



# Turning to the Mystics

Thomas Merton: Responding to  
Listener Questions

Jim Finley: 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 to our first question-and-response session for Turning to the Mystics where we'll be reflecting on questions that have come in about Season 1, where we've been turning to Thomas Merton as our mystic.

Jim, I just wanted to start by thanking you so much for this podcast. All the emails we've received show a lot of support and gratitude for what you've been doing. And for those of us listening to this in real time, you'll recognize that from the beginning of this podcast to where we are now, life's changed a lot for Jim personally with the loss of his wife and then also for all of us with the coronavirus. So, Jim, I wanted to thank you for hanging in there and for continuing to give us the gift of your teaching.

I also wanted to thank everyone who sent in a question and gave us some feedback. It's been so helpful to hear from you, so thank you for taking the time and making the effort to connect with us. It's been an incredible response, and we're grateful for the community that's listening to this podcast.

We had so many great questions. We've decided to do two sessions of question and response. This first one we'll be looking more at content questions around Thomas Merton's teachings, and the second one had more questions about practice. But before we begin, I just wanted note that a lot of these questions were very personal and very vulnerable, and we're so grateful for that willingness to share your lives. And Jim will be looking to respond with these deep truths that open up the personal to the universal. So, these questions become the questions for all of us to help us all find that deeper depth of truth about our lives. Does that sound right, Jim?

Jim Finley: It does, yeah. I like it.

Kirsten Oates: So, let's begin with the questions. The first one I can answer. So, we had a lot of people asking how long they will be able to access Season 1 and some concern that once Season 2 began that they wouldn't be able to access Season 1 anymore. So, I just wanted to share the good news is that Season 1 will stay available into the foreseeable future so you'll have the option to keep going back to it over time. And then, also, I'd recommend if you're wanting to send friends to this podcast to start them back in Season 1 and, in particular, the introductory episodes. So, onto the questions about Thomas Merton. Are you ready, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: So, Mary has a question about a stumbling block she encounters in the text from Thoughts in Solitude. Her question begins: "In Session 2, where Merton says, 'My Lord, God,' Mary says she gets stuck on the word 'Lord.'" She says that, "It's not strictly a sexist or patriarchal thing that could be fixed by political correctness. It's more what does 'Lord' mean in Merton's context? How is it relevant for today?"

Jim Finley: Yes. You know, my sense of this with Merton, and all these Christian mystics, is that they're clearly talking about how we deepen our experience of and response to God's presence in our life, the presence of God. But when I say, "My Lord, God," it means that I'm in a personal relationship with God, that God is in a personal relationship with me, and the meaning of my life is found in that relationship. And in that relationship, it's a relationship of love, like an overwhelming boundaryless love to which I am to surrender myself over into the hands of God, that I may be led by God into this deeper union.

So, it isn't just God as in a philosophical sense of God, or I believe God, or I believe that God exists; rather, I believe that God has personally awakened me to God's personal love for me, and then God empowers me to give myself to God in this deepening relationship. So, God then is my Lord; that is, he's Lord of my True Self, that he is personally guiding me. He's personally sustaining me. And I think "Lord" has that connotation of discipleship or personal intimacy. I think it's meant in that way.

I want to add one more piece, too; and, therefore, that lordship has gradations of depth to it. So, in the beginning, we might understand it reflectively as in *Lectio Divina*. Like, I'm in this relationship with God, God's in relationship to me, and I listen to God speaking to me in the *Lectio*. Then I speak to God, and I go back and forth in this way. But the lordship of God becomes more and more contemplative as it becomes more and more a communal realization of my non-distinction from God, non-distinct from me in God, wholly giving herself, or giving himself, to me as my very life. So, it gravitates towards a mystical lordship, a communion identification. That kind of nuancing is very important: What is it that makes the mystical explicitly mystical? And I think it's that.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. The next question comes from Ed. And I should say that with all these questions, they all came with a lot of thanks and praise for the podcast, Jim. So, Ed starts with many thanks for the wonderful podcast, but if I neglect to say that in all the emails, I do want to thank everyone for their support and their supportive words.

Kirsten Oates: So, Ed asks, "Towards the end of the podcast entitled 'Turning to Thomas Merton,' you talk about how Merton listened to God. Then you further reflect on ways that he shared what he heard, which then led to a deepening of self-awareness and, also, a deepening of the relationship with God. Jim, you seem to have this same kind of experience." Ed says, "I do not have this experience, but I'm hoping that by being patient with both a prayer practice, spiritual direction, and by listening to your podcast that I may find an opening into this mystery. Could you please speak a few words to those of us for whom these are uncharted waters in which we wish to swim? How do we really listen to God?"

Jim Finley: Yes. I'll answer in two ways. One is in the big picture. (I'm applying this now to Merton, and then I'll apply it to us.) I think in the big picture, you know, Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which he wrote as a monk in the monastery about his conversion and entering the monastery and his life, what he shares there is that when he was at Columbia University, he began to go through some very unexpected changes in his life, meeting certain people or moments of spiritual awakening, or he talks about being drawn to sit alone in churches, just to sit there. So, what starts to happen in him is a kind of the awakening of something in response to which it set his whole life off in a whole new direction. He started to do some studies when he was working with some literature with

Blake, like the mystical poetry of Blake, you can see where he was headed.

So, there's that. I think it could be understood in different ways. We could say we're going along, and we meet somebody, and we fall in love with the person. And we sense that God has led us to that person; and, therefore, God is speaking to me and inviting me to explore this. Or, I feel called to a certain kind of ministry, or I feel called to have a child, or I feel called to be more present to someone. So, I think that we hear God speaking to us when we hear something opening up within us, and we feel drawn to move in that direction as a way to be more grounded or a felt sense of what we're looking for. And so, that the arc of Merton's life is the arc of following that curve.

And I would say with me, it's the same thing. When I was at home going through all this trauma, and at fourteen years old when I first read Thomas Merton, it got to me, you know, it got to me. And so, I would say in kind of devotional sincerity, I believe that in the reading of Thomas Merton, God was speaking to me because I felt interiorly drawn to follow this admittedly unusual path for someone fourteen years old to want to follow. I mean that's what changed my life, see?

So, one, there's that. See, what is it that I feel my heart is asking of me? Like, there's something missing, and where do I begin to pick up an indication of the direction to move in to find it? We would say in terms of faith, that's God speaking to us in our heart. In a more intimate level, we might say a more immediate level, is how do I discern in prayer so that when I talk to God it isn't just that I read a passage in Merton or Scripture, I do that. But let's say that I put the book down, and in a kind of a prayer, I say to God, you know, "I sense that in the beauty of these words, I sense the beauty of your voice echoing in Merton's voice speaking personally to me, so that you're talking to me through this way, which is the quality that it has and why it touches me so." And I would say that kind of faith of being personally moved by or drawn by words is listening to God speak to you.

Jim Finley: Then we would also say and when we respond to that because I'm not Thomas Merton, you're non-Thomas Merton, but you are you; and, therefore, when you hear that word, how do you respond? How do you respond back out of how that word is uniquely-- And so, I say both in the big picture of life, in the immediate picture of the prayer, hearing God speak to you is a metaphor for interior intimations of God personally addressing you, or speaking to you, or calling to you in these subtle ways. And then in between prayer and life is your daily life. What are the promptings of your heart about the habits you're to form and how you're to live your life? And so, those are some perspectives that help me.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful, Jim. So, it even might be true for Ed when he asked, you know, about this desire to listen to God and facilitate a greater self-awareness, that even in asking the question, he's kind of on that path?

Jim Finley: That's right. Merton said, "The thing to know is the very fact that you're seeking God means you've already found God, or you wouldn't be seeking God." Merton says, "Deeper still, God's already found you." See? And so, I think you're exactly right. The

very fact that he is even drawn to listen to these reflections and to ask the question, bears witness in his heart that he is listening to God in his fidelity to sitting with it and then asking the question. That's true.

Kirsten Oates: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Jim Finley: I think it's true.

Kirsten Oates: And then a little shift he might make is because he asks you, Jim, "How do we really listen to God?" But in what you've just shared, maybe Ed could ask, "God, how do I really listen to you?"

Jim Finley: That's right: "How do I listen to you?" Because it's a learning curve to see how through Scripture, through prayer, through Merton, knowing that if I develop the habit of listening, like my daily rendezvous with God, it's like an intimate relationship with somebody. See, if I develop the habit of it—because it's subtle and delicate—"So, if I develop the habit of this, my ability now to hear you speaking to me, I have to trust that if I just stay with it, three months from now, six months from now, I'll be qualitatively more tuned into how you're speaking to me," and so on. And it's kind of like that, I think. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Along those same lines, Brian asks, "I'm curious to know what Merton had to say about how to know God's will in one's life?"

Jim Finley: Once Merton told me in [spiritual] direction, this would be typical of Merton, about God's will, "There's a fundamental sense we don't know God's will for certain. We can't claim that. We can't claim that." Once, he said, "Really, the key to monastic life is the freedom from having to know." There's no closure or a kind of certainty, which would be a fundamentalist chapter/verse that you can say right back. And so, it begins in kind of a humble acknowledgement that there are always ways on this earth that we don't know for certain, but what we can do is discern within our heart the direction our heart that draws us to turn towards and to be attended to and then, "By your fruits, you shall know them." See, if I do this, then if I listen very, very closely to how this is registering in my body, what are the effects of trying it on for size? Like, "I try this out for size, how's this affecting me?"

So, it's like an ongoing process, a kind of spiritual direction, really, with oneself. You're always making adjustments based on the attunements to the response of how this is unfolding because we're always subject to self-deception, and that's why it's grounded in humility. And so, it's in humility that we're always kind of open to gain insight to how we're unwittingly getting in our own way. We're kind of stridently trying to move in a certain direction, and it's our own will. We're kind of holding back and not doing something because we're afraid to try it because if we do, we might fail.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And so, we're always kind of very respectfully—this is the great thing about contemplation and prayer—it's a very kind of respectful-- And then you know that your growing quiet respect for yourself is an echo of God's infinite respect for you,

who's guiding you and prompting you to kind of ripen and mature and learn to be sensitized in these ways. And I think it has that feel to it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I shared in the introductory episode how my husband and I came on the dilemma of not being able to have children.

Jim Finley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kirsten Oates: And I remember this daily prayer of, "God, just show me your will here. Should I pursue fertility treatments? Should I adopt? Should I--" and just begging and praying desperately to try and discern God's will. And it's interesting because I never really got a clear black-and-white answer on that. But now on reflection, looking back over that period, and as I shared, being available and present, to be there for my sister in Texas when she was dying and to be there with my heart wide open to bring her son into our family. So, on reflection, I see God's will playing out longer term. Is that a common experience, Jim?

Jim Finley: I think it is. When we get to Eckhart later, there's a lovely commentary on Eckhart in Reiner Schürmann's *Wandering Joy*. He says, "You know," he said, "in life we say 'it so happened,' or we say, 'it came to pass,'" and, really, I think God's will is not some a priori upfront way of how do I know God's will but rather I find myself in a situation or with a certain person and in the midst of that, the unresolved nature of that situation, I kind of listen deeply to all things considered what seems to be the best, or even all things considered, what even seems to be possible because what I might want might not be possible. But if I accept that it's not possible, then if I just stay open to that, what is it I can discover about myself? And in hindsight, I was being offered something at the time that I didn't realize what I was being offered because I was imposing my own assumptions about my own question. And here, really, as it unfolded, it had unforeseeable ways of playing itself out. I think it's more like that, really.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Because in the end, my inability to find God's will and find a way forward was the way to move forward, to be open to this bigger event--

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: --it seems to me, looking backwards.

Jim Finley: Yeah. That's right. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. A question from Tony, "If possible, please clarify or expand upon, I'm getting a sense that if I continue with contemplative prayer so that as Merton puts it, 'the desire to please does in fact please,' and as you say," Jim, as you say, "'staying steadfast in the subtlety of the sense of wordless communion with God,' that the Holy Spirit will do the work to get me to the place of peace regardless of the external tempest of life." And so, Tony says, "I believe this is what you and the mystics have been saying all along and just wondering, wanting, a confirmation or a deeper understanding of that."

Jim Finley: I think so. In other words, I think that's a good way to put it, really. I want to put it first when some of these bigger-than-life moments, you know, when you're shooting the rapids and unforeseeable, amazing things are happening, unforeseeable sad things are happening,

and you don't know what it's asking out of you, like, where do I go from here? Life's like that sometimes, see?

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: So, I think what happens then is that we're in the midst of an immediate situation, like a pressing question, it might be interior, it could take all kinds of forms, and so, what I do as I sit with it and I act according to the lights I've been given knowing that there may be things that I'm not aware of, and I may have to make some course corrections as I lean into it. But that willingness to act in what the situation calls for according to the lights I have at the time, but acknowledging that there's maybe a lot more I don't understand than what I do understand, knowing that God will work with me in that. And so, I'll get so locked into that initial sense of what I thought it was, I'm always kind of willing to let go of what the assumption is, what you were saying earlier about yourself. And I think it's in that willingness to kind of let go to the previous assumption, to kind of let ourselves settle into a deeper, richer place that was not foreseeable from the original place. And I think that there are moments like that in life. And then what happens usually, for most people, it kind of levels out for a while, you know, we're not shooting the rapids all the time, thank God, but then it kind of levels out, and we get our bearings.

Thomas Merton once said, he said, "We spend most of our life swimming under water. Every so often our head breaks the surface, then we look around and get our bearings

Jim Finley: and then 'blip,' we go back under again." You're swimming along—"But when we get our bearings in calmer times, we can see how providentially the sequence of events that happened has led us to be where we are right now, and then we're getting ready for the next wave of unforeseeability." It's like that.

So then I think that same thing happens if we calibrate our heart to a fine enough scale, that same artistry goes on in the immediacy of interior prayer, it goes on in intimate relationship with somebody, it goes out in how I relate to my own solitude, do you know what I mean? There's a kind of a hands-on-- Rollo May has this essay on—the existential psychologist, Rollo May—on the pause. I might have mentioned it in one of the talks. And he says, "The Olympic high diver on the edge of the platform, just before the diver dives, the diver pauses, and he dives out of the pause, which renders it eloquent." So, I think a lot of the art form, is learning how to pause. It's like a hiatus in the momentum of an assumptive attitude that is surging forward.

When I was doing work with therapy and people, there are a lot of times as I was listening to them, I really didn't know what to say. I really didn't know what to say, but I thought if I waited and listened to the person until something came to me to maybe ask the person, and maybe they would get to a place they didn't know what to say either, we'd be in silence for a while. And I think a lot of intimate, like a dialogue, a lot of intimate exchanges have that willingness to pause. And an hour later you end up in some unexpected place that you didn't think that thing would take you. So, I think it happens in the big picture that way, and I think in the small picture, in the micro picture, it happens in meditation, in prayer, in relationships, and eventually it becomes habitual. There's that underlying kind of facility to roll with it and go with the flow, really, maybe it's the art of discernment. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It reminds me of what you went through in that initial introductory teaching on practice where you talked about eventually all of life becomes the teacher.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: All of life becomes the practice, and the whole world becomes your community. So that these ways of being in the practice can be the way we approach all of life.

Jim Finley: That's right. I refer to it as contemplative character transformation. See, what I'm really talking about is how can I learn to become more of the contemplative man or the contemplative woman I feel called to be? And so, the lifelong learning curve of kind of habituating into kind of a stabilized landing place of the cumulative effects of that sincere fidelity is kind of what we're looking for, really. And knowing that while as long as we're on this earth, we're subject to ongoing transformations, but I do think we come to a certain, stabilized clarity of accumulated efforts. Maybe it's understanding what wisdom is?

Kirsten Oates: Jim, just expanding on that question a little bit, could you unpack the role of the Holy Spirit? This question states that "The Holy Spirit will do the work to get me to the place of peace regardless of the external tempest of life."

Jim Finley: Yes. I like very much Raimon Panikkar, you know, the Christian thinker, and he is referring to the Trinity. And I like where he says, "The Trinity is Christ's mind." And so, sometimes Jesus spoke of God as Abba, Amma, like the loving God, the giver and sustainer of our life, "Our Father who art in heaven." But sometimes he says, "I will send the Paraclete, so that the Holy Spirit then is the indwelling spirit of God that awakens and illumines our heart to the mystery revealed to us in Christ," "Lord, that I might see," meaning "Lord that I might be awakened." And so, there is a certain intuitive, psychological quality to awakening, but there is the interior awakening of the indwelling spirit of God with unutterable groanings, see, groans that we might be awakened to this boundaryless love that loves us so in the midst of our wayward ways, and it's like that.

So, our faith then is not in ourself. My faith is not in myself. My faith is that if I stay sincere in my vulnerable attentiveness to God, I stay receptively open to the indication of God's will based on the feedback I get from my situation and with people. Then in that sincerity, God is and God will continue to lead and to guide me, and there is a kind of assurance. So, that's why I liked that little phrase by Merton, see, "If I have this desire in all that I do, you will lead me by the right road even though I may know nothing about it." That's a great statement. "Even if I'm ninety-nine, ninety-nine percent wrong, you are never wrong. And if I have this desire in the midst of my errors, you'd lead me so." I think that's the kind of faith we're talking about. Yeah. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. Yeah. Thank you. So, a question from Leif—and I hope I'm pronouncing that name correctly—he says that he experiences the world as filled with fear and worry: "We live in a world that stokes fear and worry, and keeps power through fear and worry, and prospers off fear and worry. So, it is that fear and worry about which I'm writing to you and which drives my question. How did the mystics overcome fear and worry? Is overcoming fear and worry an act of faith alone? What are the practical ways to do this and whom do we seek to do this?"

Jim Finley: Yes. I want to say in a general way first, then in the mystic way, like how do the mystics get beyond fear and worry because otherwise you would just be a worried mystic. [laughter] You'd be like a chronically scared mystic, you know, we're hoping for a better outcome. [laughter] This is my sense of this. I want to put it in terms of our Christian faith first. Jesus walked this earth, and Jesus saw that it was filled with fear and worry. He saw that. This is probably when he would tell us, "Fear



not.” But what he also saw in the capacity of each person was to be liberated from fear and worry. And they were liberated from fear and worry when they discovered that the love that was present in the midst of their situation. So, every encounter with Jesus, if you really look at each one of them, the person comes away different than they were when the encounter started. And what he saw, really, we might say, “Yes, there is fear and worry,” but he saw untapped potential for love and generosity and goodness in all of us, which he saw to be our God-given godly nature, created by God in the image and likeness of God, which had become lost but not destroyed. Okay?

So, how do we liberate that innate kind of divine invincibility of love that’s become buried under the rubble of internalized traumas, abandonments, and confusion. So, I would say that first, that the world that’s really true, you can look out at the world and see more fear and worry than you would even care to think about, but if you look really

Jim Finley: close, you’d find, also, more love than you can grasp, more generosity than you can grasp, more beauty than you can grasp, more surprises than you can grasp just in the goodness of people in the midst of their situation. And if you look closely, you can see you, too, are the mix of these two things. We all are.

So, it’s really true. But the problem is, is that in troubled times, the fear and the worry can eclipse. It’s, I guess, what trauma is. It gets internalized, and it closes off experiential access to that invincible loving, sustaining presence that’s infinitely more real but buried under the intensity of the dilemma. So, the question is how do we then free ourselves from that intensity to kind of set free the underlying, innate, much more real goodness that was there? So, that’s one basic way to look at this. And we might say, we do that through our life. You know, we do that through healing relationships, and authenticity, and humility, and service, and care, and sincerity, and prayers—you have your life, I have mine, you know. We’re in the middle of a situation here, like this. So, there’s that, let’s say. So, it’s a therapy question, it’s a spiritual direction question, it’s a where are-we-at-in-our-life question.

Another question would be, “How can I learn to be rigorously honest and endlessly tenderhearted toward the ways I’m contributing to the pain I’m trying to free myself from? There is a pain, but how can I learn to be rigorously honest about the ways I’m contributing to it or perpetuating it that prevent me from being the endlessly tenderhearted person I’m called to be? How do I find that?” And that calls for kind of an experiential understanding of looking back at own life of internalized fears, internalized abandonments, and how we ritualistically reenact those. And so, all of us are going through this together. You know, you have your sense of this, I have mine.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: And so, there’s that. The mystics, I want to put it poetically, that for the mystic, there was a moment that rendered all such concerns irrelevant, in a moment where the mystic and God mutually disappeared as other than each other, and in the boundaryless fulfillment of that oneness extended unexplainably in all directions. When the moment passes, that initial touch, let’s say, then the mystic, “I will not break faith with my awakened heart in my most childlike hour, in the hour of sorrow, in the arms of the Beloved, between two lines of a poem, looking out the kitchen window, in prayer, something happened to me, but I do not need to nor can I understand, but I know that it is the truth of every moment of my life.”

Teresa of Ávila—whom we’ll be looking at next—she calls it a certain “unshakable certainty that you cannot explain,” and that’s the mystic, see? There is an overwhelming oneness that utterly overwhelms. It’s an overwhelming realization of an infinite love that utterly transcends even as it utterly permeates the fragmentation of our lives. Because I think without that, see, we are always

on this curve of whether or not we're going to be able to get past the broken place in time before the buzzer goes off. So, you're going to be on your death bed, and you still have a few unresolved things. [laughter] I'm working on it, it's kind of like this. See, but what if on our deathbed, we're in this kind of surrendered state where everything unresolved falls asunder in the presence of the love that's taking us to itself in the presence of the unresolved thing?

Jim Finley: And I think that's the mystical intuition, like that, and that grows and deepens over time for us. That's my sense of it.

Kirsten Oates: So, we don't resolve fear and worry, we just find a deeper place to surrender to.

Jim Finley: I think in relative consciousness of relative reality, it's a psychotherapy issue. We do resolve fear and worry. In the liturgy, "Free us from undue anxiety." Maybe we're anxious, but we have reasons to be anxious. No wonder, look what's happening. We're supposed to be anxious because anxiety is then that wake-up call to tend to something and not neglect it so it doesn't get worse. And all things considered, what could I possibly do to move in a better direction where I have more self-efficacy, I have more understanding, I can get past. So, there's that. There is that. But what we're talking about is how is the freedom from fear and worry transcended in faith, see, "Fear not," and then how does that faith ripen into a mystical clarity? And in that faith, mystical clarity, we don't resolve it. It actually, it resolves. It is like we don't attain it, but it attains us in our inability to attain it, which is the gift of tears. See, it's not resolved because in some ways ultimately already resolved. See, nothing's missing anywhere in all directions, [music begins] and we're moving into the unfolding of that realization, realized eschatology of the mystery [unintelligible 00:37:30].

Kirsten Oates: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment. [music ends]

This reminds me of an experience I had recently. My husband and I, and I think a lot of people, during this time of coronavirus have been turning to nature as a place of solace and a place to help relieve anxiety and fear. We took our dogs on a walk in nature up in the headlands close to where I live. It was beautiful, and I really was feeling much more serene and calm, and nature's so beautiful and a gift that way. And then as we were walking down the hill, we had our two dogs, and people started yelling, because we're social distancing, yelling across at us: "There's a coyote just around the bend." [laughter] And, you know, I've got a little dog, and so the fear and worry for my dog, and pulling him in tight, and so even in the midst of the most beautiful of moments in this world, there are things that can [crosstalk 00:38:50].

Jim Finley: Yeah, I want to share something. I think that's true. Merton was big on this, on nature. He said, "Although I walked in those woods, how can I claim to love them? One by one I shall forget the names of individual things." So, he used to spend long hours taking long walks in the woods. And, you know, I'm here fortunately, the ocean's right outside the door here, and with my wife's passing the sadness, and everything, and we used to watch the sunsets every night. But something else as I look out at the ocean, really, what I think of is, Martin Heidegger, the philosopher, he said, "There are two ways of understanding the horizon." He said, "The horizon can be seen as the point over which we can't see." So, I look out at the ocean and there's the horizon. He said, "But the horizon can be seen as the point at which the unmanifested is manifesting itself." And so, the world was God's horizon, see? So, I could

sit every night looking at the ocean, but it's inexhaustible. I will never exhaust that because the world embodies the love of God as present to me, and it can restore me to myself. It can restore me to myself, but so, too, with all these modalities of incarnate presence in our life. And I think that's what we're exploring here together. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). This is a question from Annette, and the next couple of questions are more about Merton the man more than his teaching. So, Annette asks, "I've read more of Merton's journals than his books. I love them. I think they are full of spiritual insight as well as his terrific sense of humor, but it seems to me that contentment was elusive for him. He always wanted to go somewhere different, try new things and, of course, he chafed against the authority of his superiors. I get the sense that he often felt happiness was only to be found in the things he couldn't have. [laughter] Does this make sense to you, Jim? Do you feel there's a disconnect between Merton the teacher and Merton the man?"

Jim Finley: That's a good question because I think it applies to all of us, too, I think. This is my sense of Merton having lived with him. You see it in his writings. You know, first of all, Merton was a very brilliant, very energized, very motivated, insightful person. He didn't just write, he wrote feverishly. He says he's so driven to write, he thinks if he dies and goes to purgatory, he'll ask God to give him some asbestos to write on [laughter], "I have to write about purgatory." He was passionate about things and strong about things and desired to become a hermit, go to the Carthusians, be a hermit. And so, there was that kind of energized quality about him, which I think added to his insomnia and to some of his somatic issues. That's just where he was.

But I also think it's true that he saw that about himself, accepted it about himself, had come to terms with it, and there was a—in the core of him, my sense of him—was a very profound, contemplative inner stillness and clarity about him, and he really lived out of that. I like Thich Nhat Hahn. Thich Nhat Hahn speaking of our own personality proclivities, where he says, "Hello, habit energies." [laughter] See, we're always something.

Kirsten Oates: Mm.

Jim Finley: So, how can we learn to see it, understand it, work with it, and even use it to our advantage? And so, I think Merton is that way. He's a paradoxical figure. But really when you read the journals, he's not making that up. What shined through all that intensity was really a divine serenity and clarity. That's what make his teachings ring so true, so true.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: The abbot told me once at the monastery there after Merton's death, he said that when Merton was a hermit at the monastery, there was a nun who was writing her doctoral dissertation on Merton. And so, she got permission, the abbot said he would take her up to the hermitage so she got to meet Thomas Merton in the hermitage. She was very thrilled by that. The story was that she told Merton, "You know, I based my entire life on your teachings." He said, "Well, you missed my teaching because my teaching is to base your life on the unfoldings of your own heart, and through your own self-acceptance of yourself, and the situation in which you find yourself." And so, that's key for Merton, you know, the integrity of having come to terms with the other solitary uniqueness of who we are, and

we're a collection of assets and liabilities. We all are. And what we do with that and grounded in what transcends it so it can speak through it.

Jim Finley: And, by the way, however conflicted he was, he was not conflicted enough to [not?] [00:42:20] touch the hearts of thousands and thousands of people. And he wasn't pretending, you know, that clarity was coming right out of the center of who he was. So, when I sat with him in direction, I could just sense I was in the presence. I used to listen to Merton, and he was introducing me to St. John of the Cross. I would walk out into the woods with John of the Cross, 16th century Spain, sit beneath a tree and open John of the Cross and read it out loud to myself. It's the same voice. See, he carries the lineage of the mystic voice of the Christian tradition, and he was clarified in that peace, in the givens of his personality situation.

By the way, that doesn't mean, therefore, that we don't have to take responsibility for working on things which in different ways are hurtful to ourselves and others. That's the moral imperative. He had to do that. I have to do that. We all have tendencies to withhold intimacy, or to be angry, to be resentful, to want to take charge, to shirk responsibility. We all have that. But at the same time, it comes to a certain level, like saying, "Look, Lord, I'm kind of at the edge of myself here, and if you don't kind of step in and take me to yourself as I am, this isn't looking good for me," do you know what I mean? So, we're not trying to psychologize it, "So, once I do the checklist and I've overcome all these things, then you'll take me to yourself. You're already taking me to yourself in the midst of the unresolved thing," and I think that that harmonious balance between those two things is key.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Are you willing to say whether the superiors deserved his, Thomas Merton's, anger or kind of concern?

Jim Finley: They did. And I would just share some examples because they're kind of public. When I was at the monastery, all our mail was opened and read by the abbot. And you were allowed to write four times a year, and you had to hand your letter in opened. So, yeah, it was a sign of, kind of-- So, the abbot, he would read Merton's letters, and Merton would get an award from a university, or something. So, the abbot would accept the award on Merton's behalf and not tell Merton that he did it, see? [laughter] And Merton would go, you know, like, "What the f---," blah, blah, blah. [laughter] It would drive him crazy.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And he also saw in the novices—I was right out of high school—he really kind of promoted emotional immaturity in the novices and didn't really be with them in a mature way. So, there were just things about him that he really felt was really-- What upset him about the abbot, I think those things were upsetting. Other things I think are just attributed to personality differences.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: He took it in stride. They had a deep respect for each other and, yeah, that was my impression.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you for sharing that.

Jim Finley: By the way, he also said once-- In the Cistercian Order, there are houses all over the world, and whenever an abbot dies, at least back then, in the order, the monks could elect a Trappist monk anywhere in the world. And because he was so well known, anytime an abbot died or retired, they would vote for Thomas Merton. They wanted Thomas Merton to come be their abbot.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: He could decline, you know. So, this is what got Merton in trouble, things like this. He wrote up a notice on the cloister bulletin board. He said, "I have made a private vow to God to never be an abbot; therefore, I cannot and will not accept any nominations to be abbot." And then he said, [laughter] he said, "Besides, why would I want to be abbot of a community of guilt-ridden, introverted monks," see? And then that would raise a furor. Everyone would kind of-- And he meant it, [laughter] but he kind of meant it like if you can't take a joke, lighten up. So, he had that kind of quality to him. It was very funny, I thought, geez.

Kirsten Oates: [laughter] I can imagine the novices were like, "Uh, did you read what Merton put in there?"

Jim Finley: The abbot went off, you know, the professed one, because he was talking about all of them. He said, "Give the novices a break. They just got here. You guys have been here for years." [laughter]

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The novices would have been more excited to see that kind of thing taking place.

Jim Finley: See, I think that a lot of this from Merton is, see, when Merton wrote a *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it went on the New York Times Best Seller list it was in World War II. People saw a lot of death, and people came flooding into Gethsemani. They had people sleeping on it-- So, a lot of people came to Gethsemani because of Thomas Merton. I was one of them, you know, I was one of them. And so, I think the novices, not all of them, but I think most of the novices already came there because they saw in his writings this mystical sin [00:48:18], but it doesn't mean that everyone professed in the house saw him that way. When he got his hermitage, they called it—his name was Father Louis in the monastery—they called it "Uncle Louie's Place," and they called his hermitage "Shangri-La," you know, like, "Who does he think he is?" You know? So, in just human life, you know--

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Human interactions even in a monastery. Yeah.

Dominique asks, "James, can you talk to us about detachment and the meaning of the following quote in Thomas Merton's book, *The Inner Experience*: 'He's quite content to be considered an idiot if necessary.' Could you share your experience about detachment and being an idiot?"

Jim Finley: I would understand it this way: Let's say, clearly, there was a sense for Merton, he was very clear that he wasn't an idiot. There was also a sense that he humbly knew he wasn't beyond the possibility of sometimes acting like one. He knew that, but he was not an idiot.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: What he's talking about in that passage is I'm perfectly content to act in such a way. See, sometimes I think to be deeply faithful to what matters most to other people will look like infidelity. And, likewise, with the other people, it looks like fidelity is a rigid conformity to externals where you're measuring up to and conforming to the collective expectations of others. So, I'm perfectly willing to be an idiot, but being an idiot to act in such a way that everyone will like scratch their head, like, "What are you doing?" And he said, "So, I'm willing to stand in the solitude of that."

"If what I'm doing is I've checked it out in my own heart, that I'm doing this prophetically because I think I'm called to do it. And, also, I'm very open for any input that could show me where I need to make a corrective course here. So, in that sense then, I'm not trying to act in such a way where my primary norm is a collective assumption about how I'm supposed to act. As a matter of fact, the whole idea of monastic life should free us from that, from the ideology of the collective in terms of self-esteem and what people think of me." A lot of prophetic activity sometimes means we're called to do something that the people around us experience like that. I think it has been in those terms. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That makes sense, Jim. There are a lot of people that would look at Jesus on the cross and think that was a bit of an idiotic move.

Jim Finley: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They would say, "You know, you brought this on yourself. We warned you. You keep saying those things to the Pharisees, this will not go well with you." I mean, he saw crucifixions happen all the time. "Look where it got you." I'm sure, you know, there was that. And so, yeah, anyway, I would see it in that way.

By the way, so that insight in psychology, by the way, if someone is in a dysfunctional family system in which they were abused sexually or physically, or abandoned, and the person gets help and breaks free from that dysfunctional system, the members of the family system will turn on that person as abandoning them, as being crazy, "You're lying. That can't be true," and the more they identify with the perpetrator than with them because if what the person is saying is true, they have to radically rethink their assumptions about themselves, and so on. So, sometimes you have to be very willing to stand firm and kind of be quietly alone in a humble, nonreactive, vulnerable way to move on with your life. And I think it has those connotations to it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Do you feel that, Jim, when someone were to name another person an idiot kind of in this reactive way, if there's no sense of compassion, if there's no sense of curiosity, then it's not worth taking seriously?

Jim Finley: Yes. I would say this: Let's say he's using "idiot," a tongue-in-cheek, meaning idiot metaphorically to make a point.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: You're raising an interesting issue. Sometimes when we've been traumatized, we internalize the perpetrator. So, there's a voice that speaks to the childlike part of ourself in an accusatory, caustic, and unrelentingly mean way, and that child inside believes every word, see, "You

idiot. Look what you did now. You really goofed this time,” and the person ritualistically reenacts within themselves, and likewise, they’ll reenact that with people. As a matter of fact, you can be unconsciously drawn to people to ritualistically reenact that with, like that. So, as soon as someone calls you an idiot but they don’t mean it, like they’re winking at you, like it’s a joke, “I love you to death, you idiot. You know you’re very smart. I’m glad you’re here.”

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: But they actually mean it in a demeaning way. Then you wrap yourself in white light now that person’s not treating you the way you deserve. And you say to them something like, “Look, if you have a disagreement with me, I want to hear it from you. I do, but I cannot, will not, and I do not allow myself to be spoken to in a mean way that doesn’t respect the way I do, and I don’t want to talk to you in a way that doesn’t honor the way you deserve to be spoken to, either,” see? And so, I think that’s an important psychological insight about caustic or accusatory people and how we deal with that, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. That’s really helpful. Last one is around, “How did someone like Thomas Merton relate to institutional religion and more specifically, the existence of different religions with different and contradicting truth claims?”

Jim Finley: This is a big question, really, from Merton. So, some basic ways to start looking at it-- By the way, in his books *Zen and The Birds of Appetite* and *Mystics and Zen Masters* and in two collected works of essays on Merton, *Thomas Merton and Taoism* and *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story on Mystical Islam*, you get a really good sense of interfaith dialogue in Merton. Basically, I think Merton, this would be one way of looking at it: I think Merton would say that what we’re speaking of here is the kind of a universal God-given dignity of being a human being, okay, as a *capax dei*, as a capacity for God, as a capacity for spiritual awakening and to assent to that. So, what you have, you have religion as historically, culturally specific lineages of that universal awakening.

And so, there’s the Jewish lineage which emerged out of it the Christian lineage. There’s the Hindu deep yoga tradition out of which emerged Buddhism, the Sikh tradition in India, the Muslim tradition, like this. So, what you have is that. Now at that level, you might have, speaking of levels of spiritual maturity and clarity. So, the way I see it is this, imagine there’s a large circular area, and across the surface of that area is everyone who ever has or is saying anything, or thinking anything about God, or who we are in relationship to God. And we’re on that area right now because we’re talking about God. So, we’re there. Then let’s say we divide it up like a pie, and we slice the pie up in different colors. So, there’s the Hindu pie, the Buddhist pie, the Jewish pie, the Sikh pie, and they tend to be historically cultural traditions of awakening.

Then you divide it out from the center going out to the circumference, and out on the edge are people who say the things about God that are the easiest to say, which are assertions that would define God, define self, and that kind of ideological fundamentalistic set of things. And where people at that level, where those two pieces of the pie touch each other, they argue with each other. We’re arguing over our position. When you move in toward the center, closer to the center, it’s not like that. What you have is the devotional sincerity of those that have been touched and called by God within their tradition to be more loving, to

be more open, to be more accepting toward God, toward themselves, for other people, and in that kind of devotional sincerity of enriched actual living, you don't tend to get that.

They see these teachings more as historically, culturally specific metaphors, parables or riddles of this mystery that echoes in our heart when we're at God in prayer, and so on. You get to the very center and you have the mystic, the all-encompassing center, and the mystic in the all-encompassing center and the people as they gather from these different corners, from the pieces of the pie, as they gather close to the center, they recognize each other. They recognize each other, and there's a profound respect for each other. He said, "Religion will not survive religion based on tribal consciousness." We can see that in the world today. "But if those who draw close to the center in their mutual recognition would bear witness to the underlying unity that permeates and transcends all the traditions, religious consciousness could be a source of world peace, world unity," and he saw himself as one of those people, tried to be.

I think, also, the Living School with Richard Rohr is the same way. I think anything that makes any sense, you see people, they kind of see that respect. We have so much to learn from each other and respect. And the more we learn about another tradition, the more it deepens our respect for our own. Merton, right at his death when he was over in Bangkok, Thailand, and just before he died, learning from all these Buddhists, he wrote a letter to the monks. He said, "The more I'm with my Buddhist brothers and sisters, the more I appreciate my faith in Christ. May he live in the hearts of all of us." See?

And so, there was that deepening faith Christ consciousness that he saw echoed and reverberating in the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hahn, and the Sufis, and I think that's a beautiful stance for all of us to aspire to.

Kirsten Oates: It's very inspirational.

Jim Finley: It is. It is.

Kirsten Oates: He was a wonderful role model for that. [Corey, I'm just going to pause there so you can do the recorded questions and then I might just do an ending with you, Jim, so it feels like a proper ending.]

Jim Finley: Okay. Good.

John: [recording] "Hi, Jim."

Jim Finley: Hi.

John: [recording] "Thank you for doing this. It's been a delight to listen to this because I'm a full fan of the mystic and contemplative tradition. This past August, I drove down myself to Kentucky and visited Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, and I stayed there for a silent week. It was rather impressive to walk among some of those same halls and some of the same forests that you even mention, apparently, walking through as well, and it was a transformative time. I loved it, but it connected me with a number of things and even brought me to a few questions. I only have two, and I'm hoping that you could answer them. First is, do you ever get pushback for using the word mystic? I seem to because I think it's a buzzword that



makes some people uncomfortable, and I'd love to hear how you've helped redeem the word mystic for some people. But then, also, this whole idea of returning back to secular culture, suburban culture, and maintaining a contemplative lifestyle, I would love to hear you say more about what does it look like to be a contemplative outside of the monastery. Thank you so much for doing this. I look forward to hearing what you might have to say about this. Thank you."

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's good. First, about the word "mystic" and pushback, I would say that in the general population of churchgoers, or anyone concerned about religion in a general sense, in the present cultural milieu, you would get pushback because really there has kind of been a societal estrangement from what the word even means, see? Do they have projections about it, and things about it, like that? So, they're acting out of kind of hearsay in passing on the way to something else, and they toss out the objection. See, what would be more encouraging for such people is to say, "You know, it's interesting you use that word. What does it mean? Do you have anything to read? Like, what could I read that could help me begin to have an intelligent understanding of what that is?" And so, there's that.

I tend not to get that because when I give silent contemplative retreats, everyone by the very fact they're there, just like everyone listening to these podcasts, probably everyone listening to the podcast, they might get pushback from certain things I might say, everyone has their opinions, but there's no basic pushback to how mystical that is: "I find it quite disturbing [that] you're so mystical. I'm going elsewhere." It's because that it's so mystical is why you're listening.

So, when I'm on the retreat, the people are there because what they find is this, I think. Thomas Merton once said, "There are a lot of Catholics losing their faith and they're losing it in church because the church is not bearing witness to its own mystical lineage, which is fine," he said. We mentioned this in one of the talks actually. "The soul knows

Jim Finley: where it needs to go to find what it needs to find," it goes to yoga, or Zen, or something, he said, "but the tragedy is how badly it's needed for the church to bear witness to it," which is what we're attempting to do here at the Living School, at Contemplative Outreach, the International Christian Meditation Society [01:04:00 NOTE: does Jim mean The World Community for Christian Meditation?

And so, I think, really, people who have been touched with mystical longings, actually not only don't I get pushback, they find it very hard to find someone who's willing to talk about it with them. They'll even say that when I'm giving a retreat talk. They'll raise their hand and say, "Why don't I hear this in church?" See, "This is what I've been waiting to hear in church. How come this isn't heard?" So, I think we just need to be, you know, sensitive to where people are, and if we do use the word, you could try it out and see if they're receptive to it. Say, "Would you be interested in finding out?" A lot of them would say, "No, I'm not, actually." But if they are, suggest something, something doable like Thomas Merton's Thoughts in Solitude, or something, and say, "Try it on for size. It might not be where you are right now, which is fine."

Here's another thing to say historically, "In actual fact, the mystical tradition has been at the heart of the Catholic tradition down through all the centuries, back through the Desert

Fathers, the Desert Mothers, back to Christ spending whole nights alone in prayer, the monastic, contemplative mystical tradition, Francis, and Clare, and John of the Cross, and Teresa, Meister Eckhart, The Cloud of Unknowing,” all these things, you know, it’s like a rich lineage, and people who are drawn to it are searching for someone who can help them better understand and how they can experience it. So, I would answer that way.

In terms of how you live it, that’s what we’re saying about find your practice and practice it. Find your teaching and follow it. Find your community and enter it. So, I think how we live it is a fidelity to our daily rendezvous with God in which in childlike sincerity, we open ourselves to this vulnerable, intimate experience. And we take a text like Merton, whatever mystic, and we use that teacher that we’re reading to guide us in how to open ourselves to God in this way. If you’re fortunate enough where there’s a retreat house near you, and you know at the retreat house there’s a spiritual director who is a contemplative person, where they offer contemplative retreats, if you’re fortunate, you can go sit with the person who is this way. But I think the main thing is if you’re faithful to your practice, you kind of explore from within yourself and ground yourself in it.

And then you turn to the teaching, and you sit in a heartfelt way with the beauty of these passages. And little by little by little, you internalize your own personal experience in the practice. You internalize the teaching, and you find the community in that union with the mystic that you’re sitting with, you find community and just one other person in whose presence you’re not alone on this path, and there’s a longstanding lineage of awakened hearts, and you’re part of that lineage. And I think that’s how we do it. I think we just do it by being a contemplative man or woman in the midst of the world, in the midst of the situation in which we find ourselves, and I think that’s how we do it.

Jim Finley: There’s something solitary about it. You know, there’s something anonymous about it, but it should be that way. You just stay open knowing you’ll share it with everyone if you meet them in a loving, engaged and real way, you’re sharing this. If you look for a moment where someone may create a moment to talk about it openly, it often doesn’t happen, but it can. And if you can find a contemplative prayer group in your area, centering prayer group, or something, you can kind of go there and find kinship there, and that can be very helpful. That’s why I would suggest those things.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. That question was from John. I don’t think he gave his name at the beginning, but thank you, John, for that great question. And then a question from Brad.

Brad: [recording] “Hey, my name is Brad. I live in Toronto, Canada. I’m loving this podcast. Thank you for releasing it. It’s so good. I just finished listening to the most recent one on your response to the COVID-19 crisis that we’re in, and the imagery that you gave of walking up to Jesus and whispering your deepest fear and then listening back to what he would say to you, it really spoke to me. And what I realized in that moment is that I’m actually not that afraid of this virus and the whole corona pandemic that we’re in. But what I am afraid [of] is that I’m squandering my life. I’m afraid that I am not showing up in my relationships, to the gifts that I have, my ability to communicate, my love for music and to communicate that with people, to share that with people. And I could feel just Jesus whispering to me something to the essence of, ‘This universe has been in evolution for billions of years. I’m in no hurry. [Jim chuckles.] I’m in no hurry with you,’ and that really

stuck with me.”

“And one statement that I really appreciated you saying James, is that ‘I will not break faith with my awakened heart.’ And so, my question is that my awakened heart wants to speak, it wants to share, it wants to get into action because I end up being more on the contemplative side. So, how do I do that? I know meditation is a practice that can help me towards that, but I’d love to hear your thoughts on someone like myself who freezes but doesn’t want to remain frozen. Thanks.”

Jim Finley: Yes. You know, I would say, first, some things that might help, I think first of all is knowing that sometimes what happens in situations like this, let’s say the virus, you’re exactly right. It isn’t so much maybe for you per se, the issue isn’t being afraid of the virus itself, but rather what it’s done is it’s increased patterns within yourself of distance, or indifference, or postponed gratification about things that matter most, or whatever, and I think that awakening then is a gift provided it sets in motion the desire for what can I do about it. Next, once you see those tendencies to do that, then the next step would be you can’t, by the very fact you see it, they don’t automatically go away. It isn’t, “Oh, now that I see it, that’s gone. Now I’m this engaged, loving, attentive person. Every moment counts.” Probably not, actually.

Then you realize, this is how I put it, one way that I put it: See, there’s that in you that sees this, like a wake-up call to be more whatever, but then you can see there’s that in you that doesn’t see it yet. And it’s probably a part that formed some time back, an internalized trauma, an abandonment, because it’s trying to stay safe or it’s trying to survive. It’s trying to get through another day. It’s kind of learned how to be that way not because it’s bad, it’s just because it’s an internalized thing. So, what we do is there’s that in us that sees it, the very bad in you that’s asking this question, then we endlessly circle back to be there for and with the part that doesn’t see it yet. And we walk with that, and sit with that, and listen to that.

And then you say, “Well, you know what, maybe we don’t want to move too fast because if we try to change too fast, you’ll resist.” Therefore, what would be like a safe way to begin experimenting just being a little bit more initiating? What would it be like to be a little more-- What would that look like? And that willingness to work on one’s self that way and then trying it on for size and then coming back and trying it again, knowing that every time you return to prayer, you’re returning to the love that loves you so in the midst of the sincerity of those efforts in your peace is independent of how it’s turning out, it’s really based on the depth of the surrender and the sincerity of your effort. And I think sensitivities along those lines are helpful.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. Well, we’ve come to the end of our first question-and-response session for Turning to the Mystics. I want to thank everyone again for sending in such wonderful, heartfelt, helpful questions. And, Jim, thank you for this amazing, deep teaching you’re providing us. I think we can be unpacking what you shared today for many weeks, if not for the rest of our lives. [music begins] So, thank you so much.

Before we leave, I did want to share that many of the emails we received offered a deep sense of care and concern and love for you, Jim, as you face the loss of your wife, and just a tremendous amount of gratitude for the way you show up to continue teaching and sharing

your life with us. So, Jim, we love you. We thank you. We're grateful for you.

Jim Finley: I'm grateful to share it. Thank you.

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](mailto:podcasts@cac.org) or send us a voicemail at [cac.org/voicemails](http://cac.org/voicemails). All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon. [music ends]