

Turning to the Mystics



Bonus: Richard Rohr on Turning
to Teresa of Avila

featuring Richard Rohr

Jim Finley: Greetings I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

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

Kirsten Oates: Welcome to Season 2 of Turning to the Mystics where we're turning to the 16th century Christian mystic, St. Teresa of Ávila. Last week, Jim took us to the end of her book, the Interior Castle, with a beautiful reflection on Mansion seven, and next week I'll be joining Jim for a dialogue about Mansions six and seven. But today we have a special guest with us, Fr. Richard Rohr. Jim and I have been looking forward to this discussion with him. And so, let's get started.

Richard, thank you so much for joining Jim and I on our Turning to the Mystics podcast. It's really exciting to have you here.

Richard Rohr: Well, it's sincerely my privilege to be with you two. I get to be with you in the [Living] School, but now in a podcast. This is great. Thank you.

Kirsten Oates: We've been really looking forward to it. So, today we're talking about Teresa of Ávila. And so, Richard, I just wondered where and when you were first introduced to Teresa.

Richard Rohr: You know, like most young religious—I think I heard you say this once Jim—I opened her, I think when I was in college at Duns Scotus, and it just seemed like gobbledygook. I mean I'm nineteen, twenty years old, I guess. I just had no real inner experience. This was still before Vatican II where Catholicism was a largely externalized religion. So, I conveniently shelved her, and I only came back in later years.

Kirsten Oates: Do you remember what you read first? Were you asked to read all of her The Book of My Life, or?

Richard Rohr: No, I think it was La Vida, yeah, The Life, right. And I might have ventured into the Interior Castle, but I can't say for sure. Yeah, I'm sure I would have placed myself in the fifth Mansion. [laughter]

Kirsten Oates: Jim, was that where you were placing yourself at about the same age?

Jim Finley: No, I told Merton-- For me, the background was I was about the same age as Richard—

Richard Rohr: Yeah. We were the same.

Jim Finley: --and I was at the monastery, and Thomas Merton was novice master. And so, under his guidance, St. John of the Cross was actually the first mystic that I read. It had a very deep effect on me, and he guided me in that. It was great. So, then I read Teresa, and when I read Teresa, when I came in to see him for direction, I had my copy of the Interior Castle with me and I told him, eighteen years old, I said, "I'm reading the Interior Castle." And I said, "The way I see it, I'm in the fourth Mansion." But I said, "If you think I'm only in the first, be honest with me, I can handle it." [laughter]

Jim Finley: Yeah. And he said to me, he said, "It's none of your damn business what Mansion you're in."

Richard Rohr: Oh, wow. Wow.

Jim Finley: He said, “The spiritual life should free us up from a preoccupation with ourself.” It just becomes another way of being preoccupied with ourself, but he said “Understood in the right way, it’s extremely helpful.” Teresa is a trustworthy, contemplative guide in the Christian Tradition. And so, when I started reading her, I got into her, I read her, but it never really, she never really got to me the way John of the Cross did at first. But then years later—it was just maybe twenty years, fifteen years ago; I don’t know when it was—through the invitation of Caroline Myss, I was given an invitation to go to Ávila and talk on John of the Cross at Ávila with Carolyn Myss in Ávila. And in preparation for that, I read her again later, and I was just struck by how beautiful her teachings were. It just is really—

And then I did the online course with the CAC on Teresa. So, she’s near and dear to me. She’s so profound and down-to-earth and beautiful. And so, that’s my history with her. I was curious with you when you did pick her up later, like older and wiser, do you recall what struck you at that later reading when you read her that you didn’t see earlier?

Richard Rohr: First of all, I’m going to say her readability, that what I once thought was so abstruse and gobbledygook was now striking home again and again. Whether I was correctly understanding her, I don’t know. And her concrete images, like, you know, the crystal, the Castle, the butterfly, the lizards, they all just became, “Oh, yes!” I had a bit of identification, inner identification. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: When was that? Richard, do you remember when you read her again?

Richard Rohr: It would have been my early years out here in New Mexico—late ‘80s, early ‘90s. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: When you were kind of moving towards identifying the role of contemplation to support action?

Richard Rohr: Yes. And in realizing I had a lot more to learn if I was going to present myself as a teacher, I had to go to the best in the field, and she was there.

Kirsten Oates: I’m curious, because Richard you’re a Franciscan and Jim was a Cistercian and Teresa was a Carmelite, can you just describe how all these different lineages work and why you would be reading Teresa when you were studying the Franciscan lineage?

Richard Rohr: Yeah. It’s probably why I was able to put her off so long because believe it or not, there has been a kind of tribalism within the religious orders where you read and you studied your own group. And it was actually in La Vida when Teresa said that she hated mental prayer, but it was the discovery of Francisco de Osuna, one of us, that, in *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* that opened her up and, oh my, we had something to teach Teresa. [laughter] So, suddenly I became interested in her. Yeah.

And, knowing that Francisco de Osuna was sort of an outlier, even in Franciscanism, most friars have never heard of her—of him, excuse me—never heard of him because we had lost the prayer of quiet as we mostly accepted the noisy prayer of chanting psalms. And when I met Carmelite friends—and forgive me if this is an incorrect judgment—but it seemed like most of them didn’t relate to her and John of the Cross either because, you know, the

Council of Trent moved all of us to a rather uniform spirituality. I'm sure even to a good degree, the Cistercians. It was only after Vatican II, that we were all not just given permission, but told to go back to our founders and our individual charisms.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, do you think it was only because of Thomas Merton you were introduced to mystics like Teresa, or was that standard in your—

Jim Finley: I think that Merton in this kind of Benedictine monastic, Cistercian tradition that he was, of course, very immersed in Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian School, but he was so good at kind of recognizing contemplative, mystical dimensions of Christ Consciousness throughout the Church.

Richard Rohr: Yes!

Jim Finley: He saw the richness of the pluralism—

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Jim Finley: --of that. And so, it was very natural for him to go wherever he saw that, you know. So, he was very much at home with her and with the Carmelite tradition, because they were, they resonated with each other, you know, and this affinity of lineages. The same way with Eckhart, in England, the German tradition and the Beguines.

And so, he was very good that way, in a very broad-based, seeing the interconnectedness of these traditions and then going back to the power of these classical texts, you know, the lineage of mystical consciousness in the Church. And he felt that in a way, the scandal of the Church is it wasn't teaching its own mystical lineage and that's what the CAC is so good about I think, too, have this, this kind of re-grounding ourself in this original orthodoxy, this primal thing, going all the way back to Jesus spending whole nights alone in prayer, and how do we re-ground ourself in the timeless richness of that? And then see the beauty of these different schools of spirituality and how they resonate with each other.

And so that's what I think it was. I think it was his openness. And then he even extended it then beyond Christianity. So, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Martin Buber, and Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama, and the Sufi, you know, he saw this communal, mystical, contemplative consciousness in the human spirit throughout the whole world. And so, I was very graced that way by his inclusiveness. And then at the same time being true to his own lineage, you know what I mean, he was out of his Cistercian school, like a grounding place, open to all of them. And that was my sense of it.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. He had an eye, a natural eye for the Perennial Tradition, the Universal Truth, and he knew who was carrying it forward and who was expressing it in their own genre.

Jim Finley: There's a beautiful little book called Signs of Peace. And the subtitle is Thomas Merton's Dialogue with His Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Protestant Friends.

Richard Rohr: Wow. I've never seen that.

Jim Finley: And you see these lovely letters that they wrote back and forth, where he said, "I'd like to dialogue with you about our common ground." And you also see it in the volume of his posthumously published journals on the volume, *On the Hidden Ground of Love*. You also see these letters to these traditions. And I think CAC has that spirit about it because we're taking this, and then we're saying how can we who live in the midst of the world realize we're called to this too? You don't need to be a cloistered nun, or a cloistered monk, or a Franciscan, you know, these are lineages that are open to the mystical dimensions of the Christian life. And I think that's why people are so hungry to hear this. And I think that's what we offer people.

Kirsten Oates: Richard, you have done very much along the lines of what Jim was describing about Thomas Merton with the CAC, expanded the lineages. And where were you inspired to do that? How did that come about?

Richard Rohr: Well, thank you for asking me because it makes me try to figure it out. How did that come? I mean, it certainly came little by little, but I know it was always in reading such folks as we now call the mystics that I found resonance with the Christianity that made sense to me, but that was a growing realization starting in the minor seminary when I read *The Waters of Siloe* and *The Sign of Jonas*. In high school, how did I already know? Maybe I've said this before. I can even see the place in the library where I'm taking Merton's book off the shelf.

Jim Finley: Oh, geez.

Richard Rohr: And, of course, we're talking about 1958-59 when he was barely known, but being exposed to a big mind that early, I think gave me a doorway into it. So, I knew what to look for. Then when I went to college, I had a huge spiritual library there that I took advantage of for four years. So, it was mostly self-education.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. Just a curiosity.

Richard Rohr: Curiosity. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Was it to find what you felt when you read Merton's book? Was that like the experience you had in that? Was that guiding you?

Richard Rohr: Well, I think it was more to try to validate those few useful spiritual experiences I had. Were those real? Were those fanciful delusions? What was it I was inside of? Now, we'd call it unitive consciousness. And I knew it made me both eager to grow as a Catholic Christian at that time, and yet utterly disappointed with it because that is not what they were teaching us. It had only opened up around '65 after Vatican II where we could read texts other than papal encyclicals, and so forth.

Kirsten Oates: And for those listening that are a little newer to this sense of a Christian mystic, how would you describe that, Richard?

Richard Rohr: How would I describe a Christian mystic?

Kirsten Oates: A Christian mystic, yeah, and how they help us.

Richard Rohr: I think what attracted me-- I'm just remembering this right now. It might not be totally the picture. --was the spiritual wedding, erotic, bridegroom language. It was just so surprising to me. We had so suppressed that language as beneath us and here in the mystics were the people who used it with great excitement like Teresa herself. Which Castle is it, Jim, where she's into the spiritual marriage? Fifth?

Jim Finley: Well, what she sees starting in the sixth, she speaks about betrothal or being engaged.

Richard Rohr: Betrothal, yeah.

Jim Finley: And mystical, the seventh Mansion is you're married to God. Nuptial love is her primary metaphor for union.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. It was very satisfying to me, but always this disappointment, "Why aren't other people excited about this, or even talking about this?" Even friars, teachers that I admired on other levels and were good and holy men, but the language of the mystics was not often preached. It really wasn't. It was more the language of church. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So, it's been quite an isolated journey towards the Christian mystics.

Richard Rohr: It really has. I am sorry to say it, but that's why I did my early retreats down at Gethsemani, which was only a two-hour drive. It was the Benedictine tradition where it seemed to me to more often hold it. I came to the Carmelites later as they were rediscovering Teresa and John of the Cross because the Carmelites I met—and that's the only way I can say it—were just like me. They had largely become Roman Catholic priests and didn't know their own tradition. Forgive me any good Carmelites because I know you're different now, but in the early years you, we, were all uniform. We were trained to be priests not to be Franciscans, Carmelites, [or] even Cistercians.

Kirsten Oates: And certainly not to be mystics.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. I don't think so.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, do you have a reflection on that?

Jim Finley: Well, several things—one, I'm struck by Richard seeing the place in high school where he opened first—

Richard Rohr: Really, that's true.

Jim Finley: And same with me. I was in the ninth grade, all this, for me, all this trauma was going on, and in a ninth-grade religion class, the instructor mentioned monasteries. I'd never heard of monasteries before. And he mentioned Thomas Merton, and I went up to the school library, and they had *The Sign of Jonas* there. It was the only one they had there in the library.

Richard Rohr: Sign of Jonas, too!

Jim Finley: And I opened it up, and I shared this when we were doing Merton on the podcast, on the

very first page, he says, “As for me, I have but one desire, the desire for solitude, to be lost in the secret of God’s face.” And all of it, I stood there, and I realized at fourteen years old, I didn’t know what it meant, but something in me did.

Richard Rohr: Wow, yeah.

Jim Finley: I said, “Me too.” Like there was such a purity to it—

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Jim Finley: --that got to me, and I read him through the four years. So, it was very interesting that. And I also feel, well, it’s hard to know exactly where it began, like there are moments like that because I think there’s a graced disposition towards it. So, it feels so natural to resonate with this. Do I mean to be drawn to a monastery or to sit in silence? There’s a certain predisposition sometimes where we kind of ease into the naturalness of it for us, but how do we make it grow? And another thought I had was I was giving a contemplative retreat, this church in Cleveland, Episcopal church, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, and a good priest friend of mine, Fr. Don Cousins—

Richard Rohr: Oh, yes.

Jim Finley: He did work on sexuality in the priesthood.

Richard Rohr: Wonderful man.

Jim Finley: Wonderful, great guy. Right. And we were having dinner after the retreat, and I was teaching Thomas Merton or John of the Cross, or something, and he said, “Do you think you’re preaching to the choir when you teach this mystical stuff?” And I said, “I hope so if by the choir you mean people who feel drawn to this.” Because what they tell me, “Why don’t I hear this at church?” That is, you know, this is so beautiful, how come I don’t hear this when I go to church? And so, why, you know, people are kind of hungry to bear witness to this mystical and how the mystical spills over into social justice, it spills over into the corporal works of mercy. It spills over. And so, I think of when our friendship began years ago, there were these affinities between us, and it had brought us right up to this moment where we’re talking right now. It’s so strange how God leads people.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. I must have heard that 200 times: “Why don’t we hear this in church?” Yeah. Well, as you know, the post-Reformation Catholic Church largely—not largely, but almost entirely—centered around the seven sacraments and a rather instrumental understanding of them. And we assumed we were at a high level because we had received, in usually an objective manner, the seven sacraments. Any talk of an inner dialogue like Teresa talks of so readily in the soul and where something is going on between us and God, that was rare.

Kirsten Oates: And it wasn’t picked up in the reformed church either, Richard?

Richard Rohr: No, I’m afraid not. No because they thought of it as Catholic. [laughter] And if they only knew—

Jim Finley: That’s true.

Richard Rohr: --that most Catholics didn't have it. Such a shame, such a shame, really. Jim Finley: The way I see it, too—and I got this from you, you said this, I thought it was so true—is that in a way, the Protestant Reformation was formed not just from a badly needed reform of the Roman tradition—

Richard Rohr: Right.

Jim Finley: --but it was also formed just as much by the Enlightenment on reason. So, when Luther opened the Bible, he was reading it outside of the liturgical, sacramental, mystic, contemplative, aesthetic, philosophical ethos of the Greek fathers and the Latin fathers. And he read it, read the texts, like a fact, like proof text, you can flip back and forth, like apologetics. And then the Roman Church followed suit, the Counter-Reformation, they were off and running. And in the process, they both left behind these mystical, intimate, contemplative foundations, like the lifeblood, you know, of the interior life. And so, renewal is constantly circling back around to gather that up again. And that's one of the ways I've seen that when you said that some years ago, to me, I thought that rang so true to me.

Kirsten Oates: I love that term "lifeblood", and that's what I'm hearing from you both in the way the mystics have reinforced, like what was coming up in your own being, like the lifeblood that you felt coursing through your own veins was picked up by the mystics and kind of helped you move forward.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So, Richard has Teresa influenced your teaching these days? Like, what's her influence been on how you teach, or how you think about growth and transformation, or contemplation and action?

Richard Rohr: On many levels. As you know, I'm fascinated by any idea of staging or growth, otherwise, we get into this instrumental born again, one-time experience. And at a very deep level, her very use of the word Mansions, *morada* in Spanish, was my kind of language as I began to give retreats. And then there was a very dark time in my life when I had been falsely accused of something, and I had nothing except trust that God would reveal the truth, but I had no way to defend myself. And that's when I re-read the Interior Castle, and every page came to life for me.

And I want to mention that because is that not true for so many of these people we read where—and that's why I talk about things of great love and great suffering so much, you know, as a time of immense darkness and suffering, where I was ready for it all to be over and said, "Okay, God, I'm in your hands. Okay, God, I'm in your hands."

And then I reread Teresa, and I have this little bird, little butterfly leading me. And it was just exactly what I was able to believe, what I was able to trust in. Now to be honest, I still don't speak of that as openly as I should. I do it with some trepidation even here, even though I know you understand, but I'm going to use the word fanciful. I've even talked to nuns and contemplatives, formally speaking, who find this language fanciful. And I think if there's no inner experience to hang your hook on if you've lived your whole life just abiding by the laws of the monastery, I don't think you know this is real. In fact, I'm sure you don't.

It's just distant idealism that nobody ever achieves.

Kirsten Oates: Richard, I'm curious, during that real challenging time, what caused you to pick up Teresa?

Richard Rohr: What did? I don't remember. I don't remember. Was it just seeing her here on my bookshelf and pulling it out?

Kirsten Oates: I wonder if it was because you read Mirabai's version? I wonder if it had just been released or, you know, if Mirabai, because of the relationship with Mirabai? But that was an unusual choice given that you hadn't connected to it fully when you were young.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yeah. I can't say, sorry.

Kirsten Oates: It's fascinating the way God works, though, isn't it, that the book you would never expect to be the one to support you is the one that enters your hands somehow?

Richard Rohr: It does. Yes. No, it probably was Mirabai's translation. It might have been Allison Peers' translation, but it doesn't matter. She was with me.

Kirsten Oates: It was the unexpected support that you needed.

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

Jim Finley: It's interesting when Teresa, in the sixth Mansion, she talks about this process of what's happening here. She says really, this process, how I put it, we're really dying of love. That is, we're dying of everything less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God as the sole basis for our security and identity. And she says what happens in the sixth Mansion is this love, this divine love, moves back and forth across every aspect of ego consciousness, kind of untangling us. And one of the things you get entangled, she says is people misunderstand you and misrepresent you. And also, you have confessors who don't understand you and you feel the pain of not being understood, which is really the solitude of God. You know, you learn to depend on God.

And so, I think what happens then when we're in this situation, when you're going through something like that yourself, which is really you're in a traumatized state, really you're beside yourself. And when you open someone like Teresa, and you read her, it goes right to your heart. And you know that she's bearing witness to something in you that this thing that you're going through has no power to destroy. You know, there's something that the love of God, like qualitatively transcends the circumstance, and it's like a beam of light, you know, mainly you just hold onto it for dear life and it helps you get your balance back. That's one of the ways that I see it, too, how that happens to people.

Richard Rohr: Her transference of place is so different. You know that suddenly it's all localized inside the self, which we would have been warned against was solipsism or individualism, but it ends up being utterly different than that. It allows you to take yourself seriously and the journey toward God and the journey toward accepting, loving the self, end up being the same journey. It just amazed me that a woman of her time, largely uneducated, right, Jim? What was she doing—

Jim Finley: Yeah. Formally. You know, she wasn't allowed to study theology.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jim Finley: Women could not, yeah.

Richard Rohr: --would have such a good psychology, really, [is] rather amazing.

Jim Finley: You know, what else she'd say, too, is you're so right. It's like the solitary awakening in her heart, but the more deeply you go into it, it opens out up on the boundaryless life of that [cross talk @ 00:31:50]—

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Jim Finley: That's the great paradox, right?

Richard Rohr: Utter paradox. Utter.

Jim Finley: You go quietly into the secret touching of your heart. And when you surrender to it, it opens up on this boundaryless love of God that takes you to it. It's one of the great—

Richard Rohr: It sure is.

Jim Finley: She's so good at that, seeing that.

Richard Rohr: And to think how she's running around Spain, opening all these houses, in her cart or whatever she traveled in, and maintaining such a depth of interior dialogue. I mean, it's just hard to imagine, yet it's evident; evident.

Kirsten Oates: She's such an amazing role model of action and contemplation.

Richard Rohr: She really is.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And that final statement at the end of the seventh Mansion: "How can I be helpful?"

Richard Rohr: Is that right?

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Showing up, huh?

Jim Finley: She says for such a person who's come to this unitive state, there's only one question left: How can I be helpful?

Richard Rohr: I have to go back and look for that.

Jim Finley: See, because how can I be here with all these ordinary people that God's in love with, like Jesus walking the streets of fallen? "God so loved the world that he sent his only [son]," and it comes back full circle to her own brokenness and ordinariness in union with everybody.

She just levels the playing field. It's a lovely ending.

Richard Rohr: In the seventh Mansion? I'm going to look it up, right after.

Jim Finley: Yeah. A little epilogue when she says, "Please pray for me." That's how she ends. Keep me in your prayers, keep this poor, sinful woman in your prayers, something like that. She ends and quietly bows out. Beautiful.

Richard Rohr: Well, you just helped me because you know, I was thinking that the Interior Castle mirrors Ken Wilber's cleaning up, growing up, waking up, and I wasn't sure she talked about showing up, but you're telling me she does, right on schedule in the sixth Mansion. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it's true. And you can also see it in her writing where she's showing up on every paragraph.

Richard Rohr: Oh yeah.

Jim Finley: You get the feeling like she's right there too. I mean, in an "unimpositional" way, she's just so right out there revealing herself to us, so that as a way to help us find our way in this passage that she's talking about, like it's almost like being with her in spiritual direction. You get a feeling what it would be like to be with her. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: What also strikes me about this conversation, Jim, the way you talk about the seventh Mansion where—and you'll please say it better than me—but where God is pulling you forward from the first Mansion and both of your stories about picking up Thomas Merton. Could you relate those to that idea?

Jim Finley: Yes. And then Richard can chime in, too, this is how I ended on the seventh Mansion. What I think is so encouraging to us when we read her, as we get into the fifth, the sixth and the seventh, we realize she's talking about states, a divine consciousness that might be beyond anything that we've experienced. We're still encouraged by it because spiritually in the mystical body, what is given to one of us belongs to all of us and it inspires us to, like the celestial state of infinite union on Earth. But there's something else I think is so important. If you go back to the very beginning of the book, and she says there are some people who don't even know they have a soul and you ask yourself could I look back at a time that I didn't know I had one either and yet God found me there?

And so, what's so encouraging is this long arc from the seventh Mansion is the love that reaches out and touches us in our confusion. And I think that's extremely encouraging, you know, like the holiness where we're interiorly, quickened or awakened unexpectedly, we kind of serendipitously start to turn towards it. And then how mysteriously God leads us deeper and deeper. And I think that's very, very encouraging that we can be so at home among the lost, because God lives in the hearts of the lost and we're one of them. And we can be present to a lost world in a grounded, loving way.

And I was just very touched by that circularity of back to the very beginning. She even starts out the book this way in her little Forward. She's writing this as a seventh-Mansion mystic, and she's writing it under obedience, and she has this litany. She said, you know, this is going to be very hard to write this book. She says, one, I'm not in the mood to do it. Two, I

think I said it all already. Three, my head's spinning all the time and I'm old and sick, and I really don't see how I-- She's a seventh-Mansion mystic talking about that she doesn't know whether she's up to writing, but then she has this beautiful sentence: But because obedience has a way of simplifying things—that's a lovely statement—that once you feel God's calling you to do something, God gives you the strength to do—

Richard Rohr: Clarity, yes.

Jim Finley: --to do what you don't know you have the—And, right, so, anyway, she always has that richness and honesty about her.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Both the stories you told about picking up Merton's book, and it's like you were in the first Mansion, but the seventh Mansion was right there drawing you towards itself. And I could really feel that in your stories.

Richard Rohr: Beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Richard, part of what Jim has been teaching in the podcast is, you know, going through each of the Mansions and just identifying that each Mansion is equally valuable, and it doesn't matter where you find yourself.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: But learning about them helps you situate yourself. Jim, do you want to just reflect a little bit on your approach?

Jim Finley: Yes, what she's really saying is let's say you're a first-Mansion person. That is, you're someone who's just newly discovering personally that God loves you and you turn to it, but you have a divided heart. You have a divided heart, you know, you slide back—the reptiles, habits of the heart that compromise this love. And she says to realize that if you're a first-Mansion person and you're struggling this way, that's your holiness. And if you died, as a first-Mansion person, you would have died having lived a good life because it's a grace to be a faltering beginner who's first discovering God's love. And she is so good, how each one is, what matters is that we sense how God's with us where we are knowing that if we just stay with it and lean in deeper, God will see to it that our own heart will open and open. But we're not trying to figure out how can I get to that seventh Mansion, like right away, but how can I learn to discover God in the holiness of my first-Mansion struggles as a gift? And I think that's a big thing with her as part of her messages to all of us. Richard, is that your sense too?

Richard Rohr: I love her compassion, her mercy. Again, knowing that Inquisitional Spanish Catholicism would not have taught her that. She had to be taught by the Spirit. The only times I find her at all ineffective or faltering is when she tries to resort to the colloquial Catholic language, like mortal sin, and fit it—and I'm not denying the reality of sin—but it's there that it's sort of dead-ended. It's not invitational anymore. And it's the invitational, caring language that I think we still find so attractive. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yes. And, do you feel this way, Richard, that she uses that language as really the cultural language of the day, but when she speaks of sin, she means it really as the sin of not

surrendering to this tender love, you know, that sin isn't under certain, that legalistic sense with the Inquisition, but she understood sin to be this, you know what I mean, the disparity—

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Jim Finley: And, but we read it in the colloquial version.

Richard Rohr: We do. We do.

Jim Finley: And she also does this about women. She'll just say, you know, "We women, we're very moody." [laughter]

Richard Rohr: I love it. [laughter]

Jim Finley: And then, she also says cultural things like, "Dear God, please pray for the Lutherans." [laughter] She singles them out. So, you can see every mystic is somehow bound up in their own culture that they transcend. And we do, too, you know, we're kind of bound up in ours.

Another thing I find encouraging, she was writing in the Inquisition, which was horrible. It's encouraging for us about [how] we feel so dismayed about our present political demise, you know, where we are today politically, and where we are in certain aspects of the church too. And how she saw that she was so clear about how real that was, but it didn't keep her eye, you know, off the treasure of the love that permeates that community. That's another beautiful lesson from her, I think.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Richard, how would you recast the way she talks about mortal sin?

Richard Rohr: Well, I'm glad Jim said what he did because I struggled with that a lot going through the text. It just, for my generation, connotes so much negativity that did not invite you onto the spiritual journey. It just, it was definitive. It was a closed system. It was something you did or did not do. So, I had to end up translating that almost exactly as Jim said, whenever I'm living in a state of non-union, sometimes deliberately so because I'm so self-willed or so driven in my own agenda, whatever it is, that is a sin unto death, and you have to be rescued from it, usually by failure, in my experience. I forget, would either of you remember, how does Mirabai translate mortal sin? Does she use that term in her—

Jim Finley: That's a good question.

Richard Rohr: She wouldn't have come to that by her Jewish Protestant background—

Jim Finley: And she knows the Spanish, so, she would have known, she knows she's translating that, like what's the essence for Teresa. What would be interesting would be the word that she uses that would be—

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, I should look that up. I'm just noticing that she's using the words grave error in one place. If the soul were to fall into grave error—

Richard Rohr: Grave error. Well maybe that works.

Jim Finley: That works.

Richard Rohr: Maybe that's it—grave error. Yeah. The notion itself comes from the first letter of John. "There is a sin unto death," he says, and I think this is a chosen darkness, a deliberate unconsciousness in our language, or grave error. That's good.

Jim Finley: I like Merton's insight. And he says in *The New Seeds of Contemplation*, he says, all sin begins in the belief that our separate self is the foundation for our whole life. And we clothe this self, he says, which can't be real, and we clothe it, like we wrap like bandages, we wrap around trying to make ourselves look real in this illusionary separateness that can't exist. He calls that a life of sin, you know, and then how we act out that illusion. I like that way of looking at it.

Richard Rohr: Oh, I do too. My God, that man, if there's any notion that needs clarification, just start reading Merton and you'll find it eventually.

Jim Finley: That's what some people say about Richard Rohr. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: No, I don't think so. Richard babbles on too much. [laughter]

Kirsten Oates: Well, Richard, I do. I think when I picked up Teresa, one of the reasons she resonated for me was the way you have drawn out the necessary path of psychological wholeness and doing good psychological work, you know, as a Christian, that was kind of seen as separate, even scary at times. And so, I just wondered if you'd reflect on how you see Teresa doing that and how you came to that?

Richard Rohr: You know, it's why you've heard me say in my most recent books, how good theology does not build on bad psychology or bad anthropology. If you have a negative image of the human person, or a faulty image of the human person, you can say all the glorious things you want about God, but the two of us don't know how to meet. There's no common ground between God and the person. So, I admit my generation in the '60s and '70s and '80s was very psychological. Maybe sometimes it went too far, but I'm still convinced they've got to be kissing cousins. They have got to work together, or you can't present the spiritual journey in a way that's believable, credible, holdable.

And yet, the conservative right, it's that very thing that they hate you for, very often, they'll call it New Age or just psychology, almost as if they don't want the soul and the divine to be, you know, working together, operating as one. It amazes me, their fear of psychology because it isn't really psychology. It's just an understanding of this creature God has made in his image and likeness. If that's psychology, but it's already theology that I, and you, and Jim, and Corey, we're all theological statements in our very being.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. Jim, what's your reflection on that?

Jim Finley: I'm thinking, I think it's Thomas Aquinas, this idea that grace builds on nature. I mean, everything is grace, but it's mediated through our nature in the psychological maturity. And if we've internalized distortions, the grace gets filtered through and distorted by those

distortions. And so, we're always trying to discern what those are and head into a kind of more luminous clarity, like more reality-based basis for understanding the mystery of our life and who we are. And I would, you know, I see it along those lines. I think it's where depth psychology and the spiritual life touch each other.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Jim Finley: And then, in the depths of like AA to sobriety and recovery, you know, the more you authentically and courageously go down into the depths of the hurting place, that's where you discover that you're invincible, like what Jesus called the pearl of great price. You discover the invincible preciousness of yourself that got buried under the rubble of all that confusion. And you find your way out again. And that's what makes the healing, that humble, transformative process, such a holy place where it's inherently integrated like that. But when we separate them, like here's this theological purity and down here, here's this and the two never meet each other, it creates this dualism—

Richard Rohr: Dualism.

Jim Finley: --in our thinking. And that's the problem. It splits off divinity from the divinity of the ordinariness of the human experience.

Richard Rohr: Yep. And you don't know how to put the two together again.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I love, Richard, the way you said we're already theological in our humanity just being here, and I think Teresa really speaks to that because psychology wasn't a thing back then. And yet she was so clear on what it was to be a human being and what it was to grow in love. It was just amazing.

Richard Rohr: Clear, yeah. You almost think it was an advantage that she was not educated as a cleric or as a male, you know? Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. As a matter of fact, when you really look at it, too, the very genius of how she sets this up. So, the soul is a word she's using for our God-given godly nature created by God in the image and likeness of God. So, she starts there. Then the Mansions are the ways in which, or the degrees of which, we interiorly are awakened to the mystery of that and respond to it. So, the Mansions are incremental degrees of awakening and responding to the God-given godly nature of the mystery of our own soul. So, you see right away what you're talking about, Richard, is built right into how she starts building the whole basis for her teaching.

Richard Rohr: I just have been reading Matthew Fox's new commentary on Julian of Norwich, who would have preceded Teresa by several centuries. And, if he's translating Julian directly—I'm going to go back and reread her—but he has her saying the identical thing Teresa did—we must know God in oneself, and we must know oneself in God. That's amazing. If two comparatively uneducated women could come to such a profound theology, psychology, independently of one another, that's Perennial Tradition. That's wisdom. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: That's God psychology, theology.

Richard Rohr: That's right. That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Purely given. Amazing.

Jim Finley: You know, also, Mechtild of Magdeburg of the Beguines. Mechtild was an uneducated woman during this, one of these mystics. And she has this lovely statement in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, where she says that God revealed to her that he freely chose to be so hopelessly in love with her that he doesn't know if he could handle being God without her. And she says, "Take me home with you. I'll be your physician forever."

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Jim Finley: Where does that come from?

Richard Rohr: Where? Where?

Jim Finley: Out of the heart of a person, a witness—

Richard Rohr: The courage to talk that way.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly, with such—

Richard Rohr: We would have been told this is presumption. [laughter] We created words of sins—the sin of presumption, that you could be important to God. And that's the very message!

Kirsten Oates: Wow. I didn't know that. That was in the monastery, or in the Franciscan lineage?

Richard Rohr: Catholic vocabulary, yeah. Presumption and despair were the two false paths. Presuming too much or despairing of God.

Jim Finley: And Teresa is also very good, Richard, what do you think of this, where this kind of boldness of seeing this God-given divinity of ourself in the seventh Mansion that we're drawn towards, she says is also always simultaneously grounded in humility, that the door that moves through each Mansion: humility, prayer, and self-knowledge. So, she always grounds the boldness of God's love for us in our humble amazement of being so loved and responding to it. So, she's completely free of presumption. You know, she's almost bearing witness to this infinite love that draws us so. And other people misread her, and they turn it into presumption. It's about him: "Look what I've experienced. Look what I'm doing."

Richard Rohr: Yep. Yep.

Jim Finley: And we confuse those two things. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It must've been something about her though, because even under the Inquisition, she was able to convince them that this bold language was actually true of God. And that seems quite amazing.

Jim Finley: She was very smart.

Richard Rohr: Smart.

Jim Finley: She was very careful to stay under the radar. So, when she makes these self-demeaning statements like, "We women, we don't--" "I refer all of this to the Catholic Church." What she's doing, she's keeping herself under the radar.

Richard Rohr: That's right. That's right.

Jim Finley: That's very carefully being bold, like courageously prudent, you know? And she's good at that. She's street smart.

Richard Rohr: Genius, yeah.

Jim Finley: Really brilliant.

Richard Rohr: Before she's going to say something really bold, she reaffirms her ignorance and her obedience to the Holy Catholic Church, and then she shoots it at you. [laughter]

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: It's so helpful to hear that context. Because as a woman, you can read her and feel like, oh, she's very demeaning about herself and that's not great role modeling, but what I actually hear is she was very strategic.

Jim Finley: She was.

Kirsten Oates: And sometimes, being strategic isn't-- Yeah, it's amazing.

Richard Rohr: She knows what she's doing. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: In difficult circumstances, she was very strategic. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: There you go.

Kirsten Oates: Well, this has been an amazing conversation. Any last thoughts from Richard, Jim?

Richard Rohr: Any last thoughts? I don't know where to land. The bigger things we already addressed at least slightly. So, I'm content, more than content.

Kirsten Oates: But, Richard, which Mansion are you in? [laughter]

Richard Rohr: Oh God. Well, as Jim said, "What a waste of time." One, to answer that question is hubris.

Kirsten Oates: How about you, Jim? Any closing thoughts?

Jim Finley: You know, for me it ties in with our conversation here is just like with her, you see this in Augustine, too, that the greatest evidence of God's love for us is our own life, you know, like the autobiographical foundations. So, for me to come out of this trauma and brokenness and this arc of ending up in a cloistered monastery, you know, ending up with Merton, ending up being grounded in that, ending up getting retraumatized in the monastery, ending up coming out, getting re-grounded in this again, and out of that, writing Merton's Palace of Nowhere on the True Self and out of that as a high school religion teacher, going on tour, giving silent retreats around the country and then meeting Richard Rohr and moving on, and then being invited to the Living School. [laughter] The fact that we're sitting here like this on this podcast of the mystics, reaching all these people, and Richard and I are sitting like two old friends swapping stories about how grateful we are—

Richard Rohr: Absolutely.

Jim Finley: --it amazes me. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: We're exact contemporaries. Isn't that interesting? We saw the Old Church. We youthfully grew through the growing of the New Church, and we live now in this time of postmodern deconstruction of everything—

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: --grateful for what we were given.

Jim Finley: Yeah. But I also think, Richard, we've talked about this before on other occasion, is I think just like God providentially used Merton to touch so many people, I think providentially, it isn't something you planned, you know, the role that you've played in kind of radically bearing witness to what the heart knows is true in such pastoral, common sense ways, you know what I mean? Like the brilliance, the pastoral accessibility to the truth of all this must also kind of amaze you, how God's used you. [music]

Richard Rohr: Oh. Oh.

Jim Finley: Kind of like, "Go figure."

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Jim Finley: There you are. You're right in the middle of it. And here we are—

Richard Rohr: God largely hid it from me so I wouldn't take myself too seriously.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Thank you for inviting me into this wonderful conversation.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Thank you. Beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you both.

Richard Rohr: God bless you both.

Jim Finley: God bless you. Thank you, Richard.

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.