

[Dinnerview: CA Conrad](#)

written by Danielle Susi | May 1, 2019



[CA Conrad](#) is a 2019 Creative Capital Fellow, and the author of 9 books of poetry and essays. *While Standing in Line for Death* (Wave Books), received the 2018 Lambda Award. A recipient of a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, they also received The Believer Magazine Book Award and The Gil Ott Book Award. Their work has been translated into Spanish, Greek, Polish, Norwegian, Portuguese, Danish and German. They teach regularly at Columbia University in NYC, and Sandberg Art Institute in Amsterdam.

Here, they talk about “The Sleep Magician”, tuning into plants, and how food can celebrate a future.

On their all-time favorite meals:

Where I grew up, the Ku Klux Klan has had a foothold for many years, which is to say being queer was very unsafe. I was Outed in 1982 when I was 16, which was catastrophic, and my life changed forever. My art teacher Ms. R kept me from suicide in a beautiful way, and that is what I want to talk about. In my new life after being Outed, the spawn of the KKK, also known as my classmates, would regularly scream at me in the hallway about AIDS and faggots burning in Hell, and I should prepare to be ass-fucked by Satan, and other charming things their parents told them would happen to me. It is important to point out that this is soon after President Ronald Reagan’s press secretary decided it would be fun to make jokes about AIDS at a press conference. So yes, President Trump needs to know that it very much matters what he says because he sets the tone for either civility and kindness, or bigotry and Hate Crimes. On one such afternoon during the usual homophobic taunts in the hallway, I heard Ms. R’s voice YELL at the other kids who froze where they stood. One thing about the children of fascists, they are always ready to obey the voice of authority. I have no memory of what she said to them on that day, but she was the first and only teacher who was willing to help me, and my face flushed while she lectured them and I was unable to

maintain the stoic performance that no one was bothering me, and I burst into tears to the delight of the spawn.

She talked to me in private, telling me the things good people tell such youngsters, that there is a bigger, kinder world elsewhere. She convinced me to take her ceramics class, which was the very thing I needed but did not realize at the time. She knew what she was doing, getting me to put my hands in the clay, to get me to know my place in the soil, feel the origins of life, to truly understand that I was alive and how amazing that is. After I completed my first successful pair of plates, she invited me to her house where she made me a meal served on them. Every ingredient was brand new to me at the time: pita bread, hummus, alfalfa sprouts, napa cabbage, frisee lettuce, cilantro, and pickled daikon radish. She roasted the napa in the oven with zesty paprika. The spiciness and sharp sourness of the frisee and pickled daikon was sheer magic to the taste buds. Her fresh baked, handmade pita bread was made with a satisfying, dark whole wheat, while her homemade hummus was the most delicious thing I had ever tasted, rich and creamy, with lots of crushed garlic, fresh cilantro and lemon juice. That meal was delectable, fresh and lively, and it made me happy because it was the first time I understood what she meant that there were very different things waiting for me in this world. Ms. R saved my life, and I cannot eat hummus without smiling and quietly thanking her.

While writing this answer to your question, Spell Check told me, "The word *faggots* may offend some people. Consider using more inclusive language." It makes me happy that Spell Check says this! When I think of the things said to me after I was Outed as a youngster in our horrible KKK infested town, it feels good that both young faggots and young KKK kids will see this. It could save both groups.

The second meal I will talk about is from 1990 when I was 24. My time in Philadelphia as a young adult from 1984 to 1990 was full of the life Ms. R told me was waiting, and I was excitedly writing and loving my new chosen family of artists, most of whom were queer. The terrible news is that most of this beautiful chosen family were also dying of AIDS, in fact, most of the people I loved in these years died when we were young, full of creative ideas and promise. Many heterosexuals working in the shops in our neighborhood quit to work elsewhere, and ACT UP helped permit my anger in the streets about our isolation and the medieval ways we were being treated. None of us were getting tested for HIV in the 1980s because doctors were sharing test results with their patients' families and employers, destroying their lives. Pennsylvania state legislators had to pass a law in 1990 preventing doctors from acting like vicious, reckless vigilantes, demanding that they finally become the doctors they were supposed to be.

In 1988 I became macrobiotic, convinced that I was HIV positive and going to die soon, but I wanted to eat well for optimal health and to fully enjoy whatever time I had left. Jay Pinsky was the dear friend who convinced me to try the diet, and I loved its immediate effects on my body, mind, and spirit, giving me more energy and concentration, calming my emotions, keeping me more present, and also I never caught colds or flu from the added benefits of strengthening and maintaining a healthier immune system through the diet. In

1990 my friend Adam and I went to get tested for the first time after the law was passed. He came from an Orthodox Jewish family who had evicted him when he was 16 after they found out he was gay. Adam never said an ill word about his family, he loved them, and spoke kindly of his father, even though his father never saw him again, never hugged him again, never said, "I'm proud of you, son," again, never said "I love you son," again. We met at a party where I was a go-go dancer on stage while Adam was working the room looking for a Sugar Daddy. We were both terrified about our HIV test results, neither of us could sleep the night before, and I remember feeling like vomiting in the waiting room. Then the completely unexpected happened, and I could not believe we both turned out to be HIV negative, it was amazing, and surely a miracle had taken place. Adam was a prostitute, so I admit I was particularly surprised since nearly every hustler we knew in our neighborhood was ill. Eventually, Adam did contract HIV and later died of AIDS, but on this day we were both HIV negative, and we went out for dinner to celebrate our friendship and our lives together on this beautiful planet.

We went to Essene Cafe where we had a traditional macrobiotic meal, one I have had many times in this restaurant. It was miso soup made with wakame seaweed, daikon radish, shitake mushrooms, cabbage, and burdock root, a side of brown rice topped with gamasio, some adzuki beans cooked with kabocha pumpkin and kombu seaweed, lots of steamed carrots, cauliflower, kale, collards, and a side of arame seaweed made with pickled carrots and freshly toasted black sesame seeds. We also shared a pot of Bancha twig tea made with toasted brown rice, the rice giving the tea a rich, almost smoky character that is unlike any other flavor. It was my first meal after receiving my test results. I could not believe it. How can I ever convey to you the power of this meal and this moment? Let me put it this way, for the first time in years I was able to see that I had a future. It was as if I had sprinted across an endless minefield for six years without being blown up. Before that meal, I was secretly planning my funeral and making notes about where my lovers and friends should scatter my ashes. My old friend Jim McCormack who also died of AIDS once told me, "Honey, always remember that every gay man in the 1980s was secretly planning his funeral." In a couple of years after that meal with Adam, I began writing *The Book of Frank*, and my life went wildly forward, more fearless and determined than ever.

On what the light looks like during their favorite meal of the day:

Dawn colors. I love morning foods and eating what I need to launch into my day. Considering the stress we put on the planet with food consumption; I try as best as possible to adhere to the macrobiotic principle of eating seasonally and locally, to cut down on oil and gas transportation involved with massive imports, as well as refrigeration for non-seasonal foods. I tend to have gluten-free oatmeal with a heaping teaspoon of almond butter, and equal amounts of hemp seeds, chia seeds, ground flax seeds, sprouted sunflower and pumpkin seeds, topped with blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries.

On snacking while writing:

One of my favorite snacks is rice cakes, especially the Lundberg family's

wild rice cakes with almond butter, sauerkraut, and a dusting of cayenne pepper. Along with it I usually drink Bancha twig tea with an added shot of pomegranate juice.

On their go-to late-night snack:

I have been writing a vegan cookbook where each recipe will also be a (Soma)tic poetry ritual so that every recipe yields both delicious meals and poems. My favorite late-night snack is a simple, quickly baked cornbread made with a healthy pinch of mugwort and wild asparagus root in the batter. A minute before it is finished baking I take it out to add the darkest chocolate I can get my hands on before putting it back into the oven. After that, it gets a heavy dose of freshly minced garlic, with a dusting of both cinnamon and cayenne. Each piece is served in a bowl with half a cup of heated soy milk which is soon absorbed by the crisp underside of the bread. I call this The Sleep Magician because it gives you potent, wild dreams, the kind that has helped me understand my waking life. The Sleep Magician has changed the direction of my ideas more than once, and I am nothing but grateful to these ingredients.

On their food quirks:

Not sure if this qualifies as a quirk, but it is something I am experiencing that you might find interesting. For the past three years, I have been consuming every single day a combination of four mushrooms: lion's mane, reishi, turkey tail, and chaga. Each of these has very different jobs and effects on the body such as improvement of mental functioning and clarity of thought, relaxing muscles and taking down inflammation and other such health benefits. Also for the past year, I have had shitake mushrooms twice a week to strengthen and maintain a healthy immune system. Then there are other mushrooms I will consume throughout the week with meals like portobello, porcini, crimini, and wild mushrooms I will harvest myself like morels, hen of the woods, and chanterelles.

The daily practice of consuming these mushrooms has led to some very unexpected side effects, such as being able to tune into plants more efficiently. I hesitate to say "other plants" because mushrooms are technically not plants, they are also not animals, they are their own kingdom. What we know about mushrooms and their feathery thread-like mycelium root-like system which is called hyphae, is that they have an atavistic relationship with plants. This primordial, symbiotic relationship is complex and involves among other things, helping the water and nutrient transport for plants.

When I say "tune into plants" I mean precisely that. The daily mushroom consumption and saturation I have undergone these past few years have awakened my cells to the ongoing conversations between these two lifeforms. But here is an example of what I mean by tuning into plants. Recently I was house-sitting for a friend who has a lot of houseplants, but a different person was watching the house for two weeks before I arrived for my stay. When I first walked into the house, I was uneasy, and that feeling quickly and sharply turned to alarm. I looked around and noticed that the plants had

been neglected. Most of them were cacti and succulents who were doing okay, but it was a couple of temperate zone plants like basil which were drooping their leaves vertical along their sides, and the dirt in their pots was dry and cracked. I immediately watered all the plants, but as I was grabbing the container to water them, I was being instructed very clearly to make the water lukewarm. I placed pieces of selenite crystal near the more vulnerable plants, especially the delicate, fragile basil plants. By the next morning they were thriving again, and just before I opened my eyes, I was given the message that the basil had been on the verge of death and that if I had been one day later in arriving, they would have died. Also, the heartier plants around the basil were providing them with a transmission or wavelength that I did not fully understand, but whatever it was they were keeping the basil alive, keeping its spirits up. They knew that as soon as I entered the house, they could count on me to hear their cries and begin to make everything right again.

This newfound relationship I have with mushrooms which in turn has provided me with better ears for the plant kingdom is something I do not take for granted, and I intend to cultivate this relationship, to deepen my respect for and improve my understanding of their ancient vocabularies. It could be that the mycelium of the mushrooms has begun to allow me to follow its threads of root system back into broader conversations about creation and informing me of what the responsibilities are for taking on the role of being a deliberately, actively creative human. My vegan diet and added saturation with mushrooms have given me a new interior cavern for writing, or preferably I would say that it has shown me the way to our grand and beautiful inner-cosmos.

On their final meal request:

My favorite places to visit are NO-KILL shelters, so I would want to be at one of these marvelous farms in the world where the rescued animals are safe from dangerous humans. Animals have to go through a period of adjustment to learn that they are safe, and that they will not be murdered for food, and that they will not be forced into labor, and that they will not be made to fight for sport, and that they will not be beaten, starved, or neglected. They learn they will be given love and kindness, nutrition, shelter, and protection. It is amazing, frankly, that some animals ever trust humans again, but once an animal fully embraces this new life, they blossom. 2019 is the Year Of the Pig according to the Chinese zodiac, and I want to share this marvelous video. It is footage of a momma pig named [Hope Apple Blossom](#), and her six piglets who were rescued from a nightmare existence in a slaughterhouse and they are seeing sunshine and grass for the first time.

So I would want to be at a NO-KILL shelter with beautiful, free creatures who are feeling their bones and muscles on their terms, not by human dictates and not for the pleasure and unnecessary consumption by greedy, oblivious, top-predator humans. I want to eat a few leaves of spinach or arugula while the animals munch their grass and straw. I want to die among the very few animals who experience and understand freedom.