commitment as staff. All of the people who have worked at the center who came before me, and who will come after me, will have to commit to the true understanding of hospitality, which is that we never force anything on anyone. Our own personal beliefs are separate and aside from where this person is at in the moment, and what their needs are. We need to make it totally safe for them. Safety is a huge part of being hospitable. Welcoming is a big part of that, but also making people feel very safe in that moment and place.

**Steve:** I’m sure you’ve had this experience before. I’ve been blessed with it several times where people will preface a sharing with, “I’ve never told anyone this story before.” Then they go into the story, and there’s great healing that happens in the telling of that story. That safety you’re talking about, people have to feel safe before they’ll get to those stories.

**Audrey:** It is that word I mentioned before: trust. They trust to hold that story and to treat with the respect it deserves and not to use it like a weapon against them, but to just receive it and to hold it.

**Steve:** As you were talking before, I was thinking of, one of the joys of my work is I get to work with you in teaching the Enneagram. As I’ve shared with you before, one of the ways the Enneagram has really been meaningful to me is making me aware of the three levels of intelligence: our head, our cognitive knowing; our heart, our emotional knowing; and our gut, or our body knowing. The Enneagram has really brought that into focus for me. When you were talking about your early life experience of religion and faith, it was very similar to mine. It was almost completely a head experience. There are these dogmas, these statements of belief that you need to know in your mind. And if you have that, that’s all you need. And then oftentimes, worship would be almost like one brain talking to another brain, but all the rest of us are ignored, whereas you’re talking about in Divorce Recovery when you can feel that presence, you can feel your emotions, you can feel the connection to the emotions of someone else. Your body picks up some presence. What a richer, fuller experience that is. The brain is still important, but it becomes a part of a much larger whole.

**Audrey:** As you know, my preferred center of intelligence is the mind or the thinking preference. It’s the first way I approach when I’m in a new situation or a new experience. I’ll want to think about it; I just do. I have to tell myself to stop and check in with, “So, what am I feeling about this?” I still have to access that, and it’s still challenging. What happens to someone like me is if there is a lot of raw emotion when someone is telling a story, it’s a little bit frightening because it’s not my preferred intelligence. I have to tell myself, “Just be in the moment. Don’t worry about it. Don’t think ahead to what you will say to this or about it. Just be here.” That’s my spiritual work that I have to do, and I’m always glad and honored when I’m able to be that receiver of that sacred story even though it might be kind of frightening because it’s very emotional.

**Steve:** What has the pandemic taught you about that? My guess is it’s been both a challenge in that regard, but also a resource, that thing of just being in it and not getting ahead of it, to just be here now, to feel these painful emotions coming up. How has the pandemic challenged you in good ways?

**Audrey:** What you and I both know about the center of intelligence, if we prefer to think about things or feel things emotionally, experience it through our body and our gut instincts, they’re survival instincts. They’re really deep in us, and it feels like we won’t survive if somehow those are being messed with – especially something like a virus that we can’t understand [and] we can’t seem to physically control. And emotionally, it’s wreaking havoc on all of our lives. It can feel like we’re going to die if we can’t get a handle on it in some way. That’s what our center of intelligence is supposed to do for us. Personally, what I have experienced is people using knowledge, which is very important to me to understand something [and] to know about something. That’s a big part of how I approach life. People using knowledge as a weapon by spreading misinformation about this situation, by trying to convince people in very harsh and harmful ways that their thinking is wrong, I find that distressing. I feel like I need to do something about that, but I’m not sure what.

And then I experience … I know that on a relationship level that harder emotional center in my own family, people having really different opinions about what they’re supposed to do to keep themselves safe and all of us in the family safe. We had a lot of discussions about, could we gather? Under what conditions? So-and-so is not doing things the right way. Some were very scrupulous about that; others were kind of more casual. It meant that there was a disruption, and hurtful words were said in my family. I found that really difficult. I had to negotiate relationships with close friends, too, about, what did I need to do to keep myself physically safe when maybe they didn’t feel as strongly about it? It added a level of stress to life that was really hard to manage at times. There’s where I think a daily practice of just checking in – a daily prayer practice – but also checking in with myself emotionally about what I was feeling, and then trying to understand the ‘why’ of that – why was I feeling? Where was the threat? Was that a valid thing? Is it anything I could do anything about, or did I just have to live into it – let go and live into it?

**Steve:** Fall back on your trust.

**Audrey:** Yes. And I still try to do that. If I don’t do that every morning, I feel like I’m without a rudder. That part, like you’re in the body center, that physical center, that gut instinct. I have some affinity for that center, too. And I admire the people who use their center of intelligence to set some boundaries with people in relationships, and also personal boundaries about, “I can do this, [but] I can’t do that. It’s beyond my means.” I think about that sometimes, too. The role of boundaries, like a good fence, can help us feel safe. It can keep us walled off from people, so you have to be careful about it. But I feel like all of us could probably stand to have some better boundaries when I see … if I make the mistake of looking at a news story online and reading the comments [by] all the trolls and the instability, the unkindness, and I think, “We all could do with some lessons of good boundaries here, because the world would be a better place if we could do that.”

**Steve:** I’ve seen this, just between you and I as we make decisions with the spirituality center, more and more I find ourselves asking the question, “What’s good for all of us?” People get so hung up on what they want to do. We have to say, “Wait a second, what’s good for the group? What’s good for the team? What’s good for the group that’s coming?” Unfortunately, that sometimes strikes people as almost a surprise, like, “Why would you ask that?” I think we’ve taken that individual so far that perhaps one of the lessons of the pandemic is we need to find a sense of community and a sense of the collective again – what’s good for all of us?

**Audrey:** I believe that’s true, and to be OK with [the fact] it may involve some personal sacrifice in order to achieve a greater good. We don’t talk a lot about that anymore. Ever since I was a child – and I still do it as an adult – I love to read stories about saints and other remarkable people who chose to do things that were difficult [and] challenging. But they did it for the greater good. It just felt like they needed to make a good impact on the world. They persisted and did things at tremendous personal sacrifice. I wish we could be more that way, admiring of people like that.