

Turning to the Mystics



T.S. Eliot

Dialogue 2: East Coker
with James Finley and Kirsten 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 10 of Turning to the Mystics, where we're turning to T.S. Eliot and his poems in the Four Quartets. And I'm here with Jim to discuss his second session where you took us through the stunning poem, East Coker. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, thank you. Yes. Glad to be in this with you and all the folks listening in.

Kirsten Oates: So much to talk about today. I'm looking forward to diving in. Before we dive into the poem itself, Jim, just a couple of things I noticed. I remember in our introduction how we talked about T.S. Eliot being a very innovative poet for his time. And you mentioned that one of the ways he was innovative was that he moved through all different types of poetic form and you can really see that in this poem.

Jim Finley: And what I think the significance of that is and when you read commentaries too on T.S. Eliot from a literary point of view, in a way he feels very free to move around with different forms in terms of meter and pacing of words. In the same way in which we're trying to express something from the depths of our heart that matters very much, we're not monitoring syntax and sentence structure, we're speaking in the words that come to our heart or express ourselves. So I think he's giving primacy to the subtlety of being liberated from the tyranny of time to live in the eternity of our life and God. You see that kind of freedom to move around with structure and so on to give primacy to the insight.

Kirsten Oates: I love that, the different rhythm he felt in his heart when he was expressing different aspects of that journey. Yes.

Jim Finley: Because in a way, another way of looking at this, this is not logical and it's not practical. But the logical and the practical is myopic and brief, but the poetic is eternal and boundaryless. And so we're at that crossroads of how can language help us serve that sensitivity. It's supremely practical not to be forced to try to stay always practical, to be always linear and not be a more luminous openness.

Kirsten Oates: Always stuck within a certain container.

Jim Finley: Exactly. He's breaking us beyond the containers.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Lovely. And one other thing just to note is that if you're reading the poem yourself, there's a number of words that you'll need to likely look up. So some words are old-fashioned, like middle English perhaps. So there was one in this section, you replaced it with the word conjunction because that's what it means but it's spelled C-O-N-I-U-N-C-T-I-O-N. A word I've never seen. Other words are specific to a context. And as Americans, we might not use that same word and so you've given us some definitions. But just for people reading the poem themselves, that's one of the reasons it's challenging.

Jim Finley: That's right. And that's why in these sessions we're being very free to use the poem as

spiritual reading. We're turning to like we would to any mystic teacher to move not toward the poem, but what the poem is trying to help us realize. And that's the emphasis in Turning to the Mystics. And I would please T.S. Eliot because that's his concern also. That's why he's going to say, "East Coker, the poem doesn't matter." He actually says that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, he does. Yeah, I love that part. Okay. Well, let's dive in. And so part one really felt to me a little bit like a mirror to Burnt Norton where he's helping to expand our sense of the way we look at time, the way we... So to help us become more conscious about how we experience time in ego consciousness and help us break that open. And you said that the difference with East Coker is he's starting with a town.

Jim Finley: So you're right. In Burnt Norton, he's starting with the place, this burned out manor house. And so East Coker is a place only, it's a town. And in Burnt Norton, we're looking at a place from the standpoint of time where a tragic thing occurred in the past. And we're moving from a standpoint of time into eternity where we see the dead. And so here, East Coker, we start out in time, but what he's looking at really in time are the buildings people build to live in the town and to conduct the business of the day. And we're looking at those buildings in time. And again, I think it's easier just here in America where America's not been around that long. We can look back to indigenous peoples and what tribes lived here and so on. But in Europe where you have the Stone Age back through the centuries, you can see this big arc of time of what happens to buildings in time. He's going to start that way.

And then he's going to switch then into a state of not being in time, just like in Burnt Norton, a state of consciousness, a meditative state in the field. So that's how he sets all this up.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, lovely. So staying with what he's drawing our attention to in the way buildings disintegrate over time is part of it, Jim, that we can become so myopic in terms of our own lifetime, that we lose touch with the expansive nature of time, which if we look at it in this more expensive way, we're more in touch with life and death and life and death and life and death as the reality of being here.

Jim Finley: If we're not reflective, we're very much into our own life. It's an ongoing duration. So if we imagine an elegant home, and so the wainscot was a very expensive imported oak, and they were along the bottom of the walls against the floor a few inches or a few feet high, it was considered elegant to have the wainscot. So not only are the people in the elegant home had the elegant thing there, not only are they now dead and long dead, but that elegant home is in ruins. And now a field mouse is trotting along the wainscot. And the ares which were these very expensive tapestries that they would hang on the wall with designs on them to hide an alcove, they're now faded and tattered, and they're woven with a secret motto, which I would guess it would be death. But also notice in the first stanza, this isn't against life, he turns to scripture, there's a time for everything under the sun.

So he said, "There is a time to build and there is a time to live. And there is a time for children, for productivity or to generation of family. There is a time for all of that. There really is." But also notice just as the big arc of time is a time for that, there's a time for the ending of all of that because you'll be dead soon too. And we're trying to take that in. We're trying to just take that in as of the certainty and the brevity of my passage through time

because that opens me up to eternality of myself that never dies. And that's where the poem is trying to help us be in a meditative state to have this spiritual perspective to ourselves.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, wonderful. And even as a society, I think we've become myopic in our time, I guess due to technology, that there isn't that greater sense of history and reference to the long history we've had. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I think we're so taken by the advances of technology. We've lost a sense of the underlying layered depths of humanity and of consciousness and of life and of the sacred. The fact you got your iPhone in your hand doesn't mean you're in a better place necessarily. Although it is better in one way, it can cut you off from the incarnate immediacy of your own life. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, I think that's a really good insight that this poem is bringing to light that aspect of society that T.S. Eliot wouldn't even have experienced, but it's helping us see how myopic we've got even beyond what he was showing us.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right.

Kirsten Oates: So it starts off trying to open our consciousness to time and the way life and death flow throughout the arc of time. And then he breaks into, just like Burnt Norton did, into this more expansive, eternal consciousness. And I love the idea of it being an open field, an open field of consciousness or an open field of beautiful way of thinking about it.

Jim Finley: That's very good. So there's the town and then he moves. There's this abrupt transition and an open field. And it's an actual field where you're actually out there alone in the middle of the quiet countryside. And now you're switching then from time to consciousness. So instead of in Burnt Norton where you're running under the great barber and hear the rain dropping, or you're in a drafty church at Smokefall. Now you're alone out in this field and a van goes by rushing into the heat of the city where all those buildings are, where all the people are going to have a good time and all be dead soon enough, so will you. But they're heading for a good time. But now you're all alone in the midst of this field and now you're not in time. And that field then actually like you say, is an open field of consciousness before the field of consciousness. And this is where he slips then into this subtle shift of our awareness and face as he looks across the...

Because what he's really looking at is over the centuries, all the people that lived out across that land generation after generation that are now dead, and he looks across the field and he sees them there.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. And I wanted to hone in, you talked about these primordial signposts, and there's a number of them in this section. So the sense of an open field, he leans on the bank at something concrete that he feels in his body and the light, the dark light, the sultry light, and then the Delia and the owl. So how do these primordial signposts, how are they helping us get into this consciousness?

Jim Finley: I'm having an image right now, so I'll share it. When I left my first marriage, I was living alone in this retreat house. It was empty at the time. A person let me live there. And I used to take walks in the woods around the grounds and it was getting almost dark. And I was walking underneath the trees heading back to the retreat house, and a huge owl fell off the top of a branch, dropped down, and I could hear his wings flapping going off into the dark. He was huge. So there's a numinous primordial sense where all of a sudden the concreteness of the thing, it's beyond just what it appears to be and it touches interior depths of yourself. And so that's the power of these concrete images this way, I think.

Kirsten Oates: And is it true also, Jim, that these things in nature, the owl, the flowers, the feeling of the bank, the water, are they closer to our origin? Are they closer to this ground of consciousness? Is that one of the ways they help us?

Jim Finley: Yes. We could say that the owl, the tree, the way the light of the day yields every night to the darkness of the night and the night yields to the light in the morning, is actually as primordial then is our own body. Breathing in and breathing out, standing up and sitting down. So just like we were removed from the primordial world of nature, we're removed from the somatic incarnate immediacy of our incarnate body as a gift or something that's not as an object. We worry because we're getting older by the minute, but somehow it incarnates our presence in the world this way. And so there's something about that. There's something about the concrete immediacy of that which opens us to deeper places, the look, the touch this way. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, these kind of innate natural rhythms you talked about that nature just embodies, but also we can notice them in ourselves as human beings.

Jim Finley: And I think there's another key thing that runs through all of this. These moments of awakening and consciousness, they tend to be very fleeting, like little quickening. And then we return back to time again. But notice what we're doing is we start to notice that in these moments there's an enriched deepening of presence, but we can't make those moments happen. But what we can do is choose the stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken by the primordial depth. And that's the daily rendezvous with God in meditation. And this is what spiritual reading does. The slowness of the poem is a meditation practice where we stay long enough where these deepening layers start to have their way with us or being carried beyond linear time by the very intuitive density of the poetry that won't let us stop short with the explanations of things that can't be explained.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. And so the reading of the poem, the slow reading of the poem can be that meditative... Or even listening to you read it, Jim, on the podcast can be that meditative process. I love the way you shared one of your meditative practices of visiting the cemetery.

Jim Finley: Yes. When I was up at the cemetery on my way to my psychotherapy office and sit on a bench, I'd look out across the tombstones and realized that six feet under were all these caskets. And realizing that they were all empty, that there was nobody in there because we don't die. In other words, what's left of the body in time that's there, but

the person that we loved and loved us, the shine in their eyes, the tone in their voice, the beloved, they're all eternal. And that's what I mean in meditative states, we can see the dead, that is see meaning we interiorly realize the deathless presence of those who are crossed over that are one with us. And in that meditative state, we're one with them and the mystical body. And so the poetry helps us just sit with the beauty of that and be receptively open to that and how to really take that seriously and sit with it, we start to see how myopic and claustrophobic our life is when we're trapped just in linear time because it's infinitely more than that.

And this is our faith. This is faith. This is who we all ultimately are, is the beloved of God.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, beautiful. And so part one ends with this beautiful description of the way people were over time, but as if they're still there in the same rhythms and the same joy and the same experiences. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And my insight is not only does God know we're here because God's creating us into the present moment as the beloved, but God also knows the rhythms of our day-by-day life, standing up and sitting down and walking, who we talk to, God knows all of that. And so it isn't just that we're dead and because God never forgets, when we go into God, we'll go in the eternality of the rhythms of our life that everything real is forever. And this is the insight, I think, in the resurrection, that Jesus rose with his wounds, but they're transcended through love as glory. And so our wounds are forever, but they'll be transformed by eternal love in glory that everything is forever. So how can we, even though we're still in time, learn to live in that sensitivity, which are the mystics. I mean, these are the saints in mystics that we're seeking to follow and learn from.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And what's helpful, Jim, in what you just said for me anyway, is if everything is forever in God, one of my things, I think there's certain things I don't want to be forever about my life. But that point you made that in God, it's transformed into love. We don't need to be afraid of our mistakes. We don't need to be afraid of our... Yeah.

Jim Finley: When Thomas Merton was talking to the novices who was reading a text from one of the fathers of the church, he said, "What about final judgment day? Aren't we going to be embarrassed? See, what's in the dark will be brought out into the light and so on." He said, "Are you embarrassed as an infant of the mess you made in your diaper as an infant? That's what all those mistakes were. They're just the mess you left in your diaper when you didn't know better."

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Oh, well, I love that. I've never heard you say that. That's wonderful.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I thought that was so funny he said that.

Kirsten Oates: I love it. Okay. Well, now we'll move on to part two of East Coker. And you skipped over the first part, but discussed that he was trying to say something, he was trying to explain something. And then at the end he, with great humility, says, "That was a way of putting it. Not very satisfactory." And then he also says, "The poetry does not matter and it was not to start again what one had expected."

Jim Finley: That's right. In other words, there really is the practical language that explains. It's important.

I mean, there's the factual objective knowledge of this. That's really true. But the point is what he's getting at now is unexplainable. In other words, it's really inviting us to a deeper way to understand what it means to understand in time and conceptual time to understand is to conceptually comprehend, "Oh, I get it." But now it's to intimately realize what's incomprehensible, that it washes over you as a luminous awareness and the depth of it. And so that's why when he slipped into that on purpose, he says, "Not very satisfactory thing." But this is satisfactory from the standpoint of where we're headed. It's much truer where the medium is the message, which kind of thing exactly.

Kirsten Oates: And he says, "Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings." Like you just said, that it's not definable.

Jim Finley: No.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And I also get the sense he might even say, "If you're having trouble figuring this poem out, so am I. But I'm not writing something that's figured out. That's the point."

Kirsten Oates: That's the point.

Jim Finley: "I'm writing the language of lovers or when we talked to little children or the language of the cry of the poor. It's that kind of language. So it's realizable. It's like an awakening to these deeper places." Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It's also a helpful context for us reading the poem so that if we feel that we are left with an intolerable wrestle with words and meanings, that's part of what the poem's taking us through, undermining that, trying to help us have another way of being.

Jim Finley: Later on, we'll be exploring ways to use this poem as a prayer because if we just read on and on and on, skimming over, it's just word salad. We have to slow way down to sit with the depth of it at the place where it touches us. What if you would take one sentence or just one insight like the Jesus prayer, Lord Jesus had mercy on me or The Cloud of Unknowing? And how about if you would quietly sit in a prayerful open way? Where have I ever experienced that? Where have I ever been touched by that? How would I try to say it? What confuses me? And so by slowing it way down, so every phrase has that kind of potential to slow you down enough to sit and see how it's really putting words to things that matter very much that aren't explainable. And then it becomes a personal prayer this way.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Beautiful. I wanted to turn to this next section and go through it in quite a bit of detail where you described or what Elliot points to the wisdom of the elders and what it is and what it isn't. And I think there's so little guidance in society today for people who want to show up as wisdom elders or as wisdom mentors to others. And so I found this just very helpful in naming that and looking at that. So if it's okay, we'll go through that in a little bit of detail.

Jim Finley: Yeah, that would be lovely. Let's do that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. So there is it seems to us at best only a limited value in the knowledge

derived from experience. The knowledge imposes a pattern and falsifies. For the pattern is new in every moment and every moment is a new and shocking valuation of all we have been.

Jim Finley: All right, let's walk through that where there's this radical switch.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And he's talking about those who grow old, who have it and being old become wise and the elders who are growing old become wise. What's the difference? So what happens when we go through life in time is we go through experiences. We have an interpretation of the experience, the internalized interpretation forms a pattern. Then as we go through life, we project that pattern on the similarities and new experiences this way. And he sees that as a limited value because it's closed in repetition of projecting from the past onto the present this way. For the knowledge imposes a pattern and falsifies, and it falsifies because it's myopic. It's claustrophobic, you can't see past. Martin Heidegger says, "It's very hard to see beyond our own assumptive horizons. We have unconscious assumptions, we're trapped by them." And then he switches over, for now the pattern in eternity, there's now the pattern in the quiet moment looking out across the field with the people dancing and so on.

For now the pattern is new in every moment, like a startling newness of every moment. And every moment is a new and shocking evaluation of all we have been. It allows us to evaluate in a clearer light who we thought we were. See?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And it's also shocking because it's amazing... Put it another way. It's amazing for the self to discover the extent to which it can hide itself from itself. We saw what we saw, but we were so unaware of what we were unaware of. See?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Like this. So it's not humiliating, but it's very humbling to be sensitive to that.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, these patterns are both at the level of personality, how we experience ourselves as well as how we experience the world. We can mistake ourselves as someone less than we actually are. And we can also throw our projections on the world. I remember you teaching on John of the Cross, this idea of the glass chest, I think it is. And if my heart is full of anger, I see every person, it shines out through a glass chest, I see everyone as angry all around me. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And my heart's full of fear. I see everyone I see as someone who's afraid or someone I'm afraid of. So John of the Cross is trying to help. It's the same image. But what if in our heart is God's infinite love for us and which shines out, everyone I see is someone God's infinitely in love with including me? And this is what T.S. Eliot's about too. He's trying to bring us into that clarity of grace and see. It isn't these provisional things aren't real provisionally, they're real. We can't ignore them. They're real. But we absolutize the relative and relativize the absolute. We make them absolute. We can't see past the horizon of it. So we're to see the provisional reality, but see the infinity that shines through them and is in them. And the

poem is trying to help us develop that kind of sensitivity.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And just building on what you said, Jim, that what if we were connected to this eternal love and that's what was shining through our glass chest, and it makes me feel like love then is something very alive and new in every moment. The way T.S. Eliot said, "Love isn't stagnant. It's shocking in every moment." I think he says, "New and shocking in every moment."

Jim Finley: And another big thing that's going to be key to our life and to this poem, which is the cross, is that when love touches suffering, the suffering turns love into mercy. And God's oceanic mercy on us in our brokenness is infinitely more real than our brokenness, no matter how broken we might be. And so we're really trying to melt into the infinite mercy of God, which is experiential salvation this way.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. So it's not like we can clean ourselves up and rid ourselves of all these assumptions and perfect our personality. That's not where the poem's leading us. It's leading us into this state of humility and openness to God.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. Another way I put it helps me to see it too is that instead of thinking of ourselves as trying to reach a certain state, see, where we can become who God wants us to be like, am I lovable yet? Am I lovable yet? Am I lovable yet? Instead, like Merton says, "To understand spiritually is to know you're infinitely understood." And you don't need to understand yourself, but God does infinitely understand you this way. So it isn't the condition that you're able to reach, is realizing God is already into the holiness of the ragged edges of your condition and to rest in that God's present in the intimacy of our brokenness.

Kirsten Oates: That's so comforting. That's so comforting.

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

Kirsten Oates: Jim, can you help unpack this next sentence? It's we are only undeceived of that which deceiving could no longer harm.

Jim Finley: See, we're only undeceived of that which in deceiving can harm us because now we see we were deceived. If we don't know we're deceived, we're harmed by our deception because we think it's true.

Kirsten Oates: I see. Yeah.

Jim Finley: But once we see the deception was deception because we now see it's a deception, it can't harm us anymore because why be harmed by a deception? It's true. That's a good-

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So thinking about this as the wisdom of the elder, so where the wisdom is to recognize the way our patterns and our personality keeps us deceived about what's true. And what's ultimately true and real keeps us myopic. Yeah.

Jim Finley: We don't reject the patterns, but as long as we see the patterns are adequate for truly understanding our situation, then that's the ideological living. They have a certain provisional value. But because they're finite, they're infinitely less than the infinite love. That

alone is the reality of who we are in God. And that's the place where the poem tries to invite us to sit there and take it in.

Kirsten Oates: He gives a nod again to the tradition of Buddhism, but also to Dante who's... Yeah. And so not only in the middle of the way, but all the way in a dark wood in a bramble.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Dante, the Divine Comedy where he goes into hell and purgatory and heaven and so on. And in the middle way of the Buddha, the middle way. See, it's in a bramble and there's no secure foothold meaning this, there's no secure foothold in giving finality to any opinion, like you got it locked in. But that very insecurity, the inability to do that is the door that opens on a deeper truer security of the unexplainable love that's sustaining us in every situation of our life.

Kirsten Oates: And menaced by monsters, fancy lights risking enchantment. If you step out into the insecure footing, is that risking transformation?

Jim Finley: Yeah, yes, yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Do not let me hear of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly, their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession, of belonging to another or to others or to God. Is that then looking at the way we get caught up in these patterns? So we're exposing the patterns how we can be... To have more humility around that is the wisdom path.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And another big thing to consider not to go off into it is my oldest daughter is a hospice nurse, just full-time hospice work, and I was with Maureen when she died. Sometimes the grace of hospice is at the old age, you're in these internalized patterns and sometimes in the fragility of death you can be liberated from them. Not always, like acceptance. And you can feel it in the room when it's happening. The person's being gently let out beyond the confines that have held them bondage for so long.

Kirsten Oates: The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility. Humility is endless because it's an ongoing openness to God's knowledge, wisdom, and... Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. So without God, I'm nothing, absolutely nothing. But in the acceptance of my nothingness without God, everything that belongs to God belongs to me. Everything is possible because I'm the beloved. So yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So that's good and challenging picture of what it is to be a wisdom elder. And he threads his own way of being that through the poem with this ongoing, the poetry does not matter and... Yeah.

Jim Finley: I think there's another thing too, I want to say this being a therapist for so long. I also think as we go through life, sometimes we don't have to get old before we see this. There was in the arc of our midst of the things we don't see, there are real realizations. And I mean, touching transformations, the grace our life and our passage through time this way, I think it's good to just be sensitive to that.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. So that was part two. And so now onto part three. Oh, dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark. And Jim, you pointed to this is a reference to St. John of the Cross and

his teaching on the Dark Night of the Soul where we're actually discovering God in the dark. But it looks like it's also pointing to in this first stanza that everyone goes into the dark and that they die. But not everyone might go into this dark night of the soul. Am I getting that right?

Jim Finley: I want to put it in the context of the poem as he goes through layers of this. So he talks about the silent funeral. So everyone's dying. You're going to die, everyone dies, dies, dies, dies, dies, dies, dies. And we all go with them into the silent funeral. Nobody's funeral for there's no one to bury because no one dies. Everyone's eternal. "And I said to my soul, 'Be still and let the dark come upon you, which will be the darkness of God, which is really being blinded by an infinite light.'" As in a theater, there's this lovely scene where the pitch dark and you can hear them changing the scenery. And when the lights come on again, the screen, oh, it's a new scene. So in your life, in consciousness, you're in this new scene, you're in this new place or that went in an underground train. This is people in the subway, an underground train in London. Or in an underground train in the tube stops too long between stations and the conversations rise and slowly fades into silence.

And you see in every phase the mental emptiness deepen leaving only the terror of nothing to think about. So it's like this. If you're still in time, in a moment where there's nothing to think about is terrifying. If I just keep thinking I'll be okay. Even though if they would just stay there, the place where there's nothing to think about is the door that opens out into eternity. That there's this collective unawareness of this nonlinear depth that we're afraid to leave. We're addicted to the finiteness of ourself until sometimes the finiteness is broken open for love found or love loss or birth or there's certain things that break our heart open and lead us into the place where we can resonate with what this poem's about. Whether the mystics are about what Jesus was about.

Kirsten Oates: When I read this section, I was thinking there's certain lines that are instructions on how to meditate and how to stay with this. And so I love this. "I said to my soul, 'Be still and let the dark come upon you, which shall be the darkness of God.'" And then you read on. But that image is so helpful to me to think about, I'm in my finite egoic state of consciousness stuck in time and it's like I'm watching my life play out on a theater stage. And then suddenly the theater goes completely dark and the scene changes and I can be in this sense of the more eternal and the infinite. I just found that such a great image to think about how people might experience that shift in consciousness.

Jim Finley: Yes. It's like you're thrashing around in the dark. And then there's a moment, this happens in therapy, happens in the middle of the night, but instead of thrashing around in the dark, you just sit still in the dark. And here the very darkness you are trying to get out of has luminous depth to it and it opens up this new dimension of yourself this way, which is the darkness of God, meaning this infinite light that blinds our finite eyes.

Kirsten Oates: And this instruction, "I said to my soul, 'Be still.'" And then contrasting that to when people are on the train and they get stuck, I mean, on an airplane and you're stuck out on the tarmac or there's still things that we really just react to, we don't like them and so we're not used to being still. We don't like being still. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Maureen used to say, "You cannot keep a contemplative waiting." And that's why we say be

still and know. See, be still in this deep stillness. Then in that stillness is the divinity reveals itself to us interiorly.

Kirsten Oates: And he also says this line, “Under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing.” So it’s almost like the only way we get still is under ether, but under ether we’re not conscious of this eternal reality either.

Jim Finley: Yeah. It’s like a metaphor. It’s under ether, you’re conscious of nothing, but then you wake up.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: So the idea would be Teresa of Avila, the interior castle, she goes through these deepening layers. And in the fifth mention she says, “You get to a place where it’s so quiet. It’s so quiet. And you realize your heart’s being led into boundaryless love and you surrender to it. And the awareness gets so delicate that self can no longer see itself in its own reflective consciousness and you disappear from yourself. But then when you come back, you don’t know if anything happened because you weren’t there, but something did happen because you’re different. You know are in God and God is in you. And you also see the inadequacy of everything is not the beloved. You’re like a butterfly with tattered wings. But if you accept it’s very inadequacy is less than God, you see God shining out through its inadequacy. So you see the holiness and the simplicity of everything.” So he’s using that paradox of mystical darkness in which there’s this metamorphosis of seeing things in this new place. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. Lovely. Lovely.

Jim Finley: Which was always there and we couldn’t see it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It’s so helpful. Again, if I think about this as instructions for creating this open stance. Because when he says, “Be still.” It’s not just about not moving. His instructions, “I said to my soul, ‘Be still and wait without hope. For hope would be hope for the wrong thing. Wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing. There is yet faith, but the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.’” So this stillness, it’s almost we’re negating certain things. We’re trying to stop ourselves from having expectations, I guess, about God, having particular hopes or ideas about the way God will show up. That’s part of the stillness. Am I getting that right?

Jim Finley: I think so. I want to say it back. That’s a good way to say it. Let’s say we’re in the midst of some unresolved thing, whatever it is of uncertain outcome. And in the self and time, I’d like to push it through and settle it. But to be still, Eckhart says, “If it is, let it be. And sit in the midst of the unresolved with inner clarity. And you discover in the midst of the unresolved.” See, if you think too soon, you’re thinking the wrong thing. If you hope too soon because it’s the ego and time trying to fix itself on its own terms.

Kirsten Oates: I see.

Jim Finley: But if you sit still in the very midst of the unresolved, there can come rising up subtle realizations or subtle intimations or subtle things that are intimately surprising that help you find your footing in this new place. It’s a meditative state.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. And even the faith piece because the faith is really having faith that the depth of God is always present, that I don't need to come in with my own idea or my own expectation. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. It's almost like when we drop into that place, faith, love and hope are in eight. They're not something we have to create on our own. They come welling up.

Jim Finley: They're the dowry of our being. That is our faith is the God-given capacity to see the God-given godly nature of our breath and our life is faith. "Primitive inner assurance." Gabriel Marcel says. And so it's that kind of earthy childlike sensitivity that the present moment, just as it is, is unexplainably trustworthy this way. The mystery of being alive and real in the world, letting it unfold. It doesn't mean we don't act because it requires action, but it's an action that comes from this inner place, not an action that comes out of the reactivity of trying to make it work out on our terms, but an act that's moved by the inner luminosity that guides us. And with all things considered, what would be the most loving thing right now I could do for myself, my body, my mind, this person, this relationship?

Kirsten Oates: And this speaks to the way that this little section ends. So it opened with, "I said to my soul, 'Be still, and let the dark come upon you.'" And then it ends, "So the darkness shall be the light and the stillness, the dancing."

Jim Finley: That's right. That's John of the Cross. Oh, night lovelier than the dawn.

Kirsten Oates: Well, moving on where he does refer directly to lines from John of the Cross. And you pulled out a translation of that teaching that you prefer, Jim. And I'd love to just go, again, back over that because it's so deep every line you've read. So maybe just to pull out a few of the couplets.

Jim Finley: Yes. And let me say something, those who are interested. For a long time, the translation I had by Alison Piers, which is very good. I read it in the monastery. This translation is from the Institute of Carmelite Studies translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, and the collected works of St. John of the Cross. You can get it. So that's the translation I'm using. It's also very nice because in one volume you get the complete works with an introduction to each of the works and all the poetry's in there. So just those that are interested, that's the translation that I'm using.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. And can you just tell us again specifically where this is from?

Jim Finley: Yes, this is St. John of the Cross, the Ascent of Mount Carmel, book one, and book one chapter 13. And what he says, he says, "In order to make these teachings clearer, let me stop in a very succinct way." So it's poetically dense this way. There's a succinctness to it. And that's why we have to move very slowly, which is almost like T.S. Eliot's poetry. So if you skim over, it just doesn't make any sense. But if you take it like a Zen Koan or one of the parables of Jesus and just quietly sit with the couplet, a clarity can come this born of this patient attentiveness infused with love, and it invites us to that.

Kirsten Oates: It unravels what we think is clarity. That's part of what it's trying to do, unravel the way we

think it's right to understand things or the way we're trying to grasp things. Yeah.

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

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So maybe shall I read the couple of couplets and then-

Jim Finley: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, read the first couplet, then I'll paraphrase. We'll walk through a few.

Kirsten Oates: To reach satisfaction in all, desire satisfaction in nothing. To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing.

Jim Finley: Let's walk through that. And sitting with it, this is what's helped me to see it and it's endlessly evocative. Each listener might have it, it's better for them to see it. This is how it helps me. To reach satisfaction and the all that is God, desire is possession in no thing, which being finite is infinitely less than God. Another way to look at it is to reach satisfaction in all things. Desire is possession in the nothingness of everything. Because then its nothingness without God is God. In an ongoing self-donating act, the very presence of God is presencing itself as like you're holding a pebble in your hand. The presence of God is presencing itself as a weight of that little pebble and it's nothingness without God. And so he's awakening us to that kind of sensitivity. And then likewise, to come to possess all... Possessiveness to have. To come to possess all that is God, desire the possession of no thing. But likewise, to come to possess the all of God that's present in all things, desire the possession of no thing.

Because as soon as you close in and try to have it as the haver, you close yourself off to the experience of it. It's not for the having because it's given. And so each of these couplets invites us to sit with that paradox. And so a paradox is in an apparent contradiction. But when we sit with it, the impasse of the logical mind drops down into a deeper clarity. It breaks the stream of a linear conclusions and lets the light of insight shine through. So all these phrases are like that.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, beautiful. I love this one. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing. Yeah.

Jim Finley: So to arrive at being the all and we are the all of God because in the infinite generosity of God, God gives the infinity of God to us as our very life and our nothingness without God. Yeah. See, that's our God-given godly nature. So to arrive at being the all of God and your nothingness without God, desire to be no thing because as soon as you try to be something, you're this specific little finite thing. And that's why I say you could drop the thimble into the ocean, but you can't get the ocean into a thimble. It comes in moments of great awakening. Our heart knows it's true when it hears it. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And Jim, I think I heard the last section that you read properly, but tell me, I'll read it back. In this nakedness, the spirit finds its quietude and rest. For in coveting nothing, nothing tires it by pulling it up and nothing oppresses it by pushing it down because it is in the center of its humility when it covets something by this very fact, it tires itself.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. So imagine you're in the quietude and rest of not seeking anything because nothing's missing because even the infinity of God is being given to you as the perception that something's missing. That's God too. There is nothing missing anywhere. And so when you rest in that, that life and death are unexplainably trustworthy, divine and dimensionless

in all directions do this. But in coveting something, meaning to covet is a desire that you won't be happy without it. I have to have it. But in coveting something, it loses its inner serenity.

Kirsten Oates: I see. Yeah.

Jim Finley: But when you sit this way, nothing raises it up because how can you go higher than the infinite, the lofty depths of God and nothing lowers it in a loss? And so you're in the center of your own humility this way. And the Buddhists would call it nirvana.

Kirsten Oates: I see. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And for the Jesus prayer, see, it's being transformed through the words of the Jesus prayer into your heart center, which is God's heart and your heart is one. That's what all these traditions are about, helping us find this place and live out of it and share it with others.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. And the Jesus prayer from our last season, the wave of Pilgrim. Yes.

Jim Finley: Yes. And by the way, I want to add one more little piece. It's also important in this to be deeply at peace with the extent that we're unable to do this because otherwise we're trying again. So we're even giving up being able to do this because we don't need to do it because it's already achieving itself through us and our inability to do it. It just keeps collapsing in on itself until there's this awakening event.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Wow. That is a great image of it. The way the next thing comes up and then you have to let it go and let it collapse. And the next thing and the next thing. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Well, we're onto part four and this is where he turns more directly to Christ, the image of Christ. What an amazing way of describing Christ, opening this section. So the wounded surgeon applies the steel beneath the bleeding hands. So the wounded surgeon applies the steel that questions the distempered part. Beneath the bleeding hands, we feel the sharp compassion of the healer's art resolving the enigma of the fever chart. And so it's a new way of seeing Christ. I hadn't thought of Christ as this picture of a surgeon with the steel.

Jim Finley: Yeah, this way, I've put it in a previous session too, I think, so you can see where all this is headed. It says in the gospels that when Jesus died, they pierced his heart with a lance, and blood and water flowed out like the birth of a child. And then there was no more Jesus left in Jesus. And then the only Jesus that was ever really there is manifested throughout all the time, including now. So when Jesus says, "Come, follow me." It sounds like a good idea to see where he is taking us. So when there's no more you left in you, the only you that's ever really there, which is God being manifested and poured out as the mystery of you is poured out deathlessly throughout the whole world. And so the distempered part is the mystery of the cross. Jesus reveals that God's response to us in our dilemma is to become identified with us as precious in our dilemma. And God's response to us in our suffering is to suffer our suffering and to die our deaths this way.

And the distempered part is that we don't know how to do that. So the scalpel, the distempered part is you don't need to know how, God says, "But I do." And this mercy of your deathless beauty is already overtaking you and your inability to understand it this way.

So if we're in time, we're frustrated, distempered, but if we give up trying and surrender to the sweetness of salvation.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. And then he talks about to be restored, our sickness must grow worse. Can you help me understand that?

Jim Finley: One way to look at it is this. The contemplative spiritual director is that person into your life to let you know as lovingly as possible, you're in the midst of a hopeless situation. Your life's unfigure-outable. It's not resolvable. Because if you think you're still trying to fix it, you don't get the point. But the point, if you just accept its abyss-like unfolding, that you can't manage it, there comes welling up out of that acceptance. There's no need to manage it because you're being infinitely cared for by a love that loves you so in the midst of your limitations. I think that's the paradox.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. It reminds me of Richard Rohr's teaching in *Falling Upward* of there comes in everyone's life, something that they can't resolve, something that they can't fix, yeah, something that brings them to their knees in a way. And so this idea that our sickness must grow worse, we come to the end of our capabilities, our ability too.

Jim Finley: John Henry Cardinal Newman says, "Often in life our failures end up being more important than our successes because our successes tend to reinforce our illusions about ourself. Our failures either despair or we go deeper." See, and that's the point. You come to the edge of the breaking point of what's unresolved. And if you sit there in your openness, something's given to you there, that transcends the need to resolve it. Like a deep lesson about love and about life. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. That's so helpful. So the whole earth is our hospital, which is really what you were just describing, Jim, that the way reality plays out is actually for our good. We're being drawn to God.

Jim Finley: That's right. And this phrase, it's a love that will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere. And that's what I mean by God's presence that spares us from nothing, even as God unexplainably sustains us in all things. Thomas Merton once said, "We should all go down on our knees right now and thank God we can't live the way we want to. God doesn't let us get away with it. It prevents us everywhere, but it never leaves us because that's where God is, with us." It's the grace dimension of the unresolved matter.

Kirsten Oates: And then so the closing piece of this section. The dripping blood our only drink, the bloody flesh our only food. In spite of which we like to think that we are sound, substantial flesh and blood, again in spite of that, we call this Friday good. It's like the mystery of the cross again.

Jim Finley: There's beautiful passages in John, the Last Supper with the Eucharist and the Beloved. And he knows he's going to go out to be executed this way. Then it's also the mystery of the Eucharist. And then Good Friday is good because on Good Friday in its torment, death died, see. And the suffering doesn't stop, but the tyranny of suffering ends in the depths of Christ in the midst of suffering, it's like that. This is where the poem is headed this way.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. Okay. So the last section, part five. Back in the middle way. So here I am in the

middle way. And again, this humility about him trying to say the unsayable, trying to learn to use words and every attempt is a whole new start and a different kind of failure because one has only learned to get the better of words for the thing one no longer has to say.

Jim Finley: That's right. Or you're no longer disposed to say it. You got the mastery of it, but you're no longer inclined to say it that way. And that's really true with any creative act. When we start out as it unfolds unexpectedly, it isn't what we thought it was in the beginning this way, and just seeing this true.

Kirsten Oates: So in this section, Jim, he also reflects on all the ways this teaching has been offered throughout history, that there's others that have said it. It's come and gone. But it's so interesting, this kind of mystical teaching. You've said many times, Jim, that it rises and falls throughout history and that not everyone's looking for it.

Jim Finley: Yes, a lot of people aren't looking for it.

Kirsten Oates: That it's a gift to want to find this.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it is a gift. It's a gift to be touched by the beauty of this. And you can tell it's putting words to something that our heart knows is true, that we can't explain. That's a gift. And also to know that the very things that you are trying to say, it's already been discovered several times by men or women. You can't hope to emulate these great mystics. We can't compare ourselves to them. But there's no competition because what's given to one of us belongs to all of us, and that's lovely.

Kirsten Oates: And then this reference to Julian of Norwich, there is only the fight to recover what has been lost and found, and lost again and again, and now under conditions that seem unpropertise.

Jim Finley: Yes, that's hard to say, that word. Of unlikely outcome. And so Julian of Norwich, which is one of the mystics that we looked at, she said, "I sought him and I found him, and I lost him." And she says, "I think that's the way it should be on this earth. Because in losing, it just returns the desire to seek him." And that cycle keeps deepening throughout our life. So he's echoing her. He's going to do it again later on in the poem. He's going to quote her. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: If I didn't know better, I would've thought Eliot had listened to our 10 seasons of Turning to the Mystics or these references to our favorites.

Jim Finley: Let's put it this way. He deeply read the mystics that we're sharing. He knew them well. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Lovely. Okay. So now to the very last section. And this last section is back to what it means to grow old and wise, which it has this luminous quality to it and a sense of no certainty, curiosity, humility. Yeah. That's how it read to me anyway.

Jim Finley: I think of this too because I'm 81 years old and I live at the ocean. So I sit out there, Maureen's ashes are on the table right here. And so a lifetime burning in every moment to sit alone in silence next to her ashes, looking as night falls out over the ocean like this. It's a lifetime burning in this moment, in every moment. And not the lifetime of one person

only, but old stones that cannot be deciphered. Almost like ancient writings that you can't decipher in your life. There is a time for the evening under the starlight, a time for the evening under the lamplight, an evening with a photograph album, sitting there alone looking at pictures of yourself as a baby, your parents when they got married, grandparent. There is a time for that. These very simple moments. Love is most nearly itself when here and now cease to matter because it's everywhere. I mean, it's all pervasively everywhere.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. I'll read the last section. Old people ought to be explorers. Here and there does not matter. We must be still and still moving into another intensity for a further union, a deeper communion through the dark, cold and the empty desolation. The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters of the petrol and the porpoise in my end is my beginning. I love that sense that old people ought to be explorers. But exploring these kind of depths. Such a great encouragement to all of us that are aging, that we can still hunger and desire and learn.

Jim Finley: And that's what acceptance is, I think, in death. If you come to the stage of... Not everyone gets there. Is that you're literally at... Eckhart would say at the rim of eternity as you're starting to explore this boundarylessness, which is coming right for you and you're right in the mystery of it all. And so the poem is also saying, "Why wait till the 11th hour to get there? Why not find our way there now?" And also, it's very touching at the end, the cry, the wind, the vast water, the petrol, and the porpoise. And the petrol, it's the oil from the ships. So this mixture of the wars and society and the ocean and the primordial and the porpoise, he leaves it all intermingled, that way is the way he ends.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. What we're exploring is not just the goodness of life, we're exploring the whole of life in its-

Jim Finley: As it is. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah. That last section gives that sense of, it's endless, it's infinite, a deeper union of further communion that goes on and on and on.

Jim Finley: Yeah, because there's no end to endlessness. Yeah, the endlessness never ends and it's our destiny. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, in discussing endlessness, we now are going to end.

Jim Finley: We are. We are. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So thank you for today, Jim. Wow.

Jim Finley: Sure. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, what a beautiful-

Jim Finley: It's amazing poem. Yeah, it's really amazing. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And what a gift to have you guide us through it. To see the wisdom that you draw out is just so helpful. So thank you for today. Thank you, Dorothy and Corey in the background, helping us along. And we'll see you next time. 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.