

**Turning
to the
Mystics**



The Way of a Pilgrim

Dialogue 1

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 Season Nine of Turning to the Mystics where we're turning to the anonymous author who wrote The Way of a Pilgrim. And I'm here with Jim and we are going to dialogue about Jim's first session for this season. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, yes, welcome. Glad we're all together again, which is good.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. And we have a little announcement we want to do at the beginning, which is an invitation to our audience to share aspects of their own pilgrim journey, the idea being that as they listen to your sessions, it might bring to mind their own experiences. And so we'd love to hear from people to share about their own pilgrimage experiences.

Jim Finley: I'd like to add this also that always when you send in questions, we're not able to read all the questions, but we always read all of them. And the same is true with any of these personal entries that you make. We'll read all of them, but be able to read a random sample. And also I suggest it can either be anonymous or not anonymous. It's up to you. And also probably to choose a decisive moment, like a turning in your own awakening. And also not with this, but in a bigger thing to consider it, is to write your spiritual memoir in the present tense at the feeling level. That is right, no matter how little you were, when you got your first sense that God was real, your first sense to just as a spiritual practice, to see how you've been led right up to this where you are right now in your own journey of God's presence in your life and so on. But this would just be more of a single incident that you might care to share.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Beautiful. So people will have until May 6th to submit their story. We're going to have an episode dedicated to reading out people's what they send us, or some people may choose to leave a voicemail. So the details of how to submit the story are in the show notes, you'll have until May 6th to send it.

And just to reiterate, what we're looking for is as you listen to this pilgrim's journey where you have resonance in your own journey, please send us a couple of paragraphs or leave us a voicemail. And yes, if we can keep it to one experience and just a couple of paragraphs so we can get through as many stories as we can. Right. Well, with that, we'll get started talking about Session One, which I'm just loving this journey with the Pilgrim, Jim. It's just spectacular. And I wanted to start by talking about some of the key themes. You give some overarching ideas at the beginning of that session. And one of them is that this story is the ultimate dimensions of our story, our own life infused with God, and that this can make us more consciously aware of what's happening or has happened or is happening to us.

Jim Finley: Yes. Two things. One, this is written as a personal narrative, like it's a Pilgrim story. So we really don't know whether it's actually the Pilgrim's story or an anonymous author is writing it as the Pilgrim's story. But either way, it brings home the big point, this whole journey towards God is our life. It's our very life. And so this concretizes that and brings it out. And the second thing is this, is that this is true of all these mystics really, that the historical period and the details of this Pilgrim's life might be extremely different than ours externally.

But what we're really looking for is universal themes of awakening. And we could take all the mystics and find how he or she weaves these same themes as almost how grace is woven through our hearts collectively. So the details would be different, but we're looking where we've been touched with a certain sensitivity or a certain longing or a certain concern. And that's really the subtext that runs through the whole thing and where that touches our life as it applies to us.

Kirsten Oates: You made this beautiful statement that the Pilgrim is on a quest, but it's a quest God created in us.

Jim Finley: That's right. This is so classic to the whole tradition, really, that God created us for God, that as God created us, that we might as the beloved share in God's life as much as God shares in God's own life and our eternal nothingness without God. So we're created by God and sustained by God for God, which is this love. And this journey along which we realize that is our life, which includes not only being awakened to it, but then also the grace response to say yes to it, to say yes, to keep responding and saying yes to this lure of God's love in our life. And this is from this point of view, the mystical point of view, this is why we exist. We really exist for this and not just ultimately forever in heaven, like in glory, but we're to realize it now and the intimacy in veiled ways in our journey through time, a life of discipleship, a life of longing, a life of gratitude and so on.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. And that's the archetypal quest that we're all built for.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And Jim, you also talked about that this story starts with similar assumptions that we've had with our other mystics, that the person is someone committed to their faith, goes to church, reads the Bible, prays. He's already on a path, and then this turning or quickening happens.

Jim Finley: Yes. When we think of religious consciousness, our faith, there's our belief, what we believe, the creed, I believe in God the Father, Almighty and so on. Each dispensation of grace has its own way to word this, each world religion. For us in the Christian dispensation believe in God. And also in the scriptures we find what's revealed to us that God is love, that God is eternal, that God is mercy and so on. But traditionally belief is known as the sign of faith. We're not saved by belief. The sign of faith is an articulation of the mystery of faith, which is ferment in our heart. So it isn't just if we hear that God loves us, that we ascend to that as an article of faith, but we ascend to it as an article of faith in an interior capacity through the grace of God to sense that God does love us and then we seek to live by that love.

And so that's the journey of the Pilgrim. And so he goes along first in devotional sincerity, efficacious unto holiness, this is how we live our life. But then at a certain point there's an intimate deepening of that, like a quickening. And so all these mystics are concerned about this, that God meets us where we are in the holiness of the day by day. But then sometimes there's an inner quickening, which is a deepening simplicity or a deepening unit of awareness or deepening oneness. And this is the story of this person's quickening. So as we listen to it, then he searches for a teacher to guide him in the quickening. And as we listen to the teaching of the teacher teaching the Pilgrim's teaching, the teacher is teaching us because

we're listening closely to our thing. And also the Pilgrim's response is modeling for us our response. So it's very lovely that way, how it's woven into the story of our own life.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. Beautiful. You said something else in the introduction which really struck me that you said, "The story reveals the ambivalence between means and ends. The path wells up under our feet on the path we are on to find it."

Jim Finley: We're searching for this deliverance or say experiential salvation, this deep, what we're searching for really is how can we move with God's grace to never and more habitual underlying sense of God sustaining oneness with us in every breath and heartbeat. We're moving toward that, the peace of God that surpasses understanding. And we're in via, we're on the way, we're a work in progress. But as we're searching for this graced resting, which the pilgrim finds and the teacher guides, what we realize is that in the sincerity of our searching for this union, we discover the goal of this infinite union with infinite love welling up beneath our feet in the path of seeking it. So there's an ever greater ambivalence between the means of reaching it and how the end towards which you're moving is already giving itself to us and the sincerity of our seeking. And so that's a subtle but important point really I think.

Kirsten Oates: It's really subtle because at one level we're putting in all this effort and you see the amount of effort this pilgrim puts in, but in the end, it's God who wells up under our feet in God's way.

Jim Finley: That's right. Or I'll put it another way too. Let's say each has their own way listening to these reflections is touched by them or moved by them, and it heightens their own longing to go deeper in this path. But the point is the very fact that they're moved to listen to the talks and they long to listen, bears witness that in the longing to listen is already welling up as God giving itself to them as the gift of their longing. So the longing itself is already reverberating with the presence of what we're longing for this way.

Kirsten Oates: So in the end, the effort turns into recognition, but it's not on our terms when that turning takes place.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. And I think another important point is from God's end, the generosity quote Eckhart, that the generosity of the infinite is infinite. So in the self-donating act, infinity God is giving itself away as the intimate immediacy of our life, our life and so on as the whole world. The whole world is God's body and its body and forth the love that's uttering it into being. This is the divinity of the miracle of what it is to be this way. So that's the fullness of the generosity. The missing part is the consciousness of it. So already our body embodies the love of God and our nothingness without God. Merton says, "It beats in our very blood whether they want it to or not." What we're trying to do is to be delivered from what hinders us in our consciousness and the depths of our heart from realizing that. And that's really all the focus of this, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. So then you turn to the details of the book, start reading the first chapter, which is just beautiful. And so you talk about the pilgrim having this knapsack with

the bread and the Bible and that you talk about how we shouldn't base our life on our worldly possessions, that his possessions are very simple, but no matter what level our worldly possessions, the key is to be grateful but not to base our whole life on them.

Jim Finley: Yes. In other words, again, I see this is the symbolic value of this. Literally, yes, some dried bread on his back. And really the dried bread sustains his bodily existence through time. So we're saying, "I have more than some dried bread on my back. I have a cupboard in the kitchen with a refrigerator and a freezer full of food, and I look around, I have all this soft furniture." But as long as I realize it's sustaining me in my bodily existence through time, I should be grateful for it. I should be respectful for it. I should be generous and being sensitive to those who have less and all of that. But he says, but in his breast pocket is his Bible that is over his heart, and that is all. So this sustains me through time. We have to live our human life, but over our heart is the deathless beauty of ourself revealed to us through God's grace, because everything real is eternal.

So in this fleeting... So what we're trying to do is in AA, they say, "Keep the first thing, the first thing," and the first thing is this love. And then in this love, and sometimes we're tempted to get it reversed. We absolutize the relative and relativize the absolute, and you get all bound up in things. This gets complicated if you're really lacking in things and there's a harshness of real poverty and that's real, we need to be real. But that's what he's really doing is setting the spiritual in our heart. We carry this deathless love. It'll go on forever in a fleeting passage through time in the midst of the things that sustain us.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. It's always good to have a reality check on our orientation to things. Then he goes to church and it's the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, and he hears the words pray without ceasing, and something happens inside of him. He's probably heard this many, many times before. Something happens this particular Sunday. And yes, he's struck by that verse in a new way.

Jim Finley: Yes. See, this is my insight into first of all, there's a little play on Pentecost, which is the birthday of the church, which is the ascent of the Holy Spirit and the awakening of the disciples and whoever them after that event met Christ, they were transformed. And because we celebrated in liturgy, we participate in the mystery of Pentecost. So it's the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, and he's a church saying his prayers along with all these other Christian people saying their prayers. And he's heard this text before because it's read every year. This would be the Orthodox Christian calendar. In the Roman calendar, it might not be the same reading, I don't know. But in the Bible over his heart, he's read it many times. But here's the thing, these quickenings from God, we don't see them coming and they touch us in unexpected ways. So it isn't just that he hears it, but he wonders how is that possible? But wondering why it's possible is itself the gift this.

And I had another insight into this too, that when we just know someone on a casual basis, we know them on a casual basis, but when we really, really love someone, we're very attentive to them. And there might be a little thing, are you okay? We're resonating with them? And so he gets this sense in this experience

that God's resonating with him and quickening his heart in the wondering. And the very fact he's wondering shows you the interiority of his fidelity or his sensitivity to God. And unbeknownst to him, this is going to head his life off in a whole new direction. But sometimes it starts as a dilemma. It starts as something you don't know what to make of it. And it's like a path opens up that you didn't know about.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, I find it quite striking that he would've heard these words many times, read them many times, and it reminds me of how you say repetition is not redundancy.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Just out of nowhere, these deep spiritual texts can capture us in ways we didn't see coming.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's really true. And I think I quoted in the talk, I remember GK Chesterton that we're bored to death with a story heard over and over. We never really listened to. And sometimes the listening isn't a choice that we make. It gets to us. So we hear it. It goes on and on and on. But we're struck by it in a way that we never were before. And that's why everything's endlessly open-ended with possibility. It's endlessly evocative and what might open up out of something. And it comes to us as a call because he feels moved to pursue this. He feels... so yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And his awakening comes through a very religious setting. But you said in the talk that this comes through all modalities of life.

Jim Finley: That's right. Yeah. Through all the realms like birth, love found, love lost, endurance of long-term suffering, death, the mist of nature, some form of service of the community, a sense of solitude or aloneness or silence or tender-heartedness. So all these realms are all modalities in which these quickenings can and sometimes do occur. It just so happens here, it occurred to him of all places in church at Pentecost, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And what's striking about this to me in terms of thinking about the other modalities, is the fact that he would've heard this many, many times. So it might be we've been on this hike, or we've been on this walk, or we've looked at this tree out the window many, many, many times. And in that modality we can be struck in this same way. Suddenly the tree speaks to us in a way we'd never seen or heard.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. I remember once in the monastery, one of the novices raised his hand and said to Thomas Merton, he was giving us a talk. He said, "You know sometimes you get the feeling the church says God's everywhere, but God's really in the church and God's really, really in the Eucharist and God's really, really, really in heaven. But I get the feeling though, what the tradition is really saying is God's really, really, really, or God, really, really is the reality of everywhere, and it's nothingness without God." So this happens as it happens. And notice a lot of his later quickenings don't come in church, they come in the midst of his quest. He meets people, things happen and so on. So it spreads out that way.

Kirsten Oates: And I just love the way this quickening comes to him as a question. This idea of wondering what this praying without ceasing means and hooks him like a hook. The question's like a hook.

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's right. That's why I like this. I don't know if I said this or not, but where Merton said, "In the beginning, beginners in this search have many questions. And that's why beginners look for answers for their questions." He said, "Which is good." He said, "Once you really get into it, you discover all along that here God's the one asking the question. And you realize not only do you not know the answer to God's question, you don't even understand the question." So this is where he says, "I thought and thought and knew not what to make of it." It's not thinkable. See, the thinking can't it's not a conceptualization, it's trans-conceptual awakening that is just dawning on him.

Kirsten Oates: It reminds me of what you write about in your memoir when you first read Thomas Merton, I think you were 14 at the time. And you had a similar quickening.

Jim Finley: I did, yeah. Yeah. He says in the sign Jonas, in his journal, he says, "As for me, I have but one desire, the desire for solitude to disappear into the secret of God's face." And at 14 years old, it got to me. And I think really, if he would've presented some profound theological statement or something I was supposed to understand it wouldn't have. He was so sincere in the transparency of his own longing, it awakened mine. And you see that intimacy in the Pilgrim too. There's something very self-disclosing about it. And as we listen, it reveals ourself to ourself. It helps us be attentive to that in us. It's sensitive to these very same things.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Did yours arise like a question, Jim? Did you have a question you were trying to answer after reading that or just a...

Jim Finley: No, I got my own copy of the sign of Jonas. All this trauma was going on and going on for another four years. And so for me, it just took a different form. I was trying to just survive the trauma until I graduated from. And then little by little, that's why I felt the call to go see what it was. He even asked us here what I like to do. And that's when I felt later to go to the monastery. But it didn't come as a question. It came as a refuge, like a quiet refuge within myself where I could go in some hidden interior way that my father didn't know about. The violence couldn't find me. And it took that. That's why this is all right at the edge of spiritual direction. This is always so personal, how each one traces itself out in our life.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. I remember for me when I was struggling to try and have children, and I just was praying and very with a real sincere heart, like, "God just help me do Your will." And we were trying to decide, do we adopt a child? Do we pursue some kind of fertility treatment? And I just really was hoping God would give me a very clear answer. And I just really believed that praying with a sincere heart, "I want to do Your will," that I would get an answer. But in the end, that question was never answered. And so I went on a quest trying to understand how to even understand God and understand God's will.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And there's a good example. So you want a child, which is a very deep thing, when a woman who really wants a child, it's very deep. And should we do this? Should we do this? What should we do? But then what it led to, interestingly enough, is the desire to do God's will.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And then poetically, we might say, "My will for you is not that you have a child. My will for you is in not having a child you'll awaken to maternal depths within yourself for humanity,

for life, whatever.” And so often the answer we get isn’t the answer we understand because we’re not looking for that answer. But as we just sit with it, the unexpected answer, which ends up being the providential answer for us. And that’s often true. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And what’s interesting too, with a question like that, it unraveled me much more than just the question of, it turns out I can’t have children. Should we pursue adoption? Should we pursue some kind of fertility? That question unraveled me in a certain way, but then this question of I can’t hear God, and what does it mean to do God’s will? What does it mean to hear from God to know you’re doing God’s will? That question really unraveled me.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I was once telling at a Christian Zen retreat, a lot of zazen, a lot of sittings with this Zen roshu, a Jesuit priest from Netherlands, and he was talking about silence. And he said, “There’s imposed silence, which either a bad kind, either you’re not allowed to say what you really should say or you’ll be punished. There’s also imposed silence out of respect for others, like at a prayer service.” He said, “There’s chosen silence, which can also be bad. You choose not to speak up for fear what might happen to you. But likewise, there’s a chosen silence. You’re silent so that you might listen more deeply.” And then he says, “But then there’s eternal silence.” And so the eternal silence, so you listen, hear oh, Israel. How can I learn to listen? I used to think in the monastery, can I become so silent that I can listen to God speaking me and all things into being? And that radical shift, like an unexpected spaciousness, this is what happens to the pilgrim what’s you like leading you to the living school. You were just led unforeseeably out of these things.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. You say about the pilgrim, at this point, when he comes upon the question, he doesn’t understand what’s happening to him. He doesn’t realize this subtle touch.

Jim Finley: That’s right.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And I think the same in my circumstance just feels like life.

Jim Finley: Exactly. There’s a lovely book by Douglas Steere on Merton called *Contemplative Prayer*. And in that little introduction, Douglas Steere says, “If God is who I think God is, and if I am who I think I am, then meeting God is safe enough because my idea of myself meets mine.” He said, “But what if God isn’t at all who I think God is, and in His piercing presence whole layers of who I thought I was fall away? Who can risk it?” But the other way of looking around who can risk not risking it? See, because otherwise you’re living in the solipsistic bubble of your own inner world. And sometimes love breaks us open. Life breaks us open to let the light shine in.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Following along with the story, I was also thinking, what does it mean to pray without ceasing? I’m with the pilgrim. That’s a radical statement. And if you do think about it literally initially, it doesn’t make sense as a statement.

Jim Finley: I’ll say this to this, this often happens a lot in trauma therapy too, very often. The question is the question, but here you realize your ascent of horizon, you were taking something literally where really it’s an invitational metaphor. Then in his travels, one of the lessons he learns from one of the people is that the ceaseless prayer is really a ceaseless longing, or put it another way, it’s learning the prayer that embodies the ceaseless longing that echoes God’s ceaseless longing for you. And so little by little by little, he’s led into the implications or the

depths of what he's saying.

Kirsten Oates: I'm curious about the aspect of this journey for the pilgrim and then also in my own journey, looking back, I'm curious about the way this energy and commitment and eventually focus arises in us. Where does that come from? He's given a lot of energy. He walks many, many miles and just a real commitment to pursue this. It's like something, like a new part of him comes to life.

Jim Finley: What's coming to me right now is there's a very famous abstract artist, Matisse. He did these big, huge sweeping things like this, and there's a picture of him on his deathbed, and they put up a huge canvas six feet high next to his bed and big buckets of paint on the floor. It has a paintbrush on the end of a long handle and on his deathbed, he's painting.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, wow.

Jim Finley: It's a very striking thing. So really what makes us, it's interesting how we do certain things. We go off, we marry this person, or we move, or just like me at 18 years old just to get on a Greyhound bus and go to the monastery like this. So it's interesting how sometimes also I think we're unexpectedly called to something. It could be teaching or therapy or art or solitude or silence. There's like an imperative of the awakened heart that comes welling up, and we know we're being invited or called upon. And we also get the feeling that if I don't listen to this, I won't be who I deep down really am and called to be. It's providential, I think these moments. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, I agree. Okay. So then his first plan is he's going to go and visit some famous preachers. I thought that was interesting that it's such an impetus in society. Let's go to the most famous person. Surely they know. And he says he hears fine sermons on prayer, but no one said how we succeed in prayer. He was looking for the how, how do I do this? And he didn't get it.

Jim Finley: That's right. And that's why. So he becomes a dropout because he doesn't care. See, because it's almost like this, the awakening heart knows what it's looking for. It can also tell when the person talking isn't saying it. Now I want to say something else too. And so he stops going to churches and he hits on another plan. But I think sometimes we don't hear it in church if we're in a faith community this way. But sometimes we're to listen at a deeper level. Sometimes I would tell people Sunday mass or liturgy, if that's where they are, to go on purpose. Go there 30 minutes early and do a sitting, and then listen to the readings and listen for just one thing the person says in the homily and look around and see the collective sincerity of everybody in the room. So sometimes you're asked not to leave, but you're to look more deeply into something that's there. But sometimes you are to leave, actually. And so he feels called to leave, so he leaves.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And I think you said this in the talk, but the church also isn't offering this contemplative depth.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Even in his journey. And it's rare to find it now in our journeys.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's true. Like Merton, a lot of people losing their faith and they're losing it

in church, and they go elsewhere because the soul knows where it needs to go to find what it needs to find or to try this way. And it's really true. This is why I think really this whole spread of movement of centering prayer and the whole movement of contemplative prayer or the Living School, you see the response, the Turning to the Mystics podcast. There's a hunger. And when people see an offer like a breath of fresh air and you have to search for it sometimes.

Kirsten Oates: Well, what's interesting about today's pilgrimage, I remember mine. I went online and I found... We go looking for our teachers online these days.

Jim Finley: That's true.

Kirsten Oates: We don't have to travel knocking on doors and asking the pilgrim did that time.

Jim Finley: It's really true. Monastery and cyberspace. It's really true. And it's real. Sometimes I would tell people, I used to travel all over the United States and Canada giving sitting silent retreats. And I've been to Europe a few times. It's interesting. Sitting with people in silence at a lot of different places. They're all the same. There's an interconnectedness. And so the more we can express and get in contact with each other to know we're not alone, there's a grace in that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Because it's not just the teacher, it's also the community that provides the support.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Yeah, that's right. And that's true of all creative ministries to the poor or social justice or whatever it is. It's when people reach out and the interconnectedness of each other to know that we're not alone in how we can support each other.

Kirsten Oates: So he comes up with another plan, and you made a comment that we can become seasoned in the searching, and this is part of the way we grow. So his ongoing commitment, and he's come up with a second plan, which is he's looking for someone living the teaching, not just for the famous preacher or teacher, but someone living the teaching.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's the insight. Where can I find... See, this is what I saw in Merton whenever I could tell he knew. This is the archetypal journey. Searching, searching, searching. Where can I find this person who I can tell when they speak of it, they're bearing witness to what's happened to them? That's why I say sometimes too, "You know found your teacher when you find the person that lets you know, your heart has not deceived you because you're listening to the words and somebody who's been transformed in it." And I think that's really how the lineage is handed on really. I think it's handed on from person to person this way. So that's what he does. He goes looking.

Kirsten Oates: And this idea of becoming seasoned in the searching is that that sense of discernment continually being refined or you're learning to pay greater attention to your soul and your heart.

Jim Finley: That's right. Another big thing here I think too. Notice this goes on for quite a while, just walking away. And so the thing is, what's interesting is he's not yet found the teacher, but along the way, he's being transformed in the searching. There's a way of being experientially sensitized to the gift of the search itself is somehow the gift. So little by little by little, there's breadcrumbs, little following along this way, searching for this person, his teacher.

- Kirsten Oates: And you talk about how he's becoming more unraveled. And you can see this in the way he's asking the question. So not just how do I pray without ceasing? It's like I don't even understand what that means, so I don't even know what I'm asking to do. And you say this what happens to us. We become unraveled.
- Jim Finley: That is exactly right. That's exactly right. And then also where he says at the end, where he's talking to the teacher, he doesn't know it's the teacher yet, he first meets the star. He's still searching. He hasn't met the star yet, he said, "And whereto, I did not know." So right now, it's a pathless path. He's on this pathless path where the teachers waiting for him there.
- Kirsten Oates: And so this man who has the chapel in his house gives him one piece of advice. He says, "Ceaseless prayer is a continual yearning in the human spirit towards God." He tells him to pray more and the prayer will teach you. But that doesn't seem to help the pilgrim.
- Jim Finley: You know what? I think there's a couple things. Any transformative act like say, being a therapist, you learn to be a therapist by being one. Teaching, you learn to teach by teaching. You learn to be a poet by sitting with the poetry. There's a certain learning that takes place and committing yourself to the activity itself. So it's a lovely saying, really, it's prayer that teaches us to pray because prayer is really these incarnate residences of this meeting place with God who's one with us in our prayer and in our seeking this way. That's true.
- Kirsten Oates: Yes. But that doesn't quite break through for the pilgrim. And I love the way he says, "He thinks and thinks and reads and reads. He dwelt over and over what the man said to him, but could not get to the bottom of it. And now he can't sleep." But I love that sense of I cannot get to the bottom of it. I'm trying to get underneath it, see it from the bottom up, really understand it.
- Jim Finley: Yes. That's another thing about the awakening heart. It's on this journey and it can't tell, and there's no turning back at this, what are you going to go back to? So you can't go back to what. You don't know how to go on this way. And in the depth of the longing, you can tell you've not yet got to the bottom of it. And I would say too, it's really coming up here for him. The bottom is like Eckhart on the ground. It's not a kind of bottom you land on, it's abyss-like. It's an abyss-like landing that's welling up and giving itself to you is your longing itself. But you don't realize that yet. But you can tell I'm at the cusp or I'm right at the rim of it, but it hasn't appeared yet.
- Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. And you talk about in this phase, there's a solitude. There's a solitude in not understanding what we're being drawn towards and all we can do is trust it.
- Jim Finley: Yes. And this is why I think solitude like Merton on solitude. I think in this sense, solitude is you're less and less able to explain to anybody, including yourself, what's happening to you. But if you sit with it, if you just sit with it, in that no longer able to explain anything including yourself, already there's the dawning. It's like a deeper way to understand what it means to understand. It isn't understanding by conceptualizing it. It's like Merton says, "Little by little realizing you're infinitely understood and you're being led unexplainably along this path because God's the author of the question." And we're being unraveled in it in all kinds of ways really

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. So then he finds the abbot and his questions changed again this time because now his question is, "Help me save my soul." This has become so deep for him. So it feels in a way, he's lost his faith a little bit because he's maybe asking about, help me save my soul.

Jim Finley: Well, that's true in a way-

Kirsten Oates: Like a dark night of the soul.

Jim Finley: Yeah. We can become attached to the goal in a way. But there's another way of saying it too this way is that I have come upon a longing that I don't understand for a mystery I don't understand, but I do understand that my life without it will be forever incomplete. And that's where you become a koan or a riddle to yourself. And I think it means it more in that sense, not that he's attached. And by the way, if you want to put it that way, he could have lived his whole life and never found it. And that would've been his answer. He would've died as a pilgrim of the absolute, seeking this way and holiness for his integrity in the seeking. That happens to some people.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, I love that the Abbot has an obvious answer to how to save your soul. He's follow the commandments, say your prayers, and you'll be saved. But he's just on a completely different page to the pilgrim in giving that answer.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: It reminds me of my own situation, because seemingly I was concerned about whether to have a child or not. And so people were wanting to give me advice at that level and their experiences of adoption, or if you just relax, you'll get pregnant, those sorts of things. But that's in the end, that wasn't where I was at. I was asking something much deeper.

Jim Finley: Yes. When I was doing this deep trauma work with people. Sometimes they would sit down and they'd say, "Before we get started today, I want to ask your opinion on something." I could feel myself relaxing because opinions are cheap. Everyone has an opinion. Sure. What do you want to know? But what if you're not there for opinions? You're to listen in a way that helps the person listen to themselves. And that's a very different way to be attentive. And then to learn to be towards ourself this way. Yeah, exactly. That's true.

Kirsten Oates: But the Abbot, they say he's gifted with kindness and humility. So he obviously was a good listener and started to understand what the pilgrim was looking for, and gave him a book that introduced him, you said to the lineage like you're doing with these books for us. And so he does get more of an explanation, but it's still not what he's looking for. Now he's asking for a method.

Jim Finley: That's right. And really, I would say that's exactly right. So he's introducing him to the lineage, which is what we're offering in these podcasts. There's a lineage of this timeless wisdom down through the ages, and it washes over us and blesses us. And he's starting to introduce him to that. And also really, I think too origin, the inner meaning of Scripture to understand every word of Jesus at this level, this way, this way. And so he's introducing him to that. And so every person he sees gives him another little piece of something that leads him a little further along the way. That's really true and exactly right.

Kirsten Oates: But sometimes when you're on the journey yourself, you feel like you're getting nowhere. It's not the piece you're looking for so you don't necessarily see the progress you're making or the...

Jim Finley: That's right. John of the cross says somewhere, he says, "There are some people that think a great deal is going on in their spiritual life because they're having all these experiences, but in God's eyes, not much is going on." And other people think there's a dark night of the soul that nothing's going on. In the eyes of God a great deal is going on. It's just you're being blinded by an infinite light, so you're in water way over your head, and you're not yet capable of taking in what's happening to you.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. Yeah. So then he leaves the Abbot, and now he doesn't have a plan. He doesn't know where he's going. And what's interesting is that he falls back to his original ways. My lack of understanding made me sad so I read my Bible. And this reminds me of how with contemplative practice and lexio that we keep coming back to the beginning of the practice over and over again.

Jim Finley: It is. And you know what else I think too is this is where clinical depression is so different because there's another kind of sadness like melancholy. And melancholy is a very gentle sadness, and it's a quiet sadness that has its own spaciousness about it. And you learn to live there and to stay present there and to stay open. Because notice what's beautiful about it. He isn't trying to force his way through anymore. He's just sitting with this sadness. But I think it's a graced sadness. And it's a precursor to what's about to happen.

Kirsten Oates: And you said that piece of the journey, he's being liberated from imagining that anything he would be capable of finding could be what he's looking for.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: But it's finding him now.

Jim Finley: See the dilemma. I think another way to look at the paradox is John of the Cross says, "The means must be proportionate to the end." The end is infinite, which is God. But all your resources on your own abilities are finite. And so all your abilities are disproportionate to the end. And so anything you're even capable of finding would end up being one more thing less than what you're looking for. What he doesn't know yet, anything he's even capable of losing would be infinitely less because it's already claiming him for itself, and he doesn't know it yet. That's what makes this so subtle, I think.

Kirsten Oates: And then the teacher that he's been looking for finally comes along and he doesn't recognize him.

Jim Finley: Yeah. It's funny. It's funny. He's an old cleric of some sort, it's a monk. And he even tells them, "I belong to this monastery six miles off the main road." And here's this teacher. And he said, "I didn't feel like going." He even says, "We take in pilgrims and food like this." Often that's true. We're looking right at it and it hasn't dawned on us that it's right in front of us. Yes, it's sweet.

Kirsten Oates: Sometimes we have to come back around again and again.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's right.

Kirsten Oates: And you said, and I love this too, that the monastery's off the main road, the contemplative path isn't on the main road.

Jim Finley: And also notice this as a pilgrim, he lives off the main road, but this is now even off his off-road. And this is really where he doesn't want to go like this. And here's where the teachings about to happen, because like a good spiritual director, the director asks him, "What kind of teaching are you looking for?" Because he says, "I'm not looking. Thanks for your offer. I'm not looking for food." And he pours his heart out. And the teacher's listening. It's a key moment really, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Amazing. Wonderful. So that's where we're at in the journey.

Jim Finley: It is.

Kirsten Oates: It's very rich and deep and wonderful. Yes.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And you made a statement that everything in our life has these kinds of lessons, and often we don't get the lesson until much later.

Jim Finley: It's really true. I was sure to listen to John Reusbrook about prevenient grace, where you're given a grace, like say this grace, but you can look back and realize along the way, unbeknownst to you at the time, the connecting the dots, you were being led to this place. But often it isn't until in hindsight, you can look back. In silence the very thing that's one of those graces was at the time quite painful.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: For example, not having a child, for example, is painful.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Really painful.

Jim Finley: But then you realize that prevenient grace helps us broaden our understanding of the providential guidance that we're being led to.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Wonderful. Well, thank you for the wonderful dialogue today, Jim. I'm so enjoying this season, and I can't wait till the next session to listen to. And then I'll see you for the next dialogue in a couple of weeks.

Jim Finley: Yeah, be good.

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. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.