

Turning
to the
Mystics



The Way of a Pilgrim

Dialogue 6

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 Way of a Pilgrim by an anonymous author. And I'm here with Jim to discuss your final session for this season, Jim, on The Way of a Pilgrim.

Jim Finley: Yeah. It's been so good walking through this text again. It's such a touching, lovely thing. So it's been wonderful to share it with people.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, I'm so grateful. I've really enjoyed it too. So you covered a lot in that last session, so we've got a lot to chat about today. I wanted to start by quoting you when you said that, "We're following the pilgrim in this arc of transformation and what matters is the interior depth of the meaning of the experience rather than the exact external details. And we're learning to sensitize ourselves to the deep meaning of things, and not get trapped on the surface." So I'm hoping today we'll discuss some of those interior insights that you've been drawing out for us.

Jim Finley: Yeah. One way to at least begin, we'll keep looking at it different ways as we dialogue here in our time, but one way to look at it too is that what we're really talking about are certain moments of awareness, or shifts in feeling or sensitivities. But what we're really talking about deep down is this metamorphosis of our very subjectivity. That the grace of God is transforming the very depths of ourself into itself, into this realm of the heart, this oneness, which is, Merton says, just hidden in the ground of love for which there could be no explanations. We're looking at the expressions of this ineffable transformation, how we bear witness to it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And so from that vantage point, we see the way the pilgrim was awakened to that realm you just described.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: The realm of the heart.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: And with a dilemma, the dilemma of how to pray without ceasing. And then he was offered this prayer as a path that leads to the realm of the heart.

Jim Finley: Right. This invitation from God to these more unitive, wordless states of communion with God, these mystical dimensions. The awakening comes in different ways, but one thing they all share in common is that the present way efficacious unto holiness of devotional sincerity through prayers and reflection and so on, are not an adequate context to step into what's happening to us. That somehow we have to leave behind a dependency on thought. We don't reject thought, a dependency on emotions. Dependency on kind of going into a deeper place of the realm of the heart that transcends thought, transcends emotion, but reverberates

through thought and through emotion. But it's no longer adequate to have that be our base of operation this way. This is, they'd have experiential communion.

Kirsten Oates: And the prayer is kind of concretizing that.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. I wanted to start, just as a reminder of where we're at with the pilgrim. So this is the text of where we begin our discussion. So he's just been told to pray 12,000 times a day now.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: At the end of session five. And then in session six, "I did as he bade me. The first day I scarcely succeeded in finishing my task of saying 12,000 prayers by late evening. The second day I did it easily and contentedly. To begin with, the ceaseless saying of the prayer brought a certain amount of weariness. My tongue felt numbed. I had a stiff sort of feeling in my jaws. I had a feeling at first pleasant, but afterwards slightly painful in the roof of my mouth. The thumb of my left hand with which I counted my beads hurt a little. I felt a slight inflammation in the whole of that wrist and even up to the elbow, which was not unpleasant. Moreover, all this aroused me as it were, and urged me on to frequent saying of the prayer. For five days I did my set number of 12,000 prayers. And as I formed the habit, I found, at the same time, pleasure and satisfaction in it."

And so Jim, you started by just reflecting on this idea of the constancy of the prayer. So he went from 3,000 to 6,000, now 12,000, and this building up of this constancy of the prayer as part of the pedagogy.

Jim Finley: That's right. Yeah. So the pedagogy of the prayer is the constancy of saying the prayer is that all those thoughts arise and fall are on the edges of the mind. You don't think about the thoughts that are arising and falling. So by the constancy of the prayer, you're transcending your customary reliance on thoughts of God, and transcending them through the medium of this prayer, this prayer of the heart. And then by slowly increasing it, the stares, the guide, he's being very careful to protect the stares from getting ahead of him, from this pilgrim, from getting ahead of himself. So start this way. And then when he can tell he is getting acclimated to that. So what the stares is doing is slowly upping the ante of bringing him to the edge of himself where it kind of spills over into God.

And so now at 12,000 time he sees that he's ripe for this, he puts him right at the edge, and then he shares with us what that was like for him to do that. So his whole being is kind of already beyond the boundaries of what he is capable of. Again, in some strange way, he's acclimated to that boundary. See, in some strange way he's already intimately beyond himself, but he's still concretely in himself, and his mouth is sore, his wrist, but he's just a absorbed in a transformative event like at the brink of something.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Just reflecting on what you said in the opening, how he's really leaving behind dependency, not just on thought, but on emotion. And seeing that this, the way he's responding, his body's in pain also, like sensation, but he's so attuned to the prayer and the beauty of the prayer that it's not unpleasant.

Jim Finley: Yes. Sometimes I think this way too is, sometimes in blissful moments of finding love, we're also sometimes in arduous moments of being threatened by some overwhelming thing.

That in the overwhelming thing, it's true that it is overwhelming, but it's also true if you pause, you realize you're discovering things. You're kind of beyond your comfort level, maybe way beyond, and that's real. But in the process, there's the unfolding of deeper layers of what it means to be real, what it means to be human, what it means to be alive. And you're granted things.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And this is where he's at now, these grantings that arise out of being at the edge of our own abilities, which lets the realm of the heart start shining through as intimate understandings of unexplainable things about love.

Kirsten Oates: And you really get the sense that in this constancy that he is tapping into the constant presence of God. And that's part of how he's losing that dependency on, "Oh, my body hurts, I should stop." No, because he's experiencing that presence of God.

Jim Finley: That's right. See, because God's love is infinitely constant. There's no wavering in the infinite love that loves us so. And loves us so in our brokenness, which when we admit it and hand it over, the brokenness is transformed as mercy. God is all merciful. And that's the eternal constancy of infinite mercy. So now we're kind of starting to echo a constancy of God's mercy, and is being echoed as the constancy of our heart being transformed in this realm of oneness.

Kirsten Oates: So for those of us who can't pray constantly 12,000 times a day with the rosary, the insight that's coming out of this is, how do we find a practice that helps us shift our dependency from maybe our thoughts, our emotions, our sense of ourselves, towards dependency on God's presence and love for us?

Jim Finley: Yes. I think, and matter of fact, this is for the vast majority of us, we're not called to this. Some people are called to it and they do it, and there's a different kind of meditative intensive retreats and centering prayer sometimes for month long, or sessions, and Buddhism and so on. But in the day by day there's a daily rendezvous with God. But what happens, I think what we're talking about, is you realize in fidelity to those daily rendezvous, there's a kind of a sensitive emergence of the holiness, the simple things as you go through the day. So from watering the houseplants, and standing up and sitting down, or waking up in the middle of the night, there's a kind of an underlying new sensitivity to the divinity of the incomprehensible stature of the events of life itself. And that has a certain constancy about it. And I think for a lot of people it happens like that, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. You said in the session that when we experience stirrings from God like the pilgrim did, we don't want to ignore them, but we also can't achieve anything or measure up to anything. So all we can do is give ourselves over to a prayer, or to the prayer to learn from God that our shortcomings pale in significance to God's oceanic depth of mercy that permeates our limitations. And so I wondered how important it

is to concretize this stirring, this devotion, this desire with prayer as a method?

Jim Finley: Yes. See, I think the desire without prayer is wishful thinking, like you hope for it, and that's a gift of hope for it. But in prayer, we're actually surrendering ourselves over concretely with all our being to what we hope for. So it isn't just wishful thinking, what a lovely thought, and boy, I sure wish I could be. But you actually sit and accept your powerlessness to actualize that hope, unless God actualizes it in you through this love. And I think that's the importance of the meditative prayer commitment is that.

Kirsten Oates: And you mentioned that some of the mystics we've studied share a method of prayer. So *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Guigo and *The Ladder for Monks* and now *The Way of a Pilgrim*, but other mystics like Eckhart and John of the Cross, they don't share a method, although it's very clear that they prayed themselves. Prayer was a huge part of their own journey.

Jim Finley: Yes. For these other mystics that don't have a method, what they all say, like Teresa and John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, Eckhart, and so on, what they're all saying is that when you're doing your *lectio divina*, your spiritual reading, your meditation, your prayer, and in the midst of the sincerity of the prayer, you start to notice interior things are starting to happen to you, and you surrender to that. So Teresa, the first three mansions of the soul is reflective prayer. It's really this kind of praying unto holiness. The fourth mansion, she says, you're sitting there with the scriptures open, you're praying, and you realize your heart's being enlarged to divine proportions and you yield to it. It says, John of the Cross talks about a dark night, a deprivation of the ability to be consoled. And in that powerlessness, you wait with all your heart for the mercy of God. "Oh, night lovelier than the dawn.", for Eckhart. So that's their approach. And for Merton also it's that way.

But some people say there's a method, like a strategy, like a lineage, it's a tradition. And that kind of concretizes that process. But notice, anyone can practice the Jesus prayer. It's good to pray. It's a lovely prayer, really. And so you can practice it with devotional sincerity as you go through the day, and every so often say it. It's lovely, kind of moves you along. But what we're concerned about here is where you're practicing the prayer as a way to stabilize yourself in something that is happening to you. So you notice, something happened to him first in the church.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: He was perplexed. Not only that, there was the inner urgency to resolve what the perplexity was about, that was the event. So then the prayer comes in as a way to stabilize yourself in a kind of obediential fidelity to what the event is this way. And I think that's the relationship between the two. Notice then for the pilgrim toward the end here, this chapter, these major breakthroughs, notice that the prayer when this starts, he tells him, you can say it as often as you want.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Notice the method falls away. See, there's no need for a method anymore. It's like it has become him this way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And so it's a temporary arrangement for the transition into this thing as a vehicle.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Temporary but helpful.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. And so if this prayer isn't resonating for people listening, but they are feeling a call into some kind of deeper prayer, they could listen back to, I think it's season four, Guigo, Ladder for Monks, and season five, Cloud of Unknowing, and seeing if that's more suited.

Jim Finley: And I'd put it this way too, for the people listening to the podcast. Insofar as listening to the podcast touches you with the beauty of it, or you're drawn to the beauty of it, then listening to the podcast and being drawn to the beauty of the teachings of the mystic is a practice. Like the Jesus prayer is a practice.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And that's why it has to be a habit. So you form the habit. And little by little, if you would keep doing that, you'd internalize the music of this. And there's less and less dependency on the podcast itself, for if you get the text, you read it. Any act habitually entered into with your whole heart that takes you to the deeper place, see, is a thing. And that's what we're talking about.

Kirsten Oates: So going back to the pilgrim's journey, for him, keeping count is a big part of this method, isn't it? The way the teachers oriented him to this method, at first, keeping count becomes a big part of it.

Jim Finley: Yeah. But what I'm suggesting is we look at the lessons that are woven into the narrative.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes, exactly.

Jim Finley: So the staretz tells him, like say it this many times, and then he says, this is the key, without intentionally adding one more or one less. And by not intentionally adding, because if he was supposed to do it 3000 times but he decided to do it 3001, that would be his ego. See. I'm going to stop at 2,099, I'm going to stop. That would be ego. So don't intentionally change it. That's an obediencial fidelity.

But here's the deeper lesson. He won't intentionally lose count, but he will lose count, because he's human. And every time he loses count, he circles back around to pick up where he left off as best he can. But realizing he slipped and lost count is where he is touched by mercy. It isn't as if God's judging him with a stopwatch how you do this. It's just the opposite. It's actually setting up something on purpose you're not able to do, which is what makes it a practice. And when you slip and slide over not measuring up to it, your dependence on the mercy of God to sustain you is deepened, and that's the essence of the practice.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, Jim, all these methods, they have this kind of underlying obscure part of the path, of the method, which is this inability to achieve anything through the method. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Another example would be, let's say someone who feels drawn to practice art, for example. And they're really committed to it, and they learn certain poetry or anything that's like this. There's a certain moment where they're at the edge of something that wants to come through and they don't know how to let it come through. And they don't give up, they just stay there, and then it comes through. So when the line of the poet, the poetry comes out, the poet is just as surprised as us when it came out.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: But if they hadn't come to the edge of themselves, it would've just been more of themselves. But if they had brought to the edge of something and then something spills over and gives itself to them, a lot of life is like this, I think, really, on these transformative things in life.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yes. Another aspect of his journey was this idea of faithfully going back to the teacher. And you say an important role of the teacher is to help us know that what we've tasted in our experience is real, gives us a sense of confidence. So I guess with that in mind, it would be helpful to keep going back to the person or the teacher that gives us that sense of confidence, even if we're hearing the same thing over and over again.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think that most people who feel drawn to these more interior mystical dimensions, sometimes you're very lucky you have a mystically awakened spiritual director, and lucky you. But a lot of people, they don't. But what you have are the scriptures, and what you have is your prayer, and what you have is your life. See, does this ring true? I'm grateful I'm on this path. And you have the text, see. So it was one of my experiencing is that in accordance sovereign fidelity to the spirit of the text, and so the teacher is there to kind of... Because otherwise, this is so beyond what you're used to, you can feel like you're crazy inside.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: I mean, there's no reference points that you're used to, they're going to work anymore.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: So you have to depend on grace for a kind of a graced evolution, a sensitivity to a path that's so delicate and refined. And so you're learning to calibrate your heart to these sensitivities in a kind of humble, patient, open way, this way.

Kirsten Oates: And there's nothing better than when you read something or hear something that really gives you that sense of truth about your experience, that gives you that sense of what I'm feeling is real, and there is a way to move forward.

Jim Finley: There is. And another thing, I think, too in this material, is that what we know, how I put it to, is that, say it is a desire that we don't understand. For a union with God, we don't understand. But we know that it's real, because we tasted it. I will not play this cynic. I will not doubt my awakened heart. I was touched unexplainably by the presence of God, and I feel it's asking something out of me. I know that. And that's the inner integrity of the seeker

on the path. And then, so when you read the pilgrim, the pilgrim is really channeling that grace, the very fact we're illumined by. So even when we make a mistake, we make a lot of them along the way, that's how we learn. We head off down a cul-de-sac somewhere, but every time we realize it's happened one more time and we circle back, we know a little bit more about the mercy of God, a little bit more about our humility, a little bit more about how strange this path is toward the realm of the heart.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. That is an encouraging reminder, that especially at the beginning of the book, the pilgrim couldn't find what he was looking for, but in a way, he knew when it wasn't there, and that was a new insight for him. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And another big thing, I think this is true of all of us too, it came to him even before he was looking for it. It found us. And a lot of times, you look back to the very first moments you're awakened at all to these kind of unitive states that you were awake. It found you even before you knew they existed, and that you got a taste of it. Then once you got a taste of it, there was a longing to imbibe in what you got a taste of. So it finds us in the midst of things. It's like that.

Kirsten Oates: Amazing. It's amazing like that. I wanted to touch on this idea that this prayer, the way it's offered is somatic, so it moves down. He invites him to resonate with the words in the throat, and to use the hands with the beads, and to focus the attention on the heart. And I don't know that everyone understands that word somatic, and just wanted to unpack it a little bit.

Jim Finley: Yeah. It means of the body. I want to use an image of this. And this would be also just awareness of the breath. In prayer, we use an example of this. When you're just sitting aware of your breathing this way, notice that the life sustaining inhalation, it doesn't wait for you to approve that you're going to inhale. It doesn't have to check out, check up with you first, whether or not you agree. Because if you don't inhale, the rest of the day won't go well, see. And therefore the mystery of God is in the body, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us. So it drops down, and I think it drops down into the felt sense of being intimately present with our whole being.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Like a kind of a quiet, I'm here in my whole being. Somatic means that my body embodies. My body is embodying this love that's drawing me to itself, and it's taking up residence within me and beyond me. And that's unfigureoutable.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's nonlinear.

Kirsten Oates: Right.

Jim Finley: Therefore, it drops down into the throat, down into this realm of presence.

Kirsten Oates: It reminds me of that verse, in God I live and move and have my being.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: And it's the whole of me. And so, yeah.

Jim Finley: That's true.

Kirsten Oates: And so, to have that kind of true knowing of God, we need to be grounded in the body.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: We can't just know with our thoughts, that the knowing comes through the cells of our body, I guess. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And that's why I think also, when we go to say our daily rendezvous with God, when we sit, we kind of sit with our whole heart. Like, I'm right here Lord, like here I am. And we get grounded. Sometimes it helps some people to put their hand on their stomach about their breathing, put their hand over their heart, kind of just to be very quietly present in your being, in a kind of childlike sincerity of this engagement with God and the prayer.

Kirsten Oates: I like to, when I sit down to do my practice, just do a bit of a body scan, and make sure my... I feel like it's almost like bathing my body in attention. Like I can bring my whole body into a sense of my attention.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly. Some of this really helped me to see this too, there's this psychologist, Gendlin, and he had this image of focusing this way. And the image is in therapy. Say, imagine there's a family member, you've had this terrible fight. There's like a terrible painful misunderstanding. And sit and just listen to your body of where the pain is of that understanding. Is it in your stomach, your chest, your shoulders? And imagine you're setting it out on the table, and you sit there a little longer. Where else do you feel it? Set it on the table. Now imagine that as you leave this session and you go out into the hallway, here that very person, you've had this painful falling out with, you meet them in the hallway. That felt sense is the awakening of this thing you're carrying inside. So how can we slowly unpack those feeling their body memory? So the felt's then in the body is the memory being stored up and held in the body this way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And those things can be blockages to the mercy of God, or need exposure to the mercy and presence of God.

Jim Finley: Likewise, I think also when we're graced with moments of deep spacious awareness, we feel so spacious. You know what I mean? There's no place inside we're holding onto anything. It's really a state of the body's surrender to the trustworthy nature of life itself, and God's the infinity of life itself.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I think it's, especially in Christian circles, like that groundedness in the body. We've lost that as a grounding place.

Jim Finley: That's true.

Kirsten Oates: It's become very heady. Yeah.

Jim Finley: It's there, but for example, in the Catholic tradition with the Eucharist, we go up to receive Holy Communion and we don't receive holy communication.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: But we don't take long. And ideally speaking, when the mass is contemplative, there are silent places throughout the mass, if the Communion, like to sit for a while, be attentive to the... But you're right, it often isn't brought out into the open as well, as much as it should be to help people kind of drop down into that deeper place.

Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Another point you made was about the pilgrim's solitude. So I think the starets says, remain in your solitude. And I found this so helpful the way you talked about this is really about, there's no need to explain to anyone what's happening to you at this point. It's still integrating. And I think for many of us who travel this contemplative path, one, it's just very hard to communicate what's happening to you, what you're longing for, what you've learned. And so, I like this idea of remain in your solitude for a while.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Let it integrate.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. I think I referred to Merton saying that knowing in this contact with God in prayer, to understand is to realize that you're infinitely understood. And not only do you have solitude in that you can't explain it to anyone what's happening to you, you can't explain it to yourself. And the reason you can't is that it's infinite.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: If it was explainable, it would just be more of you. So there's a kind of quiet, intimate realization of the intimacy of the unexplainable, see, sustaining you. Is a kind of state of quiet awe in your body or in your heart, which evokes amazement. And also silence, and that we're silenced by it. And so the prayer is not the kind of prayer like the monks chanting the Psalms and the choir. There are words that interrupt the silence with explanations, but there's another kind of word that the patterns of the words are patterns of things beyond what words can say, like the chanting, or the Jesus prayer. It doesn't intrude by explaining anything. It's a living logos. The rhythms of the words carry the unexplainable along this way. And so the words of the Jesus prayer is that word.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And by the way, and also notice when you read the text, the words of the pilgrim is that word. When we read it like this, all these words, he's describing what's happening. It's not a language that intrudes upon our silence. The more we listen, the more silent we become. This way kind of invites and draws us into it. I think it's really true.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, definitely. I feel it really draw me into that realm, to the heart. My heart feels like it's coming alive, and warm, and vibrating. And yeah, it's amazing the way it does that.

Jim Finley: It does. Another interesting thing is that you notice that happening. We can feel it happening. But the moment we try to turn to habit, it eludes us. Or the moment we would try to have it, it's something to be gratified by it, as if it's enough, it eludes us. So we have to be willing to let it have its way with us, and it be transformed in the grace of it, which is itself the realm of the heart.

Kirsten Oates: In this last little section that you focused on, there was a few turning points, and I wanted to talk about them. So one was that you pointed out how the starets, the starets comes to the pilgrim and this quiet equality between them is forming, even though the starets is more seasoned, that they're both in this kind of realm of the heart. And so what's lovely for the pilgrim and the starets is, they've found community that speaks the same language. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's really true. And so yes, there's a kind of a mutuality. And why? Because the pilgrim, the starets realizes that the pilgrim is in the first stages of the realm of the heart itself, and there's an equality between them in the realm.

And here's another way that I would look at it too. Say we read *The Way of a Pilgrim*, and we stay with it over time. And through our prayers, we keep coming back to the different mystics. And we get to a certain point where we realize that passages that used to be so obscure to us are now so quietly luminous to us, and that's the equality. If that makes sense to put it that way, it's like a comfort level.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. That really resonates with me. Yeah.

Jim Finley: It does, and that bears witness to your own awakening heart, that you're being transformed in the very path that you're pursuing by the very fact you resonates is so sweet to you, or so crystalline, or so reassuring when you read it this way. And that's why, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, I think about a couple of things. One is, when I first came upon your teaching, Jim, and after a while I could even repeat things you said, repeat these beautiful phrases that you would say. But then there'd be these moments where I actually felt like, "Oh my gosh, I think I just understood that phrase." And it's such a different feeling from being able to say the phrase in my head and kind of know it's true and beautiful, but not really know the truth inside my own being. Like you say, inside my body. I think about too, when you read Merton's book when you're a teenager.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly. And also notice too, say the parables of Jesus. If we were raised in a Christian tradition, a lot of these parables we've known since we were a child.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: But we can be in the middle of the unfolding of a great love, or a death, or fear, and we hear the parable and it goes so deep. You know what I mean? It's like there's no end to it, actually, really. And it's endlessly unfolding in the depths of the realizations as it gives itself to us. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. You know what also came to mind to me when I was thinking about this piece of the starets and the pilgrim forming this community? Was when people send in their stories and

their questions, and you can just feel a kind of resonance and a sense of that community.

Jim Finley: Yeah. The reason I love the question session so much is, they'd be live on retreats too. The thing about the questions is that they're sincere. And the sincerity of the question bears witness that their ability to be sincere about such things bears witness they're already in the realizations of what they're asking about. If that makes sense in a way.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes, yes.

Jim Finley: Like we belong to each other. Like there's a resonance amongst ourselves this way.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. I love that. Okay. Another major turning point was where early one morning the prayer woke me up. And so you point out that that's a big turning point in his journey. And I wondered, was it the case that prior to this, his desire to pray unceasingly was waking him up? Is that the subtle difference? What is the difference between the prayer waking him up?

Jim Finley: Instead of, like the prayer is a prayer of reaching the realm of the heart. When the prayer woke him up, the realm of the heart he was trying to reach had transformed him into itself. So the realm of the heart and who he is in his desire for it become undistinguished from each other. It's transforming into itself unexplainably, see. When you look at me, you're looking at the prayer itself.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Wow.

Jim Finley: See? That's why I say the mystic isn't someone who said, "Listen to what I've experienced." The mystic says, "Look what love has done to me. There's nobody left." And that's the rolling over, I think, of this unity of the realm of the heart.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I wanted to read just that little piece, because there's quite a few points you made out of it. So he starts early one morning, the prayer woke me up, as it were. "I started to say my usual morning prayers, but my tongue refused to say them easily or exactly. My whole desire was fixed upon one thing only, to say the prayer of Jesus. And as soon as I went on with it, I was filled with joy and relief. It was as though my lips and my tongue pronounced the words entirely of themselves, without any urging from me. I spent the whole day in a state of the greatest contentment. I felt as though I was cut off from everything else. I lived as though in another world."

Jim Finley: Yeah. Here's what I see in that too. Is that when we come to this place in our life, see, he starts out by saying, "At first I had a hard time cooperating."

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes.

Jim Finley: And it's almost, the image I use, I think of this, is like a child learning how to walk. So when a child learns how to walk and the parents are clapping, and the child is kind of, the child's walking, but it's a precarious situation. And when it falls down has to get back up again. And that's how you learn how to walk, by falling down a lot. But that's a very, there's something precious about that getting up and falling down. And so you're right at the rim, right at the rim of these two ways. And yet even though it's somewhere, it's awkward, there's a certain eloquence that kind of takes you to itself in the midst of your awkwardness. So it kind of

pauses, but it doesn't pause. It hesitates, but it doesn't hesitate. And that's part of the process, if that makes sense.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. It reminds me of an experience I had recently, where I got on a bike. I hadn't ridden a bike for many, many years, and I got on a bike to ride it, and I was a little bit nervous. It was a big bike. But if I were to stop and think about it, and try and think through what to do, the thinking's not fast enough in a way to keep up with what's needed to ride a bike. And so, I had to let go, and just let my body move me forward. And that's what this section reminds me of.

Jim Finley: I remember when my daughters were growing up, by teaching them to ride a bike. And I can remember Kelly, we had on the bike, and I was holding onto the back of the seat and she was pedaling. And you have to get that feeling what that's like. And without telling her, I'd let go of the bike here, she was already riding the bike. But I said, "I'm going to let go." She said, "Oh, don't let go." So all of a sudden, you surprise yourself.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: This is like the interior depth dimension of this grace metamorphosis of your heart. There's something delicate about it, or something to be profoundly respected, this delicacy.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Where our effort falls away from a moment, and it arises on its own. Yeah. Amazing.

Jim Finley: Another way to look at it, it isn't as if there's a switch, like not yet mystic. And God's waiting for a certain moment, but the switch on something, it's mystical. There's a lot of this wavering place in between. God is the infinity of the wavering place. That too is its own holiness, its own. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, so would this be a description of what it would like to be in an experience of the realm of the heart? When he says, "I spent the whole day in a state of the greatest contentment, I felt as though I was cut off from everything else. I lived as though in another world."

Jim Finley: I'm thinking of a Buddhist text right now, so I'll say it, Buddhism. The Buddha, speaking of nirvana. He said, "The one who has come to this state of nirvanic peace is like a deer in a forest, that when it sits, it sits confidently. When it stands, it stands confidently. When it walks, it walks confidently. And even if it were to lie down on a whole heap of deer traps, it would not be trapped by any of them." See? And so there's like this peace that surpasses understanding. Because it's not a peace dependent on conditioned states of peace, it's not dependent on anything at all, like this.

That's why it's celestial, is you're in the world, but you're no longer of the world. You're in a kind of a celestial state of the realm of this heart, where you and God mutually disappear as dualistically other than each other. And it just is. It just is this way. And later on we're going to see, although it's beyond the darkness of the world, we're going to see later it comes full circle, and radicalizes his oneness with the world, by how much he loves each person he meets on the road. But it goes to different phases of ecstatic, kind of this beyond the world, but beyond. He did not consider his equality with God a condition to be clung to, to protect the form of a servant. And so, it circles back around and radicalizes our Christ-like oneness

with everyone in the whole world. It's the relationship between mystical union and social justice, or the corporal works of mercy. And notice, his corporal works of mercy is sharing his story with us. He did this for us. See, he was moved to help us. This was his ministry.

Kirsten Oates: Another turning point is when the starets recognizes this transition, and repeats a phrase that he kind of started this journey with with the pilgrim, which is be thankful to God, this thank God. And this time he says, "Be thankful to God that this desire for the prayer and this facility in it have been manifested in you. It is a natural consequence which follows constant effort and spiritual achievement." And I was just going to quickly read what he said the first time, which was... So this is a full circle moment from when he first met the starets, and described his desire for this unceasing prayer. And the starets says to him, "Thank God, my dear brother, for having revealed to you this unappeasable desire for unceasing interior prayer. Recognize in it the call of God and calm yourself."

Jim Finley: So that's why I say too that, or sometimes you get the feeling you're in the presence of someone who's more present to you than you are. And they see in you something unfolding that you don't yet see. And so when he comes to the starets and just pours out his heart on this story that he can't resolve, thank God my dear brother, see. Because he lights up inside, because he recognizes what's happening to the pilgrim way before the pilgrim recognizes what's happening to the pilgrim. And then as the circle completes itself and it comes and reports it, thank God my dear, this kind of empathic happiness of the starets, and his love and concern for this person being led along this love path.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And seeing these big turning points in his journey.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful.

Jim Finley: It is, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: This whole idea of this natural consequence. So his word here, "It is a natural consequence which follows constant effort and spiritual achievement." And you talked about how we might be able to see grace in this new way. So even if you weren't in a state of grace, and you give yourself over to a transforming act, and you are transformed in your fidelity to that transforming act, it's another way of understanding grace. And so, I was curious about this idea of the transforming act. And what I see as a thread in it is, that we have to give ourselves fully over to it. It's not that we do an act say for poetry, which can be a transforming act. But if I were to do it not out of the depth of my heart, if I wasn't to give my whole self over to it, then it probably wouldn't transform me.

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

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: So for example, years ago I used to go to this retreat house every other year or so, and at the edge of these big grounds of this retreat house there was a highway, and then there was an art store. I used to go there, because I like art. So the watercolors and oils and that. There was a little sign on the wall. It said, "Sometimes people will come in here because they just visited

an art museum.” And they buy a lot of art paper and oils, and they get an easel and some books. And they go home and open up how to do oil painting. And they get discouraged that their painting doesn’t look like the ones they saw in the art museum. And what they forget, is that how many times the artists, thousands of times, had to paint that rose before the rose caught fire. But you don’t paint it out of some kind of achievement. You paint it out of the inner necessity to keep pushing through. It’s asking something out of you.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And so in being a therapist, you’ll be a therapist, but the point is, by doing hours, and hours, and hours of committing myself to sitting with someone in therapy, it changes you. Anything that we commit ourselves to with all our heart changes us. And that’s what he’s saying here. It does that. There’s something about that. And it’s naturally, he says, “God kind of designed the mind that way.”

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: When it passes a critical point beyond itself and is transformed by it. And so notice how amazing it is, that this is endowed into our nature.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And this is how grace works. And look what’s happened to you through the Jesus prayer. See?

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Yeah. And there’s a kind of energy that arises around a call like this, there’s an energy that carries us forward also that’s part of it.

Jim Finley: They do it, very much so.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Very. And notice also, this is so personal, because this struggle to find it, this can go on for years.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: It isn’t like I want to get *The Way of a Pilgrim*, and get started, *Mystical Union* by Thursday. And if I don’t make it, I’ll start something else. It’s a long learning curve. But the point is, the art of the learning curve is the unfolding of realizations in the midst of the journey itself this way. You know what I mean? It’s like that, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. I could see things too, Jim, the way people have a beautiful friendship with their animals, like with their cats or their dogs, that it’s a transforming act. They give their whole selves over to that, to the care of that animal.

Jim Finley: That’s really true.

Kirsten Oates: That’s something else. Or a garden, or a loved one.

Jim Finley: That's right. And that's why a pet, an animal is so mysterious in a way, because the love are thousands of little moments with that, and the unconditional love of the animal this way, it's a sentient being. And that's why when the animal dies, see, the loss of the death of the animals. Just anything we commit ourselves to. Say the garden or the animal, yeah, exactly. And so what we're committing ourselves to here is our impoverished heart. To consummate a longing for union that was placed in it by God as its destiny. And so we care for our heart, and that means we're joining God who cares for our heart. Who's guiding us for this. And so the heart kind of opens up, blossoms.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. And then the staretz talks about that, and God's cleansing him, of cleansing the soul of sensuality, which you talk about as this desire to grasp or be gratified.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: And that's a big part of the journey.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So Jim, the staretz goes on to say about what the pilgrim is experiencing. He says, "It is a condition which is impossible to describe, and the discovery of this mystery of prayer is a foretaste on earth of the bliss of heaven. Such happiness is reserved for those who seek after God in the simplicity of a loving heart." Which is building on what you were just saying. But this idea that it's a foretaste of heaven, and this place where the pilgrim's arrived is part of that.

Jim Finley: Yes. It's like, we're really asking here is what happens when we die? And when we die and go over into God, we can't see the dead. They're here. We live in the vast interiority of God. So what happens? We're still here, but what happens when we die of love at the hands of love, till nothing's left of us but love. And that's celestial. So on this earth in devotional sincerity, God's oneness with us is veiled through insights, beliefs, aspirations. But here, in crossing over into the state, it's a foretaste of unveiled infinite union, which is our destiny in heaven. But because we're still here, is unveiled in a veiled way. In other words, it's unveiled, it's unexplainably clear, but hidden, impossible to adequately describe to anybody, including yourself.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: It's innermost.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Unveiled, but veiled. It's not for the finite eyes to see, or the finite hands to touch, or it can't be grasped with the thought, or just, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I found that so helpful the way you described that, that even these tastes, and they seem quite clear to us in reading the book, but you're right. He's got nothing he can pull out of himself and show anyone. So it is just that the staretz is so subtly attuned to this path. He can see it, but most people, we've got nothing to show them. It's hard to put it into words. And so that was helpful the way you said that. Yeah. There's nothing, no object we can

show anyone. I wondered this idea of the starets talking about, but we still need to oil the wheel. So even though the prayer's woken him up, it seems he's still being encouraged to stay committed to some kind of commitment to the prayer.

Jim Finley: Yes. Let's say someone, again, say the poet or the artist, whatever, let's say they've been habituated in this artistic state, kind of flows. But the point is, although it flows of itself, they cannot neglect continuing to being faithful to the art. You have to stay with it to keep the wheel spinning. There's a kind of grace fidelity to kind of staying with it. It is never I took care of that, I can just walk away. It runs by itself. Because it's your life. It's your actual life. But you don't do it as a burden. You kind of do it, tending to the spinning of this realm of the heart is like breathing, but you actively choose to renew your commitment to it in all kinds of little subtle ways.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Because life can get busy, and very easily distract us from, yeah.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: You are committed.

Jim Finley: Look at married love, for example. It's a gift. But if the people do not keep working at fidelity to the union of the love, it could slip away.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: It could be to neglect in other ways too. But, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So you described that the starets takes the training wheels off for the pilgrim.

Jim Finley: You don't have to count anymore. You don't have to count them anymore. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: You don't have to count. Though, I do notice he did say, "Try to devote every moment to the prayer as often as you wish, and as often as you can. Submit yourself humbly to the will of God looking to Him for help." And that's really the big change, where he's putting the starets, putting authority totally in God now and the pilgrim's. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's right. See, because you don't count the prayers anymore, because you can't count the infinite ways that God's infinitely in love with you. So it's uncountable. It's not beyond what can be calculated. And now that's transformed you into yourself, live that way.

Kirsten Oates: And the starets says, "God will lead you on the right path." And then this is really just our lives, isn't it? When we talk about the path going forward, it's his life. God will be there in his life.

Jim Finley: Yes. In a way I put it too with people, I say myself right now where you are, the people listening. If you look back at your own life, and how has it come to pass that you've become the man or woman who's even capable of being concerned about these matters? And the way that you're now capable of it, is it not so that months ago or years ago that you weren't here? See. And God has begun this work, and you will bring it to completion. You're on a path not of your own making like this, and the learning curve isn't over yet. You're still in the midst of

being metamorphosized into these unit of states and your ordinariness. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. And you point that out for the pilgrim's. One of the ways it's showing up is, you described it as the merging of worlds. And you described that his dream self and the awake self are merging, and the temporal self are merging.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: That God's will, we can speak of discerning God's will. We can pray to know God's will. But ultimately, speaking God's will for us is God. See, God wills for us to share in God's life is perfectly as God shares in God's own life, in our eternal nothingness without God. And that's God's will. So now your will, God's will has been consummated in you. It's been consummated in this divinized life that you're living, transformed in this love.

Kirsten Oates: And what was interesting to me too about the way this turns into a kind of merging of all these different ways we experienced ourselves, when he talked about how he loved everyone, "All men or people are dear to me." It made me think about he's merged like and dislike. There's no kind of separation anymore. It's just all kind of merged into this love, into this experience of the realm of the heart.

Jim Finley: See, that's where you said it was an unearthly place, like beyond the world, and this is now where it comes full circle. And I think that's how Jesus walked this earth. Jesus walked in the midst of people realizing that God was infinitely in love with each one them this way. And you sense the deep innate goodness of each person, the depths of it. You're able to recognize it this way, and see it. And also, sometimes to your own prayer and transformation, you're able to see the Godly love in them, more than they're able to. Because they're still at that phase where they think they are what's wrong with them. See, they think their shortcomings has the authority to name who they are, and they not yet then come to the place where only love has the authority to name who they are. But maybe by the way you sit with them, or the way you listen to them, or talk to them, in your presence maybe something you can be an instrument of grace to help them move along toward this love path.

Kirsten Oates: Well, sadly for the pilgrim in chapter one, the staret dies. But the pilgrim has this immense gratitude to God that he'd sent him this teacher. And I did notice in the text the way the pilgrim is so free to express grief too. It just sounds like his grief flowed, like that love was able to flow out as grief and gratitude.

Jim Finley: Yeah. He remains so even more deeply human.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And he cries in the passing of the staret. But then he goes on to say he feels the staret because the staret never dies, he's eternal.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: The staret is still helping him in God, the communion of saints. He's still being guided by the staret. But now it's a strange kind of aloneness when the teacher dies, see. Because there's now your solitude being led by God. And it's in that solitude being led by God, by the death of the staret, that the pilgrim tells the story. Because in sharing the story with us, he becomes our staret.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes.

Jim Finley: This is how it's handed on from awakening heart to awakening heart. It's a lovely thing there at the end. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It reminded me of your relationship with Thomas Merton, because after he died, then you wrote your book.

Jim Finley: Yeah. It's true.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's really true. Yeah. And notice too, don't forget, this is just chapter one.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Because he's going to say this. Read that last paragraph there, about I realize I've not yet.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Yes. Well, I wanted to make one quick point before we end.

Jim Finley: Oh, okay. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And that was really about this idea of life going on for him, and just back into the normal circumstances of life. That life doesn't suddenly become magically easy, or less complicated, or he still needs money to buy things. But there's something about his presence to life. He's sustained, like you said in this peace that passeth understanding. So the circumstances don't have as much control over his life in terms of that.

Jim Finley: That's right. In Benedictine monasticism, they have this thing about ora et labora, to pray and to work.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And so the work is, a lot of it's manual labor maintaining the monastery this way. And so labora is not a rude intrusion into your agenda to become a mystic.

Kirsten Oates: Uh-huh. Yeah. Yes.

Jim Finley: Because when you really do a day's work, you can't be completely on your own terms and do a day's work. There's something at the end of the day not finished yet. Somehow you engage in the world that's engaging with you. And so, that's the concreteness of the day by day unfolding of the unfinished edges, and unexpected things that need to be fixed and taken care of. But there's something holy about all of that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah.

Jim Finley: There's something, it's something incarnate in the ordinariness of the day's events.

Kirsten Oates: Because he's found this intertwining of the mercy and love of God within the constancy of his life.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: He's transcending circumstances by being anchored to the realm of the heart.

Jim Finley: That's right. See, because he wants to get the Philokalia part, he wants to get his own Philokalia.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And he found one, but he only had two rubles, I think. And the person who had the Philokalia wanted three.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And he wouldn't come down on the price. And so the guy says, "I do know guy who has one. It was an old one. He might sell it to you for two." But it was so old he had to make his own cover, like a cloth cover. And he put it with his Bible over his heart. So that's another thing is, I think we're grounded in this way. It graces us to resolve things. You know what I mean?

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: He just quietly is going to do whatever he can do to get what he feels would be good to help and be true to his own journey. And there's something about that kind of caring, like graced caring.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: That he shows by following through on these things, yes, about life.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: The thread still carries him forward in a certain way, but it's calm and patient, and interwoven with the challenges of life. Yeah. And then the piece about when it's hot or cold, or I'm harmed, that he turns to the prayer, so that this way that the prayer's practically bringing him into a state of peace in difficult circumstances.

Jim Finley: That's right. So if I'm cold, I am cold. And maybe at a time I thought I was no more than the self that's cold, that is no more than the self thinks happened to. So now I'm cold, but I'm not just cold. Although I'm cold, I'm grounded in this love that transcends the state of being cold, and completely permeates being cold. And when I'm hot, I am hot, but I'm not

just hot. I'm grounded in this love that transcends it and permeates being hot. I think it has that feeling to it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. It's the unexpected landing place. Because I don't know, I had hoped that you would transcend actually the horrible circumstance, but it's not transcending it in the way my ego would like to.

Jim Finley: And for us, it's the precipice.

Kirsten Oates: We're avoiding it.

Jim Finley: Yeah. That's the mystery of the cross.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: You can't have your valet carry the cross up the hill. By human standards, this isn't going well, but that's the point. The light of the resurrection shines through the concreteness of the event, and that's the unconquerable nature of love. Father forgive them. They don't know what they do. And we face the day's obstacle with that sensitivity.

Kirsten Oates: Well, just reading the last little section, the pilgrim says, "I await God's time, and in the meanwhile, I rest my hope on the prayers of my departed staretts. Thus, although I have not yet reached that ceaseless spiritual prayer, which is self-acting in the heart, yet I thank God I do now understand the meaning of those words I heard in the epistle, pray without ceasing." So what's interesting about this phase is that pull forward, that energetic pull forward to solve the riddle of how to pray without ceasing, has now turned into this patience and humility, and waiting on God's time. He feels like a very different being at this point.

Jim Finley: Yes. And also, it's so touching too that he says, "I'm just a beginner." Like I know I don't yet. But he's a wizened beginner. That is, he's an awakened beginner. And Thomas Merton once said, "Let's face it, we're beginners all of our life." And this being transformed by love into love it will go on throughout all of eternity, really. So it's kind of a very touching way to end the chapter.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And he does say he's filled with joy, that he says, "I'm filled with joy. God knows what is happening to me." But that he's in this joyful place.

Jim Finley: The story ended in the church. He couldn't figure out how to pray always.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: So at the end, he can't figure out this either. He said, "But God knows what's happening."

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: But I don't need to, because it's not figureoutable.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: All of a sudden, he's freed. That is the basis out of which he lives his life anymore.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. But he's still maintaining the prayer, and it's like his anchor, isn't it? He feels so anchored by it. It's been a very powerful thing for him, to transform him. Yeah.

Well, I am filled with joy, having had the opportunity to chat about this with you, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yeah, me too. It's been a gift. The whole thing's been a grace. Beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. So thank you for today. Thank you, Corey, in the background there. And we'll be back with a coaching session.

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.