



Mystical Sobriety

*James Finley in an Interview with Mark Longhurst
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Unedited Transcript

I want to begin the reflection on addiction by understanding, from the standpoint of the 12-Step recovery program for addiction, what the turning point is in the life of the addict. The turning point is the point at which they hit bottom, and to hit bottom is, for them, a crisis in which they're able to see for themselves the bankruptcy of their strategies. That they don't really have a problem, that they can handle it, that they can get out of it, it isn't.... And they just see it as completely false.

They're able to see for themselves that this addictive use of the substance they're addicted to is destroying them. They can also see that they're powerless to stop. So, the crisis is, for them, an existential crisis. That is, if this is up to them, they're finished. They're finished. So, if they don't resort back to denial, they're only faced with despair if it's up to them, unless there's another way. Unless there's another way.

The other way is that maybe it isn't ultimately up to them at all. That maybe there's a power greater than themselves that can achieve in them the freedom from the addiction that they by their own powers are powerless to achieve. That's the other way.

The very beginning then is a kind of a faith. Really the faith is freedom from the addiction of the perception of oneself as absolutely isolated, all on one's own. Having to make it on one's own terms. This faith begins to break open that addiction, to this radically different way of experiencing themselves. That I'm in a relationship with a mystery greater than myself, and that the mystery greater than myself is in a relationship with me, and my hope lies in that relationship. This relationship with the mystery greater than myself, in order for it to be actualized, I have to hand my life over to the care of that higher power.

I can't have it both ways. I can't say, "Theoretically there is this presence, but I'm still going to try to make it." I have to hand my life over to the care of the higher power who can achieve in me what I can't achieve. So, this starts them on this path. They concretize that through a fearless inventory, through the making of amends, this concretizing the faith community of recovery, that they bear witness that this is real. That they move through it, it gravitates toward the 11th Step by increasing conscious contact with God.

In that process, the person says to their higher power... They go through this painful, messy process ... They say to their higher power, "I don't know who you are, but I do know who you are. You're the one who saved my life. I don't know who I am. I do know you're the one I saved."

There's this intimate radicalization of how one experiences one's life, and brings one to this new state of consciousness for which one is immensely grateful and wants to pass it on to others. So, we might say that's the first level at what we could think of as the spirituality of freedom from addiction, the healing.

The next level is.... This gets generalized in terms of how we heal from the long-term internalized effects of trauma and abandonment. If, for example, if in my childhood ... God forbid ... If I was incested, if I was repeatedly beaten, if I was painfully abandoned. I was placed in this really unbearable situation that the very persons on whom I depended to survive were the very people who were destroying me. Therefore, in order to survive it, I had to somehow disconnect from the truth of what was happening because I couldn't bear it.

So, it's because I disconnected from the truth that I live. That might have been true when you were a child, but the trouble is they get stuck in it. So, because I disconnect from the truth of my life I live. If, when I was being incested or beaten, I was passive because if I would've spoke up it would've been worse, I can say to myself, "Because I was passive I lived." But then the person says, "No, because I am passive I live. Because I'm afraid to step forward on my own behalf. I offer external compliance so as not to be attacked or abandoned."

This survival strategy formed in trauma, I'm addictively bonded to it, because even though I can tell, I find it embarrassing, I find it difficult. When I try to break it I have strong physiological reactions, and it preempts my ability to step forward. Can I be vulnerable and safe at the same time?

Or because I got angry I lived. No, because I am angry I live. A lot of people in prison are stuck in that one because they acted out. Because I use food in a certain way or use sexuality in a certain way, or when I got older I compensated for my inadequacies by achieving things like image over identity, I live. No, because I choose image over identity I live, and I can't stop.

The bankruptcy is I can see it's not working, and I can't stop. So, one reaches out for help ... At a certain level, one reaches out for help, concretizing the person who's there for us, in whose presence we can openly be this way, who sees through it and sees in us something of value we can't yet see. Little by little, we can see it.

But when we turn to faith as a resource, this is the essence of our faith. It's the essence of our faith ... is that in our faith, we could say ... For us as Christians, in Jesus ... We can say that the deepest question of my life, really, is not what my father thought of me, or my mother thought of me, or what my husband or wife thinks of me, or what my pastor or my boss thinks of me. Really the deepest issue isn't what I think of me, but can I join God in knowing who God knows me to be? Can I join God in seeing who God sees me to be when God sees me? This is salvation.

In order to do this, I have to let go of my own present way of seeing things, and I discover I can't. We're afraid to lose the control that we think that we have over the life that we think that we're living, and we're addicted to what binds us, see. Out of the depths I cry unto thee, oh Lord. This is the cry for salvation. The, can I walk on water? The, is this possible that I could place my life over into your hands?

Then the mystery of the cross, then, is this mystery of just being liberated from this deep addiction to the illusion of an ultimately isolated self that has to make it on its own. To realize, I'm in the presence of the love that loves us and takes us to itself. Through that inner process of discipleship, whatever we want to call it, we can come to apatheia to this true sobriety, this deep sobriety, the peace of God that surpasses understanding.

This would be one way, then, of understanding the spiritual dimensions of the process of being freed from addiction, from self-destructive, internalized patterns, to open us up to this relationship.

Now I'd like to apply this to the Living School because I think what's unique about us ... All the above applies. Whatever addiction there might be, whatever trauma there might be. It certainly applies to discipleship, to faith. It's a Christian faith community. It applies.

But what distinguishes the Living School, it seems to me, is how does all this look from the standpoint of the mystics, see? What contribution do the mystics make? See, if we turn to the mystics for guidance with respect to these dynamics, what kind of guidance do the mystics give? That's what I'd like to focus on here.

I can look at this in a very practical way, as something I've been aware of, is that there's these regular phone calls with the students for Richard, Cynthia and I, and they ask questions. When I listen to the questions, what's so great about these questions, to my mind, is that they're path questions. They're the kind of questions that people ask who are on the path. What about this? What about that? What about this?

Which is great. It's just really great. People not on the path don't ask questions like that. The gift is the [inaudible] who will ask the question. A lot of them are people on the path of meditation practice. I commit myself to a practice and then the practice questions arise. What do I do when this happens? What do I do when that happens? How do I know this is real? How do I know I'm not deceiving myself? How do I get past this? How do I carry this into the workplace? How do I carry this ... All these questions, questions, questions. They're very important.

Notice when the teacher responds, whichever teacher it is, they always respond in the same way. Always. One, they respond out of their own experience because it's not a theory. The theory of healing heals nobody. It's not conjecture. They bear witness to how they've experienced it, and also what's real important in their answers, is the teachers aren't freelancing. They're not making it up. They refer to a text. That is, they refer to the lineage. They refer to the timeless lineage of saints and mystics down

through the ages on into the heart of Jesus spending whole nights in prayer. They speak out of that.

So, it's in the light of that, then, I'd like to share something about mystical sobriety relative to these questions and I'd like to just think out loud for a minute. Things that help me [inaudible] to this. See, Thomas Merton ... There's a lovely quote in Thomas Merton, *Palace of Nowhere*, it's in there ... page 14, I think. I can't remember. Yes, it's a lovely thing. He said, "God, my God, with you it is always the same thing. Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer."

He said, "I prayed to you in the nighttime with desire. I have prayed to you in the daytime with light and with desire, and you have descended upon me with great gentleness in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire."

So, Merton suggests that we go along, eventually start to realize that really God's the one asking the question, not us, and that we don't know the answer to God's question. Furthermore, we don't even understand the question. So, I think what mystical sobriety is, I'll put it this way to me. Here I'll do this thing where I'll be God talking. What have you got? Listening to all this. I take it to God and I'm pouring out my heart ... I'll be God talking.

You know, I'm listening to you and I'm with you. I'm with you. I would agree with you that you are a confused person. I would agree with you, and I can see one impasse after another. You know what? I get the feeling that once one of the teachers gives you an answer to this question, there's going to be another question. If you notice, there is no end to these questions that you're asking. Have you ever noticed that? Therefore, I have a question for you. I have a question for you, really. What is it in the light of which all these questions and all possible questions are rendered in some essential sense irrelevant? That's my question.

See, what is it in the light of which all these questions are irrelevant? What it is, is that I'm in love with you. I'm so in love with you that I'm utterly giving myself away as invincibly precious in my eyes, in the midst of the unresolved matters of your heart. I find in these unresolved matters no obstacle to how infinitely precious you are to me as I pour out and give myself to you as life of my life. Life of my life.

My hope for you.... My hope for you.... Here's the mystics. You would take this whole process sensing how true this is. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, you'd place all the questions underneath *The Cloud of Forgetting*. In St. John of the Cross, you would realize that I'm drawing you to myself in a passage through a dark night. The unraveling of all possible questions and answers. For Meister Eckhart, you would enter into a virgin mind. I'm not having closure in any possible conclusion of any kind about yourself, others, the Earth, or God.

For Teresa of Avila, you'd realize the time has come to love more and think less. You'd sit in a deep quiet in which this love is translating you into God like this, and that you would give yourself over to that process. When you realize that all this sounds quite beautiful, but you don't know how to do it, raising a new question, then I would say, "That's the point. Why don't you surrender yourself over to me in your inability to even know how to begin to do the one thing alone that will give you the deliverance you've been longing for all this time? Why don't you sit in your powerlessness, in my presence, breath by breath?"

I think, therefore, these methods of contemplative prayer are all our strategies to keep us poised at the brink of what we're powerless to attain is attaining us and our inability to attain it. Here's where I'll end with this prayer which I would put as a path to mystical sobriety.

Is that you're sitting here with God in this way, sensitive to this question. You're sitting there with God in the midst of this question, and you listen to God ... When you inhale is the I love you prayer, so that when you inhale you breathe in God loving you through and through and through and through and through and through, unresolved questions and all.

When you exhale, exhale yourself. Give yourself in love, unanswered questions and all, to the God that's been given to you unanswered questions [inaudible] all. For in the reciprocity of love, your destiny is fulfilled, and that way all ... You discover the unsubstantiality of all possible questions, which is the peace of God, which is the gift of tears, which is experiential salvation, which is the endless homecoming, is the way. I think that's the thing.

This doesn't mean then that we stop asking these questions. But it means the questions themselves take on a new meaning, because each question leaves us poised one more time to sit at the edge, being taken to God, in the midst of the unanswered thing.

So, that's my thought. I would call that mystical sobriety. I would call that freedom from the addiction where the asking self remains our base of operations. Somehow, if only I could check off all the lists and get an answer to all these questions, the buzzer would go off and I'd win, that I would get ... Really? Do you really think that you're going to [inaudible 00:17:23]? You can't stop asking. But we can reflect on the nature of our questions in a new ... What am I really looking for? And do all these questions beg the question? Do all these questions beg the question?

Therefore, each mystic then offers their own metaphor for this. Entering into the dark night, and the fourth mansion, virgin mind ... they're all metaphors for this very thing I'm talking about, so that when it becomes habituated I would call that a state of mystical sobriety.

Then we would look lastly and see that we're all caught up in the same thing. We're all caught up in the same thing. Therefore, can I be with people in such a way that I'm safe enough to be with that they can let me know the hurting edges of unresolved things. They can tell I can see in them a preciousness or a value that's not threatened or compromised by their troubles.

Can they then begin to internalize that and take it to heart and use it as a grounding place where they can find their way out of this and then pass it on to others? That's my meditation.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Jim. That was so beautiful and helpful.

Something that struck me that I just wanted to relay to see if it's helpful or not was when you were talking about the way that the lineage is there as a support, in a way. One of the ways it came to mind for me was almost as different love letters from mystics. An example of their long love affair with God or the mystery.

Like, here's how it looked like in my relationship. Though it's not my own personal relationship with God or mystery, there's these beautiful love letters of the struggle, the strife, the darkness. But it gives a way for it to be a support, almost like an older couple who have walked a long path, a long partnership, and the ups and downs. You can look at Eckhart and say, "Okay, that's how Eckhart was participating."

It can give me a set of eyes to approach my own relationship with integrity and trust in my own experience. Does that make sense?

It does ... I mean, [inaudible 00:19:49]. Very much so, because this then raises the question, how do we read the ... If the mystics are telling us this, how can we read them in such a way that we can recognize this in what they're telling me? And that makes sense in a way.

What I think it is really, for me, or what it has been for me, is that you read the mystic in such a way that they say something that's so eloquently beautiful it breaks your heart. You can tell, even in the midst of not being able to comprehend it, your heart recognizes it. That the person is speaking out of the depths of the truth of themselves. See, they're saying, "Let me share with you what happened to me. Let me share with you what happened to me. And let me offer some guidelines of vulnerability so that what happened to me might happen to you."

So, that's the tonal quality that resonates in the mystic. You know what I mean? That's the thing ... I think you're exactly right. You can call them older brothers and sisters on the path, or you can call them people to bring forward this process for us. I think that what the mystics do then, is when they bear witness to it by how beautiful it is, and secondly they offer guidance in it. They bear witness to it as unexplainably beautiful, intimately realized, and then they offer guidance in how to habitually ground oneself in this beauty, this thing, and how to recognize the cul-de-sacs and stuck places along the way and all of that. I think you're right. I would say that, yeah.

Mark Longhurst: Jim, I'm thinking about shame and how shame often hijacks the intimacy of mystical sobriety, and is such an experience for people who are in addiction, or the nine-year person sober who falls off the wagon. Then I'm also thinking of the ways to which we're all addicted. I wonder if you could speak about how shame hijacks that intimacy and what to do when that happens?

Yeah, that's very good, yes. Because let's face it, see, we're right at the edge of spiritual direction. We're right at the edge of where when we hear talk like this, it's beautiful. But when I come up against where this meets me in my efforts to find it, I touch things like shame.

Here would be one way I'd respond to that. In AA, they talk about making a fearless inventory ... It raises the question ... A fearless inventory raises the question of what a fearful inventory is. A fearful inventory is you already learned enough bad news about yourself. You don't know if you can stand it anymore. You're like, I don't know what else is back there. But really my plate's full. I'm an asshole, I get it. You know what I mean? Really going down the ... [inaudible] going down the tubes here. You don't need to push this point home beyond the ... I'm trying to hold myself together. It begs the question, what is the destructive power of the shaming truth about ourself? It's believing that the broken thing about us has the power to name who we are.

So, what is shame? How do we understand shame in a way? It's a kind of a faith that the brokenness that we have ... By the way, it completely lacks any tenderness because very often we began drinking to numb a pain we couldn't bear. So, the very way we were using to take the edge off the pain was the very thing that made the pain worse. And then we attack ourself for that. It's unrelenting. There's an unrelenting, punitive voice inside of us.

But what is the power of AA, really? What is the power of Alcoholics Anonymous? A person stands up in a room full of people and tells their story of the wreckage of the past. Instead of being attacked or shamed, you can feel in the room the communal safety that holds the person in the self-disclosure because they've been there, too. It's like a room full of broken, whole people, like this. Some people have said, "I feel safer at a recovery meeting than I do in church."

That's faith in the higher power. But what if the brokenness has no authority at all over us? What if only love has the authority over us? That's the essence of the gospel. The essence of the gospel is there. That's why I say the miracle stories of Jesus, when you really look at the healing stories, they're all the same, basically. A person brings suffering, Jesus listens to the suffering, responds to the suffering. But Jesus sees the essence of their suffering isn't that their daughter died or they can't see or they can't walk, whether they're a prostitute or a tax collector. The issue of their suffering is they think they are what's wrong with them. It's the idolatry of their shame. Reflected in his eyes, they see their true face before they were born, hidden with Christ and God forever. That's experiential salvation. It's experiential salvation.

So, this is the good news of Jesus Christ, you see. So, shame, and a certain level of shame, that's kind of healthy. It's like a conscience. But where it becomes toxic is where it becomes identity, which closes off experiential access to how unexplainably precious we are in the midst of the broken thing.

So, I would answer that way. But it's very hard to ... See, how ... That's what I said what therapy is about, too, is how can I ... Where can I find someone with whom it's safe to share what hurts the most, knowing they will not invade me or abandon me? By doing so, they can teach me not to invade or abandon myself. This is the long road out of the dark places.

That's the big question is ... Gee, but it raises the whole question about what feeds the shame. Does that make sense in way? Do you see it that way?

Paul: Yes, it does. That's so helpful. Thank you so much. Yeah. Wow, Jim, thank you so much for your time today. This is ... It's just so rich. [Mark] and I were just saying what a privilege it is just to be a part of these conversations.

James: Oh, me too. And again, this is what blesses me about the Living School. I mean, what an amazing event this is, really, the Living ... You know what I mean?

Mark: Mm-hmm (affirmative.)

James: Really it's a kind of contemplative Christianity reborn in the world. What I'm saying is, is that the collected journey with each other is we're bearing witness to this that we might then take it out into the world. Pretty amazing, actually. [crosstalk] over and over again [inaudible 00:27:08], yeah.