

Turning to the Mystics



Turning to St. John of the Cross
with James Finley, feat. Mirabai Starr

Jim Finley: Song of the Soul.
On a dark night, inflamed by love-longing. O exquisite risk.
Undetected, I slipped away. My house, at last, grown still.

Mirabai Starr: En una noche oscura,
con ansias en amores inflamada,
¡oh dichosa uentura!
sali sin ser notada,
estando ya mi casa sosegada.

Jim Finley: Secure in the darkness, I climb the secret ladder in disguise.
O exquisite risk. Concealed by the darkness, my house, at last, grown still.

Mirabai Starr: A escuras y segura,
por la secreta escala disfrazada,
¡oh dichosa uentura!
a escuras y ençelada,
estando ya mi casa sosegada.

Jim Finley: That sweet night, a secret, nobody saw me. I did not see a thing.
No other light, no other guide than the one burning in my heart.

Mirabai Starr: En la noche dichosa,
en secreto, que nadie me ueya,
ni yo miraua cosa,
sin otra luz ni guia
sino la que en el coraçon ardia.

Jim Finley: This light lead the way more clearly than the risen son to where he was waiting for me. The
one I knew so intimately, in a place where no one could find us.

Mirabai Starr: Aquesta me guiaua
mas cierto que la luz del mediodia,
adonde me esperaua
quien yo bien me sabia,
en parte donde nadie parecia.

Jim Finley: O night that guided me. O night sweeter than sunrise.
O night that joins lover with beloved. Lover transformed in beloved.

Mirabai Starr: ¡Oh noche que me guiaste!
¡oh noche amable mas que el aluorada!,
¡oh noche que juntaste
amado con amada,
amada en el amado transformada!

Jim Finley: Upon my blossoming breast, which I cultivated just for him, he drifted into sleep.
And while I caressed him, a cedar breeze touched the air.

Mirabai Starr: Y en mi pecho florido,
que entero para el solo se guardaua,
alli quedo dormido,
y yo le regalaua,
y el ventalle de cedros ayre daua.

Jim Finley: Wind blew down from the tower, parting the locks of his hair.
With his gentle hand he wounded my neck, and all my senses were suspended.

Mirabai Starr: El ayre de la almena,
cuando ya sus cabellos esparzia,
con su mano serena
en mi cuello heria,
y todos mis sentidos suspendia.

Jim Finley: I lost myself, forgot myself. I lay my face against the beloved's face.
Everything fell away. And I left myself behind, abandoning my cares among the lilies,
forgotten.

Mirabai Starr: Quedeme y oluideme,
el rostro recline sobre el amado,
ceso todo, y dexeme,
dexando mi cuidado
entre las açucenas olvidado.

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim and Mirabai Starr for that absolutely beautiful reading of St. John of the Cross's poem, Song of the Soul. What a beautiful way to start this season. I'm just going to take a pause and a breath to let that soak in a minute.

Welcome, everyone, to Turning to the Mystics Season 3.

Kirsten Oates: I'm here with Jim, and we're very excited to be launching a new season focusing on another 16th century Spanish mystic, John of the Cross. I thought it might be helpful to listeners, first, just to go back through where we've come from. So, we launched in Season 1 with inviting people to understand this practice of Lectio Divina.

Kirsten Oates: And then, Thomas Merton was the first mystical text we looked at. And then, in the second season, we looked to Teresa of Avila. And now, we're turning to St. John of the Cross, another 16th century mystic who was actually a friend of Teresa of Avila. So, can you reflect on where we've come from and why you have chosen that path?

Jim Finley: Yes. You know, first of all, I think what I'm doing here with this whole series is very personal in a way. And what I'm really doing is sharing the mystics whose teachings have had the

most effect on my life personally. That is the mystics starting when I was in the monastery that I was introduced to by Thomas Merton, and which I've been reading over the years, and then teaching on retreats.

Jim Finley: And so, I started with Thomas Merton, because when I was 14 years old and started reading Thomas Merton in high school. And through high school, Thomas Merton was the first teacher that I was exposed to, mystic teacher. And then, because when I went to the monastery, he became my teacher in person for three years.

Jim Finley: So, I started with him for that reason. I also started with him because he's contemporary. And therefore, he speaks our language. He's the present day mystical dimension of discipleship and of life in the world. So, it's that personal reason, he's the first teacher I had, the teacher that helped form me in his writings and in his life.

Jim Finley: And also, for the students, he's a good place to start because his language is contemporary. Unlike the others, we have to do some translation from other centuries. With him, we don't need to do that, so that's why I started with Thomas Merton. Then, next to that same personal way, what happened for me, actually, was the first classical text of the mystics Thomas Merton helped me in was St. John of the Cross.

Jim Finley: But what I'm trying to do here in this series, basically, is to go back and forth between a woman and a man mystic back and forth. So, it's because we started with Merton. Then, after, I started reading John of the Cross then I got into Teresa so to move back and forth. But I went to Teresa next, so we would do a woman next.

Jim Finley: And then, we're starting now with John of the Cross, that's the reason. So, likewise, as we keep moving through this, I want to go to 14th century English mystics. And so, I want to go to the Cloud of Unknowing. And I want to go to Julian of Norwich. So, the students is following my own personal path, but also introducing them to different schools of mysticism.

Jim Finley: So, you have Thomas Merton, who is contemporary, 16th century Spanish mysticism, 14th century English mysticism, and then we're going to do John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart and Mechthild of Magdeburg is the German Rhineland mystics. So, that's the logic to the sequence.

Kirsten Oates: I like the rhythm of it, too, because Thomas Merton was your teacher. And then, Teresa of Avila was St. John of the Cross's teacher. And so, we're going from teacher to student.

Jim Finley: We are. And actually what happened that way with John and Teresa, how it happened that way is that when Teresa was in the Carmel, Carmelite-cloistered Carmelite monastery there in Avila, when she felt called to do the reform of the order to the Discalced Carmelites for life and deeper commitment to prayer, poverty and simplicity, and so on.

Jim Finley: And in the process of the reform, she has John of the Cross to join her and do the reform for the priests, for the friars. Well, that time, he was just ordained, I think he

was 28. She was 51, I think, something like that, she was older. And so, what it really was, in a way, they were mutually, mystically given friends who mutually understood each other.

Jim Finley: And although he was so much younger than her, she respected the depth of his mystical experience. So, in a way, there was a difference in chronological age, so they gave spiritual direction, they gave spiritual support and affinity to each other, I think, as two gifted mystics. But you do get this back and forth between two mystical lives crossing each other like that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Can you describe a little bit more about what was going on in the Carmelite church at the time, and why Teresa and then John of the Cross felt so drawn to make some changes.

Jim Finley: Yes. In 16th century Spain, Avila is a walled city, medieval, because of the Moor's the invasions when all that was going on with the Muslim, the thing back and forth, all that, and the Crusades earlier, it's long complicated history. So, Avila is a walled city to protect itself during the uneasy times. And just outside the walled city is this large cloistered Carmelite monastery, a Monastery of the Incarnation.

Jim Finley: And Teresa was a nun in that monastery. And so, this is a longstanding cloistered contemplative order in the Catholic Church. And she felt called to return to a more primitive observance of a Carmelite order that it has become just the bureaucracy of it and the size of it, and there are other social factors, too, that she felt called to return to this simplicity, the silence and the prayer.

Jim Finley: So, that was her. And she also realized that the similar thing had happened with the friars, with the priest, of the Carmelite order, they're not cloistered, a commitment to prayer, and also then in ministry, to preaching and service to the community. And so, both John and Teresa both saw, it would be advantageous for the Carmelite order to return to the origins of a commitment to interior prayer, silence, poverty, simplicity.

Jim Finley: So, that was the spirit of it. And then, what happened is that Teresa went on with the reform then founded with the first house of the reformed inside the walls of that Avila. So, it's a small convent. And then, both convents are still there, and there's nuns in both of them. So, they're both ongoing convents there.

Jim Finley: And so, she started the reform. But this also then came up against the politics of the Carmelite order and the resistance to that, because they did the movements in the order that they were against the reform or against the implications they needed to reform.

Jim Finley: And so, they both had to deal with the political back and forth of all of that, to the point that when John of the Cross, they captured him and put him in a prison there and whipped him and it was a horrendous thing. And so, anyway, that's the story on that.

Kirsten Oates: What was the final outcome, did the reform take root there?

Jim Finley: It went on. Yes. While it went on, it was a complicated, circuitous thing, but it came established and that discalced nuns went on there and today all over the world, the cloistered discalced Carmelite sisters. And the discalced Carmelite order was also there. And the big picture, all evened out and moved on. And so, you have the discalced nuns and the friars today in the church, yes.

Kirsten Oates: John of the Cross has been a really important mystic in your journey. Can you tell us how you got introduced to him?

Jim Finley: Yes. I think Thomas Merton was the first Christian mystic that I read in high school, *The Sign of Jonas*, which led me to go to the monastery, be with him as my teacher, which is grace for me. But then, with Thomas Merton's guidance, I began to read the classical texts of these mystics we're going through in this series.

Jim Finley: And John of the Cross was the first mystic that I read under his guidance. And I can remember having never read John of the Cross before, any of these classical texts. I remember the very first time I took with me my copy of John of the Cross and walked out into the woods and sat on the ground at the base of a tree. And I read this opening sentence.

Jim Finley: This is the prologue of how he begins his first work, John of the Cross's. A deeper enlightenment and a wider experience than mine is necessary to explain the dark night through which his soul journeys toward that divine light, a perfect union with God, which is achieved insofar as possible in this life through love.

Jim Finley: The darkness and trials, spiritual and temporal, that fortunate souls ordinarily encounter on their way to the high state of perfection are so numerous and profound the human science cannot understand them adequately, nor does experience of them equip one to explain them. He who suffers them will know what this experience is like, but he will be unable to describe it.

Jim Finley: And I can remember sitting there as 18 years old. And that's the first sentence of the book. And I can remember just singing it, like most of this is going right over my head. But when I read it, the music of it, I felt it was accessing me like somehow it was about me.

Jim Finley: And it just set in motion, this being led by John of the Cross into the beauty and the depth of his teaching, just had an ongoing profound effect on me, his life and his teachings. But the thing is, with all the mystics, they are beautiful and profound, but he's not easy.

Jim Finley: And that's why I'm hoping that by our reflections here, once we get the inscape, once you get the sense of what he's saying, something very intimate really, once we see it, then we can benefit from the beauty of what he is saying. And so, that's the hope here, I guess.

Kirsten Oates: Can you go back to that time again, because I think we have a lot of people who are approaching these mystics for the very first time. And how do you balance that sense of, I really don't get this, with trying to find that opening to the poetic or to the mystical?

Jim Finley: Yes. And we're talking about a little later in this reflection with each other now. But I think this that Thomas Merton once said to the novices at the monastery, he said, "John of the Cross is writing for beginners." And John of the Cross says that. But Thomas Merton says

he's running for a certain beginner.

Jim Finley: And I think the beginner that he's writing for is the person sincerely who were living our life and following Christ, life of discipleship. And in this process, we get a taste or a glimmer or a longing as something deeper. And that touch of something deeper, like a touch of love, is a touch that's so intimate, we don't know what to make of it.

Jim Finley: But having tasted it, we discover in our heart a longing to abide in it. So, I would say that's the point of entry. It is a point of entry that you can tell John of the Cross is writing about. Something that you know what he's talking about because you've tasted it. And he's attempting to offer you guidance in how to be stabilized in that. So, I think it's like that.

Jim Finley: So, as we read him, we have to be very patient with our self, the willingness to be perplexed. But every so often, there's the one-liners it gets you, like what I just read. And you sit in the poetry of it and ask God to help you understand it. And little by little, if it resonates with you, I think that's how we're led into the place he's trying to help us find our way into this place. Yeah, that's my sense of it.

Kirsten Oates: I love that guidance you just gave on you need a willingness to be perplexed, an invitation for a season of being perplexed.

Jim Finley: Really, it's humility, really. See, because if we understood it upfront, it would be infinitely less so what the heart longs for. It would just be more of what we understand. The close to rise and hope we checked that off one more thing I know about. But what is it that I can't understand? But it's accessing me, awakening me to itself and drawing me into its depth, how can I learn to cooperate the depth.

Kirsten Oates: How did you proceed from there? Did you meet with Thomas Merton and processed it with him?

Jim Finley: Yeah. I saw him every other week for spiritual direction. And so, I talked about other things, too, that I was going through the solitude, just different things. But when I was into John of the Cross, I would make my reading part of what he was saying. I would dialog with him because I sense he knew it so well, or he was it. I think he was also a realized person like this, so I just made that part.

Jim Finley: Then, once I got going, then on my own, once I caught hold of it, I just kept reading it over and over. And then, I started when I left the monastery, I started giving retreats on John of the Cross throughout the United States and Canada, and so the more I kept giving retreats on him, he just become part of me, really.

Kirsten Oates: Can you tell us a little bit more about John of the Cross?

Jim Finley: Yes. This idea of the autobiographical foundations, the mystics teaching out of their own life, which helps us to discover the foundations of the teaching in our life, because it's inscribed in our story, and so to know who he was historically to help us understand who he is spiritually. St. John of the Cross was born in Spain in 1542, where he lived his life until his death in 1591 at 49 years of age.

- Jim Finley: As a young man, he felt called to the priesthood and entered the Carmelite order, one of the religious orders of the Catholic Church, which is devoted to prayer and simplicity, and poverty and so on. The nuns in the order of which Teresa of Avila was one, she was a Carmelite nun there in Avila where they're cloistered.
- Jim Finley: They're cloistered like the Trappist, like Merton was a cloistered, but the friars, the Carmelite priests committed to a life of prayer poverty, simplicity, but then also ministry through parish work and serving the board, homilies. And so, he entered the Carmelite priesthood. As he was approaching ordination, he in ordination, he was feeling called to go to the Carthusian to leave the Carmelites, which is an Order of Hermits founded by St. Bruno.
- Jim Finley: By the way, Thomas Merton wanted to be a Carthusian also, but stopped it, they stopped it, wouldn't let him go. And so, you could tell he was being drawn towards solitude and like that. So, this is when he met Teresa. And she met with him just newly ordained. And she said that she was in the process of reforming the Carmelite order of the sisters, so returning to poverty, simplicity and prayer.
- Jim Finley: And she asked him if he would join her in the reform, not go to the Carthusians. That he could find a more contemplative life within the reformed Carmelite order, and instead, would he joined her in the reform. And he prayed over it, and he felt he should do that.
- Jim Finley: And they were called the Discalced Carmelites, which means barefooted Carmelites, because out of their poverty being barefooted or with sandals, I don't, the discalced... anyway. So, you had the Carmelites then you have this emerging reform.
- Jim Finley: So, when John of the Cross and this just newly ordained priest went to the Carmelite priests, the shoe-wearing Carmelite priests, and told them that he was going to start a reform. They didn't take kindly the suggestion that they needed one. And they said, "Look, you just got ordained, back off," you know what I mean, like, "Don't do this." He said, "I can't stop."
- Jim Finley: And what was interesting, too, is they weren't required to join the reform. They were perfectly free to continue. It's just they will open up the option of the reformed houses, discalced houses. And to show you the spirit of the times, really, we get to the inquisition was going on in Spain, also, at this time.
- Jim Finley: And they, because they refused to stop, they captured John of the Cross, and put him in a little prison cell in the monastery, like a closet, very small, and kept him there for nine months. Anthony Padovano says, "The only noteworthy things to come out of Italy are the Roman Catholic Church and the mafia, because they both make you an offer you can't refuse."
- Jim Finley: And so, they made him an offer he can't refuse, they put them in this place. And it was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Light just coming in over a high window, just one little place light would come in. He had nothing to eat, but bread, water and sardines. And they would bring him out to eat in public sitting in the middle of the refectory as a punishment.
- Jim Finley: And at the end of the meal, had to strip to the waist and they each come by and whip him over his bare shoulders for the length of the Miserere, the Psalm, out of the depths I cry unto thee, oh, Lord. And this went on for nine months. And the accumulative effect of the

harshness of this, the poor diet, the whipping, and so on, his health began to fail.

Jim Finley: Anyone into a dark night, now the dark night in one sense, what it was in a sense, I think, is a crisis of faith. That he had committed his life to the church. These were the priests that he emulated in Scripture classes and so on, doing this to him. And I think whenever we place our faith in the representatives of Christ in the church instead of in Christ, we forget that we're all love sinners. And he became lost.

Kirsten Oates: Was this their strategy to change his mind?

Jim Finley: Yes, to change his mind.

Kirsten Oates: And so, for nine months, he just wouldn't refuse to change his mind?

Jim Finley: He wouldn't change his mind. Because you see, it's what is said about him is that I am not changing, because I can't. I believe God wants this out of me and isn't up to me, I can't do this. If I would give in to what you're saying, I'd lose everything. I can't do it. So, what happened in this process is that a more kindly guard allowed him to have writing material.

Jim Finley: Because what he started doing, what happened to him in the night, and not just the external night of the deprivation, but the night of the loss of faith. And what it was is he lost the sense of God's presence in his life, like Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And he was in a state of despair, and the inner darkness of the inability to experience the presence of God in the midst of your difficulties and injustices and so on.

Jim Finley: And then, in that night, he says, O night lovelier than the dawn," a great light broke forth in his heart, changed his whole life. And he's very similar here to the Muslim mystic, Rumi. And Rumi, his mystical teacher, Shams. The Muslim community that Rumi was in were jealous of his relationship with Shams, and so they murdered Shams.

Jim Finley: And when they murdered Shams, Rumi was so stricken by the violence of that and moved by it, he started wailing and whirling around a pillar, and poetry started flowing out, you see, the beauty that flows out of brokenness like this. And so, he started writing out this, and it started coming to him as poetry. It's how it first came to him in the dark.

Jim Finley: And so, he started writing out these poetry. And this is the poem he wrote in prison. This is the spiritual canticle in the person, I'll just read the first couple opening stances. See, he's writing this out of this lost place, let's see. Where have you hidden beloved and left me moaning. You fled like the stag after wounding me.

Jim Finley: I went out calling you and you were gone. Shepherds, you that go up to the sheepfold to the hill, if by chance you see him I love most, tell him that I sicken, suffer and die. O who has the power to heal me? Now wholly surrender yourself. Do not send me any more messengers. They cannot tell me what I must hear.

Jim Finley: All who are free, tell me of a thousand graceful things of you. O wound me all the more and leave me dying. Of all I know not what behind their stammering. How do you endure, O life, not living where you live. And so, it's the pathos of the depth of his longing that the light broke through and out of that. So, he escaped from the prison, which he attributed to a

miracle, miraculous event.

Jim Finley: And when he came out, he resumed his work with the reform with Teresa. And he started showing the nuns the reform, Teresa, the poetry. So, they asked him to explain what the poetry meant. They could tell it was very beautiful. And so, the works of St. John of the Cross, they're all based on this. So, he'll start with the first stanza, like this stanza number one.

Jim Finley: And then, he'll explain stanza number one in 20 pages. He'll go through each phase. So, it's interesting, it starts poetically then explicates the poetry through Scripture and images and so on. And so, that's the storyline of John of the Cross. Turning to the mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Jim and I had the pleasure of talking to Mirabai Starr about St. John of the Cross. She has been a student of his for many years and translated the Dark Night of the Soul into English. Mirabai, thank you so much for being here. Would you start us off just talking a little bit about his life and how his life impacted his spirituality and his spiritual journey.

Mirabai Starr: Sure, and I won't linger on his younger years, so I'm going to probably shoot ahead to his imprisonment pretty quickly because that's where I think the transformation happened, as it did with Francis of Assisi, and as it does with probably many incarcerated people. But he was born into a poor family. It wasn't supposed to go that way.

Mirabai Starr: His father actually came from more or less nobility, certainly a privileged family, from a family of cloth merchants, like Francis of Assisi, his family. But he fell in love with an itinerant weaver woman who was poor and was probably Muslim. Definitely there seem to have been Jewish roots.

Mirabai Starr: And of course, during this time, right after the beginning of the Inquisition, right after the Expulsion, early on in the time of the Inquisition having *sangre pura*, pure blood, was everything. Teresa, of course, we already know came from a *converso* family and the first generation converts from Judaism to Christianity. But John, John of the Cross, his family probably also had those roots, and certainly his mother did.

Mirabai Starr: So, his father's family disowned him when he married his mother, and so they plunged into poverty. They had three sons. The father died when John, who I think was the middle child was only three years old. His younger brother died of malnutrition, not long afterwards. And his mother took the two remaining children on the road.

Mirabai Starr: They were homeless for a long time. And then, finally she found at work as a weaver in Medina del Campo, I think it was. And so, it's significant that he lived this life of poverty as a young child. It also stunted his growth. He was only five feet tall and probably weighed around 100 pounds, which is just the same as me. So, I identified with that.

Mirabai Starr: And then, when he was 16, I think, he found work in a hospital. And his particular task in the hospital was basically to work in the hospice, helping people to die. And I think he was placed there because it was quickly realized that he had this gift of deep compassion, and this ability to hold the suffering of the people around him.

- Mirabai Starr: And this great gift of his actually drew the attention of the hospital administrator who then arranged for scholarship for John to go to the University of Salamanca. And at the time, the University of Salamanca was the place throughout all of Europe where the greatest scholarship was unfolding. It was also likely that at the University of Salamanca, in addition to being exposed to the roots of Christian theology, particularly Thomas Aquinas and probably Augustine.
- Mirabai Starr: He undoubtedly encountered some of the Islamic writers and mystics, and was exposed to Sufi, I think, to Sufi mysticism. And that a lot of John's love poetry, I mean, the roots were in Christian mysticism as well, but I think he experienced the writings of the Kabbalists, the Jewish mystical tradition, and definitely the Sufi mystical tradition, which later really rises up in his poetry and in metaphors like fire and gardens and wine and intoxication, and all of those rich images we see in Sufi and Sufi poetry.
- Mirabai Starr: But when he was 25 years old, he became a Carmelite friar early on and decided almost immediately that this was not for him. That the Carmelite church was way too mired in formality and disconnected from the burning heart that wants only union with God, right? So, he decided he was going to leave the Carmelite Order and become just a solitary hermit.
- Mirabai Starr: And that's when Teresa of Avila heard about him and they were in the same place at the same time, and she summoned him to her. And she said, Listen, I've been I've been hearing about you and you sound like my kind of guy. I would like you to consider not going off into the mountains to become a holy hermit, but instead helping me with my reform movement of the Discalced Carmelite Order that she was creating.
- Mirabai Starr: And he said, okay, if it doesn't take too long, because I have no patience, I will join you. And that became his lifelong passion, was serving Teresa's vision, which so deeply resonated with him. I'll be curious to hear Jim's reflections on that vision.
- Mirabai Starr: But what I want to now end with is that, as a result of John's dedication to Teresa and to this reform movement, he pissed off a lot of people and authority figures in high places, and ultimately was snatched out of his bed in the middle of the night in one of the monasteries that he had founded at Teresa's direction and thrown into us a cell.
- Mirabai Starr: Actually, it had been a latrine and a monastery in Toledo, and he languished there for nine months, the period of time that a fetus grows in the human mother's womb. And the monks horribly mistreated him, tortured him, they tortured him. They beat him on a regular basis. Usually, they take him out of his cell.
- Mirabai Starr: And while they were having their meal, somebody would be in charge of flogging him. He ultimately died of a recurring infection from those wounds. He was pretty much starved. He lived on the proverbial bread and water and a little bit of salted fish. He was in this tiny dark cell, couldn't see, couldn't even lie down, it's said. He did have a miraculous escape, who knows how miraculous it was.
- Mirabai Starr: There was probably a sympathetic guard involved. The same guard undoubtedly who handed him paper and a coil so that he could write down the poetry that the guard heard him uttering on a regular basis. It seems to me, and Jim, I can't wait to hear your reflections on this, that what saved John when he was in prison, what saved his life literally was poetry.

- Mirabai Starr: So, he would compose poetry, mostly the spiritual canticle, very, very long poem. He would compose poetry and then memorize it, and speak it over and over again. And I think the guard probably was taken, was smitten by this static love poetry, and got him to write it down. So, that was, yeah, that was the way he kept his sanity, at least, if not his life.
- Mirabai Starr: And when he escaped, it was Teresa's nuns in Toledo, in a convent that nursed him back to health. And it was after he escaped and took refuge with the nuns, that the poem, *Noche Oscura Del Alma*, *Canciones Del Alma*, the Songs of the Soul that we read, emerged, he says it was just an outpouring of love.
- Mirabai Starr: And then, later, as he did with all of his major poems, he wrote this incredibly erudite and complex and important prose, treatise, that we know of as *The Dark Night of the Soul*.
- Jim Finley: My sense of the imprisonment, which also reminds me of Rumi, when they killed Shams.
- Mirabai Starr: Yes.
- Jim Finley: And he started whirling around the pillar and the poetry started flowing out.
- Mirabai Starr: Totally, Jim, that's a perfect parallel, out of that brokenness emerged the school.
- Jim Finley: Yes, it just broke, just came flooding through. And so, yeah, I mean, to get this is that in the imprisonment, was he lost refuge in his own faith community. Where the very priest who probably studied scripture, these are the friars of his own order. And insofar as we place our faith in the representatives of the holy in our brokenness, then that breaks, that loss, and he couldn't find his way.
- Jim Finley: It was the combination of the physical abuse and the heartless cruelty of it with no compassion. And being the very people who are doing this was being the people who represent Christ, the whole thing just broke open, and the convergence of those factors, he was just put through a trauma. He was just profoundly traumatized than lost.
- Jim Finley: And then, went out of that loss, the poetry started flowing out. Is it the poetry was untranslated eloquence of the love unexplainable just pouring out. So, there was no gap between the initial impulse of the light that shined out of the dark and the cadences and rhythms of the words that embodied that light out of it. And I think that's something of the intimate immediacy of the poetry.
- Jim Finley: And I think that's why, too, when we read it out loud, the music of it, you taste the essence of it. So then, the person when he got out and the nuns read the poetry, and said, this is very beautiful poetry, what does it mean? What does it mean? And so, it's interesting, he'll take one stanza and take 20 pages to talk about that one stanza, because every little metaphor is an endlessly evocative metaphor of his love.
- Jim Finley: And it all holds together in an explicated mandala, which then offers guidance for the person on the path. Where he says in the prologue, he said, right, I'm writing this for certain sisters in the Carmel. Certain ones, namely, the ones who are being led into this, because *The Dark Night*, the imprisonment was the conditions in which his dark night occurred, which was the loss of the presence of God.

- Jim Finley: And so, there are some people, that's how it happens to them out of trauma, imprisonment. But sometimes on the surface, you're just praying, and all hell breaks loose. I mean, you're just praying. And out of the prayer. There's no God in sight. There's absolutely no God in sight. And so, he tried to help them understand that God is weaning them off, their dependency on finite ways of experiencing infinite love.
- Jim Finley: So, being weaned off their dependency on that, the influx of infinite union with infinite love can start coming up out of their poverty. And I think that's part of the brilliance of how he takes that situational core condition in which it happened. And helps people realize, that might be how it has happened to you, too, but maybe not, maybe not.
- Jim Finley: So, when I talk this way, and if you can tell, I'm talking about what you've experienced. John of the Cross, he is running for beginners, but he is running for a certain beginner. And Merton once said in the monasteries, I think many people are called to this, but they have no one to bear witness to them, what they're called to.
- Jim Finley: And so, he offers trustworthy guidance for people who are in this paradoxical, enigmatic helplessness to offer words of encouragement, this is what makes him so helpful, I think, to us.
- Kirsten Oates: Well, Jim, I think it would be helpful in this introduction if you'd be able to give us a bit of an overview of where we're headed in the season, and perhaps some of the key themes.
- Jim Finley: See, I think that the thing is so helpful, if we can sit and get the general intuitive picture that holds together everything that he is saying. Because once you get the gestalt, anytime we learn something new, a science or a language, at first, they are just a flood of details. But as soon as we start to see how they interconnect with each other, like, "Oh, I get it, I see what it's about."
- Jim Finley: Then, everything is internally consistent with that. And so, that's what I'd like to do here. I would like to... and then, in the sessions, we'll be walking through these things. So, I'd like to walk through this of love. And I want to start first at the most basic level of love's nature as a human being versus just a human experience, then as illumined by faith, then his sense of mystical.
- Jim Finley: So, I want to start first as a human in nature of love. I think here's one way I'll put it. We go through life, the day by day. And then, what happens is that we get a taste of love. And ideally speaking, we get this as infant in our mother's gaze, we get to receive our father's gaze, ideally, not everyone's so fortunate to get it.
- Jim Finley: But there are these moments as we go through life, we get a sense of loving and being loved by somebody. And the thing about this as we reflect upon it, we get a little older when we start reflecting on love and coming into all of this. We realize in that taste of love, that in a way it's like a light that blinds our finite eyes. That is, I experienced the oneness in love in my mother's gaze, my father's gaze, the arms of the beloved, my child, whatever it is.
- Jim Finley: By the way, these moments can also come in other ways as well, not just with other people, for example, the poet being touched by loving poetry, where the artist being awakened and loving art, or a solitude, or oneness with the earth, or a service to the community. But there

can be modalities in which in the midst of that modality, we're touched by this love that's in it.

Jim Finley: And it blinds our finite eyes in this sense, untouched by it. I sense its inherent value, like is boundaryless quality, but I know not what to make of it. And I think that's the first sense of the night. The night is actually a paradoxical intense light. It overwhelms our customary assumptions by being access and a oneness with love that we cannot comprehend.

Jim Finley: I think that's the first taste of the metaphor of night. Secondly, we realize that in this light as we reflect upon it, and these touches tend to be fleeting. And as it retreats and we reflect upon it, we begin to see in our heart a longing to abide in the depth of the love so fleetingly experienced.

Jim Finley: So, the next level of the night is the night of unconsummated longings. I can't consummate the fullness of love that my heart longs for, but I know it's real, because from time to time, it grants itself to me. And I think that's the next level of these longings. I think the next level as we sit with all of this in experiential self-knowledge, we begin to discern what it is that's hindering us from abiding in it.

Jim Finley: And their habits of the mind and heart that the compromise, the fullness of what loves ask of us, it can be habits of resentment, habits of withholding intimacy, habits of anger, habits of fear, and habits of not trusting our own heart and being faithful to what we're called to. There's this inner landscape of compromising forces that we realize are hindering us and holding us back from going deeper into the love that transcends these things. And it asks us-

Kirsten Oates: Can I ask a question about that, Jim? The habits that hinder us, they hinder us in our personal relationships, but are you also saying they hinder us in our access to God's loving relationship with us?

Jim Finley: Right now, I'm talking still at the level of our each other.

Kirsten Oates: Okay.

Jim Finley: And I'm talking about the layered interiority and poverty of our experience of our self and ego consciousness, and the layered interiority of the human experience is love. See, the deprivations of love is somehow that love is incarnate in that, love is incarnate as that. John of the Cross is assuming that.

Jim Finley: I think he's assuming the reality of the day-by-day promptings of the heart to follow love, be true to love, and then all the brokenness of ourselves. There is within us these habits. See, because we can't, Thomas Merton once said at the monastery, "We can't love and live on our own terms." See? And love, because of love, we're touched by something. We want to give ourselves to it. But we discover, see, we can't get to where we want to go and stay where we are. So, we can't stay in our comfort zone of where we are, even though our awakened heart is uncomfortable with it, because there's not enough, see?

Jim Finley: And then, we discover the night is, once we see this, we discover we're not able to free our self from these patterns. They lay claim on our heart. St. Paul, I have a thorn in the flesh. Ask God to remove it. The things I want to do, I don't do. The things I don't want to do, I do.

And so, I realized I'm stuck with these patterns that have habituated to them as a comfort zone at one level.

Jim Finley: This is the essence of addiction, too, I think addictive patterns, we're addicted to these. But the very patterns that we're addicted to for the comfort zone is the very discomfort of the heart, this longing to go to the deeper place. And therefore, I think this happens in marriages. You can see this with people coming up over and over.

Jim Finley: It comes up in a parent in having a child, it comes up in poetry or art, it comes up in being a teacher, it comes up in any form of whoever's trying to serve somebody, and give our self to it, like we want to be generously present to these people. And we want that. And then, we feel ourselves holding back, not just from them, but we hold it back from our self. See, like this.

Jim Finley: And so, the night then is the struggle, the [inaudible 00:50:32], see, of the discipline of love, is how do I day by day see this and keep opening my heart to the love that guides me on and empowers me to... and then he talked about slow process, slow progress marked by many setbacks, see? And so, as you lean into it, you learn to be patient with yourself, tender-hearted toward yourself, humble toward yourself.

Jim Finley: And in that transformation, you're allowed to go deeper unexpectedly. This is the very acceptance of the limits and asking not to be helped. And you can see how personal all this is, really. I mean, every one of us has our own, we're all on this learning curve, I think. And that's how we find our way.

Jim Finley: The next level for John of the Cross, he's assuming that the next level is this starts becoming religious, in which we realize this love that has accessed us is infinite, because God is love. See, God is love. And this infinite love is pouring itself out and giving itself away as a love offering that is our very life. So, my very life is the gift of infinite love to me as my life.

Jim Finley: And this love then empowers me in being awakened to it, which is religious experience. They sense the presence of God or the warmth of God or the inspiration of God, the sense of God. And being awakened to it then I'm empowered by God with a gift of freedom to then say yes to the love and give myself to the love that gives itself to me, for in the reciprocity of love is one.

Jim Finley: Next, we see that even though that's very beautiful, we see these hindrances in our heart hinder that. It hinders that. And then we realize that we're really wanting to being called to not place our faith and our inability to get over that. But place our faith in God who's infinitely in love with us and our inability to get over it, which is experiential salvation, see?

Jim Finley: So, I give myself over that I can't attain it. But it's attaining me in my inability to attain it, which is the gift of tears, it's this gift of Amazing Grace, once I was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see were found in the darkness by this love that loves us so in the darkness. And as we entrust our self to it, that light then leads us out of that darkness to put our self into the hands of this into this love.

Jim Finley: And then, we start to see then that it's the love of God that we see in our spouse, the love

of God we see in our children, the love of God we see in our ministry, the love of God, it's really God's love incarnate in and as these ways in which God is present. By this, know my disciples that you love one another even as I have loved you, see, one another.

Jim Finley: And so, John of the Cross is assuming all, see, walking the walk. John of the Cross used to say, is there a Christian in the house? Like he's saying, this is the good news, really. Next stage, it isn't just that God is loving us and encountering us in our love for each other. God wants us also to encounter the love of God in God, which is prayer.

Jim Finley: See, that we set aside a daily rendezvous, which has no agenda but love. And we open the scriptures, whatever it is. And in the lectio, the deathless love of God speaks directly to our heart in the gospels in the Scripture, whatever it is. We take the love in. In the meditacio, it invites a dialogue with God, a loving exchange with God.

Jim Finley: And then, in the prayer is the heart center, see, help me with this. And then, as I in my prayer, help me not to break the thread of this as I carry this out and find this love in this person, in this person, in this person. And the next day, we come back to the rendezvous again, sit in the presence of God.

Jim Finley: And then, in the presence of God, we start discovering the night, because somehow in our heart in the presence of God, we're touched by the love of God. As we're touched, there's a moment of being fleetingly accessed by God, not mediated through this person or that person, but directly awakening us within our heart, and calling us to reciprocate that love because I tasted it.

Jim Finley: But sitting here in prayer day by day, I'm lost in my halfheartedness. I'm lost in my distractions. I'm even lost in how hard it is to be faithful to prayer, easily gets preempted by 10,000 things, like this. And so, there's this night then of the inability to consummate the union with God, in God, as God, in prayer, heart to heart. And there's the inability to get past without God's help.

Jim Finley: The hindrances and the compromises to be faithful to that, so we don't wait until we're perfect enough to do it before we start. We started continuing our ongoing inability to do it. And we bring that to God, day by day by day by day, and that's where we learn and grow. And so, there's that. So, John of the Cross senses, so there is our life, there is a life illumined by faith, the measure of faith is love.

Jim Finley: And there's hope. And hope is that when death comes and we pass through the veil of death, we'll pass from these mediations of God's presence in prayer, inspirations, consolations, insights and service into unmediated infinite union with the infinite forever in a life of glory. That's our hope. So now, this is where John of the Cross starts.

Jim Finley: He assumes all this. He just assumes all this. He's assuming we're living our life. And what he's assuming, this is Teresa in the fourth mansion, and this is Merton from the false self to the true self. He's assuming that what happens with some people is God has decided not to wait until you're dead to begin to grant you unmediated infinite union with the infinite, a paradise in your heart, while you're still on this earth.

Jim Finley: That touch is a ray of darkness. That is, he said, we're blind, our finite eyes are blinded

by this boundaryless light that unexpectedly is giving itself to us in the very midst of our brokenness, the very midst of unresolved matters of our heart, we know not what to make of, we know not what to make of it, see?

Jim Finley: And what it is really is that God sees that we're going to have to let go of our finite ways of experiencing the infinite love of God. Because they're finite, they're infinitely less than the infinite love that we long for, like you can't get the ocean into a thimble, but you can drop the thimble into the ocean. And so, we can't get this infinite love into this finite space, it's too constricted, see?

Jim Finley: So now, what happens is we're now addicted to the finite, see? See, we're now addicted. We're overly identified with our finite hold on the infinite love that gives us some semblance of control, like, "I know where I'm going." But you're asking me to pass beyond the boundaries of my finiteness and cross over into your infinite love transforming into itself.

Jim Finley: And I'm blinded by this night. But if I'm very patient with it, if I don't run away, little by little, there are subtle seismic shifts in our heart. We can start to see this night, in the beginning was so perplexing. So, your night lovelier than the dawn, is the dawn begins to break, and we start seeing this light shining through unexplainably into our heart.

Jim Finley: And so, John of the Cross then says, "Well, you can see here, I'm not talking about ecstasy, I'm talking about something extremely subtle." John of the Cross says, "There are some people for whom this calling has been there for some time, they don't recognize it, because they have no one to bear witness to them what's happening to them."

Jim Finley: Because it's so subtle that which is essential never imposes itself, the unessential is constantly imposing itself. But there's a higher order wisdom of the awakened heart to hold in a band the impositions of the finite, to keep our heart open to this thing. And this is John of the Cross. He says, "Let me help you with this. I've been there, done that."

Jim Finley: Because sometimes then, The Dark Night, it can happen out of a life experience in prison. As soon as it happens, it's as if out of nowhere we're living our life, and you go to your daily rendezvous with God in prayer, and God doesn't show up for the meeting see? God doesn't show up for the meeting. And so, it's the loss of the felt sense of the presence of God as a night.

Jim Finley: This is actually letting God wean us off of our dependency on this finite simply by making us powerless to actualize them. God says, "Let me help you out here. I'll see to it you're not going to be able to do it. And you're going to have to then trust in me, and put yourself in my hands." And this is the teachings of John of the Cross, see?

Jim Finley: So, this is where we're going to start on the first session, because where he starts in The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book Two is how to discern this is happening in prayer, see? We're going to see this is the starting place. So, I think, at least for me, and sitting with John of the Cross, to see this overview like that, to see where he's at, the landscape he's wanting us to move in, it really helps to put each point along the way in perspective.

Kirsten Oates: Fabulous. And Jim, you'll be using the collective works of St. John of the Cross, translated by Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, which is a huge book. And Corey, our fabulous producer, will

put details in the show notes about the book.

Jim Finley: I like it because, one, it's a great translation. Also, all the works are in one volume. Also, there is a great introduction to each work. So, this centers a great introduction and an outline of each work, a topic outline. And all the poems are there in English and Spanish in the back of the book, so it's really great.

Jim Finley: At the monastery, and over the years, and I still read it, is Allison Peers translation there in paperback and get them, the separate volumes, *The Ascent*, *The Dark Night*, *The Living Flame*, *The Canticle*. And then, also, Mirabai Starr's translation. So, in those four, you have to read in Spanish, you can read it in the Spanish, read Spanish.

Jim Finley: But I'll be using, just for consistency in page numbers and so on, I want to be using Kavanaugh and Rodriguez when I cite. So, I'll say like, "The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book Two, Chapter 13, Article 4." And so, it'll be the fourth paragraph of this, so you can flip to it like Scripture. And we can look at the passage together.

Kirsten Oates: And it's not necessary to get the book, because Corey always puts the paragraphs you refer to in the show notes. And I would suggest if you do decide to invest in the book, that's a lifelong investment for you. It's huge, this book, and we won't be going into the level of detail that covers everything you said.

Jim Finley: Let me say something and this is important. I think this is for everybody, really, because this is our homeland, really. And I think for many people, just the podcast itself is more than enough. If I'm really bearing witness to it and it really touches it, and if they can carry it through the week, being more aware of that in their life.

Jim Finley: And as we go through these mystics, it's just an ongoing resource for them. For those that are so inclined, it's given to them to do it, an inclination, then to consider getting the... and also the next step then would be during the week, to read the text that Corey puts up. So, you can see in John of the Cross's own words and keep internalizing it.

Jim Finley: Then, for those so inclined, if you want to pursue it, you could take John of the Cross, we'll be talking about that in the series of how to read John of the Cross. How to become a student or a follower, John of the Cross as one of your teachers, a lifelong teacher, but I think you have to be inclined to do that.

Jim Finley: I mean, you don't need to, but some people, they know they're being led to do that and that's their path.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Well, thank you, Jim, for this introduction to Season 3. I'm personally very much looking forward to it. And I think this has been a great introduction, getting us grounded and ready. And so, thank you.

Jim Finley: You're welcome. Yes, we're in a good start, yeah, that's good. Thank you.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of *Turning to the Mystics*, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. 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.