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## RS 301 Oral History: Interview with Nancy Olson, Arcata Zen Group & Arising Holistic Center

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I spoke with Nancy Olson, who is part of the Arcata Zen Group as well as the Arising Holistic Center. Responses have been edited for clarity.

ZH:

Alright, so I have six questions, but they're kind of open ended. At least, the last few of them. What's the name of your community practice?

NO:

Yeah, my community of practice. Arcata Zen Group is probably the most formal one that I'm part of. And then I'm also part of an informal sitting group that's with Arising Holistic Community Center.

ZH:

Okay. Can you describe your religious spiritual practice before social distancing began?

NO:

Sure, and I'll preface this by saying, kind of a little bit tongue in cheek, but I call myself agnostic with Zen tendencies, you know I'm probably more of a philosophical Zen Buddhism practitioner than religious person. So my practices prior to COVID included Saturday morning meditation and chanting Arcata Zen Group as a primary part of my involvement with Zen. There are occasional other times when I meet with our head teacher once a month in a practice called dokusan. And that's just a one-on-one meeting with him, and then sometimes participating in other activities, you know, sometimes it's a class, and sometimes it's just having a potluck together as a community, so that was before COVID.

Since COVID, everything has gone virtual at this point. [On] Sunday mornings we still sit together but it's been modified. We sit for a little bit shorter time, kind of in general. I do help facilitate some of the conversations once every six weeks, you know it's part of my role in the Community in the sangha, which is the Buddhist community. We have somebody who manages our Zoom room. We have somebody who still leads chants, and you know keeps the time of our sitting practice, and things like that. So, some of the practices have been modified by being made shorter or you know, but it's all virtual at this point on Sunday mornings. They also do meditation every weekday morning and every weekday evening, and that's all virtual as well.

They have other activities, and kind of community activities that they do. You know, for example, they do shelter cooking I think once a month, and they used to gather in person to prepare food. Now they prepare it individually and then deliver it to the shelter that they're serving.

You know, so there's a lot of a lot of modifications that have been that have happened in that way.

We've tried to stay connected as a group, we've had different activities, kind of more fun social events or conversations, you know, teachings and such that are all virtual at this point.

There is conversation at this point about what's the process for us starting to come together in person. They have started with, for example, one thing they do is a work period that helps—we have a zendo and a house that is up on Fickle Hill. And they, the sangha community, take care of the grounds and such so they've started doing that more in person, so people are socially distanced, wear a mask, and things like that. That's been happening for a while and it's happening in person, but we haven't been sitting together in person. They're starting to talk about, you know, can we start gathering with a limited

capacity in person? We do have a lot of people who are involved, you know I would say, the majority of our sangha is over 65 into their 70s and 80s, so a lot of older adults, I think a lot of them mostly are getting vaccinated, if not all of them. So, there's going to be some more comfort about getting together in person, I think, in the couple of months ahead, so that's the impact of COVID on it, and I think, like in any spiritual community, some people who live outside the area that have been previously connected, have kind of reconnected with us at different points, so it kind of opens up our sangha a little bit, but I think that's true of a lot of groups that have been meeting virtually.

I've lived up here for about two years, and the sangha that I was part of in Los Angeles, I sometimes visit them, you know, since I can do it virtually. So that's my reality with Arcata Zen Group.

And then, with Arising Holistic Community Center, there's a small group of us that meet on Tuesday evenings and we have, I would to kind of say clandestinely still continue to meet in person that's been the one risk—I say air with air quotes—that I've taken because I really value sitting in person, and they're people, who are in their 30s and 40s maybe into their 50s, healthy folks and such. There's only a couple of others, you know somewhere easily between three and five of us that sit. We were sitting in a space but Arising had up until about a month and a half ago.

And it was a big open room, so we didn't we didn't mask up. We just sat and we would talk afterward and things like that.

ZH:

I mean everyone's trying to find ways to be a little normal.

NO:

Yeah exactly.

So, one of the downfalls of COVID is that they, as an organization, lost their space because the person who owned it decided to sell it, so we're without a physical home. We now meet either at somebody's house to sit together, or I have a farm share at Redwood Roots farm, and the farmer allows us to come and sit in the field sometimes on Tuesday nights, which is nice it's a beautiful space.

So that's kind of what what's happened with that practice.

ZH:

Okay, you already mentioned some challenges, but my next question is about what challenges you've faced throughout all of this as a community.

NO:

Yeah. I would say with Arising I think that particular community has been a little bit more open to connecting, so that you know that the big challenge was that they've lost their space, and they'll hopefully find a new space. And then with Arcata Zen Group, you know some of the challenges are that we have an older population, so for them learning it's how to use Zoom, which was an initial challenge.

Sometimes some of the functionalities we'd like to use with Zoom, like I was facilitating last week for what we call "Poetry Sunday's" with people bringing phones to read off of. We were having some audio problems, like some people were just cutting out, and it was kind of random so I asked them to use the

chat function if we couldn't hear them, and some of them were uncomfortable using chat. I know that they've tried to put people into small groups in the past, and that's been a challenge

Then also you know, kind of that physical distance, people feeling lonely, how do we stay connected? How do we remain vibrant and such has been an ongoing issue, but I would say, you know, on Sundays there's typically a group of 20 to 30 people who are pretty consistent, so it's kind of stabilized which is, which is a good size for our group.

But we typically have 20-ish people who participate at least and then, when our lead teacher is with us, he's with us two Sunday's a month, and the group grows up to maybe 30.

ZH:

Okay, how many people would participate in person, before COVID?

NO:

Maybe a few more people than that. You know, some people just don't like meditation via Zoom. It's such an intimate kind of thing. They feel that it doesn't work for them via Zoom, and they don't choose to participate. And then, some people who are comfortable using Zoom they may not have the technical proficiency, but I feel like our numbers have increased or stabilized as people get more used to it, you know have adapted with it.

ZH:

Okay cool, we actually covered a lot of my questions, so the last one I have for you is do you think your community will continue to use some of these adaptations once everything kind of returns to normal?

NO:

You know, I'm not part of those conversations, and I think the next step for the for the community is kind of a hybrid, some people in person, some people virtual, so I think in the beginning we'll see how that continues. There are some people who live a little bit far away since we meet in Arcata. Some people live a little bit further out of town, and they may say, "You know what, it's easier for me to participate virtually". So, some may choose to continue that way, I'm not sure, but as I understand. that the next step is kind of a hybrid model, and we'll see where it goes from there. For Arising, we've been meeting in person all along.

ZH:

Great, well that is all I have for you. Thank you for participating in this project.

NO:

Well, you know, good luck with your project in the next couple of weeks and one more year after this, right?

ZH:

Yeah, then it's the real world.

NO:

Yeah, well if there's ever any way I can support you, just let me know.

ZH:

Okay awesome, thank you so much for that.

NO:

Take care okay.

ZH:

Okay, thank you.