

# *The Healing Path*

A Memoir and an Invitation



JAMES FINLEY

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

## *Introduction*



These reflections mark out a path, a way of life, in which we as human beings may be healed from all that hinders us from experiencing the steady, strong currents of divinity that flow on and on in the bitter-sweet alchemy of our lives. The surprising thing is that the intimate healing that spirituality brings into our lives is often hidden in the muck and mire of the very things about ourselves we wish were not true. The secret opening through which we pass into wholeness is hidden in the center of those wounds we are most afraid to approach. The door that grants access to boundless fulfillment is hidden in the unfinished business of our lives: the places where we do not want to feel vulnerable, the things we tend not to sit with or listen to, the sometimes sad, sometimes tender, sometimes disarmingly simple, sometimes joyful things that make up the intimate substance of who we really are and are called to be.

As I write this introduction I am immersed in these intimate depths, sitting next to my beloved wife, Maureen, as she lies here dying in the final stages of Alzheimer's. Even though she is unconscious and cannot open her eyes to look at me, I believe she can hear me as I speak from my heart in whispered words. Just now I told her that the waves of unbearable pain and crying that from time to time overtake me seem to soften at least a little as I learn to be more accepting of the immensity and mystery of her death. After all, immensity and mystery have woven our years together from the very start.

The slowness with which she is gently fading away from me seems continuous with the slow setting of the sun out over the ocean, which is just beyond this darkening room where Maureen and I have lived and shared so much over the past thirty years.

I just told her that my suffering in trying to imagine life without her is eased in sensing that her soul is already beginning to pass over into God, leaving but a long vapor trail of herself in which she is still barely tethered to her body.

Over the years Maureen and I would often share insights that came to us in our mornings, sitting here together in what we called our monastic silence. From time to time she might share a passage from one of her favorite writings, perhaps the essay in Thomas Merton's

*Disputed Questions* titled “A Philosophy of Solitude,” or that lucid little commentary on Meister Eckhart, *The Way of Paradox*. I, in turn, might share a passage from the text of a mystic in which I was immersed at the time. Then we would return to our shared silent reading. It was such a sweet and subtle way to be so inexplicably one with each other in the presence of God. I suppose that I am now sitting here saying these things to her, knowing in my heart that she is listening from a depth of presence that I can scarcely imagine. I suppose too that I am sharing this with you as a way of inviting you to join us in these words, which are becoming our point of entry into the healing path this book explores.

I just now shared with Maureen a memory that I have shared with her many times over our years together. The memory is about how deeply affected I was by something Thomas Merton said to us novices not long after I had entered the cloistered Trappist monastery of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Merton, who was the master of novices, was speaking to us about an old lay brother who had just died. He encouraged us to realize that when we die, we do not go anywhere. We do not orbit the earth a few times and then take off for God in some far-off celestial realm. For as scripture tells us, “In God we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). All the angels along with all the blessed who have crossed over into God are here with us in

the vast interiority of God, in whom we subsist as light subsists in flame.

But we tend not to see the deathless presence of God. Nor do we tend to see the deathless presence of ourselves subsisting in God, breath by breath, heart-beat by heartbeat. I think this is what Jesus meant in telling us that we have eyes to see but do not see (Mk 8:18). Finally, we tend not to see the deathless mystery of ourselves, of others, and of all things, that alone is ultimately real. Hence the fear and confusion in which we lose our way in this life. It is in this traumatized incapacity to abide in our all-pervasive oneness that we act out the traumatizing things we do to ourselves, to others, and to the earth that sustains us. Thus, on the journey toward experiential self-knowledge our prayer becomes, “Lord, that I might see you in this and each passing moment of my life.”

As I write these words, I know that the depth of presence and love they express is all-encompassing, vast, and true. But here is the painful, intimate thing. The density and intensity of the dread I feel in not knowing how I am going to be able to survive without Maureen closes off my ability to experience the consoling truths these words embody. In moments like this I have come to understand God as a Presence that protects us from nothing, even as we are inexplicably sustained in all things.

For several months now I have been stuck in not knowing how to begin the introduction to these reflections on the spirituality of healing. I had no way of knowing that I would begin in this way, sitting next to Maureen as she lay dying. But now it seems providentially appropriate that I begin by including you in this intimate exchange among Maureen, God, and myself. This is so because for the past thirty years Maureen and I have been aware of how deeply our relationship with each other has included our relationships with the men and women who have come to us for psychotherapy and spiritual direction. In endlessly varied ways our interactions with each other as husband and wife and with those coming to us for help have helped us to find our own way along the healing path. And so I am sharing these reflections in concert with my longstanding resonance with Maureen in the hope that what I am sharing with you here will help you to find your own way through the mysterious realms in which sorrow and joy merge with God's presence, carrying you forward into all your unknown tomorrows.

Of course, attempting to communicate such delicate matters in a book is not the same as a face-to-face encounter in which you could share your own experiences, ask questions, and share your own insights with me. But being with one another in the pages of this book has the advantage of allowing you to read these words

in the same attentive manner in which I am writing them. Insofar as this occurs, I hope and trust that you might find here words of reassurance and guidance in your ongoing healing journey.

Know that the kinds of things I have been saying to Maureen embody the spiritual worldview of contemplative Christianity in which I was immersed in the nearly six years I lived in the monastery. During those years it was my good fortune to have Thomas Merton as my guide in the gentle art of contemplative living. From him I discovered that the mystical foundations of healing that contemplative living brings into our lives consist of learning how to seek, find, and give ourselves to God, who is wholly given to us in each passing moment of our lives.

When I left the monastery and began to lead weekend contemplative retreats in the United States and Canada, I spoke from the depths of my heart in an attempt to share with those present, as I will be sharing with you, that we do not have to live in a monastery to find our way into the deep healing and liberation that monastic life nurtures and protects. For this contemplative wisdom is present in the hidden recesses of our own bodies, minds, and hearts, waiting to be recognized, cultivated, and shared with others day by day.

Know, too, that while I will be turning primarily to passages in the writings of Thomas Merton and related

sources in the mystical lineage of my own Christian tradition, I will also be drawing on the timeless wisdom that is present in the contemplative traditions of all the world's great religions and that can be found as well in certain poets, artists, philosophers, and those who serve the poor. And in broader and more pervasive ways, the healing wisdom that we are attempting to explore is found in the souls of men and women, too numerous to mention, who seek to live in obediential fidelity to the unseen light that sustains and guides them amid their own circumstances. And I should add, as well, that this timeless healing wisdom is present to some degree in you, as well, as evidenced by the very fact that you are drawn to read a book such as this.

The same light that shines out from the world's wisdom traditions also illumines the path that has led in this very moment to our encounter in these reflections. To clarify what I mean, I invite you to look back on your life, through all its twists and turns, and discern how it has come to pass that you have arrived at this point in which you are drawn to recognize and care about the subtle, interior dimensions of healing that we are exploring in these reflections. Seeing our life in this way allows us to appreciate how mysteriously we have been led, perhaps through many setbacks and confusing moments, along a providential path not of our own making.



To help you see your own life from this luminous perspective, I will lead the way by offering you in these reflections a kind of teaching memoir, in which I will trace out the lessons I have learned in my ongoing efforts to find my own way along the healing path. I will begin with my experiences of being repeatedly traumatized in my childhood and adolescence. I will share how my trauma was the opening through which God accessed me, sustaining me and letting me know I was not alone in the midst of my difficulties. I will share how these graced visitations in the midst of my ongoing trauma led me, upon graduating from high school, to enter the monastery, where I was radicalized and transformed forever in God's sustaining mercy.

I will share how the further trauma I experienced in the monastery sent me back out into the world, where I continued along a winding path that eventually prompted me to begin leading contemplative retreats. It was on that path that I met Maureen, and thereafter began our life together, which has led me up to this very moment. As I share my journey in this way, I will also be suggesting ways that you can look back at your life in this same reflective manner, noting the lessons of healing and transformation that you have learned along the way.

I can move in closer to the formative energies that led directly to the writing of this book by sharing with

you a longstanding pattern that began to emerge in my life with Maureen. Every other Friday Maureen would drive me to the airport where I would fly out to lead a silent contemplative retreat, most often at a Catholic retreat house in the United States or Canada. I felt that those who came to these retreats, having read the description and knowing that the retreat would be conducted in silence, were drawn in part by this knowledge. Those who came knew that the meals would be eaten in silence and that everyone would be encouraged to maintain a spirit of silence throughout the weekend. They knew that there would be twenty-minute sessions of shared silent meditation and prayer before each conference. They also knew I would be sharing insights from the writings of Thomas Merton, Saint Teresa of Avila, or Meister Eckhart, as well as other mystics and spiritual teachers. All of these things had drawn their interest. But more succinctly still, I sensed that they were drawn to attend the retreats by unconsummated longing they did not understand for a union with God they did not understand, but which they knew was real and true because they had already been graced with moments in which they fleetingly tasted that union, present yet hidden in each passing moment of their lives.

Then, on Sunday at noon, I would leave the communal silence and serenity of the retreat to fly back to Los Angeles, where on Monday morning Maureen

and I would go to our two-office suite, where we would sit with the men and women coming to us for psychotherapy. Many of those were trauma survivors who wanted their spirituality to be a resource in their therapy. When they came in to see us, they would not simply tell us about their trauma. They would show it to us, allowing us to see their trauma in their faces and in their eyes as they spoke. And we could feel in our own bodies the places in their bodies where trauma had staked its claim on their lives.

What most surprised me as I went back and forth between these opposite realms of trauma and transcendence was that many of those coming to the retreats and those coming for therapy were essentially the same people, and I was one of them! For I was a contemplative seeker going through my own therapy for the long-term, internalized effects of the trauma I had endured in my childhood and adolescence. And I was a traumatized person who tasted traces of deep healing and liberation welling up from my wounded preciousness in the presence of God.

A good number of the insights and suggested guidelines for healing offered in these reflections gravitate around the ways in which each of us is a unique edition of the universal story of being human. And among the themes or plotlines that run through our lives are the endlessly varied ways in which we

seek to be healed from all that hinders us along the risky and transformative paths in which birth and death, sorrow and endless liberation, are ribboned throughout our days.

As I move toward bringing this introduction to a close, I encourage you to be patient with me. I am but a seventy-six-year-old man hoping to pass on a few things that might help you before I disappear. I encourage you as well to be patient with yourself. For patience ripens into humility, itself an opening to the healing path we are attempting to explore.

As a way to bring this introduction to a close, I share with you a story that I hope will help to orientate you to the intimate nature of the spiritual dimensions of healing that we are now beginning to explore. This story was told to me some years ago by Sister Mary Luke Tobin, who was mother superior of the Sisters of Loretto and a longtime friend of Thomas Merton. The story is taken from the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers. In the first centuries of the church these men and women went into the desert to undergo an interior martyrdom of dying to all that hindered them from experiencing the mystical dimensions of the promises of Christ. Men and women living in the surrounding villages would follow these solitary seekers into the desert and ask to receive from them a “word.” By that, they meant a message, in the hearing of which,

their hearts would be awakened to a deeper realization of God's presence in their lives.

In this story a Christian hermit heard a knock at the door of his hermitage. When he opened the door, he saw a mother and father and their young daughter. The parents apologized for intruding on the hermit's solitude but said they had come to ask him to pray over their daughter, whom ("as you can plainly see") an evil wizard had turned into a donkey.

"Yes, I see," said the hermit, as he invited them to come in. The hermit then asked the parents to sit off to one side as he asked the little girl if she was hungry and would like something to eat. When she said she would like that, the hermit talked to her as he prepared her a meal. Then, as she ate, he continued talking to her, asking her questions about things that mattered to her.

When the parents saw the love with which the hermit prepared their daughter some food and the sincere affection in which he spoke with her, their eyes were opened. They suddenly realized that the wizard had not cast a spell on their daughter, turning her into a donkey. Rather, the wizard had cast a spell on them, leading them to believe their daughter was a donkey. In seeing that their daughter was truly the little girl they loved, they were filled with joy and tearfully embraced her.

As the parents left with their daughter, they expressed their gratitude for what had just happened. And

their daughter was grateful as well. For it is hard being a little girl when your parents think you are a donkey. It is especially hard when you fall into the shame-based suffering that comes when you start to believe that you are indeed the donkey your parents believe you to be. The deep healing that the little girl and her parents experienced in this story bears witness to the deep healing that I hope to explore in this book.

May your reading of these reflections in a sincere and heartfelt manner help you find your way yet further along the healing path on which you have already embarked. As you continue on this way, I hope that you will continue to discover, in all sorts of unexpected ways, that you are becoming a healing presence in an all-too-often traumatized and traumatizing world. By that, I mean you will continue to be graced with realizations that you are becoming someone in whose presence others are better able to experience the gift and miracle of who they really are deep down and who they are called to be, so that they in turn can pass on the contagious energy of healing to others.

Amen. So be it.