



Turning to the Mystics

The Cloud of Unknowing

Dialogue 2: The Special Life
with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to this second dialogue for Turning to the Mystics where we're turning to the cloud of unknowing that was written by an anonymous author. I'm here with Jim and I will be reflecting on his second talk. So welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes. Welcome to you.

Kirsten Oates: In the last talk you were reflecting on chapter seven of the cloud, and yet again, just beautiful, the words and the intonations. Just beautiful. So just to begin, Jim, just wanting to ground us in what the cloud of unknowing is about, which is it's guiding us in a practice of contemplative prayer. And I wanted to start with a phrase from your talk that really touched me. So you spoke about the cloud, helping us with this phase of our life, where this way to pray finds its meaning. It's a beautiful phrase and I just wondered what you meant by finding its meaning. What's the meaning we experience?

Jim Finley: Let me put the whole thing in context. Let's say, when we were looking at this in earlier recessions on creation, and Merton, and all these mystics, how they understand this, so how they understand it is that God's creation, God's let it be, is absolute in and perpetual. That is, in creation God is pouring God out and giving God away in and as the reality of ourselves, others, and all things. So if we think of God as generosity, that we're the generosity of God as are the passing of the seasons and the darkness of the night and the sacred quality of what is, so in that sense, the plenitude of God is the very realm in which we live.

Jim Finley: Next, God also then, unlike stones and trees and stars endows us with a capacity to recognize that as persons. And recognizing that is a spiritual realization that comes to us and these degrees of spiritual realization have incremental degrees of realizing the infinite generosity of every breath and heartbeat. And so in the very beginning, say with Guigo with lectio. He starts out with how we normally or tend to understand God, his presence in our life through the gifts of God revealed to us in scripture, all that's revealed, that God is love, God is mercy, all that Jesus reveals, all that scripture reveals. And we take that gift in and respond to it in our lectio. We meditate on it in our lectio. We pray to deepen it in our prayer and we seek to live it. And that's the context for how we tend to experience God and live our life.

Jim Finley: And we also know, our faith tells us that when we die, pass through the veil of death, that we'll move from these mediations of God's presence in our life through the gifts of God, our life, our breath, our insights, our faith. We'll pass through the veil into God, The Cloud of Unknowing says, God naked as he in himself? And so knowing God is God knows God with God's own knowledge of God, which is Christ. Loving God with God's own love of God, which is the Holy Spirit. Being taken into God, being as much God as God is God in our eternal nothingness without God, which is the mystery of the life of glory that await us.

Jim Finley: Well, what happens as we're living this life in aware of God's goodness to us through his gifts to us, the special way, is that there's stirrings of love, deep stirrings of love. There's moments of unexplainable oneness or communion and they pass, and those fleeting moments enrich

our faith, they enrich our gratitude. But what happens in the singular way is that those touches of oneness start to settle into us with a desire to abide there always. It is, poetically speaking, there's a boundary crossing where God crosses the boundary and in the desire to abide in the stirring, it's a foretaste of eternal life. We're not content with the gifts of God, with the insights of God, the consolations of God, the truths of God. And that's like the person and writing the word water in the sand over and over and over again. For having tasted God, very God, all these thoughts of God, as beautiful as they are we don't reject any of them. But compared to the beloved, it is God revealing to us that we are God's beloved. The singular way then is that longing.

Jim Finley: And so the way of prayer then is a way of praying is addressed to a person who finds himself or herself in that strange place, which gives its meaning. There is this longing within me that I don't understand, but I tasted it and I can't make these moments happen, but there's a way to pray that stabilizes me in a stance that offers the least resistance to being overtaken by the abiding oneness with God, be on the gifts of God. And that's the context for the prayer.

Jim Finley: Now I would say this too. Secondly, while that's true for the person who's in that state, whatever degree, any of us are free to read the cloud and benefit from it. Because even if we're sitting at the very first beginnings of lectio, we're just beginning, the full generosity of God is reigning down into us as God giving it to us as the lectio. And we also sense in the lectio, and in the meditation, there are certain moment of stillness. There's certain moments where we pause to rest in it. And so that's the way in which, in the broad sense it's for all of us, but in particular it's for those of us who are at this certain place, this mysterious place.

Jim Finley: And Thomas Merton said he thinks there are many people who are called to this, but they have no one to bear witness to them what's happening to them. Especially out here in the world where you're not encouraged even to get help. So that's my sense of it. I think that's the context that makes it so personal for each of us as we listen

Kirsten Oates: Yes. That's really helpful, Jim. I wanted to expand on that desert at metaphor, just spend some time helping to really understand it and maybe even expand on it. This idea that any thought of God or any idea of God is not God. And you use this desert metaphor to try and help us understand that so that the writing of water in the sand is not water and it's similar to our thoughts that run through our minds, and that might be thinking of God, pictures of God, thoughts of God, emotions about God, it's not God in the way we are looking for God with this type of prayer.

Jim Finley: Here's an example that helps me. I think we share this in the session on Merton. I can't remember. The example I use is imagine a couple they're together, they're very much in love with each other, and she has to be away for a long period of time, the military or whatever. And so every week they write each other a long love letter. So the highlight of the week is getting that letter. So she, without him realizing it has had the opportunity to come back and visit, but he doesn't know it. And so she's parked out on the street, down the road of a ways, and she sees the mailman drop her letter into the mailbox. She sees him step out and take her letter out. He doesn't know she's watching him. And he sits down and he opens the letter and reads it. And so in his love for her, every word she says is lectio. Every word goes right to his heart. And also he reflects upon it, he pauses upon it. She says this, she says that, pauses. And this evokes prayer which is longing to be one with her, this reverie of union

and right in the midst, as he's holding this love letter, she walks into the room and he looks up at her saying nothing. That's contemplation. So contemplation is the direct oneness of the beloved beyond and through all the beloved words of love.

Jim Finley: And it's that presence of the beloved that's fleetingly tasted in the stirring. And it's the longing to abide in the actual presence of the living beloved that's the singular way. And so the prayer then is to stabilize, and the desire, that abiding of a communion beyond words, beyond thoughts, beyond consolations, in the simplicity and sincerity of your heart. So it doesn't mean we reject any of these, just like he wouldn't throw her letter in the trash.

Kirsten Oates: Right.

Jim Finley: You know what I mean? Oh, I don't need this. He treasures it all the more. He keeps it. But he keeps it because it has a deeper meaning to him because now every word is a poetic metaphor, every word resonates with intonations of union. And so that's what I think the scriptures are when it read the scriptures and so on. So that's one way I understand it.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful. With the desert metaphor you are using water as the image for God, so someone's out in the desert, really longing, life depends on it for God say, and they're writing God in the sand, and then they might get a taste of God. But Jim, help me understand how this works with your teaching that really they already have God.

Jim Finley: Yes. Let's put it this way. I'm going to go back to creation again. We already have God because God already has us because God in itself donating act is giving God away as us, as our breath, our heartbeat today, all of this is the presence of God. And we also know that God has us in our realization of the lectio through scripture, in that we're able in prayerful attentiveness, in reflections upon God so when we hear that God loves us through the power of the spirit that dwells in our hearts we can you know that God does love us. That idea that God's with us, that God's all merciful and so on.

Jim Finley: But in the taste of God and the stirring of very God, the beloved standing in the room, then all these words are a desert and that all these words of God that really are the words of God are compared to the fullness of God as God like a desert, words, words, words, words, words.

Kirsten Oates: I see.

Jim Finley: So how can I find my way to the one who's speaking these words and that's drawing me toward this union beyond all words.

Kirsten Oates: And is it true too, Jim, in the desert metaphor that we can't make the water come to us, but we might be gifted, come across water in the desert, and so it's the gift of the water arising in a mysterious way.

Jim Finley: Yes. This is my sense of it. Let's say regarding everything real, we really are powerless to make anything happen. We can't bring ourself into existence to be at the deathbed

of a dying loved home, we can't give ourself our next breath. It doesn't line our power to give our next heart beat lest we be presumptuous. Likewise, anyone, any creative activity, the poet or the artist, they can't make the beautiful happen and so everything is given. And so the effort is how to stabilize in a stance that allows the flow of the given to flow through us. And I think that's really true. So we simply can't make this happen. That's why I say you cannot get the ocean into a thimble but you can drop the thimble into the ocean, and we are that thimble.

Jim Finley: So I can't get the fullness of God. I can't get the fullness of God's infinite presence into the thimble of my finite ideas of God's infinite presence. I can't get the full God's oceanic love into the thimble of my felt consolations of God. It isn't that they're not real, it is that I don't treasure them, is that they don't lead me, but compared, compared to that. So, that's really what it is I think, is just leaning in towards allowing this desire to have its way with us, this God-given desire for God. And how do we learn not to get in the way. And this is where he gives us the method of this love, it's a knowledge born of love.

Kirsten Oates: What also struck me about the metaphor is when we drink the water, it's a mystery in terms of how it gives us life. And there'd be kind of a scientific method about what water does, but as we're experiencing the water, we can't tell all the ways our body is mysteriously being given life by the water.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And like in the Psalms, more than the deer longs for running streams, oh Lord do I long for you. So when we're actually drinking the water, which would be a moment of contemplative communion, the finite mind that's being transcended by the communion, doesn't know what to make of it. It's just that the finite mind puts the, do not disturb sign, on the door, please do not disturb, please, no thoughts please, please, I don't want anything to intrude upon. Because really to drink the water is a communion in which in some sense we and God mutually disappears dualistically, other than each other. It's intimately realizing, it's just oneness in all directions is to drink the water. So we're protective of that.

Jim Finley: Now what happens as we learn to stabilize in that, then we're able to see this divinity shining out through our ideas, through our words, through our actions to be a contemplative man or woman established in this, but we first have to wean ourself off our dependency on these finite means, so that in the drinking of the water, in the communion, this establishing the communion, we're able to see the communion everywhere. The divinity of each passing moment. We resonate or sense that in ourselves.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And you might know that something happened to you when you drank the water, but you can't really know because you're not in touch with your body in that deep way, but you come out different because every cell is going to be given a new taste of life as a result of drinking the water. So you can feel it, but you can't break it down second by second or every little thing may occur.

Jim Finley: Yes. This is where this term unknowing comes in. So unknowing is not, not knowing. But also unknowing is not knowing as in conceptually knowing. This knowing born

of love is trans- conceptual. It's a deep way to understand what it means to understand in this love.

Jim Finley: Now when the reflective self reflects on it and tries to form concepts of it it finds that there's no concept of it that's capable of doing justice to it. But there are concepts and words that bear witness to it, which are the words are the mystics. These texts they sing with it, you can feel the rhythm of it. And I also think it's the gospels, the scripture, understood contemplatively. It's like the Logos, the living word that resonates with what lies beyond what words can say or what thought can comprehend. But in your heart you learn to understand. That's the unknowing.

Kirsten Oates: Your desert metaphor did make me think of the way Jesus was drawn into the desert to find a deeper sense of God.

Jim Finley: And also notice in the story of Jesus, he goes into the desert, the temptations of Jesus, and really they're temptations for possessiveness or ownership or depending on the finite, really metaphors for our temptations, for the idolatry of circumstance. The idolatry of attaining. The idolatry of whatever. And so to be steadfast in this love is to keep leaning into the fullness of this love. That is the reality of [inaudible 00:19:22]. The reality of true [inaudible 00:19:24]. The reality of [inaudible 00:19:26] so profound about those temptations.

Jim Finley: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: So I wanted to focus now on the particular teaching of this chapter, which is this idea of coming up with a word that will help with the practice. And I just wanted to hear from you, Jim, what the purpose of the word is. I read in the chapter and in your talk there's there seemed to be two aspects. One is this idea of, I'm trying to gather all of my attention, whole heartedly, whole body, whole everything towards God, but then it also talked about the word is a protection. And I'm wondering if that's a protection from losing that focus on God.

Jim Finley: So let's say then the way to pray is very simple, really, is to sit and let your intention be to love God for God's sake and not for his gifts. That's the intention. But that intention of loving God for God's sake, loving love for love's sakes. St. [inaudible 00:20:53] calls it disinterested love is not a love for the sake of what circles back to how we benefit from it, it's purely a self donating love that echoes God's self-donating love for us is in the reciprocity of self-donating love. That way is so simple to sit, but its very simplicity makes it elusive. It sounds clear, intuitive. Especially if you've had a taste of this experience, you say, oh, that makes sense, that makes sense. So what the word serves then is an anchor in the simplicity of that intention. That's what it is.

Jim Finley: And I mentioned too, in the reflection that the other texts we are going to be studying later in this series is the way of a Pilgrim, the Jesus prayer, where you find the word that Jesus mercy. And so in these traditions, they have different anchors, for some it's the breath, there's also the anchor of the mandala, the visual of the cross, or the icon of Jesus. Ornstein, one writer says about the mandala, the longer you gaze at it, the less obvious it gets. It's like the mandala, the divinity of everything.

Jim Finley: So what we're looking for then is a mandala or an anchor. Why? Because that in us has been awakened to this to move beyond thought into this love. There is still that in us, that's still

accustomed to knowing God through thinking, this is moving into Abraham called into a landing new not. And it doesn't politely step aside so we can have mystical union. Thoughts arise and the thinking self tries to get us to think about the thoughts that arise. So the thought, the word then is an anchor that politely refrains from thinking about any thoughts that arise, because we're seeking a love that's beyond all these thoughts, as valuable as they are, as holy as they are. So we use the word to refrain and that's a [inaudible 00:23:09] process. It takes a while to be weaned off of that. How do we get our bearings? Like I said, it's a very subtle, different way to experience. It's like a boundary-less state of presence by thought. That's the intuition of it. I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's helpful. For people who are wanting to try this practice, how would you advise them to come about the word, the word they should be using?

Jim Finley: Well, the cloud of unknowing suggests choose a short word rather than a long one. Or you can use a phrase like an earlier talk I used the, I love you prayer. Like, I love you, I love you, I love you. Or the Jesus prayer, Jesus mercy, Jesus mercy. So he says the main thing is to find a word that's meaningful for you, but to know the value of the word does not lie into your thoughts about it. The value of that word that's meaningful to you is the anchor to transcend thought. So you choose a word that's personal to you, love or mercy or yes, and that word might change over time. So the idea is you use it as a defense to stabilize yourself against the temptations of thought that get you to think, and you just stay anchored in the word as a love act like this love grounded in this.

Jim Finley: And also it's interesting. This is the difference about John Mains and Laurence Freeman on the desert tradition too is, it's not the mantra as in where they speak of using the word like a plow, like you die to your ego by repeatedly saying the word over, over, over and it becomes like a plow that plows through tendencies to think, and to love. For the author of the Cloud of Unknowing, Thomas Keating and centering prayer, you use the word as needed, use the word. So the image I have is this. Imagine, there's these birds, they soar on the thermals, they ride the... And if you watch them, as they start to lose altitude, they'll flap their wings a few times and they keep going. So let's say your word is Jesus. Let's say the word is Jesus. So you're sitting there in a sustained attentiveness for love. And as you're sitting there a thought becomes particularly intrusive. You're losing altitude. And so you go, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. And you regain the thing, another distraction, Jesus. So you use the word to re-stabilize the state as needed.

Jim Finley: And there might be long periods, the word just falls aside. There's just long periods of the sustain. And there's other times, like he said, you can be besieged by a thought, there's a whole chapter devoted to that where, it makes an onslaught against you, but that's the logic of the word, that's the transformative power of the word.

Kirsten Oates: That's a very powerful visual. I hadn't heard you teach on that before. That's really powerful. Thank you for sharing that. I know when you're a beginner, you can get very anxious about things like this, is it the right word? Is it a prayerful word? Do you have any encouragement for... It sounds like there's no wrong word.

Jim Finley: Thomas Merton once said when he talked to the novices, he said with God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way. And that's what counts. And another way I put it, you might

mentioned it before, is that say two people that are being together and falling in love with each other and spending time with each other. One doesn't come to the other and say, I just was reading this book on intimacy and it said that sometimes intimate friends are sometimes silent. We're always talking. I wonder if we're doing this wrong. He's, oh my God, what page is that on? Oh, you're right.

Jim Finley: So it's that when there's sincere love takes care of them, it isn't that they always don't have things to learn, but you learn by trial and error based on the ways of love. And I think that's what counts. We approach it with a generous heart and a sincere heart, and we learn as we go. So we just don't try it two or three times and try to let it click in. This is a way of life and if you stay with it with sincerity you'll discover that in the weeks and months and years, it deepens of itself just with the constancy of your fidelity to it, in so far as you're called to do so. And I think that's what matters.

Kirsten Oates: That's helpful. I know when I first started trying this type of prayer, the word that came to me was, let go. Trying to have to embody the thing that I was trying to do in that time. So that really worked for me for a while every time I merged into a thought or got stuck in a sensation, just let go, let go.

Jim Finley: I've done that too. I've used that also. I have also added, let it go, let it be. Eckhart talks about letting what is, be. And we're letting go. Another thought on this, he's going to say this later in the book too, is you try it on for size and it might not sit with you. And what matters is holiness. What matters is the naturalness of this.

Jim Finley: Also know this, I don't practice this form of... I don't use the word like this. I don't practice centering prayer because notice we pointed this out before, see we're going along in lectio meditation and prayer, then there's a boundary crossing where we're touched by God, the stirring. And so in the boundary crossing, for God the boundary crossing is the stirring deepened by the desire to stabilize in it and therefore the method is really a response to an experience.

Jim Finley: It's not a method. It's the way to stabilize in the experience. But notice for St. John of the Cross, there's no method. He says your praying, and there's a passage through a dark night. There's this powerlessness to experience God's presence. And you lean into that and follow that for there. For Teresa of Avila there's no method. The first three mansion lectio divina and so on, but the fourth mansion, your heart being large and of divine proportions and so you surrender to what's happening to you in the midst of your lectio and that's the method.

Jim Finley: And so likewise for the cloud, this is his quote method, but it's a non-method method. It's a strategy to obey the promptings of your heart. And so as soon as it's turned into a technique, it falls back into the sincerity of the ego trying to master something, and the only thing the ego can master is more of itself. You know what I mean? Because if you were even capable of making it through a method since your method was a finite effort of your finite cell that union with God would be finite. And so really it's provisional, it's the artistry of a provisional strategy to keep things as freed up as possible for this grace gift from flowing as freely as it can.

Kirsten Oates: It's the temptation of the ego to bring it back to, I can write water in the sand. And so, yeah,

we can turn it into writing the water in the sand rather than the openness.

Jim Finley: That's exactly true. And the poor ego can't help itself. It doesn't politely give up its claim to have the final say in who we are. And so we can lovingly watch it do that, but we can also, with God's grace not give into it. By the way, that doesn't mean you might not be moved to right of it.

Jim Finley: For example, your journaling might become a way to pray. And by the way, notice this author wrote, that he felt moved to write to help us see. And so it's always a matter of discernment, what our intentions are, and it can also help me with this. I write to try to quietly express this as directly as I can, as a way to pray, like a poetry and blank verse. How do I put words to this? Not to pin it down, but to bear witness to it and help others realizing it like this. So I think it's not using words or thoughts, it's the intention in which the words are used.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Beautiful. Jim, can you help us understand this idea of the way the word might help us, this phrase of assign thoughts to the cloud of forgetting beneath you. What's happening there?

Jim Finley: So the image I use with the two clouds, the image I use when I used to give retreats, say a commercial flight on a cloudy day is the plane goes up to the clouds, but then you discover once you get above the clouds, here there's another layer of clouds above those clouds. And you're flying in between those two clouds before you go up over the next one. So we're traveling between these two clouds. The cloud of forgetting is the cloud of not thinking about any thoughts of God that arise, regardless of the thought. We don't reject it, because this is the presence of God beyond all... The cloud of forgetting. If the cloud of unknowing is everything we've learned about God in time, we're told this in time, time, the cloud of forgetting is knowing we've learned about ourself in time. We have opinions about ourself, opinions about life, we have positions about this.

Jim Finley: And all that's important, our ideas about this person in our life and that person in our life and our career. And so all that has gained through time and so we don't reject any of that, but we also do not think about any thoughts that arise from what we know about herself through time. So it's not just that I'm a man, but I have opinions or position what it means to be a man from society, from culture, from my experience. And there's some truth to that, but the mystery of my manhood is divine. A woman, she has ideas of what it means for her to be a woman based on her own past experiences on culture. There's a relative truth in all of that.

Jim Finley: And some of these ideas are helpful because they're loving and they promote it and some aren't helpful, but the thing is they're all finite. That's the thing. So we're lovingly in this cloud of forgetting, is we're not identifying with any thoughts about ourself because the thoughts about ourself are thoughts of a relative self form by those thoughts. But our ultimate self is who we are hidden with Christ and God before the ordinance of the universe. We're trying to join God and who God knows us to be, not who we think we are, imagine we are, like that. So that's my sense of the cloud of forgetting.

Kirsten Oates: That's another helpful image. So if we're flying the plane between the cloud of forgetting and

the cloud of unknowing, we use a word to release ourselves in two different ways. So we're releasing ourselves and dropping things into the cloud of forgetting things about ourselves, complaints we have about people in our lives or even loving thoughts that we have about people in our lives, and then we release, we could let a balloon outside the plane and it can release up into the cloud of unknowing these thoughts about God, what we think about God, even an emotional feeling about God. And it keeps us balanced in that central piece, which is the place where God finds us, it's the place because we're least distracted.

Jim Finley: That's right. There's another chapter, might get to it in another talk. I don't know. And he says, well, what happens in this cloud? I'm trying to grasp what you're saying here. And he says your very question puts me into the cloud I want you to enter. So anything where the inquiring self might draw out from it an insight to have about it is the very temptation to be drawn out of. So hidden with Christ in God, where it's hidden, it's innermost, it's hidden. So it doesn't mean that we don't draw out insights insofar as they help us to understand and be true to this. Also, notice again, and this idea about thoughts, notice how clear the author's mind is. His thoughts are so clear. And so what actually happens, it isn't disparaging thought, it isn't losing the ability to think, it doesn't mean that, but it actually clarifies thought, because it's thought in the service of love, it's thought infused with humility, stuff like that. So that's important I think.

Kirsten Oates: And in that space between the two clouds, we can witness what we're putting into the clouds. It's not like we don't see the clouds and what's in there.

Jim Finley: I think what we're doing here, here's how I put it. I put in [inaudible 00:37:17] thing is that, let's say I'm say sitting like this, you say, do not get into a discussion with thought. So what we are aware of is the thoughts that come to us in the sitting. And so the litany that I use, a biblical thought walks in and says something biblical, are you sure this is biblical? What about [inaudible 00:37:40] Do not get into a discussion with the biblical thought. You'll become biblical. This is who biblical people are. They're people who believe in biblical thoughts. And I say, my own tradition, a Catholic thought comes in. This is true to the church, put in Methodist or Lutheran, do not get into a discussion. You'll become Catholic. And you go down the list of all these reference points and thought, and then I say, fortunately, nothing happens to any of these things. Thank God. But they cease to form the horizon in which the knowledge born of love keeps flowing brighter and brighter. All these thoughts keep returning, but it's poetic metaphors, it's transparent metaphors by chanting the Psalms or instead of the ideology, it's freedom from ideological living.

Kirsten Oates: Your example was really helpful, but I think confusing in a way, because when you talked about the naughty thought, that makes a lot of sense. I think that's in Christianity not being attached to our naughty thoughts or sinful thoughts or things like that. But, biblical, Catholic, even I think you said a mystical thought, so that feels confusing. What if I had a brilliant mystical thought in the midst of my sit, I have to put it in the cloud of unknowing?

Jim Finley: The easiest example I give to. Again, we say, you stop and watch the sunset and you don't just notice it in passing, but you give yourself over of the beauty of the setting sun giving itself over to you. And notice that moment, it can be the arms of the beloved, a child, the darkness of the night, whatever it is, notice that this moment is a moment of heightened awareness. It's not lethargic. And also notice you're not thinking. In other words, it bears witness that

awareness qualitatively transcends thought. You may be sitting there having thoughts about sunsets, very deep ones. You could be writing a book on sunsets, but all those thoughts about sunsets, regardless of how profound they are pale compared to the awareness of the overflowing divinity of the oneness of the setting, the sun. And I think there are moments like that.

Jim Finley: A quiet amazement where the rains fall from your hands. And I also think it helps to understand death or rehearsing for death, really. Because in death, everything falls... The one who comes to acceptance in death, freedom from the tyranny of death in the midst of death is this overwhelming plenitude of presence that utterly transcends all possible thought. Because it's God, that's why.

Jim Finley: And so that's what it is. But then again, once you have an experience like that, it even heightens then your capacity to think thoughts that embody that awareness by their clarity or their depth or their sincerity or their things. So that's what I think it is.

Kirsten Oates: And you use that phrase, knowledge born out of love. That's knowledge born out of the unitive experience of God's love.

Jim Finley: Yeah. We weren't created by God to spend all eternity thinking about God. There aren't seminars, weekend events, reading lists. We were created by God for God. But there's a certain way of thinking that leads us to the limitations of thinking to go beyond and into an awareness of this communion with God, which then circles back and clarifies our thinking, which is the teachings of the mystics.

Kirsten Oates: You mentioned something about the constancy of practice, the cloud talks about a constancy of practice. Do you have a sense of what that would look like especially for a beginner?

Jim Finley: My bi-sense is this. Let's say you start out on this path and you can tell because it's subtle, it calls for a certain consistency, infidelity to a daily rendezvous because it's so subtle and it takes a while to stabilize in the subtlety. Now, as you stabilize in the subtlety, it's important then to stay very patient with this because to the consistency of fidelity to the quiet time you discover that months, or maybe years later in that simple consistency is a qualitatively richer realization that is way beyond anything you were capable of the very first time you sat. The very first time it was there, it was there but hidden. And so over time as it matures and ripens, I think it's like any art or poetry or intimacy, it's the consistency of fidelity to it to stabilize ever widening circles of intimately realize effulgence or fullness.

Jim Finley: And so we need to be very patient because the way things are now, if we just stay with it, isn't the way it's going to be. That's from Merton saying the whole journey as life is pilgrimage, just moving from the known to the unknown. And we're always moving from what we know into the next wave of the unknown giving itself to us and drawing us into that circle. And then this idea that that'll go on forever, for all of eternity that will go on.

Kirsten Oates: Would you say, Jim, then for a beginner, the constancy would be to have a discipline, like when you're learning something but not forcing myself to do it at a certain time, but a discipline that comes from this long [crosstalk 00:43:50].

Jim Finley: Yes. This is spiritual direction, really. Because sometimes we could do this and we sense that

we're not inclined to do it because it just isn't there anymore for us. And we return back to our lectio or whatever.

Jim Finley: Also, we can know that life goes on and if we're depressed or anxious it intrudes itself upon. And sometimes we just can't get past the intensity. We have to see it through as best we can. But other times what happens is I'm not drawn to do it. I'm being intruded by this sad thing, but I feel called to do it, even though I can't do it. And so I sit in the poverty of it as a empty handed, like a quiet integrity nobody sees, but I feel I'm to do it. You flip it over, someone else could be doing it, but they could be doing it out of ego based intensity, mystical union or bust. I'm just going to make this happen. And so we're all is discerning in our heart the spiritual rightness of the choice. And also, I think we can go for weeks or months without this life. And then it circles back around again, there it is again. So it's very personal for each of us, how this dimension of union goes. It just varies very much.

Kirsten Oates: Last question I was curious about, you mentioned a mystic, was it Nicholas of Cusa? It's always fascinating to hear about these mystics.

Jim Finley: Nicholas of Cusa is so interesting as a mystic because he was born after the enlightenment. And so he was at the beginning of science, and so you start to see... He's not at medieval period, but you can see he's very significant in its mystical consciousness, moving into our own era on how he sourced all that out and transcends it all and realizes it and so on. And, so I love that phrase of his, is that this way must be ineffably understood. And I forget the other one. It's understood, but it's understood ineffably, and I love that. He has another one, it must be spoken, but it must be... I wish I could go get it right now and read it, but I like that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And he was a reformer too, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yeah. He was a reformer of the church. But the reform of the church was really, it was like Thomas Merton or Richard Rohr. This reforming the church to keep it to renew its mystical contemplative foundations of Christ's consciousness in the world on how the church understands itself and how it lives in the world, and so on.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Which is what you're trying to do here as well, Jim.

Jim Finley: It is. Exactly. We're all in this together.

Kirsten Oates: Well, that's it for today and my little dog is ready to go out. So he's telling me it's time to finish. I think this has been a wonderful dialogue that's been very helpful to me and thank you for taking the time today, Jim, and thank you for that beautiful teaching.

Jim Finley: Surely and thanks for these questions, which I think will help the listeners doing their own growing understanding as they find their way through this. Anyways, so thank you. And thank you, Corey behind the scenes.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Thank you, Corey.

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.