



Turning to the Mystics

Introducing James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kristin Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to The Mystics. [bell]

Kirsten Oates: Well, I'm here with James Finley sitting in his cozy study with Corey from the Center for Action and Contemplation and myself here to launch this podcast series with Jim. And we're starting with a little introductory chat. It's good to be with you, Jim.

Jim Finley: Thank you. I'm glad we can do this. I'm grateful for it.

Kirsten Oates: And we should let you know up front that this is real life, for you at home, that there's going to be some construction downstairs, and some gardening outside.

Jim Finley: And my wife might stick her head in the door and say, "Hi," like real life.

Kirsten Oates: Right. We're excited to be here and get started today.

Jim Finley: Good.

Kirsten Oates: The podcast is about helping us wake up to what is already true and what is always happening that gives our life meaning and direction. Our guide will be James Finley and he will be leading us in a regular practice of meditation on the Christian mystics. How'd that sound, Jim?

Jim Finley: Nice.

Kirsten Oates: I sounded wise because I stole your wording there as a direct quote.

Jim Finley: [laughter]

Kirsten Oates: Before we get started with the practice sessions where you'll be leading people in a meditation practice, we thought it would be good to introduce you and help people get to know you a little bit. So, that's what this time is about. We have a number of topics to cover, but let's get started with how you came to be in this Christian mystical tradition. What was your starting point?

Jim Finley: I was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1943, and I was the oldest of six children. My father was a violent alcoholic. My mother was a devout Catholic. And I think through her, my faith became a kind of life-saving thing that sustained me. And when I was in the ninth grade, this Catholic high school that I was attending as a freshman, an instructor in the religion class talked about monasteries. I had never heard of monasteries before. And I saw them really as places where people go to experience God's presence. And in their

Jim Finley: fidelity to surrendering to the presence of God, of believing that, that fidelity radiates out and touches the whole world in ways that we don't understand, that sense of the mystical body in prayer. And he mentioned Thomas Merton, and I'd never heard of Thomas Merton before. So, I went to the school library, and they had one book by Merton there, a journal that he wrote in the monastery called *The Sign of Jonas*. And when I read that, it just had

a profound effect on me. He just said very beautiful things about God's presence and the nearness of God, and so on.

And so, for the four years of high school, the violence continued. I kept reading Thomas Merton, and I felt called to go to the monastery. And my master plan was that I would enter the monastery and sit at his feet and have him guide me into this experience. And so, when I graduated from high school in 1961, I did that. I left my home in Akron and went down to the monastery. It's the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky, which is a Trappist monastery, a cloistered Trappist monastery. And I entered and lived there as a member of the community for nearly six years.

So, I would say during that time, I was, I guess, immersed in contemplative Christianity. And for three of those years, Thomas Merton, in his role as novice master, was my spiritual director. So, I had the good fortune of sitting with him, and I really saw in him that he embodied the mystical lineage, the saints and mystics down through the ages, back to the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers, and Jesus, spending whole nights in prayer. He was like the living embodiment of that tradition. Which then later on I recognized in Richard Rohr. And that's how Richard Rohr and I became kind of in resonance with each other and me being here right now.

And so, one of the things that Merton led me in was a study of the Christian mystics. So. It was St. John of the Cross, and Teresa of Ávila, and Meister Eckhart, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and "The Little Flower," St. Therese, and those classic texts. So, he taught me how to experience the beauty that was radiating up from the words of these mystic teachers. So, then when I left the monastery, and returned to my home in Akron, I got married, I started teaching high school religion in the Catholic schools of the Cleveland Diocese. I still felt very much called to continue living this contemplative way of life.

So, I had a regular meditation practice, and I kept reading these mystics. And then I wrote a book called *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, which is on Thomas Merton's insights into ultimate identity beyond the ego, the self hidden with Christ in God before the origins of the universe. And when that book came out, I started getting invitations to lead retreats around the country. And it was on those retreats around the country, on these silent meditation weekend retreats, that Richard Rohr and I ran into each other on the road, and on the circuit. We met and talked. We met and talked, and it's been going on ever since.

So, then when they started the Living School for the Center of Action and Contemplation and invited me to be one of the core teachers with Cynthia Bourgeault, it was a real providential godsend for me. So, these podcasts are part of that, kind of, so here we are. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. Your life started with a lot of trauma, and it's an amazing, kind of happy ending, so to speak, that you arrived in the monastery with Thomas Merton. What do you think about that when you look back?

Jim Finley: Here's how I see it—and just to touch base on it lightly—for me, how it started is that one of my earliest memories is—I don't know how old I was, maybe four—I was lying in bed at night, and I was listening to my father beat my mother outside the door, and I remember

feeling very sad because he hit me earlier that day. And I knew if he wanted to, he would hit me again tomorrow he would, knowing it was that kind of thing.

And so, I took my mother's advice, you know, and I prayed to God for strength. And my experience was that God heard my prayer, and in a moment I don't remember, came to me in the middle of the night and took me to a secret place in God my father didn't know about. So, the next morning when I got up, the beatings continued. But for me, it was much better, because my father was really hitting that effigy of me out there that people can see. He didn't know the real me was hidden in this secret place in God.

Later, when I became a clinical psychologist, I would say I disassociated, and I borrowed my mother's religiosity to provide a framework for that. But I also think that once I sorted that out, the fact that I was disassociating doesn't at all mean that God did not come in the middle of the night and take me to a secret place, because God hears the cries of the poor. So, I saw this strange mixture where trauma and transcendence touch each other, see? And later, when I got into the mystics, like *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and Buddhist teaching, too, the "great death." Also, the very teachings of Jesus about the cross, about life out of death, and the deathless nature of love. And that's how it started for me.

And so, I took that with me to the monastery, and it just kept gestating inside of me. And then when I started going through my own therapy and working with people in therapy, it got more and more important for me to see that connection. So, what we're doing here in this podcast, the emphasis here, we'll always be including that, because that's the idea when people listen to this, it touches people, and it touches them in their heart. You know, it touches them in the ground of their body, and it touches these very deep things that we all feel inside. So, I want to keep it real at that level, but I also want to keep it firmly in the inner light of this deep sense of solace and consolation that the mystics offer for this deep, like, infinite healing. It is really the essence of the mystical experience. So, that's my sense.

Kirsten Oates: You described Gethsemane as a Trappist, cloistered monastery. Can you tell us what that means?

Jim Finley: Yes. You know, in the early Church, there was a movement within the Church of the Desert Fathers and the Desert Mothers. And these were men and women who went out into the desert to undergo an interior martyrdom, which is a way of dying to the last trace of anything less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God as the sole basis for their security and identity. And, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, which is a book by Merton that you were just looking at, they're like those Zen sayings, you know, it's so pure and clear. like this. And those sayings—and it was in the Eastern church, the

Jim Finley: Greek-speaking Church, through Egypt and Palestine—so, those sayings were brought to the West. And St. Benedict, in the fifth century, read them, because there were also wandering hermits in the Western Church, in the Latin-speaking Church, this mystical sense of Christ consciousness.

And so, Benedict then brings that into the Western Church, too, and he was living as a hermit, seeking this radical-- And so, he wrote the Rule of St. Benedict. And in the Rule of St. Benedict, the Benedictine Order followed by Benedict. So, what you have in the Church are the monastic Order of Benedictines. They really evolved in their own way as deeply contemplative, liturgical, and so on. They also wanted to found schools and different kinds of ministry. While a reform of the Benedictines in the eleventh century by St. Bernard, were cloistered. And in the Catholic Church, there were several of these cloistered orders.

So, among women, there's The Poor Clares, the Franciscan Poor Clare nuns. There's the Carmelites, Teresa of Ávila. There's a Cistercian Order followed by St. Bernard, which is Thomas Merton's order, the one I entered. There is the Camaldolese Monk Hermits by St. Romuald. And there's the Carthusian hermits. And the striking thing about these orders is there's no ministry. They don't teach, they don't serve the poor, they don't help in parishes, they never leave, and no one comes in, see? They're cloistered.

So, it's the anonymity of God in the world bearing witness to the ultimacy of God as the destiny of humanity, and then praying for the world in that cloistered silence as a call from God. And what's stunning about monastic life, I think, is its unrelenting ordinariness. There are no newspapers. There's no television. There's no radio. When I was there, there was no recreation period. You used sign language to talk, so I didn't speak for almost six years. And it's like being in solitude with God in community, like this, undergoing this mystical transformation in God in ways of ministering to the world. And it was that monastic life and those six years of silence, I think, is what really contributed to how deeply all this sank into me. It really had a very deep effect on me.

What's interesting, too, is those monasteries are very, very similar to Buddhist monasteries. If you go to a Buddhist monastery, the Dalai Lama—in India, the ashrams of India; Sufi gatherings of mystical Islam; the kabbalistic gatherings in mystical Judaism—there were these communities of, like, mystical transformation in the world through this deep inner process.

So, most of these people who come to the fullness of this, which are the mystics, we'll talk about this later, most of them are anonymous. It doesn't draw attention to itself, but some of them are called to be mystic teachers, see, because they know how confusing it can be to start to feel the stirrings of this inside of you. Thomas Merton once said there's many people who are called to these mystical dimensions of life, but there's no one to give witness to them, to explain what's happening to them. And so, it was in that setting then, this kind of monastic silence, like, we got up at 2:30 in the morning to chant the psalms. We went to bed at 7:30 at night. And, it was just *ora et labora*, prayer and work, in silence, and it did a number on me. It just really affected me. It changed my life, really. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Do you see Thomas Merton as one of those mystics who was called to be a teacher and help with the inner life?

Jim Finley: Oh, very much so. I remember once when I went to see him for direction, we were talking about this, you know, this kind of deep sense of God. And he said, "Once in a awhile, you'll find somebody with whom you can talk about this," he said, "but they're hard to find." And he said, "A lot of people don't even know about it. Without people who know about it, it will give you reasons that you can put it off until later," he said, "but what this place is all about really is fidelity to this." One Zen master was once asked, "What is the greatest suffering?" And the Zen master said, "To wear monks' robes, without resolving the great matter." See, so you're dressed up in monks' robes, and you've not resolved this great death, like this realization, like this.

So, when he wrote his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it went on the New York Times' best sellers list. He went on to write many books. And he really was, I think, one of the most significant and most influential spiritual writers of our age who lived in the Christian Tradition. It would parallel Thich Nhat Hahn in Buddhism, I think, that kind of thing. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Tell us about when you arrived at Gethsemane. How does it work? Did you knock on the door? Is there--

Jim Finley: What you do is, St. Benedict says in his Rule, that when someone comes to the monastery, don't let him in, but make him wait out at the gate for three days. And so, you go to the guest house first, and I lived at the guest house, and I was interviewed by the novice master, by the vocation director that I had been writing to for four years in high school, Father John of the Cross. He was a great guy. And then I met the abbot. I met Father John Bamberger who was a psychiatrist who interviewed you for mental health. Because in a way, it's a very simple life, but there's no escape from yourself, I mean. So, there has to be kind of a psychological constitution or a kind of resiliency. Thomas Merton once said, he said, "The thing about this life we're living is that" he said, "it's as serious as death, and if you don't have a sense of humor, you won't make it." So, they really look for a kind of grounded, humble, ordinary, real kind of grounded-ness.

So, I was interviewed by those three people. And, also, I'll never forget, I went there and at least when I was there, the guests were up in the balcony, and you look down into the monks in the choir in the cloistered choir part, chanting the psalms. And I heard them chanting vespers in Latin, you know, Gregorian chant. And, you don't even have to know Latin to be moved by, you know, the rhythm of that communal voice chanting the psalms like that. It's very archetypal and profound, really. And so, I entered. And they shaved my hair off, and I wore a monastic habit, and I got the tooth [00:17:35]. You just start.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. So, you're getting up at two-thirty in the morning?

Jim Finley: Two-thirty in the morning. They chant the canonical hours to the Divine Office. And so, the chanting of the Office is then mingled with manual labor, and study and prayer, and

Jim Finley: devoted to this contemplative way of life. And so, that's what it was. And then Sundays were just like every other day in the monastery, except there was no manual labor. And so, you got up at two-thirty in the morning and you've had all day for nothing, just silence. [laughter] Merton has this lovely saying, I love this, he's talked about Sundays in the monastery, he

says, “The young monks lean sadly up against walls asking questions that have no answers. The old monks are silent because they’ve given up interest in speech.” See? You know, like, “What’s all this about, this infinite nothingness in poverty and prayer?” And you take long walks in the woods and sit in the back of the church. Take walks in the cemetery, and it was great. For me it was.

Kirsten Oates: Tell us about the first time you met Thomas Merton.

Jim Finley: Well, when I entered, it was a medieval tradition evolved from this, that there were lay brothers, and you led a life of manual labor in prayer. They wore a brown, monastic habit, and they chanted the Office in English. And the choir monks chanted it in Latin, and they studied for the priesthood. And so, the lay brothers were a life of manual labor and prayer; the choir monks were manual labor, prayer, and study, like theology, scripture, the mystics, and so on. So, when I entered, I barely graduated from high school because of the trauma. And so, I entered into the lay brothers.

And so, Thomas Merton was novice master of choir novices, so I had no contact with him, but it was an experimental program where lay brothers could sit in on the first-year philosophy classes for the choir monks studying for the priesthood. So, this is Father Daniel Walsh, who taught Merton at Columbia and it was on Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. And for some reason, I just took the metaphysical language. I just took to it, so they changed me over into the choir. And so, Merton became my director.

And the thing for me was because of my trauma history, I had this issue with authority figures, you know. So, I’d go, and I’d sit down. I was eighteen years old. I would start to talk, and my voice was shaking, and he wanted to know what was wrong. And I said, “My voice was shaking.” I said, “I’m scared because you’re Thomas Merton.” And he said to me—this is brilliant, really. I worked at the pig barn at the time with the livestock on the farm. He said, “Every day under obedience, I want you to come in early from afternoon work, before vespers and I want you to sit down with me and tell me one thing that happened at the pig barn each day.” I can remember as soon as he said it, I remember, “I can do that,” and it leveled the playing field for me, really. And he would listen to that: “How’s sow number five? How’s her foot? How’s the thing?” And then that opened all this discussion about God, really.

So, what was so strange for me—and this is the heart of these teachings, too—is that here I so wanted him to think highly of me, and I was so embarrassed that my voice was shaking, and he saw that and had compassion on me. The brilliance of the intervention that leveled it and opened it. And I think maybe later on that really affected my emphasis as a psychologist, you know, the power of compassionate intervention that opens up something for someone to share something vulnerable that lets them go deeper.

Jim Finley: And I think, actually, a lot of Merton’s teachings are about that, because he was so in touch with his own brokenness. He was very aware of it. And he says it’s through our acceptance of our brokenness that we can get in touch with God who is infinitely in love with us as precious in our brokenness. So, instead of trying to get over our brokenness or past our brokenness, it’s the deep acceptance of the brokenness. It’s the meeting place, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And did he come across as compassionate? Did you feel his compassion?

Jim Finley: He was very, very compassionate towards himself and always towards me. He was funny. I mean, he saw things as he saw them. He was very direct that way, but he was a very compassionate person. Yeah, he was. Someone once said, “Thomas Martin was a gentle man because God was so gentle with him,” and I think he was like that. Yeah. And another thing that I want to get at here, because I think this is at the heart of it—really, it’s the heart of the Gospel; it was the heart of Christ, really—is that everyone listening to these podcasts, and I say this, too, as a psychotherapist having sat with a lot of people, everyone’s listening to this in the midst of their situation, and everybody has a little piece of their story that is sometimes almost more than they can bear. And everyone has things about themselves that they can’t abide, you know, that they wish weren’t true. And I think what I find so consoling about these teachings is the need to be honest about that, to be real about that, but infinitely tenderhearted toward the hurting places like that.

And in a way, that’s the essence of the teaching. It’s the extent to which I accept the depth of my brokenness that I come upon the depths of God’s infinite love for me as precious in my brokenness. In the Christian Tradition, this is called the gift of tears. See, sometimes it’s just literally tears, but it’s the inner weeping of being unexplainably loved without foundations. And see, that’s experiential salvation, really. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And that’s the teaching of the mystics, to help us discover that?

Jim Finley: I would say that the teaching of, let’s say, the teaching of the Good News is this. The mystical part is that on this earth we experience this, as Paul said, as “in a mirror darkly.” So, our faith is a kind of obscure certainty. Gabriel Marcel calls it a primitive inner assurance of this deep love. So, through the gospels, through prayer, you know, we live by this as our faith, and the measure of this faith is love. And so, we have our faith, we have love, and we have hope. And hope is that when we die, when death comes, that we will not be annihilated but consummated. And when we cross the veil of death, God’s infinite oneness with us won’t be mediated through faith. It will be unmediated divinity. We’ll be living God’s own life as God lives God’s life because the generosity of the infinite is infinite. And that’s our destiny in God.

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What the mystics are, are men and women who, through mystical experiences, they’re touched by the realization that even now, it’s that way, see? That even now, down in the deep-down depths of things, that God is welling up and giving Herself away in and as every breath and heartbeat. And when they taste the oneness, when they taste that taste of oneness, see, then in moments we taste that, we’re like a momentary mystic.

Jim Finley: And so, the mystics are these mystic teachers, they bear witness that it’s possible to be habitually established in that oneness instead of a momentary, little flash of it—God resting in us resting in God—and the desire to habituate it. The desire to habituate it can be consummated as abiding union. And then those men and women, the mystics, bear witness to it. The mystic teachers, such as Merton, they offer guidance to people who feel interiorly called to that.

Shunryū Suzuki, the Sōtō Zen master, says the primary task of the teacher in these traditions is to give witness to the secret that what the seeker seeks is real; that is, you know, your heart has not deceived you, because you sense you’re in the presence of someone whom it has been realized. And

I used to feel that way when I sat with Merton. I thought, whatever this is that drew me here, I'm sitting in the presence of someone who bears witness that it's real, see? And so then, now that I know that it's real, that I not break faith with my awakened heart that it's real, then what is the path along which I can abide and live in it, and then share that with other people?

Kirsten Oates: Who was the first mystic you read?

Jim Finley: I think my first mystic was St. John of the Cross.

Kirsten Oates: How did he impact you?

Jim Finley: You had to get permission then to read a book from the novice master. So, I said I wanted to read St. John of the Cross, the *Dark Night of The Soul*. And I remember walking out in the woods, and I sat beneath the tree. I never read this before. Here's an example of something that St. John of the Cross says is what happens—he compares God to a hart, like a little deer, and he said—is this infinite love of God rushes out and wounds your heart with love, and then dashes off and leaves you with a love wound, and you're walking around like your love wound. And just when you least suspect it, that love rushes out again and touches the love wound and makes it deeper. And he said that the one who's wounding your heart with love, knows where the most sore place of the love wound is and goes right there and makes it deeper. And he said then you cry out, "It's not fair that you do not carry off this heart that you have stolen, that I live, not what I live."

And when I read that, I was sitting out in the woods, I go, "It's too beautiful not to be true," you know? And I thought that it's just such a gift that there are people like this who say things like this, and not out of hearsay, they are that. So, John of the Cross was my first person, and I've been meeting him all these years. He's just really so beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: And how did Thomas Merton help you process the mystics? What kind of questions was he asking you? How was he helping you?

Jim Finley: How I put it is that when I would go into see Merton, when I look back on it, there were always three questions, that we were always under the auspices of three questions in our time together. The first question always was, and he would literally say this, he'd ask, "How's it going?" And what he wanted to know was, what's it like living in here? Like, what's it like waking up at 2:30 in the morning? What's it like chanting the psalms?

Jim Finley: What's it like walking in the woods? He said, "Because we've come here to live. That's why we come here to live." And so, "Talk to me." See? So, it's a very grounded, incarnational reality of the holiness of everyday life. "Talk to me."

The second question was, "How's it going with respect to your surrender to the mystery that accessed your heart and brought you to this place that it might transform you into itself?" See, so there was a moment in which you were intimately accessed by this love. For me, for example, reading *The Sign of Jonas* when Merton said, "As for me, I have but one desire." That there was a moment, intense or subtle, that you were touched by something, and then you were drawn to give yourself in love to the love that gave itself to you in that moment. So, "How's it going, this surrender?"

And the third question he would ask is, "How's it going in experiencing the mystery of the second question bubbling up through the messy details of the first question?" Because you wake up every morning and you're still just you. So, how's it going in this alchemy of the divinity of ordinariness and unresolved matters of your heart? Like, where are you at with that? That would be one way of trying to distill out for me what was always a re-centering place. And then it helped me to do the

same thing, you know, those three questions have always guided me.

Kirsten Oates: So, in a way, not treating spirituality is separate from the day-to-day life, but having them ultimately be processed as one.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. And that's another big thing with these mystics. Merton used to say, "Is there a Christian in the house?" You know, like, "Raise your hand." I say spirituality is experiencing what faith proclaims and responding to it. And what faith proclaims is that ultimately speaking, there's just one thing happening, that in God's fiat, like, "Let it be," the perpetual "Let it be," that the infinite presence of God is presence-ing itself and giving itself away in and as the intimate immediacy of our very presence, the presence of others, the presence of all things. And if love is the fullness of presence, then just one thing is happening, this love is pouring itself out and giving itself away, see, that we are the song that God's sings. And this is so radical that if God were to cease loving us into the present moment, at the count of three, we'd disappear, because we are nothing, absolutely nothing, apart from the love of God. Likewise, if God would cease loving the universe into existence, the whole universe would disappear. And that means that our very nothingness without God makes our very presence to be the presence of God, and that's the mystical experience. See, that's true, and we get little echoes of it as in a mirror darkly, in intimacy with others, through art, through poetry, through prayer.

But what the mystical experience is, is that the depths of God, by the generosity of God, has been given to me as the depths of myself. And that oneness is God's infinite identification with me with his own life in my nothingness without God. And that's spiritual experience. And then once I've tasted it, because love is never imposed, it's always offered, then I have to freely give myself to the love that gives itself to me. And in the reciprocity of love, then destiny is fulfilled. And that's the story of our life. I think. That's the way I'm looking at it, that the real story of our life is where are we at in the reciprocity of love? Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: At one level it sounds so simple; at another level, it's so deep.

Jim Finley: Exactly. How I put it, in these graced moments where we experience it, when it's actually happening, it's too self-evident to doubt. You know, because it's a moment of awe, or it's like amazement, or wonder. It's too self-evident to doubt. It's too deep to comprehend, you know? And that's what makes it numinous, you know, like if you take off your shoes, you're on holy ground and the holy ground is your life, you know? And then Merton would say, "Then having been awakened by it, He now is asking something out of you," see, like, "Where are you at with that," which is the Gospel, I guess. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Tell us, did you have a moment like that in the monastery that you're describing that kind of a graced event?

Jim Finley: I did. I had a number of them. The main one for me was, which was very life changing for me, really, is Merton was a hermit. He was moving toward being a hermit at the monastery. And my plan had I stayed, I wanted to be a hermit, live alone in the woods, living this. And I got permission from him to go to an abandoned sheep barn and spend several hours a day there in the loft of the sheep barn. And one day I was up there in the barn at the monastery, and I was reading the psalms. And I remember it was very hot, Kentucky, in the loft of this

barn it's very hot. And I was walking back and forth reading the psalms, and all of a sudden there was this vivid awareness of what we think is the air is God, literally God. And then I was walking back and forth in God breathing God. And the God that I was breathing knew me through, and through, and through, and through, is compassion. So, there were no images, there were no emotions, but it was like absolute. It was just like absolute and radical. And I went over to vespers that way, breathing God. I went to bed that night, and I walked around like that for three days.

And on Sunday we were allowed to walk in the woods, it was all woods, we were allowed to walk on these other woods, and I was walking out along these woods, this place I would go, breathing God. And I had a copy of John of the Cross with me, and there was a leaf hanging out over this little path through the woods going up to this little lake. And I reached and I touched one of the leaves on the tree, and I looked up in the sky and there was one cloud in the sky. And I said out loud, "It's one," like, the God I was breathing, the leaf I was touching, it was all infinitely unexplained. It was like absolute. And it changed my life, really. I don't know. It's hard to explain it, really. And that's where I felt that, when I read John of the Cross, I felt that the cadences of their voice with the cadences of that, see? It was more like listening to music and being drawn into it.

If we calibrate our heart to a fine enough scale, it's already happening. I use this example that if you have a radio, and you turn it on and there's just a hissing noise, but if there's a dial on the radio where you can calibrate the receptive power of the radio, music fills the room. I think our hearts are like that. We're always waiting for some great big thing to happen, but if you're sitting and your vulnerable enough, one breath, really. You know, the person you live with every day comes walking into the room, or you're reading your child a good night story, or you're up alone in the night, the simplest of moments it can, you know what I mean, like that. The essential never imposes itself; the unessential is constantly imposing itself. And so, we have to choose to surrender to the

Jim Finley: non-impositional intimacy of the essential, because the world comes crowding in. It overtakes this. We don't live in a world that's conducive, quite the opposite, really. And so, it's counter cultural. We have to create a contemplative culture in our heart to be a man or a woman who seeks to be stabilized in this, in the world.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, because those descriptions, those times you felt that sense of oneness seem so simple, so ordinary, just breathing, walking. Why is it so hard for us to have that experience?

Jim Finley: It's the mystery of it, really. See, I think one way of looking at it is this. We could say that our ego, we could call it our ego, is it's our human experience. So, it's our self-reflective, bodily self in our day-by-day life with others, and that God wants us to have a healthy ego, because if our ego isn't healthy, we suffer, and other people suffer. So, a lot of psychotherapy is the healing of the ego. And so, it's in my ego consciousness, my humanity, that I come upon within my ego, which transcends my ego, which is this experience.

And then my ego, having been awakened to what transcends itself, then has to surrender to that, which means it has to give up its claim to having the final say in who I am, and it doesn't easily give up that claim, especially if we've been traumatized. because is it possible to be vulnerable and safe at the same time? Is that possible? So, there's a kind of a self-sustaining

guardedness, a hypervigilance that we watch over, and that love is asking out of us, see, how do we very respectfully lean into that, surrender? And I think it's a spiritual direction. I mean, that's what makes this so intimate, I think.

Kirsten Oates: So, after you left the monastery, how did you maintain that fidelity or that surrender? How did you stay on the path?

Jim Finley: Well, I came out, I was still traumatized, really. I never worked through my trauma when I went in, and so I moved back in with my parents, and two of my brothers were in Vietnam. My oldest sister had gotten pregnant in high school, and she left. And I moved back in listening to my father beat my mother downstairs. It was just really, really amazing. And I was having trouble with the Church. It was very disorienting to me to be out here like this. And so, the first woman I dated, we went out to see Doctor Zhivago, and I proposed to her, [laughter] and she accepted. I just wanted out. I had this idea of an ideal marriage. I thought, I'm going to move out, have a little house with a dog, and it was horrible. It was just a horrible, nightmarish thing.

So, I was in this marriage, and we were living in a trailer, and I taught high school religion in the Catholic schools, and we had no money. I washed cars on weekends at a car wash. And in those contexts, I would have a daily practice. It was a yoga practice in zazu and then integrating it back into the mystical tradition. So, I had my rendezvous with God as my practice. And then I tried in my own broken way to live that through my life and circle back around each day to be grounded in the practice. And that's what I did. And then that led to writing Merton's Palace of Nowhere. So, I got up every morning at five o'clock, and I wrote for four or five hours on the true self for about five years, really. And the book got published and changed my life, really.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. What caused you to pick up the pen and write? Had you written before?

Jim Finley: Well, I don't know. When I was at the monastery studying metaphysics, we had to do these essays on being and nothingness, and Aquinas, and I loved trying to put words to spiritual things. And, also, when I would read Meister Eckhart, or I would read the Zen kōans, I saw it as journaling in a way, like, how would I articulate the ineffable? Like, how would I do that? And so, it was along those lines, see? And so, Merton's idea of the true self, ultimate identity, which is at the very essence of contemplative Christianity, really, hidden with Christ in God forever before the origins of the universe, the you that was never born because God never, never, never, never does not know who you are hidden with Christ in God, and the you that was never born is the you that will never die. And so, how can I, in ego consciousness, be awakened to the deathless me in Christ? And I was so drawn by that. I just felt I wanted to write to gather texts from Merton and put that together. So, that's what I did.

Kirsten Oates: And it sounds like you dabbled or committed to other religious paths as well?

Jim Finley: Well, what happened with me is when Thich Nhat Hahn came to Gethsemane—Merton saw this. Merton, he wrote a letter to D. T. Suzuki, the Zen scholar. And in Zen, there are these kōans, like parables, a story where an enlightened master is in a dialogue with someone and in the dialogue, the person's enlightened. So, Merton wrote a letter to D. T. Suzuki.

He said, “When I read these stories, these Buddhist stories,” he says, “something leaps off the page at me and says, ‘this is true.’ And I don’t even know if I as a Christian could dialogue with you as a Buddhist about the common ground.” So, it was in that sense, I began to see these traditions like the underlying unity that pervades and transcends the distinctions between-- It respects the traditions and transcends the traditions. And so, the mystics in each tradition recognize each other. This is why the Dalai Lama, when he was with Merton and Thich Nhat Hahn, they just immediately recognize each other, each respecting, like different dialects of divine. And so, I felt very drawn to that, really, to yoga, to deep yoga, like the yoga sutras, and then mostly for me to Buddhism. And then later on to Rumi.

Kirsten Oates: And then back to Christianity eventually?

Jim Finley: Yes. What happened was is that when my wife and I, we’d go to Maui every year, this same place every year, and it’s right on the water, when we were there in Maui and she called me out on the lanai and I came out and I looked down and there was a school of porpoise coming in toward the shore, like coming out, you know, coming like this, like this. And there was a little girl on the shore right under us, like clapping her hands, jumping up and down, and her parents were behind her taking her picture. It was like an idyllic moment, you know. And someone like four lanais down, poked his head around, he said, “Turn on the TV. They just flew a plane into the World Trade Center.”

And you know how they showed it over and over in slow motion? I shouldn’t have watched. It traumatized me. They shut down the airport, and my mother died the next day. She died the next day. And when I was at my mother’s funeral, she was a devout Catholic. She divorced my father toward the end, which is good. And the pastor gave

Jim Finley: this beautiful sermon of eulogy about her, and I came back to St. Monica’s church here, the church I was at, they were having a healing service. I was watching. They were anointing people with oil. And I sat in the back and I said, “This Catholic church of mine, what a hypocritical, patriarchal, condescending, self-righteous, beautiful, tender, mysterious community this is. And I came back into my Catholicism, and I brought the Dharma in with me, and I found these voices of God in these other traditions enrich my own discipleship, I guess. That’s what it’s been for me.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, tell us about your life today. Like, what’s it like for you being you right now? What’s your daily practice?

Jim Finley: Well, I’m seventy-six, for starters, and my wife is seventy-seven. And, you know, as you get old, the landscape changes. And my wife is suffering from some fairly serious, ongoing issues that compromise her, and I’m walking that walk with her. And then I look at my own things I’m going through physically, and just lack of energy, and I look on aging as the divinity of diminishment. And I find that it sometimes gets to me, you know? I’m not a therapist anymore. I didn’t renew my license about two years ago, and I can’t, I don’t travel anymore. So, it’s been such a godsend with the CAC and the Living School that I can do this from my home; actually, it’s providential for me.

Where I’m at with it, actually, especially at night when I’m up walking around and I can’t sleep, I say this to Maureen a lot, I say, “You know, if the purpose of life on this earth is to

learn to love, mission accomplished. And, the journey on this earth is actually very short, really, but the love we discover in it is deathless. And so, at one level, I have to just let myself be a human being. You know, it's just hard. But if I walk with it and accept it and practice what I preach by grounding my fears and sorrows in this very thing, here, I find this kind of alchemy of this deathless love permeating through, and through, and through the fleeting frailty of my life on this earth.

And I share this, too, when I was in the monastery, I would sit with Merton and so moved to sit with him. And then when I'd walk out in the woods and sit beneath a tree and read John of the Cross, and he died centuries ago, like the deathless presence of the mystic. Thomas Merton once said, *"Don't think when we die, we go somewhere when we die. You don't orbit the earth a few times and take off and go to God."* He said, *"In God, we live, and move, and have our being. All the dead are here. All the angels are here. Everything real is forever."*

But our journey in ego consciousness is a fleeting, temporal manifestation of the eternity of the fleetingness of all things. And so, I feel I'm at this stage right now. It's very fascinating to me, really, this stage. I like Richard Rohr's saying, *"The trouble is there's too many old people who aren't elders, and just because you're old doesn't mean you're an elder."* As soon as I thought it, I was saying to God, "Dear God, help me to be the kind of old person young people want old people to be." You know, help me be a wise, humble, open, non-impositional person." And so, I just feel right even having this interview here in my study, to me the whole journey is a miracle, you know, for a traumatized boy from Akron, Ohio to run off and go to a monastery, and, you know, one cul-de-sac after another. That's how I think about our life, too. Insofar as you're touched

Jim Finley: by what we're talking about, you look back at your own life on how it came to pass that you have become the kind of person who's able to hear these things in the way you're able to hear them, you look back over your own life on how has that come to pass? You could not have planned it if you tried. You could not have planned it if you try.

Merton once said, *"The next time you receive the Eucharist, you should realize someone's taking perfectly good care of you."* And I would say insofar as we hear words like this, I think this is God, actually, and God who has begun this work in us will bring it to completion. And so, that's how I experience it. I have a simple rhythm. I write six hours a day, and Maureen sits with me. And then in the afternoon, I tend to chores, and we sit out on the porch at muffin hour, and look at the ocean, and I have a glass of wine, and I journal, and we go to bed by seven o'clock. And it's a nice life. It's a good, sweet life. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: That encouragement you just gave, that invitation you just gave, about looking back over your life and recognizing where God has been taking perfectly good care of you. This is the idea that the mystics are helping us to be present to our own life and experience the deeper sense of our life, and our connection to all of it.

Jim Finley: There's one caveat with this. As true as this is, and it is true, it is true, but it doesn't mean when we're suffering that we're not really suffering. It doesn't mean that the risks aren't real. It doesn't mean by human standards not everybody makes it. As a matter of fact, many people don't. And so, there's the raw reality. See, there is a way we don't transform trauma. There's the brutality which trauma transforms us in really brutal ways. It's like being burned alive,

but it's not just terrible, see? God writes straight with crooked lines. And out of the suffering deeply walked with patience, and courage, and the givens out of it, the miracle arises. You just look out at the world and you just turn on the evening news, how are you going to take all that in, if we don't somehow believe all this is somehow grounded in something, and that I'm invited to or called upon to play my part in it? It's just given to me to do so in the place where I live, with the person I live with, the people I work with, and that radiates out. And that's the way I think.

Kirsten Oates: So, no promises that this podcast is going to relieve us of all suffering?

Jim Finley: It will not. As a matter of fact, I will make you a promise here, really. I want to share something. If you had any hopes that by listening to these podcasts you are going to be delivered, I don't see it happening. I just don't. I share this story about myself. When I did the sitting group at St. Monica's Church, it was upstairs, the parish hall, and I would work on one of these talks like I want to share on the podcast, a half-hour talk and we do an hour of sitting practice. And so, I would work for a year on one mystic. So, one week I was working on this talk. I think it was on Meister Eckhart, but I don't remember. And I personally thought the talk was particularly profound. I thought it was really, you know, "This is a good one." And when I got to the church, I realized I forgot my brilliant talk at home. And so, I only had thirty minutes before the group started. So, I tried to find a room to sit down and scribble out what I could remember, and all the doors were locked. So, I had to sit on the floor at the end of the hallway on the back of an envelope writing out what I could remember. And as they were walking up the stairs, all the people were coming up for the sitting, about a hundred people, or so. And as I walk up the stairs, because it happens to me all the time because I'm dissociative from the trauma, and I said to God, I said, "You know, I just wondered am I ever going to get my act together?" And God said, interiorly inside of me, he said, "I don't see it coming." [laughter] "I don't think you're going to get your act together." He said, "I just don't see it to be honest with you." You got to die kind of whacked out guy [@ 00:53:00]. And that's what the teachings are about. You know what I mean? And if you're like a dying loved one, really, they're so disarming, you know, in the transparency of their beauty in the presence of what's happening to them. And, likewise, this is why little children are so disarming too. So, there's that in all of us. We always try to pose, and posture, and cover it up and that's the sadness of it all. If we can let ourselves be grounded in that and then live our adult life out of that, I know the world would be a better place.

Kirsten Oates: Who do you see as the community that you're hoping to build around this podcast?

Jim Finley: I see it as an extension of the sitting group at St. Monica's Church and, really, the contemplative silent weekend retreats I've given all over the United States and Canada for maybe thirty years now, and maybe six to eight times, or so, in Europe, starting through the kindness of Carolyn Myss, first in Ávila, with Teresa of Ávila, but also in Norwich, England, with Julian of Norwich. And so, all over the world people gather, and it's always the same. You know, there's a kind of a communal sincerity of people who are searching for ways to deepen their experience of and response to God's presence in their life. And I'm speaking out of the Catholic Tradition. I speak out of this Christian Tradition, but open to all the traditions.

And so, I hope what people might possibly find here is words of consolation and also words that will not compromise the radicality of the mystic way. And by making it true to its radicality will make this strangely accessible. That's the thing, really, see? And I think that would be my hope. I would encourage people if they keep listening to this, to be patient with it. Because this way of talking, it's a nonlinear kind of poetry and blank [@ 00:55:19] verse that sustained exposure to brings about the realization of what the words are about. And so, that would be my hope. And then also in the resources, we're going to give them [information] about the texts where they can read it for themselves, and related resources. This might be a way for them to emerge into this stream of these wisdom traditions.

Kirsten Oates: So, Jim, I'd like to pivot and talk about life for you today. How we got to know each other and your involvement with the Center for Action and Contemplation. So, could you start by sharing about how you got involved with Richard and with the center?

Jim Finley: Yes. When Merton's Palace of Nowhere came out, every other weekend I was flying around the country leading silent meditation retreats in the United States in Canada. And I was very aware of Richard Rohr's work, and it just so happened once that we were at the same retreat house at the same time and talked. People were also telling me that he was telling people that he really liked Merton's Palace of Nowhere encouraging them to read it. So, I think we developed a kind of a mutual friendship with each other as teachers, as spiritual teachers and he had me come once to CAC and give a weekend retreat there. So, I went, and I did that. So, then the next step was I was invited to speak at one of these big conferences that he leads in Albuquerque. And so, I went and did that. I think the first one I did, I think it was Jesus and Buddha. Those were great experiences, you know, it was really lovely.

And then I think then the next one was Intimacy: The Divine Ambush, John of the Cross. And what was the third one? I can't recall right now. So, anyway, there were several of those times I was invited to be a guest speaker with him, in Albuquerque. Then what happened was that there was a retreat I think in Assisi. And in Assisi is when they were going to announce this idea of this Living School, that there would be this program where people could devote their lives to a commitment to a contemplative practice, the reading of the classical texts of the mystics, and letting that embody a form of service to the world, a non-academic program, personal enrichment in the transformation of the world.

And Cynthia was there with Richard in Assisi, and shortly after that event, which I knew it was happening, I got a phone call, I think it was from Richard, inviting me to be one of the core teachers with Cynthia. And Cynthia knew of my work, too, because she was at one of those big conferences that I did on Intimacy: The Divine Ambush, I think. So, she was very aware of my work. So, right away I said, "Yes. I'll do it." And the reason I did it was I really saw that Richard Rohr is doing as a Franciscan in the world what Thomas Merton was doing as a Cistercian in the monastery. That is, he was carrying forward contemplative Christianity in today's world. And it was such a natural fit into what I'm about and how I live my life. It was just a perfect fit for me. And so, that's how it came to pass that I ended up being a core teacher in the Living School.

Kirsten Oates: And Cynthia Bourgeault is who you were referring to there, and the three of you launched the Living School about seven years ago now?

Jim Finley: I believe so, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. One of the first times we started working together was when I was first starting at the CAC and helping them create a strategic plan. We were asking this big question, “Is there a life for the Center for Action and Contemplation beyond Father Richard’s life, or should we be preparing to wind it down and just have a legacy organization?” And we were asking audience members of the CAC, and teachers, and others in the landscape about how they’d been impacted by the organization, by Richard’s teaching, and if they thought there was a role for us. And you had one of the most impactful answers and I wonder if you remember how you answered that?

Jim Finley: Yeah. You know, what I was comparing this to in my mind is let’s say when St. Benedict was living in the fifth century, and he was one of these deeply contemplative people. He had a profound effect on people and people gathered around him. And so, when he wrote his Rule, he wrote a legacy that would carry forward with what people saw he embodied by the following of the Rule. And so, you have the Benedictine and the same with Francis.

So, I thought if we look on Richard Rohr in that way, that he’s someone who providentially has touched many, many, many people, and knowing just like all these teachers, he’s moving on. By the way, so is James Finley moving on, and Cynthia Bourgeault, we’re all moving on. Therefore, how would we carry forward this lineage, which, really, Richard embodies it, but it’s not about Richard. You know, Richard embodies it in his obediential fidelity to it. So, I thought, “What we can is anything that any of us come up with, like an idea, like a course, or a certain emphasis, whatever it is, is if Richard could hear this, would he you approve, and since he’s still alive, we can ask him.” See, is this of your mind? Because if it is of your mind, then it’ll be the mind of the tradition because you feel faithful to the lineage, the spirit of the tradition. And that’s how while we still have access to him, we can capture the gestalt. We can capture that sense and carry it forward. And I also think another thing about Richard that’s true with all these people is that he wouldn’t want it to be that we would parrot him, but rather we’re carrying forward what’s faithful to the lineage as it lives in us just like the people who would listen to the teachers are to carry forward as it lives in them. I think that just makes sense to me. That’s just how a heritage is handed on.

Kirsten Oates: You said at the time something to the effect of the CAC should be about what Richard’s been about, because Richard hasn’t been about Richard.

Jim Finley: That’s right.

Kirsten Oates: Richard’s been about this Christian mystical lineage.

Jim Finley: That’s right.

Kirsten Oates: And that’s become an equation we use now inside the CAC: CAC equals what Richard’s about.

Jim Finley: That’s right. I once gave a talk to the International Thomas Merton Society. It’s a great society. Also, there’s a lot of scholarly papers and books on Merton, carrying forward. train for it. I thought, and the same thing applies to Richard in place of Merton, with Merton, and I would say it with Richard, is that one way to study Merton, to understand Merton

is to study Merton: What did Merton say about solitude? What did Merton say about art? What to say about prayer? That's good. And you do a paper on that, or a book on it, or you give talks on it.

The other way is to join Merton in being committed to what Merton was committed to, which is God. And if we join Merton in being committed to what he was committed to, or join Richard Rohr and what Richard Rohr is committed to, which is his fidelity to God's fidelity to us translated into service of the world, that's really the spirit of this, what it's about, really.

Kirsten Oates: I remember when we very first started working together when I became your main point of contact and we had some things to negotiate. We were expanding your role. You were renegotiating your whole kind of teaching ministry in the world. And I remember you highlighting to me that how we acted in the conversation, in the dialogue, that the dialogue itself was the most important thing to you and that how we behaved in the dialogue, how we stayed in a state of contemplative listening and respect. And it really impacted me, your guiding me that way. And I realized that often in meetings, I had the outcome in mind, that I was kind of moving towards something and not honoring the sense and the presence of the dialogue. I've tried to maintain that in our relationship moving forward but also now in all my meetings and dialogues at the center.

Jim Finley: Yes. You know—I said this as a psychotherapist, too, an ex-psychotherapist—is one way I've thought of psychotherapy is that psychotherapy is meditation for two. In other words, what psychotherapy is about is I'm inviting you to slow down enough to be present at the feeling level to what you just said, and I meet you there and we talk. See, then we're in this stream of transformation. So, in therapy we're not coming to hear a lecture about diagnostic categories, you know, we're looking for help.

And the same with spiritual direction, you go see the spiritual teacher, you're not looking for a lecture on theories of mystical union, you're looking for how to be faithful to what's happening to you. And, therefore, I thought if you and I in our dialogues, it's important that our interactions embody that same spirit then we are about what the tradition's about. And that's the priority of process, which then gives rise to a content that concretizes that process momentarily because it has to give way to a new configuration, a new configuration, and that way it kind of models that sense of mutual, open-ended attentiveness toward each other, in the path along the way.

Kirsten Oates: Which is really contemplative work, to do the work that way.

Jim Finley: It really is contemplative work. And I also think—like what I would say with these mystics we're reading, say Merton or John of the Cross—when you really think about it, in a way, Merton is inviting you to join him as Merton says, "With God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way." So, in a way, he's inviting you to meet him, see, and as we listen to words, that helps us listen more deeply to ourself. And so, the reading becomes this very kind of encounter that we're talking about here, like heart to heart, like a longing for longing, like that. That's it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. Moving out of the professional sphere. So, prior to me working for the CAC,

you were already my teacher, and I wanted to share a story about when I first joined the Living School as a student. And the first thing you do at the Living School is you go for a week-long symposium with all the other students and the teachers, and it's in person; whereas, the majority of the teaching's online. So, it's a big, in-person gathering. It's really exciting.

I showed up to that Living School Symposium not feeling great. I would describe it as kind of a depression or a dark night, even. I hadn't been able to have children in my life, and I was just struggling with the way that had been impacting me. I felt isolated from my friends as they were all having children, and their social structures were really evolving to be around the kids. So, I was not able to join them in that, and I was not being invited into that. So, that was really difficult. And then just my own real disappointment in not being able to have that experience. And then some of the disappointment from my family, you know, trying to live with all of that.

Kirsten Oates: So, I came to the Living School feeling really down but hopeful that I would get a word there or something. Anyway, so I was there the whole week and the Living School finished, and I hadn't gotten it. I was still feeling really low and even hopeless by then, because I felt like if a gathering like this, if teachers like this can't help me, then, you know, I was starting to lose the hope that I had.

So, it was the day after the Living School finished. I was due to fly home and my flight was later in the day, so I went down to the cafeteria or the little restaurant to have lunch. I was standing there with the person about to seat me, and you came in behind me and I turned around and I said, "Oh, Hi, James Finley." And, you said, "Hello. Want to have lunch?" And it was as if in that moment, the roof blew off the hotel, and this sense of darkness and hopelessness just all went away. It felt like I was in warmth and sunlight, and it was as if God was saying, "I've been here all along. I've been here all along. What you've been looking for has been right here." And I didn't really get the answers that I was looking for. Like, why wasn't I able to have children? What is the plan? Why is that happening? But I felt a sense of peace and contentment, and then we had lunch.

Jim Finley: Yeah. That's a lovely story. I'll share some thoughts about that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: You know, St. Benedict says in his Rule that when someone approaches the monastery to enter, do not let the person in right away, keep them waiting outside the gate. And the question is, you know, is, "What are you looking for?" Like, "What do you want?" "And this is in the Buddhist tradition, also, in approaching the entrance into the sangha. See, "What kind of teaching do you want?" And what often happens is the teaching we think we're looking for isn't the teaching that we're really longing for. And very often it starts out by searching for something to ease a source of suffering in our life. And then you encounter someone or someone in whose presence a qualitatively different dimension of the whole thing opens up. Like you're blindsided by it almost, you know? It's a strange experience like that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: I also think then that should help us all to realize how providentially love uses us to serve its own purposes. We never know. And what we're always looking for is to see the lost look in somebody's eyes and to stop and ask, "Are you okay?" We never really know. Maybe you could be saving their life, you know? We never know. And so, I think this is how this lineage is lived by our sensitivity to each other like that. And that's a deep part of the teaching, I think, really. Well, anyway, that was a lovely story. I remember that moment. So, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I have another one. [laughter] So, this one was a few years before that where you were teaching at a big CAC conference, one of the ones you mentioned. And we often have a banquet at those conferences. And so, the banquet was finishing, and you were walking across the room to leave, and you walked past me. I was sitting down my table and I can't imagine the lost look on my face because as you walked past me, you looked at

Kirsten Oates: me, and then you stopped, and you said, "Hello." And I said in this rushed, nervous kind of way, "Hello, James Finley. Your talks on healing have changed my life."

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And you knelt down to be eye to eye with me, and you said, "Really? How have they changed your life?" And I said, "Well, you know, my father is bipolar, and he left when I was very young, and I have a very chaotic sense of a father in my system. And listening to your talks, and the way you talk about love, and the way you talk about the preciousness of all of us, I've let that reparent me and to be the voice of my parent and then to access that as God's voice parenting me, and it has changed everything."

Jim Finley: Wow, I must guess yes. You know something, I think about this, too, in certain schools of psychotherapy, you know, they speak about transference. And transference is where the person in therapy will project on you the issues of the core parent figure. So, they're either like angry, or aloof, or resentful, or seductive, or ingratiate, whatever it is. So, what the therapist is to do, is to listen to the transference, and listen to their own countertransference, and use it to respond to the person to reparent them in love; that is, it's possible here together that we can have a corrective experience by modeling for you the way you deserve to have been treated from the day you were born, like that. And I think that's a big piece of, you know, kind of like contemplative mercy of how that happens to people.

Kirsten Oates: I remember you saying at the time that when you hear stories like that, it gave you confidence that you were doing your own work and that the grace was passing through you into the lives of the people that were coming to you.

Jim Finley: When I was teaching in Cleveland, Ohio, I hadn't written Merton's Palace yet. I was teaching at this Jesuit school in Cleveland, high school, and there was a nun there at a retreat house in Cleveland. And she had heard that I was teaching there and that it was with Merton. She asked me to give a talk at the retreat house there. And so, I had never given a spiritual talk before, and I'm actually very introverted. I'm very shy. I've now kind of [inaudible @ 01:15:25] And I decided just to speak from my heart and kind of try to share with them what happened to me in the monastery.

And it was a strange experience for me. It was like an event in the room, you know, it was almost like a voice that touched a shared longing in people, and I'll never forget that

moment. And that's what it's always meant to me to be a teacher is to somehow channel in a way of sharing what utterly radicalized my life by just speaking of it as honestly, you know, as clearly as I can, because it just touches a very deep longing in people. And I kind of trust the providential nature of people where our paths cross unexpectedly one-on-one like that. That is very mysterious, really, how that works.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, to bring my two stories together, at the end of 2014, so I was just in the Living School, just after our big lunch moment, at the end of that year, my husband's sister-in-law died tragically and unexpectedly, and she had one son, Will, and he was about twenty-one years old at the time and just was shocked and devastated, and then left alone after his mother's death. And so, my husband and I did our best to kind of adopt him. He came to live with us for eighteen months, and we really just tried to build a connected relationship with him, help him get back on his feet. And, you know, he's become like a son to me and a very important, precious person to me. And I remember writing to you at the beginning of 2016 and saying, "I can't believe I'm starting this year with the spiritual father I always needed, and the son I always wanted, and I couldn't have planned it if I tried. That just held a lot of gratitude for the way things can work.

Jim Finley: I remember that. I remember thinking about this, that there are women who are mothers. It's a gift to be a mother. It's part of the transcendental quality of our very being, really, to mother, to father. It's part of our humanity. It's a very deep thing. And so, somehow to want that, and some people for different reasons don't want that. They don't want to actualize that potential. But there are some people who aren't able, say, physically to do that, and then providentially, the maternal reality unexpectedly grants itself like you with Will. And all of a sudden in a very real way that's as real, which is really the depth dimension if a person was physically your son, and some people that maternal grace can be more deeply realized. And I also think that's a mystery—I know celibacy is problematic and complicated—but I do think the idea of the charisma of celibacy, like in the Buddhist Tradition, in the Catholic Tradition, it really is that there's this kind of a sublimated prayer energy in which one fathers or mothers people, you know, in a kind of very powerful way passes on, and it's always a grace when that happens.

Kirsten Oates: Once when we were meeting for breakfast, you told a story that I've always remembered, and I'd love you to tell it about the relationship between a student and a teacher, and it had to do with a long corridor.

Jim Finley: Yeah, yeah. I share this in my audio that I did with Sounds True on Merton's Path through the Palace of Nowhere. So, this is one of the metaphors, that is, it should be used like a metaphor. Let's say we're talking about the relationship of the seeker to the teacher in these traditions. And, I say, "Imagine you're at the end of a long hallway, real, real long hallway, and you have your arm full of books all the way up to your chin. And down at the other end of this long hallway, there's a door and your teacher standing there at that door with his or her hand on the doorknob. And you start to walk down the hallway, and the very first step you trip, and you go down the whole hallway, like, 'Ahhhhhhhh,' by trying to get your-- And just before you crash into the door, the teacher opens the door and you head out across the countryside, 'Ahhhhhhhh.' Eventually, you get the hang of it, see? And then you're a mystic. The mystics are people for whom it's been unbearable for so long they've discovered the divinity of it all. And there's a lot of truth to that, really.

Kirsten Oates: I remember you saying, “The mystic’s the one who’s learned to trip and stand up, and trip and stand up, and trip and stand up.”

Jim Finley: I’d say the mystic teacher is the one to let you know as gently as possible that you’re beyond human help, see? Because if you’re capable of achieving it on your own, it would be infinitely less than what you’re looking for. And so, the dark night of the soul, when we talk about these purifying experiences, these are really metaphorical ways of alluding to that coming to the end of our own resources, staying there with sincerity and patience, and then discovering this kind of unexpected richness, like, welling up and giving itself to us in ways that are beyond what we would have been capable of attaining. And then being, like, surprised by that, or amazed by that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: One last thing I remember is when I started putting these stories together for you in one of our dialogues around that first time we met at the conference and then the Living School and now we’re working together, and I remember you saying, “I hear these stories and I think, ‘Who is this James Finley that she’s talking about?’” Can you expand on that a little bit?

Jim Finley: In that sense, I think in stories like this, in other words, I see, really, what people are responding to really. They’re kind of responding to what I responded to when I met Merton. They’re really responding to that, and it’s real. I mean, I just live this way. And this is a point for them, too, that I live here in the concreteness of just being a human being trying to get through another day. So, I’m seventy-six years old. My wife’s out in the living room, seventy-seven, she’s seriously ill, and I live in a daily fragility in the unraveling of the unraveling of things. And, that all this is, is I’m not exempt from the human experience, this suffering, and death, and loss. And so, my participation in the ordinariness of the human experience is I’m being asked to walk the walk as I’m being asked to the sense that God is a presence that spares us from nothing even as God unexplainedly sustains us in all things, that I’m to be unexplainably sustained in the midst of unravelings that I can hardly deal with. And that somehow, if I do that deeply, that somehow this is as precious, you know, and as trustworthy as the day I was born with a day like that. So, I think this is where eventually for anyone who is for other people in this way, that the authenticity of the teaching comes out of the authenticity of their vulnerability to themselves as an infinitely loved, fragile human being. I think that’s the teaching. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: [music] Well, thank you for your teaching, and we’re so excited to have this podcast with you, and look forward to all that it will bring.

Jim Finley: Thank you. And I’m grateful, too, that now that I’m at this place where I can’t travel anymore. So, it gives me a providential way that I can share these teachings with people and here from my home. And so, I’m kind of amazed and grateful for that, too. It’s kind of utterly unexpected to me, so I’m grateful for it. So, it’s a win-win all the way around.

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.