



Finding Peace in a Troubled World
Faculty Reflection by James Finley
Unedited Transcript

James Finley: Well, first I was pleased to know this was my turn to contribute something and the student; I don't have your name here in front of me, who suggested something that I might speak on, which I thought was a good suggestion on how not to be disheartened or cynical about the exposure to all the suffering in the world and the cynicism and negativity and confrontational edge towards each other. How not to be downhearted about that. I think for us in the Living School what we're really asking for is what contribution does our commitment to the mystical lineage make to our ability to be more grounded and peaceful in this situation. I mean I think we're all facing the situation, but what is it that the turning to the mystics as our guide, what is it that they can possibly contribute to us finding a source of peace in a troubled world? I think that's what's relevant for us. So, in a very brief way I just want to share, like, a little poetic little thing to consider in this. You know, first of all, I think a place to start at is a kind of an aphorism. It's to say that there is no refuge from suffering, that there's no place so innocent, there's no place so pure, there's no place so well-ordered, there's no place so controlled, that suffering can, and eventually, will find you. Including death finding you. So, there is no refuge from suffering, but the great insight is, is that suffering has no refuge from a deathless love that permeates the suffering unexplainably and all pervasively in all directions. So, there's this strange kind of alchemy, a kind of an intermingling of a love that utterly transcends even as it utterly permeates the intimate details of our suffering, so the God's understood then as this presence that protects us from nothing, even as we're unexplainably sustained in all things, which is the peace that surpasses understanding. So, we might say this is one of the things that runs through all the mystics, that the peace of God that surpasses understanding. This is the peace of God that surpasses understanding. Next, I would say this, that I think for all of us, we've all had fleeting moments where we've experienced this, there's a moment, it can be very intense or very subtle. It comes in all kinds of ways. It is a moment of resting and God resting in us. And in that moment, like, "What a fool I am to worry so the way I sometimes do." It's like a— One way I put it is, it's the realization that God is infinite presence that's pouring itself out, giving itself away, or presencing itself in and as our very presence. In and as the presence of others and of all things. And we, kind of, momentarily rest and being intimately accessed by this all-pervasive oneness we could not explain. We don't know what to make of it. And I think spiritual direction, then, is sitting with someone with whom you can attempt to share something, and you get the feeling they know what you're talking about, because they've experienced it too. So, let's say this— this is the great teaching, you might say. The mystery of the cross, love crucified, whatever, the mystical marriage, the great death, all of them. Also, there's moments in which we've experienced it for our self, which is the intimate foundations of our faith. And yet what we find, because we're just a human being, you know, out in a troubled world. We come to discover that if you're not careful, we can search for that mystical union as an escape from the suffering of the world. And once I wanted to see Thomas Merton for direction complaining about something, I forget what, I was 18 years old. And he said, "We didn't come to this monastery to breathe a rarefied air beyond the suffering of this world. We came here to experience the suffering of the whole world in our hearts. That's why we're here." So, we realized that we seek this peace, we've tasted this peace, and we seek this peace in prayer and meditation. We lean into it, to be grounded in this unexplainable oneness. Not that we might flee from the suffering of the world, but rather we might be present to the suffering of the world with our heart anchored in a peace. It doesn't take the suffering away. It gives us the courage and the strength and the groundedness to be present to the suffering. And because we're grounded in a peace it's not dependent on the outcome of the effort. Because regardless of the outcome, who knows what the

outcome— Merton once said that people committed to social justice have to be very careful not to be committed to the outcome of the effort, because by human standards it might go down in flames, which is the cross. So, the peace that surpasses understanding, because you're deeply grounded in this peace, because you've experienced it, you know it sustained your day by day, and you know it calls you to go out and be present to the suffering world in a kind of an authentic encounter, like eye to eye, like, "I'm so sorry you're going through this." At the human level you have to pace yourself so you don't get flooded. You know, you have to pace yourself. You have to pace yourself. You have to take care yourself. So, that's the encounter be carried out in such a way that the encounter might be the upwelling of a mystical taste of a compassionate encounter. So, it isn't just that you helped, you hoped that you did, but you helped in such a way that the person caught a glimpse in the encounter of something unexplainable that sustains them. So, to my mind, I would think, then, the sensitivity to things like this could really help us in the Living School that when we get confused and get upset we return to our practice. We keep returning to the practice. At the next level we keep returning to the people who help us to ground that unitive consciousness in our bodies and our emotions, because we've all got stuff going on. And then in that attitudinal stance then we face the world without being tricked by it, without being confused by it. We know the score. We know the score. So, I would offer that. I'd offer that. You know, it's a lifetime of work. I mean the details get worked out in spiritual direction, but to me, the sensitivity to these kind of truths is, to give an example kind of what helps me. It's helped me with my own trauma, working with trauma, just turning on the news that I not get swept away by the intensity of darkness, that I lose access to the light that sustains me in the darkness out there. So, that's my thought.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, sir. So then I can admit I'd love to ask you about his— the Narrow Gate kind of came up for me about, how do you stay open to both the reality of the suffering world and also the presence presenting itself with that? You talked about the ability to bypass, if you only tried to look at the suffering if you focus on just the presence.

James: Yes, that's right.

Paul: Holding that balance, and you kind of touched on the practice being an important piece of that. Can you say a little bit more about how to try to embody that in a— what's the phrase you used, where it's studied in a way where it's—

James: Here we're seeing a Following the Mystics through the Narrow Gate. "Narrow is the gate that leads to life and few there are who enter it," kind of thing. To use that metaphor as it would apply here. To use that metaphor, let's say from God's side the gate's wide open. You know, everyone is invited to the wedding feast. Infinite love is infinitely giving himself away. Pouring himself out as the universal, the world, and nothing is missing anywhere. And when it touches us, we realize that it came through the gate to touch us to invite us to pass through the gate into the love that came through to find us. And then when we try to get through the gate, we discover the gate's narrow from our end, and it's narrow because nothing less than love can fit through, you see. I can't take with me the baggage of my internalized resentments and strategies and conclusions and arguments and proofs and all. I can't. It won't fit through the gate. So, what I do then in my meditation is I keep catching myself trying to drag the bags through the gate, and I can't get it through the gate. And then I experience God unexplainably loving me in my confusion in trying to do that, and I think that's repentance, you know what I mean? Like, that's the gift of tears. So, we discover ourselves kind of unexplainably accessed by the love that we're falling short and being able to be faithful to. And I think that's important, because otherwise the ego is so seductive, it's so determined that it's going to work it out on its own terms. So, poverty of spirit is it doesn't get— Like, we can attain it, but attains us in our inability to attain it. And then in the deep surrender to that we pass through the gate. We pass through the gate. And so every time we get confused, we can tell

what we're doing. The heart is contracting in kind of figuring out that it has to work it through on its own terms. And then somehow what's happening here has the authority to know who I am, and I get caught up, and you can feel it. But the more I take a deep breath; it depends on what the situation is. As soon as I get vulnerable, as soon as I realize what I'm doing one more time, so I take it to my prayer. This wordless— So, I take it to this wordless prayer, like experiential self-knowledge, like, "Look at me here. And I trust You're using me for Your own purposes, in my frailty, that You use the weak to confound the strong." I reflect on it reflectively in the gospel. I work it through with the people involved and I start over again. And I think that's the narrow gate. You know what I mean? The narrow gate is that paradox in which we catch ourselves trying to do something that can't be done, doesn't need to be done, but every time we see what we're doing and accept it, and we realize we're being unconditionally loved in that confusion, and then that's experiential salvation. And then I think that's what we're bringing to the world. I think that's what we're bringing to people. Does that make sense, in a way, to put it that way?

Paul: Very much so, Jim. Thank you. That's really helpful on clarifying our effort and how we're to effort, and as we've said you cop out and all a sudden go through that gate, but it was not by your own effort.

James: That's right. And a couple of examples. Look, how in marriages sometimes where a couple get in an argument where there's this horrible feeling you're powerless to get the other person understand you. You know what I mean? You get in this thing kind of thing. But as soon as they mutually acknowledge what each one's afraid of, you know, as soon as they each acknowledge what's underneath it, as soon as they listen, they can start to feel it like breaking open. Another way I would always experience it in therapy, because sometimes people bring in these horrendous things, it's very complicated. And I realized that if I'm the one that has to figure this out, we're both in trouble, you know what I mean, because it's complicated. I mean there's a lot at stake. But if I say to the person, "Look, what if we sit here together and kind of listen to what's going on inside of you. Listen to what's going on inside of me. Keep our heart open and see where it takes us." Then all of a sudden it kind of qualitatively shifts into a deeper level where you start to find your way through. And a lot of meditations like that, a lot of— Anything real, maybe, is like that at some level, I think. So, anyway, it was a good question. I thought it was a very timely question and. . . .