

Turning to the Mystics



Thomas Merton: Session 1

with James Finley

Jim Finley:

[music playing] Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

[bell sound]

Welcome to this first session of this series of explorations we're titling, Turning to the Mystics for spiritual guidance. In our sessions together, I'll be sharing with you here how I've come to experience and understand the contemplative, mystical dimensions of the Christian faith; one with the contemplative, mystical lineages of all the world's great religions that I was introduced to and immersed in, in the years I spent as a monk in the monastery, in which I continue to try to be faithful to in my day-by-day life out here in the world.

And what I want to start with here is our first mystic and some teachings, some sessions, devoted to Thomas Merton, whom, as I understood it when I was with him, to see him as a living mystic in this living lineage. And so, he's my teacher. I mean, I went there at eighteen years old, and I just sat at his feet. I just saw myself sitting in this ancient lineage of mystical Christianity open to these things. And so, here I am today sharing this. So, that's Thomas Merton.

And so, in this first session—and this is how I usually start when I give a retreat on a mystic; when I give retreats on Thomas Merton—this is the text I usually begin with. And this passage is the final paragraphs of his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*.¹ (Excuse the sexist language. It's before they knew better. If he were living today, he wouldn't do that.) So, I'll read the text, and then we'll look at the text together. We're setting now an example of how these sessions will go. They will have this tone.

[QUOTE] *What is serious to men is often very trivial in the sight of God. What in God might appear to us as 'play' is perhaps what [God] takes most seriously. At any rate the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Bashō, we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash.—at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the 'newness,' the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.*

For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter [very] much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.

1 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 296-297

Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.

That's our passage. That's beautiful. And so, I'd like to look at this together. And what I'm doing here is practicing a kind of lectio out loud. I'm sharing with you how this strikes me so that through my sharing, it might help you sit with how it strikes you, and we could enter into the spirit of the text together, like what it revealed to us about ourselves and about our life.

He begins, first, really meditating on the poetry of creation—see, that “the world and time,” or “the dance of the Lord in emptiness”; “the silence of the spheres.” And the spheres here mean the heavenly bodies—the sun, and moon, and stars overhead—so, “The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast.” And so, he sees creation then as the infinite presence of God in the “let it be,” like, “let there be stones, and trees, and stars, and you and me.”

He once said in a talk in the monastery, he said, “Creation isn't something that just happened in the beginning and then God walked off and left us to our own devices.” He said, “Creation is going on all the time. That creation is absolute and perpetual.” So ultimately speaking, God, the infinite presence of God, is pouring itself out, giving itself away and presencing itself as the intimate immediacy of our very presence, the presence of others, and the presence of all things in our nothingness without God. This gift of God is the absoluteness of the gift, God giving us her very presence, his very presence, and pouring itself out as a gift and miracle of our very presence. It's absolute in this sense that if God were to stop loving you into your chair, wherever you are listening to this at the count of three, at the count of three, you'd-- [cell phone ringing] Oh, and it's a robocall to make it perfect. Probably selling aluminum siding, or something. [laughter] Okay. All right. Before we were so rudely interrupted. Okay.

As you listen to what I'm saying right now, if at the count of three, God would cease loving you into you listening to me right now, at the count of three, you would disappear. For you are nothing, absolutely nothing, outside and other than the love of God giving itself to you as your very life. But it's your very nothingness without God that makes your very presence to be the presence of God. And that's the paradox that lies at the heart of all reality, which then renders the universe as God's body and that it's bodying forth the love that's uttering it into being.

St. John of the Cross says, he said, “In the beginning, the beauty of the created order of physical things, the world, in possessiveness at heart, it can be seductive. We want to own it.” He said, “As we go more deeply into being present to the beauty of the Earth,” he said, “We realize the Beloved has passed this way in haste.” That is, we see traces of the divine in the holiness of the material world, the sound of the rain, the smell of a rose, the darkness of the night. And he said, “Then,” he says, “I realized my Beloved is the mountains.” See, there is a point that the mountains are God's body, that the mountains are bodying forth the love of God giving itself as the concreteness of all things.

So here Merton begins by bearing witness to the already perfectly holy, to the sacred nature

that ultimately, the God-given godly nature of what is; that. Next, he says in this text, he says, from time to time, he says, we do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game and of that dancing. As grand as this is, paradoxically, we don't have to go very far to see it. Where he says when we turn to see a flock of birds descending; when we see children in a moment they are really children, who we know love in our own hearts; the Japanese poet Bashō hearing the splash of the frog. At such times that turning inside out of all values, the purity of vision that make themselves evident, you get a glimpse of the divinity of the intimate immediacy of our life.

And at such times when it's actually happening, when the quickening is happening, then you realize, just for a moment, like, what a fool I am to worry so; where you realize that things already are unexplainably, infinitely more than okay. See? There's somehow a kind of a boundary-less generosity that's pouring itself out in the intimate immediacy of this very moment.

So, I'd like to take one of these moments as an example, because Merton is inviting us to become students of these moments, because they tend to be very subtle and fleeting, and we tend to walk away. It's like we were running roughshod over what we're looking for. So, if we can slow down enough to catch up with ourselves, to pay close attention to reflect on the way we are in one of these moments.

So, imagine you're driving home from work towards sunset, and you're out on a somewhat deserted stretch of road, wherever, and the sunset is particularly striking; beautiful. So you pull the car off to the side of the road, you turn the car off, and you sit there, and you give yourself over to the beauty of the setting sun giving itself over to you, like that. And it's one of these moments. It's so simple. It's like blessedness, like that. And then you realize it's been a timeless moment of time in sequential time. You realize it's getting dark, and so you start up your car. You stop at the store on the way home to get some groceries. You pull in the driveway. You go into the kitchen. You take out the trash. You get the mail, and you're standing in the kitchen going through the bills and the advertisements, and so on. And standing in your own kitchen, you remember the moment with the setting sun on your way home. And you ask yourself this question, "Why do I spend so many of my waking hours trapped on the outer circumference of the inner richness of the life that I'm living? Why do I let the centrifugal force of the momentum of the day's demands spin me out into shallow places where what I'm looking for, I'll never find it there. Why do I do this? I don't like living this way. I want to take the mystery deeper."

Imagine you've inherited a large, elaborately furnished mansion. Some rich relative died and you have this beautiful mansion. And you go to your inherited, elaborately furnished mansion, and you're just delighted about the thing. The thing is you don't have the keys to get in your mansion. So, you have to live in a little tent behind the garage of your elaborately furnished mansion. And on a weekend, you invite all your friends and relatives over to show off your mansion. And after the little cookout, you casually say, "Would you like to see the place?" And they're peering through the leaded glass windows. "Here's the grand hall, the library, the music room. Let me get a ladder. I'll show you the bedrooms." They say, you know, "It's an amazing place you have here." And he said, "Well, I like it, but I don't have the keys."

I want to take it even deeper. What if all along you've been living in the mansion all your life but through a tragic mental condition you think you're living in a little tent behind the garage? And every week your psychotherapist comes over for your weekly session, and your therapist says, "Look, I wouldn't, honestly, I wouldn't lie to you on this one. You're in the mansion. You've been in it all along." You say, "No. No. I-- As a matter of fact, I don't even think I deserve to even try to get in there, actually." That in God, we live and move and have our being. We're living our life in the vast interiority of God pouring herself out and giving herself away as every breath and heartbeat, as every passing moment of our life. This is confusion. Jesus called it blindness. The Buddha called it ignorance. We don't see the God-given, Godly nature, the boundary-less generosity of every blessed moment of our life.

So, in this way then—see, in this way—we start to see that as I start to have faith in my moments of awakening, I will not break faith with my awakened heart. In my most childlike hour, in the arms of the beloved, reading the child the good night story; in the pause between two lines of a poem, lying awake at night, listening to the rain, I was intimately accessed by a fullness without which my life will be forever incomplete. And having tasted it, I'm incomplete without it, but I, by my own finite powers, cannot find my way to abide in it. This is the graced discontent of the seeker; see, that one was granted something, and I will not break faith with my awakened heart, but that which was granted to me-- And I also know, the intuition is, that in this moment, it isn't as if something more was given to me, but a curtain opened and the infinite love that's always been given to me, it touched me. And so, I then seek to know how can I then learn to accept in humility that actually I tend to get absorbed in my obsessions over what I think is the meaning of it all, and I catch myself imposing of it upon myself, the very dilemma I can't bear? And here I am. Here I am.

And then Merton says that it doesn't matter very much because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things. We're staying in the joy of the cosmic dance, which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it and it is in the midst of us for it beats in our very blood whether we want it to or not. And I think this is the beauty of the teachings of Thomas Merton and the mystics: Am I to put my faith in my ability to abide in that which I know always abides in me and I in it? Or, am I to put my faith in the love that loves me so, and is giving itself to me in my inability to abide in it? See, in my inability to abide in it, it abides in me as precious in my confusion and precious in my wayward ways. See?

And so, the distortions of a truth did not have the power to destroy the truth being distorted. And we live in perpetual distortions, but the truth is pure. It is pure. And there's this love that gives itself to us. And then he says, "[But] the fact remains, we're invited to forget ourselves on purpose, [to] cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance."

And how do I do that? Our meditation practice is where we do that. We come out from behind the curtain, and we risk getting vulnerable. We risk being empty handed. We risk living without answers. We risk learning to lean into the love that loves us so in our confusion. And we learn to sit there like an unlearned child that this love might take us and guide us to itself unexplainably, which is our practice. That

in our practice we forget ourselves on purpose, all our obsessions, our compulsions, they're still there, like the buzz that circles around waiting to have their way with us. But in our intention, we can keep the intentionality of our heart focused on what our heart knows is true and what Merton is bearing witness to when he talks to us this way. And so, this is our first meditation.

And so, with this then, and in this spirit, I'd like you to join me in entering into meditation. And, again, to your own self be true. I'll lead us into this, and then you enter into this as in the givens of who you are, where you are in all of this. And so, what I want to be doing here is I want to invite you to sit straight and to put your palms together as in prayer, and to bow, echoing here in our minds the words of Sōtō Shunryū Suzuki that when we bow, we give ourselves up. If ever we get to a place in life where the only thing we can do is bow, we should do it. And as contemplative men, as contemplative women, Merton has invited us to this place where the only thing we can do is bow in gratitude to this.

Then in bowing to this in silence, sitting straight, I'll say from the Psalms, "Be still and know I am God." And that stillness of the Psalms is the very stillness that Merton's words invite us to. The "at such times," see, "the turning inside out of all values," and we sit in that stillness of a kind of childlike, sincere attentiveness. And so, I'll say from the Psalms, "Be still and know I am God." And I'll invite you silently within yourself to repeat that after me. And I'll keep shortening it one word at a time until I just say the word "be." So, "Be still and know that I am God. Be still and now that I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be." [bell ringing]

Fold your hands and bow. We'll slowly say "The Lord's Prayer" together.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory now and forever. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives-- [Response is "Pray for us."] Saint Francis of Assisi, pray for us. Thomas Merton, pray for us.

[music playing]

Kirsten Oates:

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