



# Turning to the Mystics

The Cloud of Unknowing

Session 3  
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Jim Finley: Greetings everyone, and welcome to our time here together turning for guidance to the teachings of the Christian mystic, the anonymous author of the Cloud of Unknowing. In this session, I'm inviting you to join me as we explore chapter 68 and then chapters 38 of the Cloud. These two chapters are especially significant in that they bear witness to the grace transformations that occur within us in our fidelity to this prayer of loving God for God's sake and not for God's gifts, and of anchoring oneself in the Word as our defense against being dragged off into our thoughts about this, our thoughts about that, to stay steadfast in this knowledge born of love. And because of the sublime nature of this mystical state, this mystical communion of intimately realizing God's infinite oneness with us as the very reality of ourselves, others and all things in this love union.

Jim Finley: I think it's very helpful as we listen to this not to try to figure it out because it's not figure-out-able. And therefore, it's more helpful to understand it by listening to it, by allowing your soul to kind of sing with the awareness that in some way you recognize what the author of the Cloud is talking about, because in various ways you've tasted it, you've experienced it and you yourself long to abide ever more completely in this oneness, which is why we're drawn to these teachings, which is this path. And what the author of the Cloud says in trying to bear witness and open up this grace, communal realization of oneness with God that unfolds within us in this prayer.

Jim Finley: He begins in chapter 68 by talking about a way to understand contemplative prayer. He says at the beginning of chapter 68 that, "Another man might tell you to withdraw all your faculties and senses within yourself, and there worship of God. And this is well said and true besides, and no sensible person would deny it." I'd like to start there as what we're trying to do is gain a clear and understanding of the inner landscape of our soul. As we're trying to, this experiential self-knowledge that deepens within us in our search for God. And one way is to understand this contemplative prayer in which this union is realized by allowing the typical thinking self in our day-by-day consciousness to fall into the background so that a more contemplative interior beholding consciousness might come into the foreground.

Jim Finley: I found this expressed in a very succinct and helpful way by Father La Salle. Father La Salle was a Jesuit priest and a Zen sensei who taught at Sophia University in Japan. He was a friend in colleague of the Jesuit priest, William Johnson, who was a Zen sensei, and who translated this translation of The Cloud of Unknowing that we're using. It was his doctoral dissertation, the theology of The Cloud of Unknowing. Merton wrote the forward to it. And so Father La Salle speaks of this way of understanding contemplative prayer that the author of The Cloud is referring to, by inviting us to notice how it's really true that most of the time our thinking self is in the foreground, thinking about this, thinking about that in the midst of the situation, and so on. And well we should, well we should be invested that way in thinking this, thinking things through and guiding our behavior and so forth, including thinking about the things of God in our. In our Lexio Divino, we take in the Word, the words of Jesus. And then in the Meditatio, see, we reflect... It's like the reflective mind illumined by grace. Well we should do that.

Jim Finley: But notice, Father La Salle says, that in the background, there's a more contemplative state of a kind of quiet beholding, or you might say, a quiet state of communal presence, and

one with that which we're in the mystery or in the presence of. And this happens to us spontaneously from time to time. We've talked about these moments, these stirrings, these awakenings. Turning to see a flock of birds descending in the arms of the beloved, holding a newborn infant, giving ourselves over to the smell of a rose, listening to the rain, the pause between two lines of a poem in our quiet prayer, there are certain moments where there's a spontaneous event, we're so interiorly quickened that we move forward in kind of a quiet beholding communion as the thinking self falls into the background.

Jim Finley: And it's in that state, then, that we're graced with these touches or these realizations of God's oneness with us beyond thought, beyond what words can say. And they pass away and we return to our thinking self, hopefully hallowed and illumined by these graced moments.

Jim Finley: But what happens is that we can begin to experience the grace of longing to abide in that state, that we're not content with the serendipity of these fleeting tastes flashing forth here and there. But how do I abide in this state? Because I can't make these moments happen, but I can assume the inner stance that offers the least resistance to being overtaken by this God's oneness with us, that I'm powerless by my own powers to attain. And that's my meditation practice. One way to do, that practice, that contemplative stance, is to allow the thinking self to fall into the background as we allow this contemplative state to move into the foreground and then stay there. And stay there long enough to let it have its way with us that we might be habitually stabilized. It's one way.

Jim Finley: And so the author of *The Cloud* says, "Yes, well said, and true besides." But then the author of *The Cloud* says, "Yet for fear you may be deceived and interpret what I say literally, I do not choose to express the interior life in this way. Rather I will speak in paradoxes. Do not try to withdraw into yourself, for to put it simply, I do not want you to be anywhere. No, not outside, above, behind, or beside yourself. But to this you say, 'Where then shall I be? By your reckoning, I am to be nowhere.' Exactly. In fact, you've expressed it rather well, for I indeed have you be nowhere. 'Why?' Because nowhere physically is everywhere spiritually. Understand this clearly: your spiritual work is not located in any particular place, but when your mind consciously focuses on anything, you are there in that place spiritually, as certainly as your body is located in a definite place right now."

Jim Finley: I'd like to reflect on this. One way of getting at this poetically, we're trying to find our way to getting our bearings here and something is so subtle, and yet so foundational to this path. One way I think of starting to look at this poetically is to realize that God can't go anywhere. And God can't go anywhere because God already is infinitely everywhere. That's why God can't go anywhere. Deeper still, God already is the reality of everywhere, and it's nothing that's without God, as God is perpetually in an ongoing, self-donating creative act, creating and bringing every single place and holding it into existence. And there's nothing that's without God, which is the divinity of every place like this.

Jim Finley: But you and I, when we're thinking about anything, see we're right here. We're right here in this place. We're thinking the way we're thinking now, certain kind of thinking that transcends thinking, but when you sit in a certain place, but what happens is that in states of contemplative beholding, that you that's specifically grounded in the thought that you're thinking, is transcended. So we said earlier that you're sitting in the practice, the thoughts arise, they linger and they fall away within you. And as they arise and linger and fall away

within you, if you think about the thought that arise and falls away, it carries you off into thinking. But if instead you freely choose not to think about the thoughts that arise, but you become contemplatively aware of thought arising, of thought enduring, of thought passing away, that the awareness of thinking is not thinking and the awareness of thinking is the state of awareness that's not localized anyway there. "So your spiritual work is not limited to any particular place," the author would say here.

Jim Finley: How so? You know, there's a passage in Thomas Merton, where he is in the middle of the night, he's lying in his cell, in the monastery, and he has insomnia. He is lying there in the dark and he gives himself to God in his powerlessness to go to sleep. And as he gives himself to God, he says, "Suddenly the bed becomes an altar. And in a distance city, somewhere, someone is suddenly able to pray." Merton says, "Perhaps some people whose lives we will affect the most deeply are people we will not meet until after we are dead."

Jim Finley: It's like Christ hanging on the cross. In the moment he was the most powerless, the infinite love that was pouring itself out, this infinite mercy of God pouring itself out wholly pervades and is continuing to pervade all time, right up to this and every possible moment. And so too with us. So too with us. In the moment we're the most powerless to find any gratification, any specific thought of God, in the moment we're kind of surrendered over to this quiet beholding, a kind of leaning into this beholding born of love, transcending the boundaries of all thought, we enter into this boundary-less state of our interconnectedness, the communion of saints, which also includes the dead and the angels and everybody everywhere.

Jim Finley: So there's a kind of hidden ministry in which in ways we do not understand, our quiet fidelity to this prayer is pervasively flowing out and touching the minds and hearts of people in the midst of their situation, wherever they might be. And so fidelity to this prayer is kind of a vocation that the author of *The Cloud* was saying, "Is it all humanity's helped more more by this love than by anything you might do for anybody." It doesn't mean you don't keep doing things for people. Quite the opposite, but it brings a new depth, a contemplative depth to all the things you try to do to people, to do this.

Jim Finley: So there's another way of looking at this as subtle points. See, where do you stop? See, do you stop with your skin, do you stop with the walls of the room? See, where do you stop? Gabriel Marcel says somewhere, "When you're deep, you can be deeply in love with someone on the other side of the world and in your love for each other, you're one with each other. You can so love someone who's died and crossed over into God and having crossed over into God, you sense your unexplainable oneness with them and their unexplainable oneness with you in God."

Jim Finley: And so we're trying to move beyond understanding this as kind of poetic words, instead of words that are putting words to what in our heart we know is true, and how can we stabilize in these sensitivities? And so to be nowhere physically is to be everywhere spiritually. That is, when you're freed from being specifically bound to the specificity of thinking anything, you cross over into this everywhere, in which you're all pervasively one with God forever and ever, and ever pervasively flowing out into

oneness with everyone and everything, everywhere. Another way to put it would be this way, through this very poetic language that allows us to try to get a sense of this.

Jim Finley: I keep returning back again to this contemplative understanding of creation. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And all things were made through Him, for without Him has been made nothing that has been made. And so too, with all of us.” That is to say from all of eternity, God the Father and this, the poetics of the Trinity, that God the Father, God as origin, is eternally expressing emptying the infinity of God away and pouring it out as the Word of God. And God as He eternally contemplates Himself in the Word. And God eternally contemplates in the Word who God eternally knows you to be hidden with Christ and God forever before the origins of the universe. And since everything in God is God, this is the divinity of you. This is the you that was never born because God never, never, never has not known who you are. It is the you that will never die, that God will never, never not know who you are.

Jim Finley: And this you, this birthless/deathless you, is all pervasively, unexplainably woven into and one with the all-pervasive presence of God throughout the whole world. And so in this act of love, your act of love touches the heart of a person on the other side of the world. And you touch that person’s heart without going anywhere because you’re in this space. This means an awful lot to the cloistered monastic traditions of the church. The Cistercian order that Merton belonged, the cloistered Carmelite order that Teresa of Avila belonged, Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, the Carthusian come out of the order. These cloistered orders are bearing witness to this, but we’re called to realize it out here in the world. See, this cloistered heart, this cloistered with respect to not being carried off by thoughts that localize us, into this all-pervasive love and leaning into it and staying long that it might transform us into itself unexplainably, leaving us everywhere, which is to be nowhere physically. We’re not anywhere in this beholding unexplainably.

Jim Finley: He continues about this poetic, “Your senses and faculties will be frustrated for lack of something to dwell on, and they will chide you for doing nothing, but nevermind. Go on with this nothing, moved only by your love for God. Never give up the steadfastly persevering this nothingness, consciously longing that you may always choose to possess God through love, who no one can possess through knowledge. For myself, I prefer to be lost in this nowhere, wrestling with this blind nothingness, than be like some great Lord traveling everywhere and enjoying the world as if he owned it.” And so he’s saying you’re sitting there, you’re still just you. You’re just your ordinary self trying to get through another day. And so this ordinary you in this unseen, unfelt glory, you’re just still sitting there. And that you that’s transcended in this doesn’t get this. It’s in water way over its head.

Jim Finley: And so it’s frustrated. It’s frustrated because it’s so used to staying localized in what it can think. It hasn’t yet been transformed in this mystical sobriety, this deep communal oneness. And so it’s frustrated and it finds it difficult, but he says, “Nevermind, nevermind. It is difficult, but nevermind.” I’d like to talk about the nevermind. Sometimes I think when we love somebody very, very much, and they’re going through some challenging, painful thing, and in our love for them, we invest

ourselves to be there for and with them to help them as best we can.

Jim Finley: And that effort to be there for and with them does not come without a price. We feel the burden, the cost that we pay, the price that we pay in love to be there for and with this person. By the way, sometimes it's our own broken self that we learn to be with in this way, not to give up on ourselves or despair on ourselves, this deeply wounded, infinitely precious self. But nevermind, nevermind. Why? Why nevermind? Nevermind, in this sense, yes, this is hard to be here for this person that I love it. It's extremely hard, but not nearly as hard as not being one with the beloved. Not nearly as hard. So I glad nevermind, I gladly pay the price because by paying that price, I'm in the gift of my oneness with this person that's beyond what words can say. And so this communion with the beloved that we realize with each other, father, mother, sister, brother, lover, spouse, friend, that's a sacrament of this love, the love for God.

Jim Finley: So there are two kinds of everywhere. There's a kind of world of everywhere, of the possessive self owning the world as if he owned it, attaining this and this, and this, whether in activity or in our thoughts, the acquisition of more and more knowledge, whatever. "Forget that kind of everywhere in the world's all. It pales richness beside this blessed nothingness and nowhere, don't worry if your faculties fail to grasp it. Actually that is the way it should be for this nothingness is so lofty that they cannot reach it. It cannot be explained, but only experienced." That's true. "Yet to those who have newly encountered it will feel very dark and scrutable indeed, but truly they're blinded by the splendor of its spiritual light rather than by any ordinary darkness. Who do you suppose derives it as emptiness? Our superficial self, of course, certainly not our true self. No, our true self, our inner self appreciates it in its fullness beyond measure for in this darkness, we experience an intuitive understanding of everything, material and spiritual without giving special attention to anything in particular."

Jim Finley: So, who derives it? That self that's out alone in the desert dying of thirst, not just writing words over... Writing water over and over in the sand, but that tenaciously insists on keep writing it, trying to hold on to water, how it would define water or understand its thought. But here, having tasted water, having tasted this infinite union with infinite love beyond all words, we're like a [santar 00:21:58]. There's this quality, even as we're in glory, there is still left in us this part of us that doesn't know it yet.

Jim Finley: So we need to be compassionate on that part of us. We need to be there for and with it. It's not its fault. It can't help itself. But through love, little by little, by little, this love can slowly infuse itself into the poverty of ourselves, in the kind of habituated mystical consciousness of day-by-day living.

Jim Finley: Now chapter 38. In chapter 38, he's talking about loving God for God's sake. We're in practice and he's talking about using this word "God" or "mercy" or whatever the word is that is your defense. And you stay steadfast in the word by not letting thought carry you off into thinking. So chapter 38, the author of *The Cloud* says, "Why do you suppose this little prayer of one syllable is powerful enough to pierce the heavens? Well, it is because it is the prayer of a man's whole being. A man who prays like this prays with all the height and the depth and the length and the breadth of his spirit. His prayer is high for he prays in the full power of his spirit. It is deep, for he has gathered all his understanding into this one little word. It is long, for if this feeling could endure he would go on crying out forever as he

does now. It is wide because with universal concern, he desires for everyone what he desires for himself. It is with this prayer that a person comes to understand with all the saints,” he’s quoting, referring to Ephesians, Paul in Ephesians, “it is with this prayer that a person comes to understand with all the saints the length and the breadth and the height and the depth of the eternal, gracious, almighty and omniscient God of St. Paul.”

Jim Finley: Says, “Not completely, of course, but partially in that obscure manner, characteristic of contemplative knowledge. Length speaks of God’s eternity. Breath speaks of His love. Height, of His power. Depth, of His wisdom. Little wonder, then, that when grace so transforms a person to this image and likeness of God, His creator, that his prayer will be quickly heard by God.” I’d like to reflect on this passage.

Jim Finley: Here’s the poetry of it. You’re you’re sitting there and this word, say the word is “Jesus.” The word is “Jesus,” that’s your anchor. And as you sit there in this love, every time you might be pulled off this way or that way off into thinking about this or that, thinking about Jesus, he says, “Turn to Jesus. Not what you think about Jesus, but turn to the presence of Jesus who is the infinite embodiment of this very unit of consciousness that is transforming you into itself.”

Jim Finley: Why is it then, that this word “Jesus,” experienced in this way, why does it have such power to transform? He said, “It is because it is the prayer of your whole being. That is to say, speaking first of heights, you realize the most noble thing you could do, the most noble act is to give yourself in love through the infinite beloved that is giving itself infinitely to you.” That’s the highest act you could do. The word embodies the height of your soul. And then you discover that the heights of your soul concretized in this cry from you meets, merges and opens out upon the vast celestial heights of God. And in this prayer, the vast celestial heights of God is descending, dropping down into and giving itself whole and complete in and as who you simply are sitting here, so transformed in the sincerity of this love.

Jim Finley: “Likewise, it is deep. Why? Because you take all you could possibly know about God, all these thoughts about God, true thoughts about God, revealed thoughts about God and you bury them in this one little word. And in burying them as one little word, that’s the deepest kind of knowledge you can do is to bury and pass beyond the accumulated ideas of and about and around God and spiritual matters.

Jim Finley: “And as you sit that way, and this word “Jesus” with all your heart, down into the depths of yourself, you discover that these depths of yourself meet, merge and drop down into the bottomless abyss of God. This welling up and giving itself to you whole and complete in this knowledge born of love, which is the very love of God, being poured out and given to you whole and complete, transforming you into itself unexplainably. And likewise, it is long because when you cry out like this, if you could, you would cry out forever. If you could, continue cry out forever in this self-donating act of longing, of giving yourself to God in love. And because you’re sitting this way with all your heart, giving yourself like this.”

Jim Finley: This fulfills the teachings of Jesus When they asked him, “What is the greatest commandment? Of all these beautiful things that you say about God and so on, what is the one thing that if we ground ourself in that, everything else would fall into place?” And he didn’t present a doctrine or whatever. He says, “The greatest commandment is to love God.

It's to love God with all your might, with all your soul, with all your mind. Yeah, that's the commandment. And the second is to love your neighbors, yourself." And you're fulfilling this great commandment of love. And what you discover in this, when you give yourself like this in this longing, if you could, you would not... But you can't go on forever because you have to have lunch. There's a meeting coming up, whatever. We're living this out.

Jim Finley: But in our desire when we lean into and give ourselves to what we discover, is that our desire to cry out forever meets and merges and opens out upon the eternity of God. This flowing into us as the eternality of the fleetness of each passing moment of our life, this eternal life. Eternal life intimately realized. The deathless life of love, like this.

Jim Finley: "And it's wide because you desire for everyone, you desire for yourself. And your desire is much for them, as you desire for yourself. And in this universal desire, which is God's universal salvific will concretized in the sincerity of this desire, a desiring that's broad for everyone, that the breadth of your desire of all-inclusive deliverance for all of humanity meets, merges, and opens out upon the breadth of God, which is boundary-less and vast, in all directions permeating everyone completely through and through, and through, and through in ways that we do not understand. And that all pervasive love of God permeating throughout all of humanity to each person's life, we discover is that breath is giving itself to you and pouring itself into your heart so transformed in this desire, in this thing." That's what the author of *The Cloud* says.

Jim Finley: "Little wonder, then, that when grace so transforms a person to this image and likeness of God, his creator, his prayers are quickly heard. Why? Because in a certain way, it's God listening to God. It's not that you are God, but rather in the order of grace and love, you're transformed by God into God, in your eternal nothingness without God. And I feel sure," the author continues, "that God will always hear and help a man who prays to him like this. Yes, even though he'd be a sinner and as it were God's enemy, or if grace moves him to utter this anguished cry from the depth, the height, the length, and the breadth of his being, God will hear him. Let me illustrate what I am saying with another example. Imagine that in the dead of night, you heard your worst enemy cry out with his whole being, 'Help!' Or, 'Fire!' Even though this man were your enemy, would you not be moved to compassion by the agony of that cry and rushed to help him?"

Jim Finley: "Yes, of course you would. And though it were in out of winter, would you still not hasten to quench the fire and calm his distress? My God, if grace can so transform a mere man to where he can forget his hatred and have such compassion for his enemy, what shall we not expect from God when he hears the person cry out to him from the height and the depth and the length and the breadth of his whole being, where by nature, God is the fullness of all that we are by participation? God's mercy belongs to the essence of his being and that is why we say He is all merciful. Surely then we can confidently hope in Him to reflect on this final thought."

Jim Finley: You know, my sense is this. Is that when we follow this path, when we seek to follow this path of this all-pervasive love, it makes us even more aware of and sensitive to our infidelities to our halfheartedness and to survival strategies formed in trauma and abandonment, and how particularly when we feel challenged or stressed, it can come out in all kinds of hurtful ways. And we're also keenly aware of our confusion, how there's so much about this we don't

understand. What we're saying is that's not the point. The point is that our inner peace is not dependent on our ability to live up to this measure of love because in the finiteness of our broken and wounded state, we can. Rather, our inner peace is surrendering ourselves over to the infinite love that's infinitely in love with us in taking us unexplainably to itself in the very midst of our brokenness, which is experiential salvation like this.

Jim Finley: And even though we may be in the midst of something, we can still tell we're not being as kind. There's always some crazy thing going on. We're not as caring as we should be or kind as we should be. There's always the tyranny of the "should," always. And it's real. We need to always keep trying harder and do our best, but what we're really doing is giving up the idolatry of attainment and surrendering ourselves over to this all-merciful love that permeates us, this unexplainably precious, the Pearl of Great Price in the midst of our brokenness.

Jim Finley: And it's true. We hardly understand anything at all. We don't, we don't. It isn't just that, well, we won't live long enough to figure this out, but we'll spend all eternity being endlessly transformed in every deep... Because there's no end to the endless, but that's not the point. The point is this infinite love is unexplainably giving itself to us and granting itself to us in endlessly varied ways in the midst of our poverty, our confusion, our brokenness, and so forth.

Jim Finley: And I think, therefore, we can talk about this next time, what happens is this prayer, this transformed state, little by little it starts to habituate itself and permeate itself, where habitually starts showing up throughout the day. Not just how we understand ourselves transformed in this love, but it helps us understand everyone in this way. Each of us this unique addition of the universal story of being a human being, an infinitely loved, infinitely precious, fragile, broken person.

Jim Finley: And by the very way we've learned to be transformed and know ourselves in this self-knowledge, it helps us to know and understand, accept, and be there for and with an understanding of everyone as he or she is finding their own way along this love path, as it's given to them to do so. And so with that, then, we'll end with a meditation.

Jim Finley: I'd like you to sit still, sit straight, fold your hands and bow. Repeat after me, "Be still and know I am God. Be still and know I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be."

Jim Finley: Bow. We'll slowly say the Lord's Prayer together. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be the name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day or daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Jim Finley: Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, pray for us. Julian of Norwich, pray for us. Blessings, 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](mailto:podcasts@cac.org), or send us a voicemail at [cac.org/voicemails](http://cac.org/voicemails). All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.