



Turning to the Mystics

Bonus: Sink Into the Taproot of
Your Heart

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

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

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

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to this podcast recording of Turning to the Mystics with Jim Finley. I'm joining you in my role as program designer for the CAC, and just letting you know that at the CAC, the Center for Action and Contemplation, we are trying to create some more responsive programming to the terrible and unexpected chaos that we've found ourselves in as a result of the coronavirus.

We're so lucky to have someone like Jim Finley on our faculty who has not only a depth of knowledge and embodied experience in the Christian mystics, but also worked for many years as a psychotherapist. And so, what's happening now really touches on one of Jim's core teachings, the spirituality of healing.

And so, Jim, we're so grateful that you've taken time out of your day to spend with us responding to the virus. And before we get started, I'll just let everybody know that you're at home in your study in California. I'm at home in mine, and Corey, our producer, is also on with us in Albuquerque, New Mexico. So, we've been in the shelter-in experience for at least a week. And, Jim, we're so grateful to have this time with you today.

Jim Finley: Thank you. Yes, thank you, Kirsten. When you called me and said that the staff there at the CAC was talking about how timely it would be to say something about what's going on, to kind of ground these teachings of the mystics in the suffering of the real world. This connection between the mystical traditions and social justice, the corporal works of mercy, that it heightens our response to suffering. And so, it seems so timely and kind of providential and important that we can do this. So, I'm glad we can do it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Thank you, Jim. And when we spoke about the podcast overall, we thought that we will continue with these more-responsive podcasts for a while. We're estimating at least four weeks of recording a new podcast each week in response to what's happening in that moment alongside your evergreen depth of teaching that really stands the test of time in terms of responding to crises like these.

Jim Finley: Yes. And then what we'll do after these three or four, or whatever that is, we'll just pick up where we left off with Merton, and we'll probably move next onto Teresa of Ávila as the next subject, and we'll just continue on with the series. So, this is kind of a hiatus to ground these mystical reflections in the suffering that we're all going through right now, how our grounded-ness in the mystics can help us to be present to this in a spiritually grounded way.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you so much, Jim, and I'll hand this over to you to lead us through today.

Jim Finley: Thank you. Thank you, Kirsten. Yes. What I'm going to do here is I want to follow the same format that we've been following in Turning to the Mystics. That is, I'll share with you a reflection, kind of a poetic, experiential reflection on kind of grounding ourselves in the richness of the mystical lineage of the Christian Tradition, one in spirit with the mystical lineage of all the world's great religions, and then some poets, philosophers, or

those who serve the poor. And then I'll share with you a way to meditate or pray as a way to experientially ground ourselves in the spiritual truth embodied in the reflection that we can then carry out of that daily meditation practice a way to help us be present to this crisis in a more compassionate, grounded, authentic, and helpful way. And, then we'll end with a meditation. We'll sit, I'll ring the bell, and we'll bow, and say the Lord's Prayer. And so, that'll be our format for each of these. So, with that then, I'll begin.

Let's say here is a kind of a devotional practice. We begin by a kind of visualization practice, that we're approaching Jesus with our hearts heavy, with these fears of the pandemic for ourselves, for our family, the disturbing statistics that we're seeing on the media, and something that may go on for a while, get worse, and kind of the breaking down of the societal structures on whom we tend to depend for our security, kind of the uncertainty of it all.

And so, we're approaching Jesus then with our hearts heavy with these concerns. And as we approach Jesus in this kind of waking dream, as we approach Jesus, we see that he's already engaged with people who are asking him a question. And the Pharisees are asking him, "Lord," Rabbi, teacher, you know, "out of all your teachings, what is the teaching that is the greatest teaching? That is, out of all your commandments what it is that succinctly epitomizes everything that you're saying?" And we also sense that while the Pharisees may be there in their attempt to trick him, the disciples that are there, among whom we would consider ourselves, were keenly interested in what he's going to say, because we sense that in the presence of Jesus we're in the presence of God, and in the parables and in the stories that he says, we sense the beauty of his teachings, and they're beautiful because they're true, because he conveys to us the truth of God, God's presence in our life.

And so, we're keenly interested in what is this truth; that is, what is the truth in the light of which all the other truth that he expresses can be understood? That is, what is the truth, and grounded in that truth, everything that he teaches about us and God kind of falls into place. And, therefore, we assume that this really will set the context for our fears about the pandemic, because if we can then see our fears about the pandemic in the context of this truth, we're already in a teaching moment for the healing of our fears. And so, what does Jesus say?

I think, also, when someone like Jesus is asked a question like this, we're especially attentive. How would the teacher distill out the essence, this ribbon through everything that the teacher says? And Jesus does not say the first truth, the most important commandment, is to believe that God exists. See, we might say that we believe that God exists. We can say that God exists.

To move in a little bit closer. He doesn't even say that the greatest commandment is to believe in God, like, to entrust ourselves to God. You know, like in Alcoholics Anonymous where the recovering alcoholic admits that they're powerless over alcohol, we would say we're powerless over our fear. And then they would say that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity, which is their Higher Power, which is God. But this will happen only if we hand ourselves over to the care of God can we be delivered from this. So, just as the recovering alcoholic says, "Lord, I don't know who you are, but I do know who you are, you're the one who saved my life. And I don't know who I am, but I do know, because I'm

the one you saved.” We’re drawing into this very intimate kind of faith-groundedness in this relationship in which we’re set free and liberated.

But Jesus just doesn’t say that. He moves in closer to entrust ourselves to God. He said the greatest commandment is to love God—this is Matthew 22:34-40, I think—he said, “The greatest commandment is to love God,” and not just to love God, but to love God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second commandment is like to it, is to “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

So, here then, I would suggest under the auspices of these words, this great teaching, we can then ground ourselves in an inner clarity that will give a context to the liberation from our fears, of where we are, our very understandable fears about the pandemic; first, for ourselves, for our family, for our loved ones, for society, for the world.

And so, how do we get at this then? We say that Jesus here is now speaking theologically as the Christ. Another way of looking at it, we would say, Jesus is a Jewish mystic, and he speaks to us as truth. That in his presence, we sense that we’re in the presence of God, and that in his words, are the intonations of God’s voice in our heart. And so, how are we to listen in like this? And I think here first, when we were looking at this, when we were reflecting on Merton, is we’re looking at this now in terms of the ancient wisdom of contemplative Christianity, the timeless wisdom of the contemplative worldview, this way of understanding ourselves, others, and all things in the light of creation.

So, here’s how we might say it poetically—all the mystics are kind of like echoing this vision, this understanding of creation—is that ultimately speaking just one thing that’s happening, that the infinite presence of God is presence-ing itself, or is pouring itself out, or giving itself away whole and complete in and as the gift and the miracle of our very presence, the presence of others, the presence of all things in our nothingness without God? That’s the mystery. Ultimately speaking, that’s what’s happening. And since love is the overflowing fullness of presence, we can say, ultimately speaking, just one thing is happening—the infinite love of God is pouring itself out, emptying itself, and giving itself away in and as the intimate immediacy of our very presence, the presence of others, the presence of all things.

So, love then, this infinite love of God, is our origin, the infinite love of God is our sustaining ground. If at the count of three, God would cease loving us into the present moment, at the count of three, we’d vanish because we’re nothing, we’re absolutely nothing apart from the infinite love of God that is the very reality of our life. And the love of God is our origin, this infinite love as our ground is our destiny, is our eternal destiny.

And so, next we can say then, there are certain moments, “This is our faith,” like an obscure certainty in our heart, “like a primitive inner assurance,” Gabriel Marcel says, this is our faith, that there are certain moments when we realize this, maybe with great intensity or maybe ever so subtle, subtle, subtle. So, in the midst of nature, like lying awake at night listening to the rain, or giving ourselves over to the smell of a

blood red rose, or in the arms of the beloved, or reading a child a good night story, or a quiet hour alone at day's end when the pause between two lines of a poem, or in a prayer, or in an act of being there for someone who's suffering, "How can I be helpful?"

There are certain moments our heart is quickened by the intimate realization of what faith proclaims. And in these quickenings, these awakenings, we taste for ourselves, like, "What a fool I am to worry so, the way I sometimes do," that nothing is missing in all directions. We serendipitously have found our way into this abiding love of God that is life as reality itself. But then we also see how these moments fade. They tend to be very fleeting. They fade away from us, and then there's another one, and there's another one. And soon, we can start to become aware of our tendency not to be aware of this infinite love that ultimately alone is real. And so, this is what Jesus meant, "You have eyes to see and you do not see." And so, our prayer becomes "Lord, that I might see." There are fleeting moments I see this. I see the truth that you and your love for me are giving yourself to me as the very miracle of me and of others and all things. I am subsisting in you like light subsists in flame. There's a certain moment I sense it, but I also see how I tend not to see it. I tend not to see it.

And so, here it seems then, this is kind of the poetic image we're kind of moving toward here, that we can't get the ocean into a thimble, but we can drop the thimble into the ocean, and we are that thimble. At a certain moment, we realize this that in God, we live, and move, and have our being, and in these moments of realizations, we see that fear has no foundations.

And then we see how that slips away from us. So, there's that in us that sees this, these moments, "I will not break faith with my awakened heart," and then there's that in me that doesn't see it yet, which is the me that still gets reactive, still gets overwhelmed, still gets flooded by fear such as with the pandemic. We're just human beings. We are just human beings. And this is the way of starting to move in closer, I think, to how to

Jim Finley: understand ourselves in the presence of Christ, in the presence of God, and what this deep healing consists in, like this.

And there's another mystery in this, too, for us to consider. And the mystery is this, this is really the mystery of the cross, too, that in these moments of realization and we look out at the world, we begin to understand God as the presence that protects us from nothing even as God unexplainably sustains us in all things, that this presence of God, it doesn't protect us from the death, from the illness, from the fear of the loss of the beloved, from the suffering of this world. We just look out at the world, and we see all the suffering. It's like the view from the cross. It's like the view from the cross. We are not protected. God depends on us to be there for and with each other, that wherever there is suffering, we lean in close to touch the hurting place with love, to touch the hurting place with love, in ourselves and others, but grounded in a peace that's not dependent on the outcome of our efforts, because we're grounded in the peace of God, it isn't dependent on anything for it is rather the peace upon which everything depends.

So, here then it seems to me as a kind of the poetic imagery that allows us to develop a certain sensitivity or a certain sensibility to understanding that the intimate nature of this situation in which we find ourselves together on this earth as human beings, that I am sustained, I am being sustained in this moment, and each passing moment of my life, by this love that's giving itself to me as my very life, I am sustained, and the unfolding, unforeseeability of life circumstances, and I ever shall be sustained on, up, to the moment of my death and beyond. The moment that is approaching, even as I speak, it's approaching for you even as you listen to me. There's a deathless beauty of ourselves that shines bright and invincible in the fleetingness of our life in this world.

And we see, too, as we look out, that we see our neighbors, those around us, are in the same boat. You know, we're all in this together. The deathless beauty of the beloved, Gabriel Marcel says, "We know we have learned to love someone when we've seen in them that which is too beautiful to die." And we know we've learned our self when we see that in us that is too beautiful to die. But this deathless beauty of our self is glimpsed fleetingly, like this, I think it's so easily overtaken by the part that doesn't see it yet. It's still reactive, still gets overwhelmed.

So, it isn't just that we're all bound together in this invincible love that sustains us unexplainably, but we're bound together in the communal fragility of ourselves in the invincible love that sustains us so inexplicably, so mysteriously, like this. So, this then is the image that I offer, this spiritual worldview. We don't live in a society that cultivates the sensitivity which is at the heart of the gospel. And each world religion has its own language for this, but this is the lifeblood of religious consciousness; this, what I'm speaking here now, sharing with you, like this. And so, this is our reflection.

And so, I'd like to suggest then a meditation for you. See, here's the thing, I think we see that unless we're faithful to a daily rendezvous with God, to kind of sit quietly in a place apart, to get re-grounded in the presence of God, and the truth, and the beauty of having the taproot of our heart anchored in this, that the intensity and density of the day-by-day flooding of the images of the pandemic—and who knows what else we're going through in our own life—this is very, very personal because some of us are more robust than others, and some of us are carrying internalized traumas and abandonments. So, this present traumatizing, things that the society further activates this, so we need to be very vigilant and watch over ourselves, and to help each other, and be there for each other.

So, in this fidelity, we can sit and reflect on this would be the meditation. But here's a specific meditation that helps me, it has helped me in the past with this. You know, it says in the gospels that Jesus would spend whole nights in prayer. So, in this kind of waking dream, imagine that you're alone in the garden, in a remote place where Jesus is there praying through the night, and you're there and your heart is heavy with the fears of the pandemic, and you're searching for Jesus, trusting that in the oneness with Jesus, that you might be released from this; see, how to be free of the tyranny of fear in the midst of your fear, free from the tyranny of death in the midst of death, how in the presence of Jesus we might experience this experiential salvation.

You also know in the waking dream that Jesus knows you're there, there looking for him. And you walk along, it's a full moon, and there you see Jesus at the edge of a clearing,

and you intuit in the dream that he's waiting for you. And you walk over, and you kneel down on the ground at his feet, and you can feel his hand on your shoulder, and you lean in real close, and you whisper in his ear your fear. And you sense that he's listening, like infinitely listening, understanding infinitely more than you do the texture of your fear and understanding infinitely more than you do the love that is sustaining you in it. And he just listens.

And when you've spent yourself, like pouring out your fear, you pull back, and he leans in real, real close, and he whispers in your ear that which releases you from the tyranny of fear. So, the question is, "Tell me, what does he say? That's the meditation, like, "Speak, Lord, your servant listens."

There's another way of looking at this. Teresa of Ávila talks about inner locutions, inner words of God, and she says a locution is a word of God that creates what it says. So, when Jesus says in the Gospel, "Do not be afraid," like, "Fear not," Jesus leans in real close, and you hear the words of Jesus resonating in your heart, "Do not be afraid." And in Jesus' words not to be afraid, you're liberated from the tyranny of fear in the midst of fear. It doesn't mean that you're still not afraid, because you're just a human being. You have to go back out and turn on the TV and be caught up in whatever it is you're going through with all this. But it does mean the taproot of your heart is experientially grounded in this love that utterly transcends the darkness of this world and sustains you in this darkness of this world.

And so, this is this experiential salvation, and then to love your neighbor as yourself, because everyone you see is a variation of yourself, everyone that's walking around. So, how can you be a healing presence in a traumatized world? That is, how can you in your own groundedness, be there for and with others, not just how can I be helpful in the practical realities, your family, your children—whatever this is, you're in your situation, I'm in mine—but how can you become someone in whose presence that in the sharing of their fears, they might get a taste of this depth dimension of this loving presence that's sustaining them in the fear so that we then kind of pass on these healing energies throughout the world, within ourselves.

So, in the light of that, then, I invite you to join me then in the meditation. I had to print out the words to the Lord's Prayer, because I forget the words to the Lord's Prayer. And so, here we're going to just sit just for a few moments. But, of course, on your own day by day, as you sit with this, if you're so inclined to listen to this, you can sit as your heart inclines you to sit and the situation allows. So, in this spirit then I invite you to sit straight, and bow, and, too, interiorly whispered, repeat after me:

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

[three bell tones]

So, we'll sit then for a few moments in silent prayer, meditation, and end with the Lord's Prayer.

[bell tone] Then bow and 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. And 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, pray for us. St. Francis of Assisi, pray for us. St. Clare, pray for us. Blessings. Thank you. Until next time.

Now, I'd like to move from this meditation to a dialogue with Kirsten Oates here, kind of listening for herself and then listening on your behalf for questions that might come up, or questions that might arise and the implications, the far-reaching implications, of seeing life in this way, the situation in this way, as it applies to each one of us, so we can engage in this dialogue now. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Thanks, Jim. I was really struck by the way you said that when Jesus said "Fear not," he wasn't suggesting that we be released from our fear, our human fear, but that we are released from the tyranny of fear in the midst of fear.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Can you explain that a little bit? How did that feel to me?

Jim Finley: Yes. Yes. I want to use it in specifically Christian terms first and apply it to us. Let's say Jesus is this kind of incarnate presence of God as the human experience itself. In the Garden of Gethsemane, it says Jesus "sweat blood," in a very severe trauma, because he saw crucifixions, you know, they were an extremely cruel kind of violent death. And so, see, "If it possible, let this cup pass from me." So, in sweating blood, he was in a severely traumatized state. And which means then, he's one with us in our traumatized state.

There was a Franciscan priest, William McNamara, who lived as a hermit for a while, he gave a talk once to his community. He's passed away now. I think he's passed away. And he said, you know, if you saw off a tree, you see the rings of the tree there, but it's important to know that the rings run the entire length of the tree, you know. So, the life of Christ is just the rings, like God's oneness with us in suffering runs up the entire thing. We fill up what is lacking in the suffering of Christ. And then when he hung on the cross, not only was he in this executed state, but then say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" See, he lost faith. In other words, he prayed to the God he could no longer find. So, in a sense, out of love for us, he becomes identified with us as precious in our trauma.

And so, we're not exempt from trauma. When we get overwhelmed and afraid because we've lost someone, or we look out at the world, we're afraid, because very, very scary things happen to us. And so much so, we can momentarily lose experiential access to that love we know is there, and that helps us have empathy. If we have the gift of faith to reground us in the love we know is there, we can have empathy with those who aren't able to experientially ground themselves in it. And that's how we're woven. We all belong to each other, that our suffering doesn't belong to us. Our suffering, we're all woven into each other, like this, and God's love is woven into our trauma. And I would put it that way.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, do you think at a time like this it feels like we're at extremes, like there's a communal fear, that we're triggering each other with our own personal fears so the sense of fear seems to be at an extreme, does that provide more of an opening for the sense of that love or that infinite presence?

Jim Finley: It does. You know, in terms of the big arc of history, in scriptural terms, this would be like the experience of the fall of Jerusalem, when Jerusalem fell, or in times of St. Augustine, the fall of the Roman Empire, or where the black plague swept through. We all kind of rely on the kind of constancy of the structures of society, you know, the norms and the patterns, and we tend to rely on those almost in an unquestioned sense. So, suddenly, when it breaks open—

There's a little Zen story about, you know, these Zen masters, the tradition, they hold this little fan, the tradition is it's made of rhinoceros horn. And so, there is a little kōan where the Zen master says to the student, "Get my rhinoceros horn fan." And he says,

Jim Finley: "Master, the fan is broken." He said, "Well then get me the rhinoceros," see? And Thomas Merton, when he commented on that, also reflecting on it in the Asian Journal and the talk he had with the Dalai Lama. See, the structures are broken. We have faith in the structures. We also have faith in our ego-self that's formed in those structures. So, when it starts to break open, we start to break open.

That's what trauma is, that we can tolerate anything as long as the center holds to face it, but it's very scary when the center starts to go. And so, we're in kind of a collective traumatization. So, what we're looking for is how to ground ourselves in a love that transcends it. Not to flee from it, but to give us the courage and the strength to be authentically present, and as one more scared person among a lot of scared people, that is, someone we hope and trust, that the tyranny of our fear is healed by the love that sustains us in our fear. And we're kind of like that with ourselves. We're like that with each other. That's the sense of it. I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that really resonates with me when you were saying that unconsciously we're so reliant on societal structures and then you took it a step deeper that our ego is kind of formed in relationship to the sense of the safety in those structures. So, it's a very challenging time.

Jim Finley: It is. When I work with people in therapy with trauma, you're really working with somebody who has been in the presence of an overwhelming event, and they can't get their balance. They can't get their balance. And so, this is why this is so universally personal, you know, this touches you because it activates our own. And this is why we need to be very present to it and very respectful of it. So, how can we ground ourselves in this thought through prayer? And then, also, where can we reach out to just one other person, just one other person, who we know we're not alone in this.

Maybe that's the value of what we're sharing right now with people if through this, they can be touched by knowing that they're not alone in it. This is how we then collectively move on together as we find our way through this, getting grounded in an inner peace that is not dependent on the outcome of the effort, because we are unexplainably sustained regardless of the outcome by human terms as this love that takes us to itself unexplainably. But we do our best to protect ourselves and others as best we can. I think that's our task. That's our challenging task.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And then this faith can be built on partly knowing that throughout history, this is how Christianity has grown and sustained itself. There have been many instances of this happening where people's faith has sustained them through very challenging things.

Jim Finley: It's very true, not just the crisis of society to the community, but also the crisis of faith itself, and leaders in the church, and brokenness. I always share with people that, you know, at The Last

Supper there was a traitor at the table. Things weren't off to a good start, so, just brokenness everywhere, like fragmented. But the thing is, what is the invincible light that tenderly shines out through the broken places, and how can we regroup ourselves in it to touch the broken places with love that they might dissolve in love? That's the tonal quality, I think, of what we're saying here.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. When you talk about that there's a part of us that has glimpses of this and has a real knowing about that light that shines through, but then the part of us that still doesn't, and when you say our hope and our faith tells us not to flee from the tragedy but to try and stay present to it and find our way to that depth, I've noticed in myself and in friends and family, this kind of primal fear response that arises. And so, I think psychotherapists—the fight, flight, or freeze—this kind of response, I just wondered if you could speak to that and how we might become more self-aware and help ourselves in those moments.

Jim Finley: Yeah, really. I want to say something, too, of just the vulnerability of all this, and this is not to divert from it, is that this is especially poignant for me because of my own history of trauma and sitting with traumatized people for thirty years in therapy, and knowing that my dearly beloved wife just died a week ago, right here in this house, kind of broken, broken, broken, broken. My oldest daughter who is here with me is a hospice nurse in a hospital, and one of the very first cases here in this county was in a hospital where she works. So, she must go in tomorrow to admit people into hospice in the hospital. And so, she's to take her notes and go out and write her notes in the car so she's not unnecessarily exposed. So, she's concerned about herself, then she goes home to her children. So, we all have our story, do you know what I mean? This is universally personal for each one of us. And I think that's the context for it.

So, your question was what? You were asking--

Kirsten Oates: I was just asking then in terms of your experience in psychotherapy, help us with the fight, flight, or fright that arises.

Jim Finley: Right. I'll put it in a therapeutic stance and what's the spiritual ground of it.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: Let's say that the fight-or-flight response is a deep survival strategy that's somatically grounded in all of us to fight or flight, it's a survival strategy, fight or flight, and properly understood it preserves life. For the flight is to do what we can to avoid the destructive event and to help others avoid it. To fight means to set a boundary against it, like not to passively get into it, but the fact that we set the boundary in it. So, we might say all those right now that are working in the medical field and with the sick, they're fighting in this sense of fighting, of setting a boundary to work through all this, and we're one with them in spirit. There's all of that. And that's important, I think, I mean that grace empowers us to set boundaries and to be protective and be nurturing, all of that.

But what we're saying is this: But what about all those for whom we see on the news every day, they count the numbers of those that went under in this illness? And then we say we can't rule out that one of our loved ones might be one of those who might die. We can't rule out that you and I, and some of those listening right now might be among those who die,

what then? So, if my base of operation is nothing deeper than the self that things happen to, so if I fight or flight, what if I-- So, how can I, as a human being, sink the taproot of my heart in a presence that transcends my ordinary humanity, and at the same time utterly permeates it through, and through, and through, and through, and empowers me to be present to do the best I can to be a nurturing person, a protective person, a healing person, in a peace that isn't dependent on how that might turn out specifically for me or my loved ones? I think that's the courageous spirit here, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. Well, I certainly felt that myself when I was sitting in the background here in your meditation and when you invited us to whisper in Jesus's ear our greatest fear, and then you said, "What does he say to you?"

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So, there's something even in not knowing what I'd say to him and what he'd say back to me, but just in that opportunity, I could even feel some comfort.

Jim Finley: Yes. I love the saying of Thomas Merton, he says, "In the spiritual order, to understand means to understand that you're understood." And by the way, I think there's something else here for all of us when we look at it this way. There is the fear of the pandemic but based on what we're going through at the time, that might not be our deepest fear. See, the fear of the pandemic may be activating or energizing our deepest fear, which might be something much closer to home, and that's what we tell Jesus.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: You know, that's what we take. We go as we are in our fears, because we're loved as we are and sustained as we are in our fears. That's the intimacy of it.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you. Just to share with people listening, I've just noticed personally, my response is freeze. You know, like I really freeze up and want to get small, and my body contracts, but being with you and listening to that meditation, I could feel, you know, that opening up to something bigger, something deeper. So, I really appreciate what you're offering there.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And by the way, that's what makes us so incarnate. All of us have little survival strategies inside, that we know if we're faithful to them, we get a little more grounded, present. Sometimes when we get very afraid, we're neglectful of our, you know, we panic. So, it might be a real, real, long hot shower, a walk around the block, a phone call, making muffins, having a sip of tea, sitting there looking out of the porch. Whatever that is—

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: --whatever these rituals of nurturance are, these simple human rituals are, that we know that we're not neglectful of that. And then in that rested state, we sink our taproot into this thing and move forward as best we can.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, that's very helpful. That's very helpful, Jim. So, like stay with the practical things that help relax your system and allow you to practice more fully.

Jim Finley: That's right. I think another sensitive thing about this is that if we don't get close enough to the hurting place to touch it, we can't heal it. But if we get too close too soon, the energy in it overwhelms us. And I think that's why sometimes we pretend that we care less than we do because if we opened our heart to care, we feel we'd be swept away. So, we're learning the art form of modulating our tolerance, to back off, to get a deep breath, to get re-grounded, not to run in the other direction, but to continue to come back again, to touch the hurting place in ourselves and the people that we love. I think that's the artistry of compassion, really, I think, the mercy, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). One other thing I just wanted to touch on from the meditation today that you talked about places where we might feel the depth of that taproot. And you talked about in the midst of nature, that we might have tasted the abiding love of God, or in a moment, but we can't grip onto it. This morning, I'm fortunate enough to live by the ocean, and my husband and I took our dogs to the beach, and I was just so struck by the beauty of the waves rising and crashing and the sound, and I just had this sense as it crashed just the exploding beauty and kind of sense of something beautiful and deep and wonderful, but then it's gone. The wave's gone. And maybe that's kind of resonant with what you were expressing.

Jim Finley: It is. I love this saying, you know, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Buddhist teacher in Boulder, I love that saying he has. He says, "our raw and beautiful heart." And it's very true. It's very true that the trauma can overwhelm us, and it can. But what's also true, there's like an unexpected ability to see the eloquence of something in the midst of pain. You know, it's a very enigmatic experience in the very midst of it, it actually opens us up to see it.

I was talking to my youngest daughter. She's in Cleveland, Ohio right now, and I used to live there. And so, she was walking in the woods, and she turned and showed the camera walking through the woods. And I can remember when I lived in Ohio, the woods. And when I was in the monastery, I used to take long walks in the woods, and there was something like the ocean, or the mountains, or the woods, or you know, a single flower, or a slant of light across the floor. I love that saying by Carl Jung, he says, "How can we claim the years have taught us anything if we haven't learned to sit and listen to the secret that whispers in the brooks?" And so, the whole world bodies forth this love, and it's such simple moments as that, you know, the waves crashing on the beach, it's like a memento in our heart. It puts us back in touch again with what's always there. Yeah. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. Do you feel that that saying is like the veil is thin? Does it feel like a time like that for you, Jim?

Jim Finley: It does, you know, that Celtic thing about thin places. I think what we're saying here is every place is a thin place. What it is, is that in our fear, the world is opaque to this love, but love casts out fear. So, whether it be love of a person, whatever the modality is, the horizon of this world becomes translucent to the love. And so, the thickness is really in our own heart, you know, the thickness is the layered, internalized traumas. I have my struggles, you have yours. But then we realize that everything is diaphanous, I mean, everything is thin, we can see it meekly shining through. I think that's what meditation practice is.

I think meditation practice is what the Buddha talks about neither perceiving nor not

perceiving. It's like a very subtle state. Is it possible to be vulnerable and safe at the same time, and in kind of a trusting stance of being sustained in the miracle of a single breath, see? And so, I think we must get acclimated to staying in that space long enough so it can have its way with us.

Another way I put it is that that which is essential never imposes itself, that which is unessential is constantly imposing itself, but by a higher order of wisdom of the awakened heart, we can give ourselves over to that which is essential in the midst of that which is unessential and be a more grounded person in the midst of our situation. That's the path we're all on, I guess. Yeah, trying to.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. Some closing words just to recognize the encouragement here to continue with the practice, but in the silence, you've said before, just take whatever time you need. Maybe you can only do a minute right now, or maybe you need an hour, but be gentle with yourself.

Jim Finley: That's right. And I would say this, too, to the people who would come to my silent retreats over the years, I'm speaking here out of kind of a mystical Catholicism, out of my own tradition. I've also been profoundly influenced by the Dharma. And so, I think what we need to do is ask what is our venue of transformation? So, for us it might be art, or poetry, or silence, or being vulnerable in the presence of that person in whose presence we're taken to the deeper place. What is that act that when we give ourselves over to it with our whole heart, we're taken to the deeper place? We may not even identify with any religious tradition at all, but there is that taproot, that grounding place. And so, each of us needs to find our own place that grants entrance into the deeper place and be faithful to that. And then respect kind of the beauty of the plurality of these modalities of awakening so that each of us can help and support each other in our own space. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Thank you, Jim. We'd also like to invite questions in these new podcasts. We're trying to be more responsive, so to be able to answer questions that arise, we just ask people to be very succinct in their question or their comments so that we can turn them around in a week or two. So, please, send Jim some questions but as succinct as they can be, just a couple of sentences and then we can—

Jim Finley: And they know how to do that, the format to send it?

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So, that's in the show notes and mentioned at the very end of the podcast, so, thanks, Jim. Before we go today, I just do want to acknowledge, Jim, the passing of your beloved wife, Maureen, and that's only happened less than a week ago.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: And so, I wanted to thank you for being with us as a community even in the midst of your own grief. And I wanted to, on behalf of the community, let you know how sorry we are that you've lost Maureen, and that we stand in solidarity with your grief.

Jim Finley: [music plays] Thank you for that, very much. I appreciate that so much, really, thank you.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. We love you, Jim Finley, and we're so glad you're here to help us at this time.

Jim Finley: Well, it helps me to help you, you know what I mean? So, I'm grateful for it. Seriously. Good. Okay, great.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So, if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org, or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All this information can be found in the show notes. 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.