

Turning to the Mystics



Turning to Thomas Merton
with James Finley

Jim Finley: [music] Greetings, I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell sound]

Kirsten Oates: In season one of Turning to the Mystics, we're going to be turning to the Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, and in this episode, Jim will provide an introduction to Thomas Merton. But before we turn to our mystic, we thought it would be good to always begin our intros with a reminder of the basic structure of contemplative or mystical Christianity. [music ends] Jim, can you give us an overview of that basic structure?

Jim Finley: Yes. Let's say we look back over these Christian mystics down through the centuries, and, specifically, these mystic teachers; that is, these mystics who offer trustworthy guidance to people who feel interiorly drawn toward this deeper unitive experience of God's presence in their life. And then we say, "Well, who are these people," in the sense of, let's say, St. Francis of Assisi was a mystic, or Clare was a mystic, John of the Cross was the mystic, Eckhart was a mystic, Merton was a mystic. How can we understand what it is that makes these mystics, mystics? That is, what is the nature of the teachings that they're offering us?

To me, what helps me to see it, is to say this, that the mystics assume several things, which is very much rooted in a classical understanding of the Christian faith. Also, it's in concert with the contemplative mystical traditions of all the world's great religions. There's a universality to this, but we're looking at it specifically within the Christian tradition. It says they're assuming several things, that first of all, there's the dignity, and the reality, and the complexities of the human experience. You have your life, I have mine, and just what does it mean to be a human being day by day in our life with each other, in our passage through time? They're always assuming that these are real life people living a real life. So, in that sense, it's that. It's a deep respect for the dignity and gift of the human experience.

Secondly, they assume that it's the human experience illumined by faith, and specifically as revealed in Christ and all of the Scriptures, that we're living our life in a relationship with God, and that God's in a relationship with us, and God's in this related state of oneness with us. And God's oneness with us is the reality of us. That is, God's perpetually creating us breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat.

Jim Finley: And so, the ultimate meaning of our life is found in that. See, how can I, in my capacity for spiritual awakenings, how can I intimately have flashes or experiences of this divine faith dimension of the gift and miracle of my life? That God's giving Himself, God's giving Herself away in and as the intimate immediacy of myself, others, and all things. And how can I then, through my faith, sense this inherent holiness of the gift of myself, and know that the measure of that holiness is love? Because God is love. And so, they're assuming that. Let's say they're assuming a life of goodwill illumined by faith or discipleship. The discipleship they understand, the general understanding, the deepest sense of discipleship, is intimacy. That the mystery of Christ is that we're called through Christ to share in Christ's own union with the Father; that is, we're called to participate or share in that as our destiny.

So, that's the Christian life. See, we would say that's the Christian life. On this Christian life, this daily life illumined by faith in the presence of God, the measure, which is love,

that we know it on this earth as in a mirror darkly. It's like an obscure certainty in our heart. But we trust that when death comes, when we pass through the veil of death, that we're not annihilated but consummated. And it will no longer be knowing God's oneness with us mediated through faith, through consolations, through insights, but it will be unmediated divinity forever. There will be sharing in God's own life as God shares in that life as our destiny. And that's the Christian life. And that's hope.

So, our faith is a certainty in our heart, the measure which is love. We live by hope and this ultimate fulfillment, and that's the Christian life. They assume that. But they also assume, that even now, it isn't just that when we pass through the veil of death, God will be all in all, but that even now God is all in all, that even now the infinite presence of God is presence-ing itself in and as the presence of myself, others, and all things, and it's possible to experience that. That is, it's possible to experience this one life that is at once God's and my own, I can experience the oneness prior to the difference. And these are moments of religious experience. These are moments where we're like a momentary mystic, where we and God disappear as other than each other in a moment of oneness. We would say, also, I think they assume that everybody, certainly any person of faith, everyone has little flashes of this in prayer, or sometimes like loving somebody, or having a child, or spending a long time alone in the midst of nature.

Everyone has little moments of this kind of miraculous quality, of this already perfectly Holy nature of life itself. But what happens in some people is that these momentary flashes, each time they dissipate, they can start to create a longing to abide in that oneness, see? Having tasted this fleeting taste of the divinity of the intimate immediacy of myself, there's growing in me a desire to abide in that, which is the path. So, the mystics then are men and women that give witness that that's possible, see, that there are men and women who have come to a habituated state. We call it Christ Consciousness or Divinity of God Consciousness. And these are mystics.

So, they bear witness of the godly nature of the intimate immediacy of ourselves, everybody, all things. The mystic teachers are then men and women who, in having traveled this path and then awakened to it, they want to offer guidance to people who are just beginning to get a taste of this because they know, by experience, that how at first it's very bewildering in a way, like, you don't know what to make of it, so, how not

Jim Finley: to be disheartened, how not to be confused, how to follow. What is this taste, trustworthy guidance? Leaning deeply into this transformative process of divinization through love. I would say that's the feeling tone of that mystics. What they all share in common, as we go through these mystics together, each mystic has his or her own genius, or his or her own way to articulate this, or offer guidance in it. And that's the tradition, I think.

Kirsten Oates: What is the approach to suffering for the Christian mystic?

Jim Finley: I think the approach to suffering for the Christian mystic, again, going back to basic humanity first and then illumined by faith, is that, first of all, there's just the fact that suffering is part of the human experience. So, there's the moral imperative not to intentionally cause suffering to oneself, or anyone else, or any living thing. That's the moral imperative, not to cause suffering. Next, where there is suffering, it's a response to do what

we can to lessen the burden of that suffering within ourself or others. That's the moral imperative of compassion, or the moral imperative of ministry, or service to the poor. That's the relationship of mystical union to the corporal works of mercy: What can I do to help relieve the suffering within myself?

So, we could look on medicine and the field of mental health, really, as the spirituality of this service to humanity of, one, not causing suffering, and then, secondly, doing our best to remove the suffering that's present, and that's through the human experience illumined by faith. The mystic contribution is how can I do that grounded in a peace that's not dependent on the outcome of the effort, see?

Thomas Merton once said, "Those committed to social justice should be very careful not to give too much emphasis on how it's going to turn out because by human standards, it may go down in flames." So, the whole mystery of the cross is the ultimate victory of love that totally permeates all conditions, including permeating devastation, including permeating trauma and tragedy, that somehow love unexplainably permeates it completely.

And so, the mystical consciousness of the awakening of suffering is to avoid suffering, remove it as best we can, but then grounded in a peace that sustains us in the process and wholly permeates whatever suffering remains as our teacher. Paul speaks of a thorn in the flesh, is I ask God to remove it, and God said, "Leave it there as your teacher." See? I think that's the point really, it's kind of a poignant, a kind of freedom in the midst of suffering. And that's why the mystic in the service of the poor has to be careful to always keep returning to the rendezvous with God to get re-grounded in that unconditional love that permeates the conditions in order to keep returning to the suffering conditions, because they're just a human being and you can get momentarily overtaken by the suffering again. I think that's the stance of the contemplative, mystical person in service to the world. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: How would you advise us to integrate this sense of the Christian contemplative tradition, the teachings of the Christian mystic? How do we integrate that into our day-to-day life?

Jim Finley: I sense first of all, when we talk like this and what's good about these teachers, because they talk like this, is that really, we're right at the edge of spiritual direction. That is, it's universally personal, like it's deeply, deeply personal. And so, this would be an example. Let's say we hear talk like this, and we recognize it as beautiful and, also, we sense that it's beautiful because it's true. And then the truth of it is that in actual fact although I know it's beautiful and it's true and actually I spend a great deal of my waking hours as if I didn't know this at all, that my consciousness is conditioned by conditions. This realm we're speaking of now is there, but it's vague and in the background. See? The essential never imposes itself; the unessential is constantly imposing itself, and I see that I'm caught up in momentum of circumstance.

So, then, what I do is I say, unless I set some time aside where there's no agenda but love, is I want to set some time aside, like the still point of the turning world, to get grounded in this clarity and how to learn from God, how to ground myself in

God who is perpetually grounded in me. And so, the meditation practice then, this contemplative prayer, this meditation practice is the rendezvous point habituating that. As I undergo all of that, and the mystics give a lot of helpful insights into the potential radicality of sitting like that in silence, how the transformation happens there, then you ask when the each meditation ends, how not to break the thread of that intentionality in the oneness.

So, little by little by little, you can start, like the experiential self-knowledge, you can see where the breaking points are. You can see where things get to you. Little by little, you can like rethink those things in God's presence in prayer, and little by little by little, there can be a more habituated love consciousness, which is the path that mystics want us to follow. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. What's the role of paradox and metaphor in the teaching of a mystic?

Jim Finley: See, what I think it is, how I put it, it's like language in the service of the unsayable. There's a primary distinction in Jacques Maritain, the thomistic philosopher, and it's said in spiral dynamics, too, and Ken Wilber, and so on. But Jacques Maritain, what he said, "In the problematic order, the mind moves in a horizontal line to come to rest in a conclusion." So, one plus, one plus, one equals whatever. That's the order of objective knowledge, of objective reality, in which we come to conceptual conclusions, and that's real. And then we apply that to life. So that's the pragmatic order of life.

When it comes to these matters, which are really incarnate infinity, it's a matter of a deeply realized incarnate infinity, that kind of paradigmatic consciousness, that logical, paradigmatic consciousness. You can't get the ocean into a thimble, but you can drop the thimble into the ocean. See? That we can't get this vastness of this love into our finite conceptual mind trying to grasp it, but we can drop the thimble into the ocean. And when we drop the thimble into the ocean, what kind of language, is language in service of the intimate immediacy of unexplainable things? See, I know that it's true. In philosophy class at the monastery, Dan Walsh used to say, "See, I know what I know what I know that I know it. So, it is I who know that I know it."

Jim Finley: So, there's a conviction in my heart, but when I try to explain what it is that is the conviction of my heart, it's a deep conviction of what I cannot explain. So, there's several modes of language then. As we read the mystics, we'll say this is how they talk. A paradox is an apparent contradiction. It's an apparent contradiction. The logical mind momentarily comes to an impasse. See, you can't proceed in the face of the contradiction. And then sitting patiently in the impasse, the mind breaks into a qualitatively richer way to understand the question itself. And so, I think it uses paradox to slow down the logical mind seeking a conclusion so that resting in the impasse, it might come to this kind of enigmatic certainty in the heart, like this. And I think that's the role of paradox.

What I think metaphor is, is that a metaphorical language is a language—I like Pastor Eugene Peterson, and he's speaking of the prophets as poets and metaphor—he says, "A metaphor, it says what it means and it doesn't say what it means; and, therefore, it

sets in motion the spiritual imagination and engages you in it.” So, when Thomas Merton says, we’re talking about on creation, “The world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness.” So, in the logical mind, what’s happening? [laughter] “The world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness.” So, in some sense, it’s saying what it means; namely, the divinity of what is, but it doesn’t say what it means. And, therefore, I’m kind of drawn in to come in closer so that I might realize this language.

I think there are other modes of it too. I think the language of lovers is this language, because the language of lovers is not the language of explaining anything. The language of lovers are words that kind of express what is the deepest reality in their oneness with each other. I also think it’s the language of the cry of the poor. The one who cries out in pain is not looking for an explanation, they’re looking for help. I also think it’s the language of poets. I think poetic language, love language, the language of healing, metaphor, these are all kind of ways that language can be used to communicate and to convey these things to us. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Given what you’ve just said, it seems to me that there’ll be times in the meditation practice, or on this path, of tremendous frustration of the mind. And then other times, like when you talk about the language of love, tremendous senses of connection and upwelling in the heart.

Jim Finley: Yes. As we look at these mystics, this is what they offer practical help in. Let’s say I have my rendezvous with God and I’m sitting in meditation or prayer seeking this, what happens when I actually tried to do that? Like, what happens to me when I start seeking that? I think what the mystics are saying is that at one level—again, we’re back to the practicality of the human experience—I’ll say it the way the mystics would say it. Let’s say I’m sitting there reading a mystic or the Scriptures, and let’s say that in the reading of it, I find solace in it, like, I rest in it, and they would invite us to see that solace as God’s presence being conveyed to us in the cadences of the mystic’s voice, like, “This is the way.” They would also invite us to say that since that solace is finite, although God’s present in the momentary touch of consolation, we need to be grateful for it without clinging to it, because the love of God given to us in the solace is infinitely greater than the solace can offer.

Jim Finley: Likewise, we can be sitting there and get an insight, and the insight we recognize would be an insight from God. We’d also know the mystery we seek is infinitely beyond that insight. St. John of the Cross says, “God grants it to some people to understand that everything remains to be understood.” See? That I’m grateful for it, but I’m always looking over it or past it towards something that’s not reducible to this insight, this constellation, or anything at all. That’s my attitude of gratitude in a detached openness.

Likewise, let’s say I’m stuck. I just feel stuck like my mind’s racing. I think the mystics would say, “Well, do your best with that.” Would it help you get up and walk around for a while? We’ve talked about these methods they suggest, about awareness, or the breath, or a word, or the Lectio. Do your best with that. But I think the mystic would also say this, “Know that your confusion is no hindrance right in this very moment to God unexplainably loving you through, and through, and through, and through as unexplainably precious in the mystery of your confusion. Your confusion does not have the authority to name who you are. Your confusion is no hindrance to God loving you in your confusion.

Therefore, if you could learn to place your trust in God who's sustaining you in your confusion, like breathe deeply and listen to it, like listen to the confusion. In your confusion, deeply accept it as humility. In your confusion, deeply accepted, unites you with the confusion of the whole human family in the presence of God. So, I think they're always bringing that balance to joyful solace and to sorrow and confusion. They're trying to see the divinity that permeates both of them.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And the balance between the infinite unknowable and the concrete actual—

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: --and continuing to look for that intertwining.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's right. And notice the paradoxes I think they're saying is that, the example I use, is that let's say you're holding a small pebble in your hand. And we would say that it isn't just that God is creating that pebble right at the moment you're holding it. So, if God would cease loving the pebble into your hand, it would disappear. But the mystics are also saying that the infinite love of God is infinitely giving the infinity of itself away completely as that pebble. And so, the smallest of things can break your heart open, like a single glance or a look at something, that everything's boundaryless in all directions in the concrete simplicity of it, and that's the paradox. See, that's what I think the paradox is, and it always has that sense to it.

Kirsten Oates: Now let's turn to our particular mystic for this season, and that's Thomas Merton. Who was Thomas Merton, historically?

Jim Finley: Briefly. And by the way, listeners, if they go on and look up on the internet, look up life of Thomas Merton. There are a lot of lovely, biographical outlines of Merton with time outlines, and then also his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* that he wrote as

Jim Finley: young monk, the one on New York Times Best Sellers List gives you the story of him, and then, through his journals, his later writings.

Someone talked about the Augustinian introversion of Thomas Merton. St. Augustine said, "That I might know myself in thee, oh, Lord, only this and nothing more. Absolutely nothing more." So, Merton saw the deepest evidence of God's presence as our own life. And so, there's a kind of autobiographical nature; whereas, he shares his life, he invites us to see God's presence in our life.

And so, the life of Merton, like, who was Merton historically as insight as to who he is spiritually, which is the bridge to understanding who we are historically, to understanding who we are spiritually, forever. A simple, short version would be that he was born in 1915 in France. His father was an artist. He had one brother. For all practical purposes, there was no religious upbringing in the home. If anything, there was a kind of suspicion of it or a distance from it. Both parents died of cancer when he was young. He was at Cambridge University for one year. The war was going on. Rumor had it that he got a woman pregnant and that she was killed in one of the bomb raids. And he was drinking a lot. And so, the people there concerned about him, about his kind of wildness, sent him to New York to be

with other relatives there to watch over him. He went to Columbia University.

At Columbia, he had a series of religious experiences. He met some people there at Columbia, and he had a very profound religious conversion experience at Columbia. And he felt interiorly drawn to be baptized as a Catholic. When he got baptized as a Catholic, he was wondering what to do with his life. He was very involved in literature. He was very involved, for example, Blake, the poet Blake. It gives you kind of a sense of where he was looking in terms of literary interests. And wondering what to do with his life, he was thinking of joining the Catholic Worker Movement with Dorothy Day. He was exploring for a while the Franciscans. And Dan Walsh who taught philosophy at Columbia is the one who introduced him to the Trappists, or the cloistered, Cistercian monks at Gethsemani. He encouraged him to go down and visit, and it had a very profound effect on Merton, and he felt called to do that.

And so, at 28 years old, he left a promising career in literature and entered this cloistered Trappist monastery. In that monastery, he wrote his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and it went onto the New York Times Best Sellers List. He went on to become one of the most prolific and widely read spiritual writers in our time, really.

As time went on, in the '60s, as his own life kept evolving, he got very involved in the contemplative traditions of the non-Christian traditions. So, he carried on very serious dialogue with the Muslim Sufis, with the Zen Buddhists, with the Jewish Tradition, the Protestant Christian Tradition. People would come there and visit him. He was in very serious dialogue with this. Thich Nhat Hanh came to visit him there from Vietnam at the time before he went to Plum Village. Abraham Joshua Heschel came to visit him there. Bede Griffiths came from the ashram in India to visit him there. Muslims came to talk to him about Sufism and the nuptial mysticism of the Muslim Tradition.

Jim Finley: He got also involved in the relationship between mystical union and social justice. He wrote a book called *Seeds of Destruction*. So, he was very much as an advocate. He was pro Dr. Martin Luther King, anti-Vietnam, anti-nuclear war. And so, in his interest in Asian religion, he was invited to attend an international conference of monastics in Bangkok, Thailand. The abbey gave him permission to go there. So, he saw it as an opportunity to have firsthand exposure to the Buddhists there. Also, when he wrote *Seeds of Destruction*, he was getting hate mail. He was living as a hermit at the time. He got permission to live as a hermit on the grounds of the monastery.

People were threatening to come and kill him. So, he was considering living in Asia somewhere. Maybe the bishop of Alaska would accept him to live as a hermit. He didn't know where he was going to go. While on that conference, he was electrocuted in his hotel room, 53 years old, December the 10th, 1968. There were rumors that the CIA killed him because this is back when the Berrigan brothers, they were on the FBI's most wanted list, pouring blood on draft cards, and such. And so, he was seen as one of these liberal people at odds with the political realities at the time, which are similar to our own, in a way. I don't think that was ever proven. And so, he died and was flown back to Gethsemani. When they flew him back, the other dead bodies in the caskets were dead soldiers from Vietnam who flew back with him. And so, he's now buried at Gethsemani. That's Merton.

Kirsten Oates: Were those visits that he was having with the different religious leaders, was that made public?

Jim Finley: Yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, in his journals, in his posthumously-published journals, there's a volume called *The Hidden Ground of Love*. In *The Hidden Ground of Love*, it's his dialogue with these people in different traditions. Also, there's a lovely little book called *Signs of Peace*. *The Signs of Peace* is Thomas Merton's dialogues with his Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, these friends on this serious interfaith dialogue of the contemplative interconnectedness of all world religions moving beyond the ideological qualities in each as a source of peace in the world. That's all available. You can read those. Also, his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite and Mystics and Zen Masters* is where you can see the deep stuff he did with Buddhism.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Can you give an example of how Thomas Merton uses paradox or metaphor just to help us in this introduction, get a sense of where we're going?

Jim Finley: Yes. I'll give an example that comes to mind. His writings are full of it really. I love this phrase. He says, speaking to God, and he says, "You who sleep in my breast are not met with words but with dispossession within dispossession." That metaphor to God, that "You who sleep in my breast," that's a very evocative thing, and you're "not met with words," see, it leads you to reflect, what does that mean, dispossession? So, I think to me what it means as I reflected on it, I'm going along, and I think I'm getting a clearer sense of all of this. So, I'm really making progress with my insights and then I hit the wall and I'm dispossessed. See, like all of a sudden it cracks open with me. And then in that dispossession, I start to regather myself up again at a deeper level. I gather up, out of that loss, I broke then to a deeper place that I never would have found had I not broken out of where I was before where all got taken away from me. And then I started getting

Jim Finley: comfortable again. See, I go a little deeper, I have a little, interiorly richer experience with my insights. And then there's another dispossession, see? It's dispossession, within dispossession, within dispossession, within dispossession. And so, somehow God is then seen to be the infinity of the dispossession itself. The enigmatic richness is plenitude and emptiness and are a constant. God's kind of the infinity of the interplay between birth and death.

Thomas Merton once said, he said, "Do I even have a life anymore? I'm blown down the street like leaves scattered in all directions." See, you're dispossessed of having, you're dispossessed of a cherished thing to protect, which he saw as freedom. But at the other level, it always means to me at the psychological level, we need to have our bearings somewhere. There's physical, psychological security. We all need that. We're just human beings. But as an ordinary human being, I've somehow been transformed in this freedom of the midst of the unraveling as I might be happily going through in my life right now. And so, I find peace in the midst of my fear, peace in the midst of my uncertainty. I think that's the quality of the path, I think.

Kirsten Oates: It's so subtle. He writes about it beautifully. When did you come upon Thomas Merton?

Jim Finley: Oh, when I was at home growing up in Akron, Ohio with a violent, alcoholic father, like ongoing violent abuse. I was in the ninth grade at an all-boys Catholic school there

in Akron, Archbishop Hoban High School. One of the instructors in the religion class mentioned monasteries. I'd never heard of monasteries before. Because of the role prayer played in my life to help me survive what was happening to me at home, I was already starting to get opened up that way. I was very taken by this idea of monasteries, that there were places you could go to, to seek God, and so on. And he talked about Thomas Merton. So, I went to the school library that day and they had one book by Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, which is a journal he wrote in the monastery.

On the first page of that journal, he writes, "As for me, I have but one desire, the desire for solitude, to be lost in the secret of God's face." At fourteen years old, I didn't know what it meant, but something in me did, like it got to me, what it was. So, I took the book out, I got my own copy, and I read it over, and over, and over again. I thought it was so beautiful. I just sensed how true it was. Therefore, in the four years of high school, the violence was still going on. I started writing to the monastery. I thought I wanted to enter the monastery. When I graduated from high school, I entered, and went in there, and then Merton was novice master. That's how he got to be my spiritual director. I was eighteen years old.

Kirsten Oates: How has he impacted you?

Jim Finley: Well, to me, how I say it is, is when I went to see him—first of all, I think being in his presence, how I put it is, that the reality of Thomas Merton made God's unreality impossible to me. That is, his very reality was to me, the presence of God as a transformed person. I saw it in this ancient lineage of the mystics that he was that. I sat at his feet in the classical sense, I've had this rare opportunity to be with somebody like that. They're hard to find. Then, also, I share with people, because of my trauma, when I would go to talk with him, I'd hyperventilate. I couldn't breathe.

Jim Finley: I was so nervous. He asked me what was going on, and my voice was shaking, and I said, "I'm scared because you're Thomas Merton." Then I was embarrassed because I wanted him to think well of me, and then he got to see what I was really like, this traumatized person. Then he said to me, he said, "Every day before vespers, I want you to come in from afternoon work." I worked at the pig barn, "and I want you to tell me something that happened at the pig barn each day." It was a brilliant intervention, really. Because I can remember thinking, "I can do that." I'd knock on his door, and he was always writing a book and he would sit and listen and talk, and it leveled the playing field for me, really, just absolutely in terms of compassion. And then out of that compassion, I told him about my desire for God. That's what opened it up to me. Then he told me, he said, "Once in a while, you'll find somebody to talk to about this, but they're hard to find. They're really hard to find." And he said, "The purpose of this place is, it is a place that meant to protect, to preserve, and cultivate this radical desire, as a charism in the world." And then he offered me guidance in my own prayer. And then he led me to the classical texts of the mystics who we'll be looking at. He introduced me to John of the Cross, and these people. I don't know, it just one of these life-changing experiences for me. When I left the monastery, I went up to his hermitage the night I left. I said I needed to go home is how I put it and just deal with my father's abuse. I needed to face it. He said, after you take care of that, he thought I had a vocation to solitude. So, he gave me the address of a hermit in Nova Scotia, and I thought that's what I would do. I thought I was going score off with my dad and go to Nova Scotia. I didn't go. But that's the last time I saw him was at the hermitage when I left. Then he died a

year after I left. Someone called me from the monastery and told me that he died in Asia.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It seems appropriate that he's our first mystic that we turn to. What's different for having had the personal relationship with him? Is it different to the other mystics we'll be looking at later on who have been dead for a longer time?

Jim Finley: In one sense it is, because I think when you're with somebody like this, their presence is precious to you. What's interesting, it's uncontrived. They're not trying to be that way. They just are that way, and its very open face. It's like a treasure. So, there is that and in that sense it is different. But on the other hand, I think this is key to these teachings. I can recall sitting with Thomas Merton in spiritual direction, and I first started reading St. John of the Cross. I never read John of the Cross before. I walked out into the woods with my copy of John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and I sat down at the base of a tree, and I started reading it out loud to myself. And it was the same voice; that is, the mystic voice that I heard in Merton was the voice that was echoing in John of the Cross. So, it's like the deathless presence of the teacher.

Also, what I think about these mystics, they're the kind of person where everything they say counts. Everything they say counts and, therefore, in a sense, they are present in their words. They're not reducible to nor are they distinct from their words, and the depth and beauty of their words is the depth and beauty of God's words to us uniquely expressed in that mystic. I think is comparable to say to someone who knows classical

Jim Finley: music well. And if you really know classical music well, I don't, you learn the signature of each composer. Do you know what I mean? You can really pick up right away that utterly unique voice in the polyphony of these classical voices. I think mystics are like that. You pick up the mystic voice uniquely expressed. I think that's when we read the mystics, we're looking for the one that resonates deeply with us, you know, where there's an affinity, a resonance, as a point of entry like that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: When the Pope came to America, he honored Thomas Merton.

Jim Finley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes. Also, he made specific mention of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day. There was one other person too. I'm sure it was Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, both. Also, what the Pope was doing, really, was acknowledging the importance of contemplative mystical Christianity. Thomas Merton is bearing witness to kind of mystical Catholicism or the mystical depth of the mystery of church, and he saw that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Back in the day, would he have been well known in America? I know many people, younger people, haven't heard of him at all. Was he well known?

Jim Finley: He was extremely well known. Thomas Merton, each of these books were widely read, like, Thomas Merton was the thing. See, that's why after he died, when I wrote *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* right after he died, what helped that book get published, I just took it as text on Thomas Merton on ultimate identity beyond ego. When that book came out, the book did very well. That's how I started getting invited to give retreats around the country. But it did well because Merton was still so much, like, right there. We were very aware of him, and people move on, you know. That's why I think in its own way, I think CAC, I think Richard Rohr and the CAC, it's another modality. It's like a current, and then someday people will

be like, “Who’s Richard Rohr?” Do you know what I mean? Gosh, he lived forty years ago. That’s forever. And then there’ll be a new person rising up.

Jim Finley: But what I’m suggesting is, it’s good to be aware of these people. It’s just good to be introduced to their timeless beauty and carry on the lineage. It has that sense of history, the historical unfolding of this lineage.

Kirsten Oates: Last question. What encouragement would you give us as next week we’ll start on our first meditation practice on Thomas Merton?

Jim Finley: I would suggest, several things I would say. As you listen to it, this might not be for you. You might listen to it and, like, “I don’t get it. Life’s too short. Why bother with it?” Stay with it for a while. Say, “That’s interesting. I’m glad to know that’s there.” But next, let’s say it’s not like that for you. Let’s say there’s something about it that you can tell is offering something you’re looking for, like there’s something missing. You can call it a sense of depth or a sense of what you’re looking for is closer than you realize, you sense a word of encouragement. My next thought would be, to the extent that’s true, be patient with it. Be very patient with it, because what it’s doing really, it’s recalibrating consciousness, in other words, where repetition is not redundancy.

Jim Finley: As you listen the podcast, or then you go to the text itself, and listen to it, it’s a matter of sustained exposure. The cumulative effect of sustained exposure in a vulnerable sincerity brings about the transformation. Once, someone came to see me that wanted to learn how to meditate, and I asked him if he had ever meditated before, and he said, “I did.” He said, “I tried it once five years ago and nothing happened.” So, it isn’t like that. It’s like learning to do oil painting or watercolors. You don’t go out and get art supplies and sit down in three minutes, like, “Hell I can’t do this.” You have to be drawn to do it and stay with it under the guidance of a teacher. And little, by little, by little you can see if there’s a connection there, or not.

Jim Finley: I think reading mystics is very much like that. Be very patient with yourself. Another thing that I suggest, too, is for all that you don’t understand, which might be considerable—for me, too—take just one thing that rang true, like one saying, or one word. And I would even suggest something like writing it out. Fold it up and keep it over your heart, or in your pocket, or even keeping a journal where you process, write it out longhand, and then what does that say to you, or where are you at with that, or what’s that asking out of you? Because when we do that, we’re starting to read the mystic at the level of which the mystic was writing, and we meet it, because that’s how they wrote this. The encounter happens in that resonance, sincerity to sincerity.

Kirsten Oates: They didn’t write it from their heads.

Jim Finley: No, they didn’t. At a secondary level, they really vary how their mind works. Thomas Merton was an intellectual. Meister Eckhart was a great intellectual, some of them had great intellects. Teresa of Ávila, for example, she had a deep kind of pragmatic intellect, very pragmatic. But it’s not essentially intellectual as in conceptual. It’s more intellectual as in like God’s own intellect being communicated to us in and as the gift of our intellect. See, it’s a trans-conceptual transmission of knowing. They were always working at that. But at

the secondary level, you can tell there's definitely an infrastructure to their teaching. It's not random. Do you know what I mean, that they don't let that get ahead of what they're saying. That's why when we read it, we should always pause to see, how would I say it? How would I say it? But we shouldn't let that get ahead of the intimate immediacy, what transcends what I am able to grasp. And the more I just stay with it, it'll get clearer, and clearer, and clearer as time goes on. I think that's the way, actually.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. So, from a practical perspective, we'll be launching one practice per week so people will have seven days to sit with the practice. And your encouragement is for us to re-listen to the meditation and do it for the seven days and perhaps journal.

Jim Finley: Yes. Let me offer this exercise that I share with people. Again, to each person, let your own self be true. This would be like one way to use these talks as modeling contemplative Lectio Divina is listen to the talk. Let me put it this way. Take the text—I'll always read a text—then write the text out. Write the text out longhand. After you write it out longhand take, say the first two or three sentences of the text, write it out long-hand, and then underneath it, put a block on the paper and say, "How have I or how am

Jim Finley: I experiencing this?" And it might be blank. Next, "If I were to say it, how would I say it?" Again, it might be blank. "I don't know. I don't know how I would say that."

The next would be, "What's this asking out of me?" Again, it might be blank. And, "Where am I at with this?" Then you'd write out the second sentence. "Have I or am I experiencing this?" Dah, dah, dah, dah, and you go through the questions. What you're doing then is you're signing off on it in a slow, unhurried, like you're absorbing it concretely in your life. And then during the day, if certain pieces that occurs to you during the day, sit with it. Just let it cross your mind and stay present to it.

And so, the next day you come back, you'd listen to it again, the whole thing—the talk, the text—and you pick up where you left off. You would take another sentence. So, when you do your first journaling process with it, you might just do one sentence. So, you do one session. Each day, you'd listened to the whole session again, and then you would take the next sentence, go through it, the next sentence and go through it.

Jim Finley: That would be one method that's helped me to slowly start to internalize it in a way that you can kind of live with.

Kirsten Oates: They could take a sentence from Thomas Merton's text, or a sentence from your reflections on Thomas Merton, whatever really impacts them.

Jim Finley: I would suggest taking the texts from Merton. This is how I see it, too, is that Thomas Merton listened very deeply to God in the monastery, and the psalms, he just listened very deeply to God. Then in having listened to God, he shares with God what he's learned from God about himself. Then he invites us to listen into what he says. So, when we listen to what he says, when he talks with God and what he learned from God, then it touches us, and it provides point of entry of how we, through Merton, can learn to listen to God, to help us listen to ourselves and say to God whatever and then we kind of breathe with the spirit of prayer. The whole thing becomes a living word for us. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. And then, throughout the season as people are gathering their own questions or curiosities, we're going to ask them to send them into us, and we'll do a reflection together at the end on what's come up for people listening to the podcast.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly. That will be wonderful. And then when we do that, we'll see what the response is. In a realistic way, what we'll try to do is take a representative sample of the questions that seem to be ones that have a most universal application to people. It's like when I'm giving silent retreat talks, [music] like the way I'm talking on these podcasts, but at the end of each talk, there's a dialogue, and the dialogues are always very personal. It just touches me as it touches you; this touches you as it touches you. That's what counts. But anything that we ask at this level, there are many other people, in his or her own way, that are asking that, too, because we all share this in common, and that's why things are going to be valuable about those sharing sessions.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. We look forward to those.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of *Turning to the Mystics*, a podcast created by the [Center for Action and Contemplation](#). Please consider rating it, writing a review, or sharing it with a friend who might be interested in learning and practicing with this online community. To learn more about the work of James Finley, please visit jamesfinley.org. We'll see you again soon. [music ends]