

Turning to the Mystics



Dialogue: The Sixth and Seventh
Mansions (Part 1)

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell, music]

Welcome to Turning to the Mystics, Season 2, where we're turning to the 16th century Christian mystic, St. Teresa of Ávila. I had planned to engage Jim in a dialogue around Mansions six and seven today, but as you'll hear, I didn't get that far. As you may be experiencing, these concepts are so deep that I spent quite a bit of time unpacking many of them one at a time. And so, we will have a second episode next week where we get deeper into Mansions six and seven.

Before we get started, I just wanted to do a shout-out to my nieces and nephews who live in the Philippines, who I miss very much, and who I mentioned in this episode. So, love to Sam, Ottie, Lulu, and Georgie Grace. And so, here's the dialogue with Jim.

So, listening to your two talks and reflecting on Teresa's writing in the Interior Castle, what she's trying to get at, what you're trying to get at in these mystical Mansions, it's so subtle, it's so hard to grasp. So, for me personally, I feel more of a resonance of truth in my heart about what's being said, but I don't understand it all. I don't. And I don't, I can't go to my own experience to find it all. Is that normal for someone who's trying to track with you?

Jim Finley: Yes. She says this several times through her book, really. She says, "I'm speaking of things which cannot be understood except to the extent you've experienced them." And she says, "Even the one who has experienced them can't conceptually grasp them." But in hearing it, we recognize the beauty of it because we recognize this kind of primordial call to this union with God, which is already occurring as the very reality of being created by God in the image and likeness of God. So, we're listening, and we get intimations of something. We intimate the relevance of it at some very deep level. We can also be very aware that we can't begin to grasp. That's why we need to be very patient with ourselves and bring it to prayer and walk with it. But it's just like that. Because if it wasn't like [that], it would be something we could explain. It would just be more of ourself. Do you know what I mean? The ego would explain it and move on to the next topic. This is the intimate immediacy of the unexplainable accessing us. It's kind of like that, I think.

Kirsten Oates: So then, how do we think about someone like Teresa who is explaining it? Because I think she gives us the sense that, "Oh, I should be able to explain it like Teresa does." So, she's someone who went all the way to the seventh Mansion and then she's explaining it to us. Am I getting that right?

Jim Finley: Yes. Let's say there's two things here. Let's say, yes, Teresa is someone who's reached this state, this unitive state, we'll be talking about a little later. She did do that. But there are people who reach this state who can't put words to it like she does. That's what the gift of the mystic teacher is, that there are mystics who are graced with this state as their vocation. But then there are those who are graced with putting words to it. But notice what she's doing. She's putting words to what she's experienced. See, it's her experience, but the integrity of her sharing of her experience, she's also very aware because she did a lot of spiritual direction with the nuns coming to her. So, she's very aware that who she's really writing for is the person who's being interiorly drawn in this direction. And she knows how hard it is to find

trustworthy guidance because we're subject to self-deception. We're subject to the very things we think are hindrances are actually taking us to the deeper place in all of that.

So, I think that said, she's gifted in two ways: One, the mystical union itself as part of the charism of holiness, it's a manifestation of holiness, a dimension of holiness, but then also the gift of articulating it for the benefit of others, which is us, you know, we read her and she's trying to help us.

Kirsten Oates: And she says in the sixth Mansion that it's actually hard to find spiritual direction, a spiritual director that can understand what you go through. So, this mystical experience is by no means mainstream, not even in church leadership, not even in roles in the church that are there to guide us and teach us, is that right?

Jim Finley: Yeah, here's how I put it. Here's how I put it. In my, over the years, talking to the people in direction on retreats, they say to me, there are people that they come to silent retreats, so, they're drawn to this. And there are people who have not, they don't have a spiritual director. They don't have someone with whom they can dialogue to help them find their way. They don't have any director at all. There are other people who do have a director, a man or woman of deep prayer who helps them with the Scriptures, and Christ Consciousness, and the Gospel and discipleship. But when it comes to this, they don't know how to go there. Or, there's people who have had such a director and lost their director because he died or ran off with the cook, or did some damn thing, or he moved to Idaho, something, but every once in a while, you'll find somebody with a director.

So, when I was with Merton, we would talk like this. And he would say, "Once in a while, you'll find someone with whom you can speak about such things," which was him. He said, "But, you'll spend most of your life without such a person, which is your solitude, depending on God." So, you have your life, you have your Scriptures, and then what you have is the teacher, Teresa, and her deathless presence shines out and touches us like that.

So, what we find in the leadership of the church, is people who are good people, they feel called to ministry, it's their vocation. Hopefully, they're teaching the Gospel and helping people. There's all of that. But people who are drawn to this, who come to the retreats, they'll say, "Why don't I hear this in church? How come no one talks like this at church?" Sometimes you have deep Bible study, or you have centering prayer, different things, but it is there, but you really have to search.

Sometimes I suggest that people, they approach a local retreat house and look for retreat houses that offer contemplative retreats and see if there's a spiritual director there [that] does contemplative spiritual direction, but you have to search for it. And that's part of the loneliness of the sixth Mansion is being misunderstood by people. You know, it's so hard to find somebody who is himself or herself in this, that can guide you in it. And that's part of what this path is like. There's a certain loneliness in it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And even for those who don't find themselves in one of the later Mansions, but they're drawn to this kind of path, and there's no one to illuminate it or to even kind of be able to understand that deep, deep longing for that, for that kind of deeper path?

Jim Finley: Yeah. Yeah. Let's say it this way. Let's say we're talking about the first three Mansions. And

so, we're talking about devotional sincerity in discipleship of following Christ in a daily rendezvous paired with Lectio Divina. We take in the word. We reflect on it, Meditatio, the prayer, "Help me with this." We carry that throughout the day, there's that. And that has its own mystery, its own challenges, its own gifts. There's all of that. But let's say a person in the midst of that, which is holiness, you know, that's where the holiness is, is in the fidelity to that. Let's say a person in the midst of that begins to experience, which she talks about in the fourth Mansion, where it's not me in prayer seeking God, but I begin to experience God's presence silently flowing into my presence in a kind of a communal oneness between God and myself beyond words, which brings me into a state of quiet and that I know not what to make of it and say, where can I find somebody to help me to understand?

And that's where it gets. You have to find someone who himself or herself-- Sometimes you find just a fellow traveler, you can share notes with each other, and support each other. But sometimes you find someone who's a bit further down the road than you are. And they're very familiar with how challenging this can be because it's so delicate or so subtle. See, how do we kind of-- And so, that's what makes reading someone like Teresa just a gift, really, we sense her, the clarity, you know, with which she speaks and touches words of encouragement in fidelity to this.

Kirsten Oates: And it's so rare that these teachers-- There's not a book every year on this kind of thing, like there are on many other topics, but they seem to come along in kind of longer cycles. And so, we're drawn back to a teacher like Teresa, Thomas Merton, another one, but, yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah, I think this. My sense is this, is that there are clearly people, it's very rare that they have the teaching gift like she had, that has such stature and breadth like Merton. Like in each age, God raises up people that bear witness to that and thousands and thousands of people were drawn to Merton for that person. But what I also found in my travels is that there are people in monasteries, and in retreat houses, and in life, who are very immersed in this and are sharing it in one-on-one contemplative, spiritual direction with people. And it's just there, but it doesn't draw attention to itself. Do you know what I mean? So, you have to keep your ear to the ground and listen, and go looking, like where can I sit in the presence of someone I can tell is ripened with this and who can sit with me, and they're there, but it's kind of hidden. It's hidden in a tender way, and you have to just stay open and keep staying open. And in the meantime, you have life, and the Scriptures, and prayer, and Teresa, these mystics, that's why we're studying these mystics, so we can sit in their presence like this.

Kirsten Oates: And, really, she's about, and these mystics are about, helping us understand who we are, not something above and beyond just who we are, and who we are in God. Is that what, ultimately, she's trying to get at?

Jim Finley: Yeah, I would say that. Yes, exactly. See, what she's saying is this, "Look, the idea isn't hearing about something called mystical union and how can I possibly get there." What she's saying what we're to do instead, is to sit very deeply in the presence of God and bring ourself to God as we are because that's where it's at. Because it's never other

than the holiness, and the immediacy, and the subtlety, and the unresolved matters of where we are brought to God in prayer and love, and that's what matters. And then it grows from there. See, it grows from there. So, there's something about the childlike, humble sincerity of settling into where we are with an attentive heart that we begin to sense maybe what she's speaking about is closer to me than I realized. So, maybe it's something very simple, like disarmingly simple and intimate. And I think that's what she's trying to do. She's trying to help us do that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And then, just the other thing I wanted to draw out is, ultimately, we will all experience this seventh-Mansion union. It's our ultimate destiny. So, not to worry if we're not experiencing it today, it's coming. It's on the horizon.

Jim Finley: Yeah, yeah. Let's say, really what she says—and this why in the end, she turns around at the seventh [Mansion] and says, "How can I be helpful?"—the only thing that matters here, the currency of the land is holiness, is to do God's will, God's will is the radicality of love, see? And then in prayer, in God's providential wisdom, there are degrees to which we get foreshadowing of heaven, this kind of unitive state of infinite union with the Divine. And so, when we pass through the veil of death, we enter into this like the fullness of this as our destiny. So, that's that.

And so, what we're to do is to walk our walk in sincerity and love and humility, keep our heart open in prayer. And the extent to which this celestial union begins to occur in us now by dying of love; that is, we're literally dying of everything but love, until there's nothing left of us but love because God is love. So, by hearing Teresa talk like this, knowing in the mystical body, what's given to one of us, belongs to all of us. And, also, she invites us just to lean in towards it and keep our heart open. But when it does arise, it will always arise not out of where we're supposed to be, it will always arise unexpectedly out of where we are. That's the whole point, I think. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So, I hear, Jim, in what you're saying and what Teresa says, that ultimately, we can trust that God is guiding us and taking us exactly where we need to go. And God is guiding us from that seventh-Mansion place, even though we may be only experiencing that as a Mansion-one person or a Mansion-two person.

Jim Finley: Once Merton said at the monastery, he said, "You know the next time you receive the--" You know, he's speaking of the Catholic tradition. He said, "Realize the next time you receive the Eucharist, that God's taking perfectly good care of you otherwise this wouldn't be possible." And therefore, the very fact that people who are listening to this and are touched by it bears witness that they're being perfectly taken care of in ways they cannot and do not need to understand because if it weren't true, they wouldn't be touched by it. So, already the very longing, and being drawn in closer to it, bears witness to our heart because we only realize what in some way we're already into, and we're trying to get more deeply into what's already happening as evidenced by the fact that we're drawn to this, which is contemplative church. It's contemplative community. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It's so funny. I'm just noticing, even in this conversation, how I've been in other meetings this morning and how I'm slowed right down as we enter into these kind

of conversations and this kind of topic, and that's a big part of it is learning to just slow ourselves down to be present to our own lives.

Jim Finley: It is. In a previous session, I think we mentioned in therapy, I've noticed how a lot of psychotherapy is being with someone who repeatedly invites you to slow down and listen at the feeling level to what you just said. That we're always skimming over the surface of the depths of our own life. And that's why you can't skim-read the mystics. In order to read the mystics, you have to read it very slow, very slow, very slow. And in a way, that's the pedagogy. You have to slow it down enough to kind of be touched by the nearness of what's being alluded to, and then learn to live there. And then you can carry that interior slowness—that's the seventh Mansion—you can eventually learn to habituate that slowness, like the access of the turning world, you can learn to habituate in the midst of action, you know, over time it becomes all-pervasive. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I wanted to reflect on the way the book is divided. And you really divided into these two parts with four as like a transition point. And I've heard you use terms like Mansions one to three are developing this spiritual and psychological maturity; five to seven is when it becomes mystical. But I've also heard you talk about life in Mansions one to three as the life of the saint, and then life in Mansions five to seven as the life of the mystic. And I think with your Catholic background that has a very particular meaning that it would be helpful for you to help us understand.

Jim Finley: Yeah, let's say in the Christian Tradition, here, is that really what matters here is holiness. That's what really matters is holiness, is that we, say speaking as a Christian, that we recognize what's revealed in Jesus is that God's response to us in our dilemma is to be identified with us as precious in the midst of our dilemma, in the midst of our confusion, in the midst of our brokenness, in the midst of . . .and then surrender to that, which is salvation really. And then to live by that, to live by that so it metamorphosizes our attitudes, and metamorphosizes the way we see everything, metamorphosizes the way we treat people and see people, the earth, and everything. That's really, that's it, see? That's it. And that's why these classical mystics are saints. They're saints who are very saintly because the essence of it is holiness.

So, what the mystic is, a poetic way of putting it, God decides with some people that you don't have to wait until after you're dead to begin to experience what awaits you in heaven, that even in space and time, you can realize that God's oneness with you, which in your very being is given to you breath by breath is the divinity of being alive, that God can begin to flow in and realize the divinity of you in consciousness. That's what the seventh Mansion is, the imperial heaven, which is this infinite union in heaven, is inside of you. So, if heaven is where God lives, since God dwells within you, the kingdom of heaven is within you, your soul is God's heaven. And so, it can be a vocation or a charism to be drawn into this foreshadowing of eternal life, through dying to everything less than this love, finding our way into the seventh Mansion.

So, really, it's a kind of a charism of the church, this kind of mystical dimension of incarnate infinity actualized in these people. And then we realize that she's talking to all those who are so drawn to it. Thomas Merton saying, "There are many people who are drawn to this. They have no one to bear witness to it, what's happening to them." And, St. John of the Cross, he

says-- We'll be looking at John of the Cross next, I guess, as our next mystic. And Thomas Merton said John of the Cross is writing for beginners, but he's writing for a certain kind of beginner, see, this kind. And Teresa does the same thing. She starts for a certain beginner, not the mystical beginner. As a matter of fact, let's begin before we became a beginner. Let's talk about when we were lost and wandering around, and God found us there. And then let's stabilize in mature Christian living. Let's stabilize in the holiness of living, and then realize that for some people, she says this is why I'm writing this book. There are some people for whom they begin to experience something happening to them. Not by efforts to reaching God, but God flowing into me, seeking me out, and God's presence being infused into my presence in a unitive state that I try to understand what's happening with me and how do I cooperate with this? How do I not get in its way? See, how am I to understand what it's asking out of me? And that's what she's and all the mystics are offering really, mystic teachers.

Kirsten Oates: So, in Catholic terminology, Mansions one to three, there are many saints, that people haven't been deemed saints. That Teresa would, in Teresa's pedagogy, would have only got to Mansion three, but then they had a different charism to mystical charism and they traveled a different path. And then there's some that have this more mystical charism.

Jim Finley: Yes. I'll put it another way about saints. See, how I put it is for many of us this is true: Where would we be without that person who saw in us a value we couldn't yet see? And where would we be without that person in whose presence when we revealed the painful thing, the thing we're most ashamed of, we're broken, instead of pulling away from us or judging us, kind of sat with us to accept us in a way that helped us to accept ourselves as an echo of how God already accepts us in our brokenness. Look at the indebtedness of that holiness you know of the person. And then we realize we're called to pass that on, we're called to be that for each other, which is the holiness of daily life. There's that. And then there's this mystical dimension of that, which to varying degrees is present in everybody. But she's talking about the person for whom it's their primary way in the midst of all the others.

Kirsten Oates: That's helpful to understand. Thank you. Jim, that pouring you talked about it just a minute ago, about the way the water pours. She uses that metaphor of water pours from us to God, and then it starts to flow in without effort. And you used in the podcast, also, the word energy, the energy starts coming in the opposite direction. What did you mean by energy?

Jim Finley: By energy, I mean, let's put it this way. Let's say there are two people who are in love with each other and in a moment of intimate sharing, they're in the energy field of each other's love; that is, it's not an abstraction. You know, it's not an idea or a thought, it's not a theory. It's not a thing. It's a certain vibrancy of the intimacy of love, see? And then that is a sacrament or an echo of this vibrancy of this infinite love as the living reality of love, actively flowing into us, like touching us, awakening us, calling us. And then the prayer becomes our surrender to that, or our attentiveness to that, or how do we give ourselves in love to this love that's giving itself to us, like this reciprocity of love? It's energy in that sense. It's a kind of unifying love energy, a presence—

Kirsten Oates: Oh, yeah.

Jim Finley: The fullness of presence, that love is the fullness of presence. It's that overflowing energy of presence.

Kirsten Oates: What's coming to mind for me, as you talk about that, is, as mentioned, I was not able to have my own children, but my sister had four children and I've had the experience of being able to hold her babies on the day they were born, and this little being in my arm, and I'm completely in love with him or her, two boys, two girls, just completely in love with them. And that energy field between us lasts across the ocean and across the lifetime. Yeah.

Jim Finley: See, another thing I think the mystics are saying is that all the dimensions of us are created by God; therefore, that capacity while holding that little newborn infant to feel moved by that love, God creates that love. And God's the infinity of that love. So, that way you are so moved by the infant is an echo of how infinitely God is freely choosing to be moved by you, and holding you, desiring you, and then God asks of you out of that same primitive purity to reciprocate that union. And so, it's like a little taste of heaven and really, it's a taste of God's love for you being manifested in the immensity with which the infant moved you, the love of the child. It's like being a momentary mystic in a moment like that. Yeah.

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

I wanted to ask you about, you use the wording "wounded with discontent." So, I have a few questions around this.

Jim Finley: What's the phrase?

Kirsten Oates: Wounded, wounded with discontent.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Wounded with discontent, yes..

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And I have a few questions.

Jim Finley: Okay.

Kirsten Oates: So, you talk about the process of being wounded by love. So, can you help me understand how I would differentiate between being wounded by love and being wounded by life, or are they the same?

Jim Finley: No, I don't think-- But let's say first of all, I want to talk psychologically first. Let's say there's the discontent of having been wounded by past traumas and abandonments because even though the wound and experiences may have passed, we realize they kind of got into us. They got into us, like we're trapped in this interior woundedness. And we're discontent with that as well we should be. You know, we have this intuition: I have a right to live my life. You know, I was placed here to be fully alive, and I'm not. I'm like the walking wounded. So, how can I be healed from that which hinders me from being, coming into the fullness of that. There's that kind of woundedness. And then we're motivated in the search for wholeness. Whatever that means, we seek that.

There's another kind of woundedness, which is the grace of woundedness. And it's the grace of having been granted a taste of love. By the way, then the nuptial mystics see marital love as a sacrament of this. I want to say it in spiritual terms. Is that there's a moment that you'd been touched, like intimately touched, with God being infinitely in love with you and being, as St. Augustine said, "Closer to you, than you are to yourself." And in that touch,

that overflowing fullness of being so touched, when it withdraws from you, there's the holy discontent of being satisfied with anything less than the infinite love that fleetingly touched you in the moment. And that discontent is the impetus of the path, how can I be stabilized in a habitual state of a loving union I know is real because I experienced it? But it doesn't lie within my finite powers to make it happen. That's the dilemma of the seeker, that God touches us with the desire by our own powers, we're powerless to consummate, which then deepens our radical dependency on God, turning to God. And that's the path. So, the whole path of the mystics is the path that leads us along that consummation of unconsummated longings.

Kirsten Oates: You say, I think Teresa says this as well, but we'll be wounded, I think by our state of life or in our state of life. So, how might that be different for us? What was a wounded state for you, Jim? And I wonder what mine might be in my state of life.

Jim Finley: Well, let's say, first, in the first woundedness, we're all wounded to varying degrees in our state of life with traumas and abandonments, and life. You know, we're doing our best to be a whole, protective, nurturing person. And when suffering occurs, doing our best to relieve it in ourself, and others, there's all that. But we're asking the question, how would this holy woundedness occur?

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And I'll apply it to you with the image you use about holding the little baby. I would say in the moment you held the baby, you were wounded. Wounded by a love, which in the moment was a freedom from woundedness. It was like blessedness. But say in your own inability to have children, the touch of holding the child was a wound. And that God is somehow the infinity of that wound. God is somehow the unexpected intimacy with which you're asked to find God and the arising of maternal energies rising out of your heart as a path.

And so, I think everybody has that. She says that early in the third Mansion that she said we're cloistered nuns, but married people find this in their marriage. So, you will see parents finding it in their parenting. Teachers find it in their tea[ching]. How can I find this in this situation in which I am? And it's always, it's universally intimate. See, it always gives itself to me.

So, for me, in my childhood with all this severe trauma going on, I found it in the midst of being repeatedly terrified by my father who was beating me. And I found it as something I held on to for dear life that I'd not be annihilated like that, which led me to the monastery. And then I found what happened to me in the monastery. And then when I left and got married and got a marriage that fell apart, I found it in holding onto dear life, understanding what in the hell happened here? [laughter]

Like all this, I didn't do this for it to fall apart. But the more I looked at it, I could see how unwittingly the structures, it was inevitable that it fall apart and how I was distant from my own children because of my trauma and my own therapy. And then I met Maureen, we found-- So, I always think we're looking at the crest of the wave of the grace that's present in the sometime uncomfortable immediacy of the fullness of what we're being asked to look at,

or to listen to, or to walk with, or to be faithful to, and to be honest about. Does that make [sense]? So, I would put it that way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. What's interesting about your story there, Jim, is that you were wounded in life with trauma when you were young, but you were also wounded with this holy desire within that situation of wounding. So, it's not like the wounding in life might even be completely separate from the holy wounding.

Jim Finley: Yes. And I think what happened to me, I think has happened to other people too. I think when I was touched by this, in my woundedness, in my childhood, read Merton, I went to the monastery. In the silence of the monastery and kind of the lofty part of myself in silence, there were all these realizations happening to me, these experiences, but down in my body was sleeping the trauma. It was sleeping inside of me. And it unexpectedly came out and brought me down. You know, I left, I had to go into therapy, go through a lot of stuff. So, everyone, we have to follow our path.

You know, Thomas Merton said, "We must never underestimate the need to tell the truth." And any unacknowledged part of ourself can rise up and overtake the gift. So, it's an ever more inclusive state of acceptance, and honesty, and vulnerability. And so, for me, paradoxically then, it came full circle in leaving, going through all of that and then becoming-- Going through my own therapy, working with trauma and how trauma touches transcendence. You know, here I was leading silent retreats, sitting with traumatized people, and I was a traumatized person leading the retreat. And it gave me a strange sense of the traumatized world and the holiness that shines in it like this. And that's been my path. You know, I-- But, everyone has their path. You know, everyone has their story of how they're being led along this way. But the stories converge in different places. You can see how all these stories resonate with each other, with these certain patterns of vulnerability, and surrender, and transformation and all of it, life, I guess.

Kirsten Oates: Can you help us understand this sense of discontent and how it might show up in our day-to-day life? Would it be a sense of a discontent with my whole life, a discontent with my own behavior, a discontent with my relationships, or is it something different?

Jim Finley: Well, it would be, I guess in patterns is how it's experienced. One common way, I think, is we become aware of how caught up we are in the complexities and demands of the day. And we realize that what it's asking about is like dragging us down the road. And somehow I lost myself along the way. So, unless I pause to freely choose, like the inner freedom of a hiatus from the momentum, or just a quiet rendezvous, just to be simple, and honest, and vulnerable, and present. It could take different forms, but I could also bring it to God in prayer. And then I discover that that grounding place is at first subtle and hard to hold on to because my cell phone goes off; I'm distracted. But little by little by little I can sink the taproot of my heart in that.

In marriages, it can happen this way too. People realize, "You're busy. I'm busy. We're kind of losing our way here. And if we don't stop and set aside time where there's an agenda of love alone, we can lose this; we can lose this." And so, it's the willingness to pause, and stop, and get re-grounded. Likewise, some people can be so busy they never really look at their own child. The child says, "Will you read me a good night story?" They don't realize that

to read your child a good night story is God, you know, they don't, they don't let-- Or, if we live alone, the person can just feel their loneliness, but they don't realize that inside the loneliness is solitude, never less alone than when alone. See, a person with chronic illness, a person with a death of a loved one, all these are modalities of transformation. If we stop long enough to be courageously present to them in a loving way and listen, very deeply, to the presence that's hidden in them, as we lean into it. I think it's like that. That's what makes it always so personal. That's why I think this language with Teresa, we're always right at the edge of spiritual direction, you know, you take one step closer. It's so evocative because everyone says, "Well, what about that? What about it?" It engages us with ourself.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah. That's helpful, Jim. So, it could start with a level of a sense of discontent about our current life, something going on in our life, or a kind of-- [crosstalk @ 00:36:10]

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: But, if we sit with it, it might-- What we're actually looking for is there is a sense of that holy discontent and how would we--

Jim Finley: Exactly. Yeah. Let's say at work, for example, another example, a person can be at a job and say, "You know what? If I'm honest about it, I really don't give it my best. I'm about half throttle. I think it would be good if I understood what that's about, because maybe if I gave it my best, I would offer more, and it would offer me more." Where do we-- Like the compromises of our heart? What are you doing, like this? So now what we're talking about, if the place of work, or the place of daily life, or the place of marriage, the place of that, whatever has it, then we're saying that ultimately speaking in religious consciousness, what is it then in the midst-- And maybe the mystical touch comes in holding a baby. It doesn't come in prayer. Maybe the mystical touch comes over as I was holding the baby, there was something infinitely more than the baby giving itself to me there. It was really a touch of God. And having been touched by it, then there's the gift of longing to abide in it. And that's the holy longing; that that's the path. How can I habituate and stabilize in that state that I know is real because it touched me like that? And that's what I think that God's the infinity of all these modalities.

Kirsten Oates: I hear the question in this teaching around, can I be grounded in something deeper and more trustworthy than I am? And I really resonate with that. And, I think similar to what you're describing with the ideas of discontent, that it's interesting to look at where I have aimed my trust or my sense of deepening myself and like in my job, or in my relationship, or I think even in religion, like when I started going to church and, you know, I looked to religion to deepen me, but I think what Teresa is saying, what you're saying is, it's actually found in God.

Jim Finley: Yes. You know, I want to be doing some study group work with people again in Gabriel Marcel. And on the internet, there's Gary Sadler [who] has a series of philosophy lectures. He's very good. And he has two on the ontological mystery and Gabriel Marcel. And just yesterday, I was listening to this. Last night I couldn't sleep. I was listening to Gabriel Marcel. And he said, "The thing is, can I learn to trust what does not depend on me and which by my own powers, I can't make happen?" That's trust, which is faith. That's a big question because if it all depends on me, see, you have the problematic. You have

methodologies, you have-- But what is it can I learn to trust what doesn't depend on me, which entrusts itself to me and is calling me to itself? And I think that's the--

And here's the thing: If we've been traumatized or hurt, we're afraid to entrust it because if I open my heart like that I'll get hurt again. But unless I risk it again, the internalized trauma and abandonment has the final say, practically, not ultimately. Only love has the final say. So, it's only if I believe, yes, all these things have happened. And that, yes, I'm doing my best. I have all these gifts and abilities, whatever they are. And we should do that. But there is that which matters very, very much, which doesn't depend on me. It's more than the sum total. It's infinitely more than the sum total of all of this. It's granting tastes of itself in the midst of all of this, and how can I learn to live by that and abide by that? I think that's a good way to see it sometimes.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's beautiful. The phrase that's coming to mind that you often say is so it's like, can my dependencies on my own efforts be conquered by love? Would that be how you use that, like, conquered by love?

Jim Finley: Exactly. That's what she says at the beginning of the fourth Mansion. She says the trouble with third-Mansion living, which is virtue, is that reason has not yet been conquered by love. It's entirely too reasonable. She said third-Mansion people, they do go sailing, that is, they pray, but they're always careful to keep the shore in view. See, you always circle back around to write in your journal, your latest intuition, or your ministry, [laughter] but what happens when the open seas carry you out into open water? See, what if God is saying, you know, you're being drawn out into something of the unexplainable, which is an act then of trust and surrender to this, like this mystery. And then she's offering reassurance.

Kirsten Oates: That's a good way of looking at it because my effort and my energy to get back to the shore, but what if I let the current draw me away? That's like the energy going in the opposite direction.

Jim Finley: It really is that. It's almost like the intuition is saying, "Look, you know, even if I were capable of attaining it, it would be infinitely less than what alone would fulfill me. If I were even capable of comprehending, it would be infinitely less. Even if I were capable of losing it, it would be infinitely less." And somehow, it's delicately infusing itself, tenderly enlarging my heart to divine proportions. It's starting-- But instead of staying there long enough to let it have its way with me, I move on to the next thing. But what if I would stay there long enough to kind of settle deep down into it and see where it takes me, which is, by the way, the only truly trustworthy thing. Sometimes I always-- People say this to me in spiritual direction. They say, "You know, one prayer I'm afraid to say really is 'Thy will be done' because God just might take me up on it." [laughter]

Jim Finley: And, I thought, imagine I said, imagine you could talk to somebody you know, and they say, "Oh, you know, did you hear what happened to so-and-so last week?" You go, "No, what?" And they say, "God's will was done in her." You go, "No kidding. I saw her Thursday. She was fine, but you know what? I was next to her in chapel. I heard her say, 'Thy will be done.'" [laughter] It's like driving without a seatbelt. You take chances and look what might happen. So, we always hold back a little just in case.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes.

Jim Finley: But what happens when it's already too late? See, what happens if there's a tenderness that's already having its way with us? And it understands why we're afraid, and asks us to understand why we're afraid, and to bring the fear to that love. And that's the intimacy of it, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Yeah. That's helpful. Can you help me understand, help us understand, what would it feel like to have a moment of the ego being conquered by love? Like, what would that feel like? What might that be like? What's an example?

Jim Finley: I'll go back to you holding a little baby again. It feels like that.

Kirsten Oates: Mm. Mm.

Jim Finley: It feels like that. Well, another way I used to think of it, when I was a therapist, too, doing this, I used to teach high school with the students. I taught high school religion, seniors in high school, Christology, and different things. It was great. And it had its own things, you know, with it. I loved it really. And sometimes the students would be there, I was so taken by the collective sincerity and their struggles, you know, like what a gift it is to be in a room full of young people that are honestly asking about God or even wanting to share why they don't even care about God. And it's a safe place to say that. And this is a pretty amazing place. Like, how can this be a safe place for these people to be, and I'm called to be with them, and what is teaching them?

So, it comes to us unexplained. It can come to us in long, slow walks alone, and you realize in the long, slow walk to no place in particular, there's a certain granting that comes to you like that, like you're touched or drawn by something that has no name. You're drawn. So, I think that's what we're looking for. Gabriel Marcel says, "We do not see the light. We are the aperture through which it shines." And there's a certain place where it comes shining through in suffering, or birth, or death, or loss, or poetry, or service. And so, what if I would then sit with that? You know what I mean?

Kirsten Oates: Richard uses that beautiful teaching on great love and great suffering as our teachers. So, could it also be I lose my job, I fail at something? And, in the sense of failure and not letting it have the last word, like finding something more meaningful about myself in God, or finding something more meaningful beyond being stuck and named by the failure?

Jim Finley: I think this. Let's say we're talking about devastating suffering, like real loss, like your house burns to the ground, or your spouse dies, your child dies, or a marriage you thought was going to last falls apart. You know, there's a certain way that we need to be very careful not to romanticize suffering with spiritual language. And the only authentic response to such a person is, "I'm so deeply sorry you are having to go through this." So, we meet the person, so they know that they're seen in their suffering. We're with them in their suffering and join them in their suffering. And as we walk with them, what could we maybe do here together that might lighten the burden somewhat? And as they do that walk, which is always very deep, doing deep therapy and trauma work for example, they discover it's precisely the moment in which you got so dark that a light that I didn't even know was there was shining through, like coming into the darkness to find me. It's precisely when it was so terrible, I

discovered it wasn't just terrible. It was terrible. But in that which was so terrible was the granting of something that maybe I never would have found had it not come so terrible. And I think it's like that, you know, so we first meet it and honor it for what it is. We're trying to, like that. But if we sit with a deeply, Vipassana, like looking deeply into it, we can see shining out through the intimacy of it.

So, in Christian terms, this is the mystery of the cross in the ground of our body, the mystery of the cross and the ground of our mind, and the mystery-- It's the crucifixion of our dreaded and cherished illusions that anything less than an infinite union with infinite love will ever be enough for us and that infinite love is shining out through the intimate immediacy of the unbearable thing and can touch me there. And so, I don't know if there's a place where suffering and transcendence touch each other like that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And the mystery of the cross, like you say.

Jim Finley: It is.

Kirsten Oates: So, yeah. Turning a little bit more focused on the sixth Mansion, why do you think that book is so, that the sixth Mansion is so long in the book? It's eleven chapters. It's a big chunk of it.

Jim Finley: I think it's because, see, let's say first in the fourth Mansion, there's the first intimations of this influx in the quiet, and your heart's beating, and all that. She talks about all of that. And then in the fifth Mansion, the influx of the Divine becomes so pure that the reflective, intentional self can no longer be the basis for it. And the self goes into kind of a sleep. It's a kind of a death, really. And in that death, the seventh Mansion stands free and clear. That is, the infinite presence of God is presencing itself as the immediacy of your very presence, a transsubjective communion. So, when you return to reflective consciousness, that union you didn't see because you weren't there washes over you, that momentary touch, and you have the certainty that you were in God and God was in you. You desire only to do the will of God, and you're this butterfly with tattered wings, just like that. What happens in the sixth Mansion is that fleeting moment of oneness starts becoming-- Is that the dog growling?

Kirsten Oates: [laughing] Yes. Sorry.

Jim Finley: That's good. That's good. No, it's good. It's good. It's good. No, it helps. It's good. [dog barking, laughter]

Kirsten Oates: [speaking to the dog] What is it? Okay, off you go. Off you go. [dog barking and growling] A seventh-Mansion arising upstairs that they have to attend to.

Jim Finley: I hear it. I hear it.

Kirsten Oates: But disappearing from me.

Jim Finley: Yeah, here's what Teresa would say, see, was that interlude with the dog an interruption, or is God the infinity of the barking dog? See, is everything the divinity flowing out like that, uninterruptedly? Like, that's a nice little sense of it.

So, what happens in the sixth Mansion is that God starts moving back and forth across the entire range of all your experiences dismantling your ability to live there on your own terms. So, being understood by other people, physical health, mishaps, and also intense raptures, raptures meaning God carries you off to have your soul entirely for himself like this, the intensity of these raptures, visions, all these, you're in a really mysterious-- They say, it can go on for years, really. And really, you're being unraveled by love with anything less than love as being the basis for your security and identity. And there's a lot of fear in it. There's a lot of, you know, there's that. She said it's a delectable death that you go through like this.

And so, the sixth Mansion goes on for so long because it's so all-pervasive. There's no nook or corner that's reserved as separate from the love that doesn't find that little piece of yourself and take that, too, by transforming it into love—my fears, my hopes, my waking up in the morning, the unresolved matter of my heart, you know, the tender place, my anger, my fear, whatever it is, it becomes all-pervasively-- Meister Eckhart says this is what happens when a person encounters the same, no matter where I turn, it's all the same. There's just one love. Teresa says it's all the same. That it's just one love making a huge move on you, see? And literally what it's doing is transforming you into itself. Little by little by little by little like that, see? So, that's what's happening

Kirsten Oates: And in all nooks and crannies of your whole life, meaning any place you might be blocking that openness to love, any place where you might have your identity and anything but love in any place?

Jim Finley: Yes, it comes in different ways. I think one way it comes to me is often it goes this way. It's any place that is unresolved, like a habit of my heart, some unresolved, whatever. We all have our little rituals of things. It's any place that I actually believe that has the authority to in any way diminish the love that's happening to me. I attribute authority to an unresolved thing, a hurtful thing, an angry thing, and giving that authority is a way to keep my toe hold. It's a paradoxical form of control. Or it's attributing authority to any attainment that I have. Maybe attainment in mystical consciousness, maybe an attainment in art or teaching, or wherever, and attributing authority to it, see, as if somehow it's gracious enough or generous enough to reveal to me who I am because only this love that's taking me to itself has the authority to name who I am. And that's what I think it is. It's just, it's an all-pervasive coups d'état of this love over the infinity of the unresolved infinity of-- It's like then everything becomes incomprehensively and unexpectedly clear.

Kirsten Oates: It sounds like that it could be horrible, but is it, is there a sense that you're so far along that even all of that feels trustworthy?

Jim Finley: Yeah. That's what happens—

Kirsten Oates: In the undoing of yourself.

Jim Finley: That's what happens in the seventh Mansion. It, by the way, it seems horrible sometimes because it is horrible. She says there's great suffering in this. And sometimes this is what happens with physical suffering, you go through deep periods of thinking maybe you don't even believe in God anymore. You don't love God anymore. She says we can go on for weeks and months like this, feeling alone. It sounds horrible because it is horrible. She says you're literally dying. She's really asking what happens when we die. Namely, what happens when we die, for all the threads that connect us to anything less than the love get untangled and broken. And yet, it's horrible, and at one level, it's so horrible only to the point that I resist it. See, it's only the resistance of it that's horrible. But if I trust it, and move with it, and understand it, and trust it, and know that my suffering has united me with the suffering of everyone throughout the whole world, my suffering unites me with all of this, then it's suffering, but she said you'd never been happier in your whole life, never been. You've never been so blessed.

You had no idea it could be anything like this. It's like this, that's the paradox.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So, if we relate it to death, when you're-- I'm just thinking back to my witnessing my grandmother's death and realizing, you know, my grandmother was so active, had so many friends had, you know, a beautiful garden and watching her slowly pass away in hospice, like just realizing each one of those things weren't there with her. She didn't have a friend. She couldn't-- She always helped people, even her ability to help people. Initially, when she got into hospice, you know, "I'll pour my own water." She even wanted to help the people around her, but in the end, she couldn't even help people. And then there was this beautiful moment, right before she died, she'd been fast asleep and almost in a coma-like state, and the chaplain came into her room and said to her, her name was Norma, "Norma, are you happy with your God?" And she opened her eyes, and she said, "I am happy because God is love." That was the last thing she ever said. And, I remember being happy for her, you know, that she was in such a peaceful state, and then months, months, months, months later, I remember waking up with my grandmother saying that and saying to me, "And you can find that now," and thinking all the things she let go of and didn't have when she said that, and maybe that's kind of what she was pointing to.

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's a good-- That's why I think death is really a good, helps us to see this, like the stages of dying and coming to acceptance and, you know, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' stages. So, all the previous stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, that's all the ego, but acceptance, she says not everyone comes to acceptance. And she describes being in the presence of someone dying with acceptance. She describes it as uncanny. Like, there's something very deep and beautiful. And when you look into the face of the dying beloved, who's come to acceptance, you know that their face is the gate of heaven. It's the great passing away in which nothing's left but that which never passes away. And so, then God is the infinity of death. See, God's the infinity, the death, everything less than God. So then can we die mystically?

That is, can I so perfectly die of love that in some sense when the moment of biological death comes, nothing will happen because I've already crossed over into the love that crossed over into me. Something clearly will happen when I die. I'll be dead. But I won't give any talks anymore, so that's settles that. [laughter] So, in another way, at the factual level, but is there the welling up of the eternity of the fleetingness of it all, there's the welling up of the deathless duty that never dies. And somehow that moment with the dying loved one in acceptance we cherish it because it really is for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee. And can you experience it now? And see, I would say the question, can you experience it now is the voice of God, which is the call to mystical union? Can I-- You could wait until your deathbed, wait until you're in hospice, and wait until the eleventh hour, and the gate will fly open, but maybe, why postpone it? See, what would be possible to taste it now? Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, we are reaching almost the hour mark and I have a lot more questions. So, Corey (Producer), I'm wondering if we should turn this into two episodes and finish this one here?

Jim Finley: Should we? Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. How do you feel?

Jim Finley: Yeah. It's worth it. Do you think? Yeah, because we haven't really looked at the seventh Mansion yet.

Kirsten Oates: And I have a lot more questions about the sixth Mansion.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Yeah. Well, no, and they're so rich when it reaches this-- All these mystics are going to be this way, it reaches a crescendo. Like the fullness of it is so-- Anyway, let's do that. Let's honor the pacing of this. And so, we'll just set a time and resume this seventh Mansion and that'll set up the time to answer the students' questions and that will kind of round out [Teresa]. Okay, good. I feel good. Yeah. It was a nice dialogue. It was lovely. It was beautiful. Nice moment. Yeah. So anyway, good stuff.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you so much for today, Jim. Thank you for what you share, all you share and, I look forward to the next time. [music]

Jim Finley: Good. Good. Thank you so much.

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.