

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross: Session 5

with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to The Mystics. Greetings everyone. Welcome to our time together turning for guidance to the Christian mystic St. John of the Cross. In preparing for today's session, it kind of dawned on me to share with you what I hope will be the way to help you to recognize the ways that these teachings of John of the Cross pertain to you personally. That he's clearly speaking of a passage through a dark night, that in the lofty depths that open out upon mystical union with God. But what's important is to see that those lofty depths of union with God and the flowering, a mystical consciousness, that mystical union is present in all the stages and phases and aspects of our daily life. I want to share with you a meditation to hopefully help you to see how this poetic metaphor of the dark night is a way of putting words to something that you've experienced or something that you're experiencing now, like the transformative power of the dark night being transformed into deeper states of unit of habitual love, really.

Jim Finley: I hope this helps. This is kind of a first draft. This just came to me and needed some more work, I guess, but I trust us together enough. I can tell by the spiritual direction here that it will help you tune in to see how this pertains to you in the midst of your daily situation, whatever it might be. I want to start first again by going back to some imagery, though we started with Thomas Merton on this contemplative worldview. We started with this imagery of imagine you're waiting along the ocean shore ankle deep. It's true, you're just ankle deep, but it's also true you're in the ocean. It's also true, if you just head out to deeper water, it'll get plenty deep, soon enough. In terms of ego consciousness, that deepening as you keep swimming out and the water beneath is getting deeper and deeper. That depth is a measurable depth.

Jim Finley: You're moving in incrementally increasing depths of from one foot to two feet to 20 feet to 50 feet, 100 feet, 200 feet deep, deeper, deeper, deeper as a measurable depth, quantifiable measurable depth, which is the experienced in ego consciousness. We might say then at a more interior level -- but what if the ocean and its hidden center, seeing the ocean here as a metaphor for God, the presence of God, but what if the ocean and its hidden center is infinitely deep? What if the ocean is infinitely giving the infinite depths of itself away whole and complete in and as each incremental degree of entrance into it? That is, maybe toward the level of ego consciousness and measurable objective terms you're just ankle deep, but in the terms of grace, in terms of the fullness of God's presence in our life, you're in water way over your head.

Jim Finley: For you're in the plenitude of the infinite love of God pouring itself out and given to you completely in and as that most shallow beginning level of your entry into the ocean. Our situation then is that we're living in incremental degrees of realization of infinite generosity of God pouring itself out and giving itself away, whole and complete in the very least first stirrings of the awareness of the love of God, the presence of God in our life. That the plenitude already perfectly all about us and within us. There's a poem by Barbara Lutes. It was on my table where I was giving a retreat years ago. Here she's referring when she speaks of her, she's referring to her soul. She says, it takes almost nothing to move her. A soft agitation in the rain, an ant going by knowing where it is going, that suddenly you can be blindsided by a quiet amazement of the miracle of some simple thing.

Jim Finley: The ant going by, the agitation in the rain, the stirring of the wind blowing a curtain, the shadow, a slant of light across the floor, a sleeping infant, the palms of your own hands, smell

of a rose. There are these moments where we were quickened. For Thomas Merton, turning to see a flock of birds descending. We get even at the most rudimentary level, a sense of we're already in the immensity of an overwhelming depth of presence manifested in this. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in *Inscap* following Duns Scotus, talks about seeing them, the stature of God or the presence of God in a single leaf. In the concreteness of a configuration of stones, your heart, your interior heart recognizes and senses something like that. See the holiness of that. We might say, in these moments, in these moments, and however they might come to us, the dark night then, the poetic imagery of the dark night is a two-fold aspect.

Jim Finley: First, the dark night is that our finite eyes are blinded by the unexpected nearness and immensity of these awakenings. That is, we know now what to make of it, and we know not what to make of it. Another aspect of the dark night then, this imagery for John of the Cross is it when we compare the quality of our consciousness and the moments of such an awakening to the day by day living of our life in which we tend to be not to be aware of that ever present depth. We see that tendency not to be aware is a night to us. We tend to live in a darkness and being exiled from this generosity of God being poured out in this incomprehensible stature. Simple things, standing up and sitting down, looking out the window, whatever it is. That is, this idea of skimming over the depths of our own life. What's regrettable in this depth deprivation is that God's unexplainable oneness with us is hidden in the depths over which we're skimming.

Jim Finley: This is the poetic image. This is the poetic imagery. I think a lot of the teachings of the mystics is very similar to doing deep therapy work in a lot of ways. Because what we're really doing is slowing down to calibrate our heart to be very patient about subtle and delicate matters that we're not used to paying attention to. We're not on our way to some hope for flowering of something. I mean, we are, but the sadness is we don't realize that the flowering or the fullness we're looking for is unexplainedly giving itself to us in the simplicity of the unawareness in which we're awakened. This is what we're trying to do here. We're trying to find our way to this luminosity we cannot comprehend. Then seeing exiled from the luminosity given to us in the earth and the beloved and the child, and the passage of time, the sun moving across the sky. This is our sorrow. This is our estrangement from which we're trying to be key holder.

Jim Finley: I'm going to look at this then in terms of married love, because for St. John of the Cross, because he's one of the Christian mystics, these nuptial mystics, where they see romantic, sexual marital love as the primary metaphor for mystical consciousness. As we see in the Song of Songs in the Hebrew scriptures, in the New Testament. We also see this nuptial path, this love path. There's parallels to this in the Hindu tradition in Bhakti yoga, the Bhagavad Gita, this love path, this devotional love. Also, in Islam, the Sufi path of love of the poetry of Rumi and Hafiz, this love. This love path of nuptial mysticism, seeing marriage as a sacrament of that, or as a context in which it can be realized. I encourage you though to see that what I'm about to say here about the presence of the dark night and the ordinariness of things as a path that opens out up on the loftiness of John of the Cross is inviting us to find our way to is already somehow present.

Jim Finley: To see that what I'm saying here with marriage, we can do this, I could make these very same points about being a parent about parenting. I can make the very same points about being

a teacher in terms of being devoted to the students. Out of love for the students, you give yourself, in love to the teaching task. Or if you're in the healing professions in the art of healing, or in your own healing, 12-step sobriety, or the healing of trauma, or living alone, or being old, attending to a dying loved one. These are all modalities in which this transformative power of the dark night of love. That it's the love that blinds us and being unable to grasp it. Yet at the same time, it illumines the darkness of our life without it motivating us to lean in deeper in this kind of way of living our life, a sensibility to the transformative call of love in the midst of our present situation.

Jim Finley: This is what it means then to be a seeker. See, to be a seeker is to be someone from graces engendered a riddle. The grace is it arises of itself, the quickening of the awakening unexpected. The riddle is we know now what to make of it. We know now what to make of it. We can't explain it but we realize from the immediacy of the intimacy of being overtaken by the unexplainable, in such a simple thing as smelling a flower or lying awake at night. We're tending the road of whatever the simple act is. In that sense then, I'd like to look at this in terms of married love. First of all, imagine two people, they meet, they spend time together, they're attracted to each other. As that process goes on, they begin to realize they're falling in love with each other. The newly emerging awareness that they're falling in love with each other is a dark night to them in the luminous sense in which they know not what to make of it.

Jim Finley: They can tell that it's happening, but they can't explain what's happening to them. It's like wondrous onto them. Also, they're able to see when they look at this newly emerging fullness of love that's coming into their life, that their life before the emergence of this love was a darkness. It was a darkness compared to the light in which they're now newly being introduced was also mysterious. In that unawareness, they weren't aware they were going to meet each other. Here, the unfolding of that love was already hidden like a seed unbeknownst to them. In the circuitous ways of life, all of a sudden had blossomed and like, there it is. The mysterious, like the arising of these awakenings from places unseen. Also, I think a certain solicitude then, to be watchful for this love, to watch over it, to be protective of it, to be grateful for it. Also watchful and that they're aware there's no promises here.

Jim Finley: St. John of the Cross talks about everything falls like falling water, that there's no promises here. The fact you're falling in love, it doesn't mean you're locked in to the contrary. There's a long road ahead. The dark night comes to them as seeing the fragility of this, how terrible it would be if this got lost. If we're not careful, it might get lost because sometimes it does get lost. It reappears somewhere else in other way. But with us right here, in the mystery and depth and beauty of this, we could lose this, which is the night unto them, which energizes their solicitude, their watchfulness over it. And so St. John of the Cross says, "This is what happens when you newly start emerging and be on discursive meditation and the three signs of prayer. A general loving awareness." He says, first, this communion, this wordless communion beyond thought and words and emotions is so delicate at first.

Jim Finley: You don't even notice that it's there, but if you stay there and rest in it and let it have its way with you, you begin to see the richness of this unexplainable simplicity.

You have solicitude over it like you're motivated by love to be watchful over this emergence of this unexplainable love. A kind of interior fidelity. Next. Let's say then these two people, this deepens, deepens, deepens so they get married. What does marriage mean here interiorly? By the time they have the married ceremony, they're sacramentally celebrating the marriage that already is there. That there's a certain point where they cross over. It isn't just that they know whatever the future holds. They want to be sure that the future holds their presence to each other in that future come what may. But somehow, one is somehow already occurred like there's already, it's like an interior fact of their awakened heart that they're married.

Jim Finley: It might've come to them all of a sudden, maybe slowly like water filling the marshlands. But there is this realized oneness between them like this. The vow that then expresses that. I'm just thinking about this. It says, my wife died a year ago. I have memento pictures in the living room of her and us. Here's the typed, actual typed thing that we held in our hands, our vows that we said to each other 30 years ago. I'll read it to you. This was at the retreat house where she was a spiritual director. Her friends were there. My friends were there, my children. Anyway, it was lovely. One of those lovely moments. I'll read my thing. I handed it to her and she read it. I, James Finley, take you Maureen Fox to be my wife from this day forward, to love, cherish and care for till death do us part. I vow to you my honesty and vulnerability day by day, walking our walk into all our unknown tomorrows.

Jim Finley: I know that to grow, we must continue dying, and it is you I choose to live and die with. Head-to-head, toe-to-toe, soul-to-soul, this day and forever. You are truly my best friend, lover, and soulmate. The one through whom God calls me to be my true self. This day I vow to accept this call. I heard her return the same. I would say this moment, this luminous moment in the presence of the community is a dark night unto them because he is all into all our unknown tomorrows. See, how can we vow a oneness in unforeseeability, especially knowing that sometimes those who make the vow it doesn't work. What is the spiritual truth of the vow in which we're in water over our head. A fidelity of love that transcends the unfailing and the outcomes of what the future might bring like this.

Jim Finley: Then they go home to live out that vow day by day by day. This is how St. John of the Cross describes this path or discursive meditation leads into this deepening of perpetual surrender to this communion with God. Whereas it's a process of learning to die or to let go of, or to pass beyond all the ways that we're attached to anything less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God. It's the sole source of our security and identity. It's tremulous. It's something that we lean into in our fragility to live up to it. But in our ability to live up to it, it sustains us and our inability to live up to it and transforms us and leads us ever deeper into itself in unforeseeable ways such as this marital love. And such as the marital to love as a sacrament of God's love for us and the unfolding of this emergence of this contemplative communion with God in our daily life.

Jim Finley: Next. As the months and the years go by, things happen. There's unexpected stress, unexpected mishaps, unexpected pressure. The terrible thought of getting used to each other or taking each other for granted. Once they start to discover that a shadow

is falling across the luminosity of their love for each other, for they each brought into the marriage habits of the mind and heart formed in past traumas and abandonments great and small, that they act out on each other. As the withholding of intimacy, as attempts to control the other person, as being insensitive to what the beloved most need you to be sensitive and responsible to. Jealousies, becoming too busy that you don't have time to set everything aside to have time for no agenda but just to love and be loved by each other. It's this litany of the compromising of the gift of love.

Jim Finley: This is a dark night to them because they can both feel it's happening. They don't want it to happen. They don't want it one morning to just start chiseling away at the love that we committed ourselves to. It just starts chipping away and eroding away out of the fragility of our lives just as human beings. They see it's a dark night unto them. It's also a dark night and that they're called to the luminous dark night of perpetual commitment to being vulnerable over and over and over and over again. You know there's a form of marital therapy called logotherapy. It was the two people sit down and each shares with the other... Each tells the other what they would like more of or less of in order to feel loved in the marriage the way they need to be loved.

Jim Finley: In the mutual vulnerability of doing love's work, returning again and again of kind of refining the edges of love and being patient with each other. At the same time, calling each other on love's path, on what love is asking out of them. What we discover, this is a dark night because easier said than done, because we're attached to these patterns. Sometimes the patterns are actually compromising the love for the partner as acting out the compromised love for oneself, that we're exiled from the partner because they were exiled from ourselves. We're distant from the partner because we're distant from ourselves. As a call to perpetual exodus beyond that, which compromises love and union and oneness with the gift of our body, our mind, our life, the body, the mind, and the life of the beloved and how they each foster the patterns of loving communion with each other, each unto each.

Jim Finley: St. John of the Cross and the Dark Night, the second book following the Ascent. There were some time through these compromises of love for those who have not yet gone through the dark night. They're in devotional sincerity of discursive meditation. He runs through this litany of subtle false compromise, the purity of love. For example, he says people in their devotional sincerity in their Christian life can be subject to a certain kind of pride where they start to feel or sense that they're holier than other people. Sometimes they get jealous because they see other people seem to be holier than they are. Or if someone, the person they're going to for spiritual direction criticizes them or judges anything in any way, they tend to think that their director isn't deep enough or profound enough to realize how holy they are and so on.

Jim Finley: He points out these subtle infidelities. Because the purer the love, the more important it is for us not to passively be in collusion with the compromises of love. It's a work of simplicity and vulnerability. It's a down to earth messy day by day day transformative yielding to love's call in our life. Lastly, in their years together, if they are fortunate enough to find their way along this circuitous path and find their way into a great depth of love, and in which the whole thing has become ever more completely unexplainable and evermore amazing. That they've been broken open by love over and over and rendered whole in the brokenness by being unable to live on their own terms. One with each other to live by love's terms, then in

that path is their fragility of death itself. With you, we must live and die. Then the night is the death of the beloved.

Jim Finley: Sometimes people love each other much, they both die together in a crash or something that happens. But typically not. They typically one goes first and then the other faces a new night. And so the new night is this unexplainable pain of the absence of the presence, the familiarity of the simple rituals with each other like that. If they don't panic, they don't panic in that, they see that that night is a luminous dark night. With a deathless presence of the beloved is unexplainably one with them. It's true, they're no longer one with each other and being one with each other in love on the earthly plane. But now they are one with each other in love for the one left is still on the earthly plane. The one is crossed over into love of God. In the love of God, they are one explainably one with each other like this, which is the path of the one that's left as a path in which there's yet more unfoldings of love and the mystery of love.

Jim Finley: The gift of that until that person dies is how it works. There were on this earth for a very short time for really to learn how to love. God who is love breeds us forth to live a life to learn to love. In God's own time, a God who breeds us forth and emerging into this world as a person on the path, God inhales and takes us home. The circle completes itself in love. What happens here I think for John of the Cross is this, I think, is that when two people are walking this path, it is inherently holy. It is inherently divine because God is love and wherever there's love, there's God. That if their life together is illumined by faith, they're able to see how God's love for them is the love that led them to each other. God's love for them sustains us with each other. It's out of their love for each other, they each deepen their own union with God so their life of prayer becomes in a circularity of a oneness with their life of love with each other.

Jim Finley: Sometimes most people aren't. They don't experience it that way. They're not illumined by the gift of faith. They live God's love anonymously by the integrity and power and beauty of their love. Sometimes the one who lives by faith, they can see this incarnate infinity. They can see the incarnational quality of their married love foreign with each other. There's another piece of this that's also true, that at any point along the way from the very earliest beginnings of their love, from the very first moment that there can be flashes of mystical oneness can unexpectedly break forth in them. In a kiss, an embrace, laughing together, taking a walk, doing the chores, whatever it comes as it comes, it flashes forth. They sense it. But in sensing it, they can't live there. But having sensed it, they know that it's there. Now that they see that it's there, that love in them seeks to move towards being habituated in that flash of oneness that was granted to them. That's how they're lured along the path.

Jim Finley: We go along the path. This is true I think of all of these ways of love when a deep commitment to a path, it can be being married, it can be living alone, it can be being a parent. It can be a life of solitude. It can be a life of oneness with the earth. It can be commitment to healing, whatever the modality is. Once the dark night becomes the operative metaphor of the light that blinds our finite eyes, but then accessing us having tasted it, we know we're incomplete without it. Then that light that visited us, that met us where we are, that leads us forward to meet us into this deeper realm of love. I get the feeling for me, at least. Seeing things this way helps me to see, help us see what John of the Cross is talking about. I think really, if you could have John of the Cross as a spiritual director, that

he just wouldn't start out in some place way up here somewhere.

Jim Finley: He'd want to talk to you first. He'd want to join you first. He'd want to meet you first. So in the encounter, the two of you together would help you to see how this operative transformative work of love of the dark night is present in your life and the ways that you can be faithful to it. We'll end here on this. Let's do a a sit. I should just sit straight. Hold your hands and bow. (silence) Slowly, say The Lord's Prayer together. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen. Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. St. Teresa of Avila, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us. Blessing us till next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to The Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.