



Turning to the Mystics

The Cloud of Unknowing

Dialogue 3: The Singular 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 Turning to The Mystics, where we're turning to the book, The Cloud of Unknowing, by an anonymous author, and I'm here with Jim and we're going to dialogue about his last session. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Hi, yes. Hi. Good to be with you again.

Kirsten Oates: You too, Jim. In the last session, you focused on chapter 68 and 38 of The Cloud of Unknowing, and I'm wondering why you chose those chapters.

Jim Finley: I chose those chapters because, as we go through each of these mystics, I'm trying to focus the point at which they help us discern the point at which our prayers becoming mystical. And how to understand what that means, and how to explore it, and surrender to it and so on. So, there are a number of places in The Cloud where the author does that. But these two chapters in particular, I thought were particularly profound or luminous, poetically beautiful. So, I chose them. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, I really enjoyed the episode and the poetics of it were very clear and beautiful. Thank you. I wanted to start by reminding people that through The Cloud of Unknowing, we're learning a method of prayer. And in this episode, you focused on the role of the word and how we might use the word as a way to create a wholehearted presence towards God, and so that we might experience our union with God.

Kirsten Oates: So, there's some clear, actionable instructions in this book, but then there's also these very poetic descriptions of why we would enter into this type of prayer, how it might be helpful. And Jim, is that because this prayer isn't really guiding us to a particular outcome? So, these poetics put us in the realm of, I think you said in the episode about, trying to help our soul resonate or sing with the idea of this union with God?

Jim Finley: Let's say that, for a comparison that when Theresa of Avila speaks to the beginning of the mystic on the Fourth Mansion, your soul's being enlarged to divine proportions, at which point this contemplative prayer starts to take on its mystical quality. There's no method for her-

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: ... except to keep surrendering to that. You go deeper, deeper and she offers guidance in the phases that it goes through. Same way with John of the Cross and a passage through a dark night. This deprivation of a sense of God's presence and where God's weaning us off these finite ways of experiencing God. So, there's no method in John of the Cross. Rather, it's to cooperate and surrender and understand what's happening to us as we're entering the state of more wordless mystical union. And likewise with Merton, there's no method either.

Jim Finley: So, with The Cloud, there's no method actually as a... In other words it isn't Like there's

some method and if I perform this method, then this will happen. Rather, what it is, is it's a way of concretizing how to fulfill a desire. As you would go through the common life, religion is a way to fill moral norms to this special, which is devotional sincerity. And which we grateful to God for his gifts to us, our very existence, our faith, our love and so on. And in that, in that special way, there are these stirrings of love and the stirrings of love tend to be very fleeting, but they kind of render the devotional sincerity, more luminous or vibrant or more.

Jim Finley: And he says in these three ways: the common, and the special. Those two ways begin and end on this earth, but also what begins is the singular way, which is the way of the desire to stabilize in the oneness fleetingly experienced in the stirring, instead of just accepting it fleetingly to in lieu of devotional sincerity, you desire to abide there.

Jim Finley: That singularity that singular way, he says it also ends here when we die past with veil of death, but it opens out on the perfect way, which is God's own life and glory. But the thing is the perfect way, which is God's own life, given to us in glory, begins here and begins in this desire. That is really a foretaste of heaven. You're literally experiencing God, accessing you as God and drawing you and transforming you into this knowledge born of love. Yes.

Jim Finley: And so he says, well, how do we, instead of saying just cooperate with it, dude. Like John Cross, he said, here's something you can do a way to pray, but what gives its meaning is it's a way your heart is responding to how to concretize itself in this strange desire, this mysterious desire. And that's, that's the guidance of the person. So, it's a method in that sense.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: It's a method. It almost is like a poetic method to transcends reliance on any methods.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Because because if it was a method, it would be more of you. See, in other words, if you would do something that by the result of that, you would achieve it. Then Master Dogan says about enlightenment. He says, it's entirely without human agency. That is true, you may never reach it unless you seriously seek it with all your heart. But if you do realize it, it won't be the results of your effort, because it's not the result of anything. It's just the boundary less divinity giving itself. So, it's a method in that sense.

Kirsten Oates: That's so cool. I haven't heard you say it that way, but that it's really a way to conquer a desire. And then I hear what you're saying too, without an attachment to outcome, We're trying to give to God what God gives to us, which is love.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly. It's an infinite love itself. And again, we use examples where, say anyone who's a true poet or an artist or a musician. It's true they've learned the craft of that. They had to do the craft, but really the craft conquertizes an opening through which the gift flows. And so they can let like actively choose to let it happen and express itself through them. And so their training is helpful-

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: ... but the fruit of the training transcends the training itself. It's a granting of a gift that blesses us when we see it or when we hear it, you can tell you're in the presence of the gift.

Kirsten Oates: Jim is part of the gift, you talk talked about this, sorry, interior self-knowledge is part of the gift that we might get in committing to a prayer like this deepening our interior self-knowledge. And what does that mean?

Jim Finley: I think at one level, is it deepens the knowledge that unless... See what will happen to me if I see surrendered to this? What will become of me, but what will become of me if I don't? So, it's the self-knowledge of a kind of mysterious imperative of your heart. You can't explain it, but it's just true about you that you be surrendered over to the self donating love.

Jim Finley: Secondly, as it gets deeper, you realize that it's self knowledge, and it's a mystery in which the mystery of yourself and the mystery of God's own self are one communal self. So, when Jesus says, "I came to you might have life and have it more abundantly." The life is a life that is at once God's in our own and that's the life that's offered to us. It's divine life.

Jim Finley: And it's the same way when we use the word consciousness. In a way it's our consciousness. But in another way, it's God's own consciousness infusing itself and giving itself to us in and as our consciousness, transformed in God. And so it's a trans subjective unit of sense of self and consciousness.

Kirsten Oates: The way you said that really moved me, that the interior self-knowledge is into the mystery of ourselves encased in history of God. It's like that, yeah. Oh, wow. So, so the knowledge isn't head knowledge. That word, points what will I learn about myself? But it's really opening up onto an experience of the mystery of that we are here at all.

Jim Finley: That's why we'll look at it later when he talks about the word, how in this word do this? And that's what it means because it's the prayer of a person's whole being you step forward in the totality of yourself and meet God moving towards you in the totality of God.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, so I want to move on to that. And the chapter's focusing on the word to support us, giving ourselves wholeheartedly. But I wanted to start with what you mentioned in that episode, this idea that the word helps us move from the physical to the spiritual.

Jim Finley: Yes, in this sense. If by the physical, we mean it helps us move to what we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands and hear with our ears, our own interiority of our physical self and the physical world. There's the sunshine, there's the tree, there's the water, so on. But moving to this to the spiritual, is again, this idea of a contemplative understanding of creation.

Jim Finley: That in creation it's a self donating act of God in which the whole universe is God's body. The concreteness of the world is the concreteness of the presence of God

expressed and realized as the gift in the miracle of the tree, the water, the bird, the breath, and so on. So, it's not as spiritual that's, dualistically beyond the material, but it's the spiritual of the intimately realize infinite depth of the material. See, it's God's manifested as incarnate presence.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you and that's reinforcing what you said in the episode is this idea that God is present, but not bound physically. So, then is it the same for us that we're we're present, but we might not be bound physically either?

Jim Finley: Yeah and nother way I put it, or I say in the reflection, or I ask this question, like, where do we stop?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Do we stop with our skin? Or do I stop with the walls of this room? So, if the room was bigger, I'd go out more and meet the walls. And so it raises the questions that ultimately speaking. I never stop because my very presence embodies, manifests and opens out upon the boundary less presence of God.

Jim Finley: And this is why then it permeates all of life, it permeates. And this is why then we could say, and this is kind of the intuition behind the cloistered monastic life and or just the hidden life. That when we sit this way, in a way we don't understand, our inner fidelity to the surrender touches the whole world in ways we don't understand. So, when Merton has insomnia in the middle of the night, and he says, "Suddenly the bed becomes an altar and in a distance city, somewhere, someone is able to pray." It's boundary less. And not only is it boundary less, it travels beyond the frontiers of all created reality into God himself, into God herself. So, that's that boundary less state intimately realized.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, because it's not like you just said, the skin... I can be conscious of the walls, even the horizon. My consciousness can spread out in the physical realm, but that's just kind of pointing to what you're describing, right? So, I can see how I can be conscious of more and more. But this is an interior consciousness of something that's at the heart of everything I see.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Let me use another example where we experience this example again of a sitting in the presence of a sunset and giving yourself over to the beauty of the sunset, giving itself over to you. So, in that immediate sense, there's the boundary less quality of the oneness of the beauty of the sunset. But that doesn't mean you can't stop and notice that the sunset, the physics of the setting sun, the earth is rotating and on its axis and the sun is going over the horizon, or you can look around and notice the physical characteristics of the thing you see in the setting sun. Or get out your iPhone and take a picture of the clouds, but then soon as you do that, you can drop back in again to the wonderment of this unit of mystery that utterly transcends what in relative consciousness is observed. And I think we go back, because the two are actually intermingled with each other.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

- Jim Finley: And this is true of human intimacy or parenting or watering of the house plants. That everything is what it is physically, but with these interiorly awakened eyes of the heart, it's God being poured out and given the love of God conuertized as the flowers, the setting, sun, my breath, whatever.
- Jim Finley: And we experience it first in the prayer. As we keep practicing the prayer, it starts pervading all of life. There's an underlying habitual unit of consciousness, which is a contentment of character transformation kind of transforms.
- Kirsten Oates: In the episode you use that example of deep love. How you can love someone, like me on the other side of the world, like my family in Australia and that connection is real. So, it feels like it's something about that sense of connectivity and the mystery of the way we're connected and we can feel connected to others, to nature, yeah.
- Jim Finley: That's right. That's why I say you can... Let's say someone's in a really broken marriage state and you can be miles away from the person you're sleeping with, but the intimate beloved, the one who understands you and knows you and cares about you can be on the other side of the world and interiorly you're closer to them and they're closer to you.
- Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Jim Finley: So, it's not limited to the physicality of closeness and likewise also mysterious when the beloved dies. Gabriel Marcel once says his mother died when he was very young and the influence she had on him. And he said, "It's amazing how present a dead person can be." And so this is this inter communion of saints. This is intimately realized interconnectedness on the interior of God.
- Kirsten Oates: Yeah, and Jim, you feel that with Merton and John of the Cross and even the author of *The Cloud* I guess.
- Jim Finley: It very much so. So, all these books here and all these mystics and I'm sharing that these podcasts and mystics have influenced me since I was in the monastery. And so I think when they speak, they speak with such clarity. It's like a sharing. And so when we read them like the author of *The Cloud*'s deathless presence shines out and gives itself to us in the text, it's same with the God tunnel of understanding of the gospels. It's the same way, it's God's voice shining out through this contemplative understanding of every word of scripture and every everything that Jesus says. Yes.
- Kirsten Oates: The author of *The Cloud* teaches us that thought binds us to the physical, but awareness of thought opens up on the spiritual the way you've described it. And I did wonder, I want to talk a little bit more about thought, but I did wonder is that also true for... Say you have an emotional sensation in your body or a physical sensation, can those sorts of things also bind you to the physical?
- Jim Finley: This is my sense of it. Let's start with the first. Where he says, "Understand your spiritual work is not limited to a particular place," that's how he starts. It's boundary less. He says, "But when your mind focuses on anything, on any specific thought, then in focusing on that thought your mind is located there in that thought. This is as assuredly as your body's located in the room." He said, "But what if it, through this prayer using the word is the

anchor, thoughts arise and fall, but grounded in this loving intention, we don't think about the thoughts that arise and fall and linger within us."

Jim Finley: And what we come to then is the awareness, see, of thought arising, lingering, and passing away. But without thinking about the thought that's arising. So, awareness is itself, a boundary less state that bears witness that thinking doesn't have the final say in what knowledge is.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: There's a kind of boundary less awareness and that boundary less awareness then is the state that offers the least resistance to the granting of the oneness.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: It doesn't make it happen, but we're dislodged from specificity in thought into. And examples of this again, in human intimacy, or say being quietly present in an art museum where you just sit quietly before a great work of art, you can feel the thought fall into the background, your thoughts about it, what you learned about it. And there's a kind of a communal state of the beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: And the same with the voice of the poet or the same with certain music. And so these are modalities, which kind of invite a unit of contemplative awareness in which conceptual, theoretical formulations, and so on fall into the background.

Jim Finley: That still allows us secondarily to circle back around and have those thoughts, but to understand them within the context. It's trans conceptual knowing born of love and so it's true in that sense. So, it grounds us in one sense, then this awareness liberates us from being localized anywhere, but as we follow through it, and as it kind of rolls over and takes us to itself, then we start discovering by that very liberation. We see the presence of God welling up in, and as every thought see? And it's nothing that's without God. In and as every memory and it's nothing that's without God. And I think that's the big thing, really, I think in a way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's very helpful. So, the poetry or the art is a good example because in one way I might look quite bound to the picture. My eyes are focused on it, my full attentions on it, but there's this switching over into a different kind of awareness. Not a physically bound sense of awareness, but that's coming through my eyes. It's kind of like that-

Jim Finley: That's right, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's what I said. It comes through the senses inter of itself, transcends the sense. So, the artist say contemplatively saw something, a flower. And what they did then is they shared with us what they saw. So, when we're sit there quietly, and we look at the painting of the flower, as we learned to see the painting of the flower, we're drawn to the generosity of the

artists, into what the artists saw and seeing the flower.

Kirsten Oates: I'm wondering like this contemplative state, because there was a description where the thinking mind tends to be in the foreground, the contemplative awareness in the background. And there's these moments when we switch and the contemplative is in the foreground and the... Is it just part of our human nature to have that contemplative always in the background, but we're just, we're not connected to it?

Jim Finley: I don't think so. Owen Barfield, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien of Barfield. There's different ways of understanding that in previous times, and still in indigenous cultures, that background awareness was the cultural habituated awareness of the oneself the world as embodiments of the mystery. The Great Mother, the Earth, the presence of this.

Jim Finley: So, when Carl Jung says, "How can we claim the years have taught us anything if we've not learned to listen to the secret that whispers in the brooks?" He's bearing witness to this primordial thing. But we've become too different through the enlightenment period, the emphasis on reason to the Industrial Revolution, through technology, and into this Newton, this mechanical objective thing, in which this unit of conscious falls.

Jim Finley: We still know it in moments of love or solitude or silence, or art. It isn't that it's gone, but Thomas Burton once said, "We live in a world today in which you simply learn not to listen, not to go crazy because you're bombarded with things. And then we forget to know how to listen." So, what we're trying to do then, in the Cloud of Unknowing is, we're trying to be reinstated in a mystical contemplative dimension of every moment of our life, and to be that in the world and share that with people as, as it's given to us to do so.

Kirsten Oates: So, almost like the changing the habituated state from thought in the foreground to this contemplative awareness in the foreground. But not as a goal, going back to where we started this as a way of meeting God, being open to God, that's our desire is to be-

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. I want to give two examples. So, let's say for example, in psychotherapy, if I'm seeing someone in psychotherapy and we're exploring a place in their life where they're suffering in their life. So, as I listen to them, say I sit there and I ask myself, I don't know the answer, and I can't just throw out an answer. But if I say to myself instead, let's see what's going on here, right? Now, let me ask you some questions. And they're real questions. They're real questions. And the questions are such that in order to respond to me, you have to pause and listen to yourself. And when you listen to yourself, you're more present to yourself in my presence. And then the depth dimension opens up.

Jim Finley: I think that same thing as through a poetry or art, whatever. I think we all know what that's like of the wisdom of that kind of receptivity. Not long into it to get through it, but how to do the opposite to step back and be attentive to what's going on in me as I listen to it and what's going on here. It isn't just what would Jesus do, but how would Jesus understand the situation? What would Jesus' attitude be to this situation? And his attitude was always love and what he saw in every situation was God shining through every situation. And Jesus said, "You advised to see and do not see the root of our suffering is so you don't see it."

Jim Finley: So the author of The Cloud, all these mystics are trying to help us come to this unit of seeing. So we don't get tangled up so much in conditioned states and yeah.

Kirsten Oates: In the minutiae.

Jim Finley: Yeah, minutiae. And so the intensity of the minutiae closes off access to a broader context, see? That it would allow us to see it in greater clarity or in a more love based way, or a more... It's like setting back in order to get closer to deeper level.

Kirsten Oates: And the minutiae can be enormous. It's not just little things. It can be really big things going on in your life, but it's in comparison to the infinite mystery that we're built for. It's-

Jim Finley: Exactly. And another thing, not to go off here and into depth dimensions of therapy. See it is minutiae compared to it, but to the internalized wound itself, the minutiae is a trip wire-

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: ... for unbearable painful loss that happened. The minutiae is an attempt to grab hold of something or have something. So, I don't feel so out of control. So, part of it is learning to listen to the minutiae and understand that what at some level might appear to be petty, the very fact, the body responds the way it does. We need to keep circling back to listen to it, understand it, and walk with it and let it kind of become the opening through which it can become the contentment of life.

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

Kirsten Oates: You talked about the word that we use during this contemplative prayer as powerful, because it's a prayer of our whole being. And then you referred to a scripture, Ephesians 3-18, and it's so helpful to see how these mystics draw on scripture and Jesus' life. But the scripture says that we can comprehend with all the saints, what is the width and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passive knowledge that we might be filled with all the fullness, God. This idea of this prayer is grounded in scripture.

Jim Finley: Let me put another way too. This is true of all the mystics also is that when the mystics speak of the soul, what the soul refers to who we are created by God, as persons in the image and likeness of God. So, the interiority of ourself, our soul is our God given capacity, see, to be awakened to, surrendered to, and be one with God as our soul. And therefore we're in an exiled state. We're exiled from the God given divinity of our soul for different complex reasons. And this exiled state the fallen state.

Jim Finley: And so what we, what we do then is find our way back to our soul as oneness with God, by with the prayer of our whole being. And so the word embodies that. So, then following scripture, then in this contemplative state, if the loftiest act I can perform is to give myself in love to God for God's sake, this is the loftiest thing.

Jim Finley: So, then when I do that in that sustained state of that awareness, that's where I began to realize that the heights of my soul embodied in that desire open out upon the vast heights of God, who in that moment is descending into me, in and as that moment. And likewise, each direction is the same way. My depth, the deepest thing I can do is bury all my knowledge into this one little word, see? But the more I bear my whole self on this one little word, the more my depth bottoms out into the bottomless abyss of God welling up and the length, If I could, I could cry out forever if I could, but I can't as a human. But if I could, the desire to

cry out forever opens out upon God's eternity, which is the eternality of time and love and breath is we desire for others, but we desire for ourself.

Jim Finley: So, the prayer embodies God's universal salvific will. So, really it's divinization through love is what it is. And what happens here, I think in a way is you can no longer find the place where you stop and God begins. You can no longer find the place where the world and everybody stops and you begin. And it's a very intimate realize of this unit of state, of living our life in the interiority of God.

Jim Finley: And notice, this is not for him. It doesn't say that there aren't visions and ecstasies. Those are going to happen. And John the Cross talks about those trees that talks about those. But The Cloud doesn't go talk... He does have a chapter, I might mention it next time, where he talks about these can be gifts where we can get attached to them. This isn't really the kind of ecstatic, it's more of an extremely subtle and emptyhanded and vast. It's like an obscure certainty, as unexplainably self evident in some unexplainable way. And it's like, what's become of you through love and that's more the tone of it.

Kirsten Oates: It's so helpful to hear your contemplative reading of a scripture like that, because the church has also gotten caught up in that rational mind and quite often presents scripture in a much more rational, black and white way. So, to hear that mystery emerging from the scripture in that beautiful way. It's just really helpful to hear that. I don't think that's offered very often.

Jim Finley: Yeah, no, and if you listen to Gregorian chant, even though you don't know Latin, you can see the music of it does that. But also, ideally speaking, when a homily shared by a person of prayer is going to the homily itself moves like you're moved by it. You sense something unexplainable without which the world would be a dimmer place. And it's like, that's the quality of transmission of mind, the Buddhist would say. It arcs over into the listener. Like an event happens of a certain recognition of something that we're all waiting to hear.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, the fruit or the some of the changes we start to see might be that our inner peace... These are your words, of course, but that the inner peace. Our inner peace is not dependent on anything, but this love. So, we're giving up our need for finite attainment.

Jim Finley: Let's say this is so normal, the human experience, is our inner peace is dependent on being able to maintain ourself in conditions conducive to peace. So, when all is well with our health, and our relationships with our loved ones, our career. So, the self that is itself, the subjective awareness of these fluctuating conditions states we're at peace. When the conditions are no longer conditions conducive to peace is injustice, cruelty, hurt, abandonment, death, war, all this stuff, with the racism, all this stuff all over, see? Then all of a sudden, because the conditions are no longer conditions conducive to peace, we're not at peace. And so then we seek to be more peaceful again, by restoring the conditions conducive to peace.

Jim Finley: How can I write this situation, to be state, and we should do that. But what we're saying here is that we honor that, we do we do that, but it's a peace that isn't dependent on the outcome of the effort. Because it's not a peace that's dependent upon conditions conducive to peace. It's a peace that's not dependent on anything at all, because it's the peace of God being given to us unexplainably in our life.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: And this is why you can experience this on your death bed when you come to acceptance.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: And sometimes amazing. Look at John of the Cross on these, Rumi. Some of these people, this bliss sometimes broke through in times of great darkness.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And so it is a condition state of a love that utterly transcends and totally permeates the constantly fluctuating conditions. And it doesn't make us indifferent to them like we're above it all, but it radicalizes our ability to be present to the conditions. Because our heart is tapped into a love that isn't dependent on the outcome. And we can draw upon it to be as present as we can, to the people who are suffering or our own suffering and not. So you see, we lose our balance.

Kirsten Oates: I think that's a big thing that actually finding this piece makes us more present. So, if it's physical pain or some kind of suffering, it's not like this is a magic trick and if you can find this inner piece, the outer chaos disappears. It's a different stance you can take.

Jim Finley: Yes. Something that helps me to say this, see this too is to say, when you look back, there are certain moments like the stirring. There are certain moments in any conditions at all, mystic nature's solitude, the love of the child, the poem, whatever. There's a certain moment in which you become unexplainably one with this. Like what a fool I am to worry so the way I sometimes do. It's just like wondrous and then it then it disappears as mysteriously as it came.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: So, what you're saying then is that I believe that in these moments, it's not as if something more is given, but a curtain opened and I intimately realize that every moment always is. And so what I'm trying to do then, the path forward is not trying to attain anything because nothing's missing. That's the point. The awareness shows us like divinity in all directions. So, how can I free myself from what hinders me from realizing this plenitude or generosity of love, and that's the path? How can I extricate myself from my tendency to absolutize a relative and relativize the absolute? See, how can I lean into it and be transformed in it?

Kirsten Oates: And if that's something you long for, then the cloud is offering us this way to concretize that longing and perhaps be more open to that habituated state.

Jim Finley: That's right. And notice also, it's really a letter of spiritual direction. He's talking to someone, but other passages, he clearly realizes he's talking to all of us who might find it helpful.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: And notice is how beautiful his language is. It's very concrete, but is so luminous what kind of poetic, just the sheer beauty of a bear's witness to the truth of it. You know what I mean,

it like bodies at forth, and that's why the longer we time we spend with it, it gets into us. You know what I mean?

Jim Finley: I think it was Howard Thurman, once I saw him on a video, and he was talking about what he owed to his grandmother. I think who was once a slave actually. And he's how he owes everything to her, he says. And then he said, "The thing about spirituality is you can't get it out of books by trying. What you do is you hang around with somebody who has a bad case of it and you start coming down with it, like the flu." You run into somebody that just manifests it, like their presence manifested. And then when you sit in their presence, it starts happening to you.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And I think that's how the lineage works. And sometimes we can be with the person physically, it's fortunate. And we can do that being a contemplative thing with like an awaken teacher, but the deathless presence of the teacher is present in the text, just like the death of presence of Jesus is present everything Jesus has. So, the more time we spend time in company, these people and just surrender to the beauty of it, we realize it's happening to us. It's starting to arc over and become the way we're starting to see things. So, that's what it's all about really, in a way.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Well, I found it even beautiful when you were talking about the struggle around this and how the author says, nevermind, don't mind. And so I did want to focus a little bit on that struggle.

Kirsten Oates: So, the way you described it is to say that there's parts of us that can't get this and won't ever get there while we're here in the finite plane and in The Cloud, they talk about those parts in being a kind of darkness. And I just wanted to talk about the ways that might manifest. Y.

Kirsten Oates: You talked about frustration, but I wonder if there's other ways like waking up, not wanting to practice kind of being avoidant or feeling doubtful. Is this really doing anything? Is this worth it? For me too, other parts that need therapy more than the practice that I have to go and take care of. Are they ways that we kind of find ourselves in what the book refers to as darkness?

Jim Finley: I want to speak of it psychologically first and then spiritually.

Jim Finley: Let's say we're on a path where we realize that there's a certain tendency that has caused suffering to ourself and others, narcissistic entitlement, resentment, emotional withholding, quick to anger, whatever. In realizing the suffering that it's caused, we seek to be free from it. And in seeking to be free from it, we realize the depth to which it has a hold on us, like St. Paul, the thorn in the flesh.

Jim Finley: And so we keep trying by endlessly circling back to be there for, and with the part of us that needs to be loved the most, this broken part. To spend time with it, to understand it, to be with it. To love, we do the inner work. So, what happens is that the breakthrough doesn't come and that you broke through that as you saw the puzzle, the buzzer it went off and you made it, But in the very midst of the sincerity of endlessly being there for yourself in immersive way, the light starts unexpectedly shining through the vulnerability of your

sincerity, if that makes sense in a way.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: That's the unexpected nearness of it. So, we're saying that in a way that it's kind of a sacrament what happens here. Because the great dilemma is this, God grants us a taste of a oneness with which having tasted it, our life without it will be forever incomplete, but by our own power, we're powerless to attain it. That's the gift of the dilemma.

Jim Finley: So, what we do is we sit at the edge of our powerlessness to attain it, because it's infinite and it's finite. And what happens in a willingness to sit this way, what happens is that love burns away our reliance on our own effort. "And as our own effort, see, my strength is perfected in weakness," he tells Paul. "You need the thorn there," he says. My strength is perfected in me because in your weakness deeply accepted my infinite for you, shines bright like this. And I think that's another paradoxical intimacy in all of this.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So, just practically Jim, would that be to say, if I wake up and I feel like I really don't want to do my practice. I accept my fragility and my desire to comfort myself or not be, yeah, put in a state that doesn't feel good. And I can accept myself fully that way and be compassionate towards myself and then I may do the practice, I may not do the practice.

Jim Finley: Exactly. See, I think we're trying to learn to trust ourself. So, if I don't want to do the practice, but don't do the practice.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Don't do the practice.

Kirsten Oates: But don't beat myself up for not doing the practice.

Jim Finley: No, don't beat yourself because it isn't as if you don't want to do the practice because deep down you're really that bad person you feared. You really are. You tried so hard to prove it's not true. Oh my God, it's true. It's not that. You don't want to do the practice, don't do the practice because your heart is beating. You're breathing in, you're breathing out the sun's moving across the sky.

Jim Finley: But what you'll tend to notice though, and maybe it's because it isn't for you right now, is to be more in reflection or loving people or you follow the currents wherever it goes. Yeah. But then you realize though, if it goes very long, the grace is you realize you miss it. That is you miss what you're not in the mood of doing. So, then you could sit and ask yourself, but what is it in me that's not in the mood to do what will and my fidelity to it bring me to the liberation that I seek?

Jim Finley: And then we get back to experiential self-knowledge. Is it the fear of boundarylessness? Is it I'm traumatically bonded to pretending that I'm less what I'm called to be? And am I going for where you would just quietly sit with it, like asking God to help you.

Kirsten Oates: Is it the frustration of how busy my thoughts are and how hard it feels to do the practice?

Jim Finley: Exactly. If it went smoother, I'd be more willing. But my mind's all over the place. So, God says, "Of course it is like, what do you think? It's all over the place." But I'm steadfast and I'm infinitely one with you in your wondering ways and that's what you're trying to discover. Because I think another way of looking at these practices is that what happens is set up in such a way you can't do it. It sounds great.

Jim Finley: You got your copy *The Cloud*, you let a candle when you bow and you get going. I'm about eight minutes into it, this is a rough row. But that's the point. See, so you sit with it and see if you feel called to do it. And what is the gentle light that shines through these variations? Because notice what you're doing. You catch yourself in the act of perpetuating violence on the part of you that needs to be loved the most. You're buying into the idolatry of attainment. Instead you're being asked to surrender yourself over to this love. This is unexplainably attaining itself and giving yourself to you and your inabilities. I miss things like that, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, as I reflect on my experience, I started a practice and then when Will's mother was dying and then knowing Will was going to come and live with us, I said to God, I know I have to commit to this practice to be the person I want to be in this situation. And from then on, I just committed to it.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It was to concretize my desire to be a loving, helpful presence to Will. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's why I say that in a very deep down way, in open ended, freewheeling way, everything's right on schedule. So, maybe for a long time you just can't do it. Then something happens. A death, a birth, then all of a sudden what alluded you before... That's why the author of *The Cloud* says, "For all the grandeur of this..." He said, "Yet, when you're called to do it, it's a simplest thing there is."

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: Because you're not going against the stream all of a sudden. And here you're being prepared for it all along and all those things you had to go through, because-

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: ... it's a continuum really-

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: ... of God's oneness in life, I think. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, to end on an encouraging note, you said that God will always hear and help someone making this prayer. What does that experience feel like?

Jim Finley: Yes. Let's say that we're immersed in a long standing, inability to be stabilized in this. We long for it. We just... And let's say even more in our daily life, in our intentions to be loving and good and clear minded, a lot of slippage all over the place. And I start to realize then

that this is all up to me, this is not looking good, really. I mean, I'm really just lost in my fragmentation. But if I then am moved to cry out, like this, in this desire to give myself in love to this infinite love wounded-ness and all, see? What is it love that is the gift of not attributing authority to the wounded-ness. But rather it gives itself to the love that's unexplainably giving the totality of itself to us as precious in our wounded-ness.

Jim Finley: It's like the hymn amazing grace. Here's a person, a slave trader bringing slaves over. See? Amazing grace that once was lost was now what I found was blind, but once I see. And sometimes it's precisely because things got so broken and so dark, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness grasps, but not the darkness can't grasp the light. But in the darkness it can be illumined by it coming to look for us, like that.

Jim Finley: And this often happens in AA, like deep recovery work. It often happens in trauma recovery work. It doesn't always happen. Sometimes you drown in the pain and some people don't resolve this side of death. It gets resolved in eternity, but for many people is precisely because it got so lost.

Jim Finley: They one said about Thomas Merton. He was a gentle person because God was so gentle with him. That one lost sheep. The love went looking for you just when you were lost and touched your heart in the lost place and you put your trust in that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And that's the union.

Kirsten Oates: So, we can have confidence that God is always listening and helping, but we might not always know it on this side of our-

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: ... experience in the concrete details of our life. But in that part of our soul that we are trying to connect with, it knows.

Jim Finley: And this is why Thomas Martin used to say is there a Christian in the house? We've read the gospels lately. So, in Jesus, I see father forgive them, they know now what they do. The Abyss, like mercy, dissolves it all. So once said, compared to that, mercy is like a drop of water on a fiery furnace. Just everything's consumed in the nothingness of it all is this. And we place our hope in that.

Jim Finley: So, that doesn't mean that we don't continue trying to overcome the difficult, the moral imperative we need to. But rather it's been transformed because like the thorn in the flesh God says, "Leave it there as your teacher, your peace isn't dependent on that." And by the way, your inability to get past the hurtful thing creates the empathy of your oneness with how precious everybody is in their brokenness. And there's ministerial implications of this on how we relate to people.

Kirsten Oates: Well, what I'm hearing today is that each of us is a unique version of this portal of-

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: ... union and love and connection through our soul, and we're all completely loved by God.

Jim Finley: Exactly. That's it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Well said and true besides and no sensible-

Kirsten Oates: I've had a good teacher.

Jim Finley: ... person would deny it. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: I've got a good teacher.

Jim Finley: Why yes. There we go. The Cloud of Unknowing, we never go wrong. This for these teachers are so... What a gift to be touched by these teachings and-

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: ... the beauty of it. The truth of it's pretty amazing, actually.

Kirsten Oates: I was referring to you Jim.

Jim Finley: Oh, I see.

Jim Finley: Okay, sorry.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. Well, we'll end there. Thank you so much.

Jim Finley: 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. 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.