

Turning to the Mystics



T.S. Eliot

Session 4

with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. Greetings, everyone and welcome to our time together, turning for guidance to the teachings found in T.S. Eliot's poem, Four Quartets. The fourth and final poem we've now come to is titled Little Gidding. And Little Gidding is a chapel, a small chapel in the English countryside where in the past a community of people gathered for prayer. So Little Gidding is really the grand finale of the whole poem because all through the poem the struggle to find our way into primordial time, beyond time, and it goes on and on and on and on. In the end, it's resolved in prayer, to kneel where prayer has been valid. So really this is also where it becomes explicitly mystical, about God's oneness with us woven into the suffering of our life, the love of our life and every aspect of life itself is ultimately divine. And so it's really just a lovely kind of eloquent kind of crescendo to the whole poem.

So with this in mind, we turn to the poem itself. And in the poem T.S. Eliot begins by telling us that, "Midwinter spring is its own season, sempiternal though sodden towards sundown, suspended in time between pole and tropic. When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire, the brief sun flames the ice on pond and ditches, in windless cold that is the heart's heat, reflecting in a watery mirror, a glare that is blindness in the early afternoon."

So he's talking about a bitter cold winter day and brilliant sunlight. And the brilliant sunlight, he's going to be saying, is shining on the snow and the branches of the bushes and the trees. And the brilliance of the sun in the bitter cold, "Stirs the dumb spirit." Dumb I think meaning we can't hear, deaf and dumb, like we're not able to hear. "No wind, but Pentecostal fire in the dark time of the year between melting and freezing." So he's bringing one of these strange times again, like a timeless time, like a bitter cold day on a brilliant sunny day. And the Pentecostal fire is not the fire of, "time's covenant," he says, so this is not springtime with voluptuous sweetness, but a timeless, frozen time. And he says, "Where is the summer, the unimaginable Zero summer?" So in the midst of this, can't even imagine the summer so cold, like everything... It's that kind of time, kind of a primordial time that's so strange and mysterious to us in ego consciousness and time.

And then he says, next stanza, "If you came this way," and what he means, what way, "If you came this way to Little Gidding, if you'd come this way with me to the chapel of Little Gidding to join me in prayer, where prayer has been valid." "If you came this way," here's the mystical part of the poem. I want to say up front how it helps me to see this. In the previous poems, we simply can't handle or we can't effectively overtake the uncertainties of the fluctuations of primordial time with fires and floods and mishaps and struggles and so on, and especially the inevitability of death. He says, but there's moments that we're conscious we're not in time, which are meditative states. And a meditative time, it's a moment of time transcending time, and then we see that our body dies, we're actually all eternal. Nobody dies. We momentarily are above it all. But the thing is we can't stay there because time reclaims us again with the day's demands, the losses, the pain, the struggle and so on, and it goes on and on and on. We do the best we can.

What he's going to say is now going to happen, to come this way, "If you came this way to Little Gidding," is something different. And I want to set this up to help me to understand this as we walk through it line by line. See what if and when we die like a candle blowing out, it's nothing, there is no life after death. It's just nothingness this way? Then it really wouldn't matter how we lived in a way because no matter how we lived, it ends in nothing.

But what if instead of being nothing, what if it's infinite? What if the infinite love of God is infinitely transforming us into the very infinite love of God, like the divinity of us boundless in all directions forever? Then it really doesn't matter how we live if when we die, we spill over into the eternal infinity of God. And what's possible is we can start to spill over into the infinity of God by realizing in prayer we don't need to rise above time and timeless moments.

And here's where it gets specifically Christian and mystical. Why? Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, that Jesus did not consider his equality with God a condition to be clung to. So the infinite presence of Jesus as God has entered into time. So now this is God's oneness with us and the eternality of the ticking of the clock, the sun moving across the sky, of standing up and sitting down. And Paul says, "For me, to live is Christ," that in Christ God is living our life. God is suffering our suffering. God is dying our death and a death that ends in resurrection. And that's prayer. It's in prayer that we kneel to the grace of the spirit to internally realize the incarnate infinity of the love that loves us so. That it's in prayer that this abides. So he said, "If you came this way," namely this way that's going to lead you to the moment of prayer, where you're going to realize that the infinite presence of God is present in the passing moments of your life, as God is the holiness of life itself.

So now I want to walk through it line by line. "If you came this way, taking the route you would be likely to take," probably the one you take each day from your home, wherever you go, but you're going to end up in Little Gidding because you got to start from your house to get there. "If you came this way in May time, you would find the hedges white again in May with voluptuaries sweetness. It would be the same at the end of the journey." So when you walk there in the voluptuous May, when you finally got to Little Gidding, it would still be in the middle of May when you got there, when you arrived at the door of the church of Little Gidding. "If you came at night like a broken king," in history in the past it was a king who lost a battle, and he came to Little Gidding to pray. So if you came from your own house where you'd normally come, or if you'd come at night like a broken king, it doesn't matter because when you kneel in prayer, it's infinity. So it is the same thing, it doesn't matter.

"If you came by day not knowing what you came for," see, you're looking for something but you don't know what you're looking for and you end up at Little Gidding. Life's like that a lot of times. But it doesn't matter that you didn't know why you came. Why? Because you're at Little Gidding. See, because when you kneel, it's God. "It would be the same, when you leave the rough road and turn behind the pigsty to the dull facade," and here's my Advent meditation that I give about the pigsty. The Advent meditation that I give is, it says in the scriptures that when Mary was about to give birth, she was in the last time of her pregnancy, she had to, by order of the Roman authority, had to be taken by Joseph to Bethlehem to sign the census. All the Jews had to sign in the census of the place of their birth. And so they went on this hard, arduous journey. And when they got to Bethlehem, she went into labor. But there was no room in the inn because all the other pilgrims were there too. So she gave birth in the dark in a stable.

So the lesson is this. See, there was no room in the inn, but Jesus came anyway. So here's the point of this. We might say our life is too busy, there's no room for God. But God comes anyway. The world's too crazy, there's no room for God. But God comes anyway. We're too confused. But God comes anyway. But we got to be willing to leave the light and the noise and the hurly-burly of the inn and go alone in the dark to the stable, which is the poverty

of our heart and humility, and God's waiting for us there. "And the tombstone." Which is death, the cemetery, the deathless nature of death of those who no one ever dies. "And what you thought you came for is only a shell or a husk of meaning." You thought you knew why you were going. Like back in the days when you were so holy, it was so clear, but along the way you're not so sure anymore what it all means even.

And there you are at the door of Little Gidding, just like a husk of meaning. "From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled." So the purpose you came for, it breaks wide open when it's fulfilled by God in prayer beyond all expectations, beyond anything to be expected. It hasn't entered our mind what God has prepared for those who love Him, God has prepared for us as God. If at all. It might not break at all in human terms, for you at all, but still in the mystery of God it breaks unexplainably. "Either you had no purpose," you were just wandering around minding your own business and ended up a little... Doesn't matter. "Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured." So you had a purpose, but when you got there and kneeled in prayer, it's beyond the end that you figured. See, it was unforeseeably incomprehensible. "And is altered in fulfillment." And then when it's fulfilled, it's altered or metamorphosized in the altering.

There are other places which are also the world's end. Some at the sea's jaws over the dark lake, in a desert or a city, but this is the nearest in place and time now in England, namely it's the nearest for him. And so what is Little Gidding for us? It's our living room is Little Gidding. See, it's the bed we wake up in each morning. It's the place in our own life where our own heart's being stirred by these things is Little Gidding. In our own moments of the sincerity of prayer, there it is like there. "If you came this way," by the way, "this way" meaning this way to Little Gidding, or if you came in this way realizing it doesn't matter which way you're coming, if you came this way, in via, in via, "... taking any route, starting from anywhere at any time or any season, it would always be the same." Because it all ends up being God because everything's ultimately infinite and eternal and you're the beloved.

"It would always be the same: you'd have to put off sense and notion," any sense you had or what it would be like, you're going to have to put it aside. It's beyond all notions, beyond expectations. "You are not here to verify," what would that mean? You've got a clipboard and you're going to see if it checks out or not? And if it meets your... Because the you that's looking for verification is the finite you that's being transformed into God, is being divinized. You're not here to instruct yourself. You're not here to learn something. Thomas Merton once said, "Perhaps there's nothing to figure out after all. Perhaps we only need to wake up." We only need to be quickened to see the divinity of every breath and heartbeat. Or you're not here to "inform curiosity." I just thought I'd stop in a getting because I'm curious to see what this prayer is like. Well, you're not here to carry a report. Who are you going to go back and tell about prayer?

It's like Moses in the burning bush, in the story of the burning bush. It was burning but it wasn't burning up. He was beyond cause and effect. There weren't any ashes even left to show anybody. You know what our quickening's are like. How do you explain this to anybody really? It is such a gift then to be in the presence of someone

who can't explain it either, and we recognize each other. And I think this is The Living School. I think this is a Turning to the Mystics podcast and here T.S. Eliot, we're joining him and he is inviting us to get in touch with this within ourselves and he shares it from his heart because he's realized it himself as a teacher, as a mystic teacher.

"You are here to kneel where prayer has been invalid. And prayer is more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying. And what the dead had no speech for, when living, they can tell you being dead." When the dead were living they had no speech for it because they were still living. But now that they're dead, namely they're transformed by God into God, they can tell you the communication but tell you how in the depths of prayer you can hear the voices of the dead, namely the voices of eternity in prayer and the mystical body, the death and life were intermingled with each other in love and prayer.

"They can tell you, being dead: the communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living. Here," here's this phrase again, is, "the intersection of the timeless moment." The intermingling of time and eternity prior to the difference. The zero variance. "Here, the intersection of the timeless moment is England and nowhere. Never and always." It's never, because it can't be pinned down any specific moment because it's the one thing that's always happening in every moment, including this one that I'm speaking in the moment you're listening to this. That moment.

I'm going to skip a few stanzas. And now the scene changes. And the scene changes either in prayer, this is like a vision that he's having or it's like a waking dream. It's a change of scenery. But it's the same mystical dimension. [In the uncertain hour before the morning," so this is pre-dawn, "Near the ending of interminable night, at the recurrent end of the unending," that is it's the recurrent end of the ending of the night, which endlessly never ends because it happens every night. You're out alone walking. "I met one walking, loitering and hurried as to blown towards me like the metal leaves before the urban dawn wind unresisting." He's walking along in the dark and he sees a stranger in the dark almost like being blown towards him by the wind.

"And as I fixed upon the down-turned face that pointed scrutiny with which we challenged the first-met stranger," like, "Who are you? Are you safe? We don't know who you are." Because you're all out there by yourself with this person. "The first-met stranger in the waning dusk, I caught the sudden look of some dead master whom I had known, forgotten and half recalled, both one and many." So it's a dead master. But the dead master is like many dead masters collapsed into one. And who are the masters? They're the masters he's been quoting through the poem. It's St. John of the Cross. It's Julian of Norwich. It's the masters of the Turning to the Mystics podcast. It's Teresa of Avila, it's Meister Eckhart. It's all these dead masters. It's the Buddha, it's Krishna. Arjuna sharing with us the pilgrim which he's learning from the teacher in the Jesus Prayer.

So we meet the dead masters, meeting this dead master as one. "Whom I had known," I knew them because when I read them I was touched by the beauty of their words. But I forgot because I'm busy. And I half recalled the beauty that touched me,

I kind of remember it this way or how I was moved when I was in their presence. “Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled, both one and many: in the brown baked features, the eyes of a familiar compound ghost,” seemed like compacted into one. “Both intimate and unidentifiable.” Here’s the thing about the mystic’s voice, including this poem, it’s very intimate but it’s unidentifiable. So you can’t identify what the intimacy is that you’re intimately experiencing this way. Because that’s the way masters talk, because that’s God’s voice coming to you in your heart in prayer.

“So I assumed a double part, and cried and heard another voice, ‘What, are you here? Although we are not. I was still the same.’ And I think it means this. I assumed another voice. Now the dead master is that in us that already knows this. See there’s the awakened you, your heart’s been quickened. If it wasn’t quickened, this poem wouldn’t make any sense. It wouldn’t. But because you have been quickened, it does make sense because we only recognize what we know. So there is that which knows it, but there’s also that which doesn’t know it yet. So now it isn’t interpersonal but also intrapersonal transformation of this loving exchange between these dimensions of ourselves, the dimensions of the dead, the dimensions of the dead masters and the echoing of God’s voice through all these voices, including the voice of this poem.

“Knowing myself yet being someone other, and he a face still forming.” So the face is still forming, the face hasn’t formed yet. “Yet the words suffice to compel the recognition they proceeded.” Notice, “If you’d only talk to me the words, the beauty of your words will precede the formation of your face.” I can’t see your face, but I will know in the depth of what you say to me, it will reveal to me who you are.” Like these words or the words of the mystic, the words of Jesus. “And he a face still forming, yet the words sufficed to compel the recognition they proceeded. And so, compliant to the common wind, too strange to each other for misunderstanding.” The stranger is so mysterious, it’s too mysterious to be understood. There’s nothing to understand. So you’re in the intimacy of the what cannot be understood.

St. John of the Cross says, “God grants to some people to understand that everything remains to be understood.” So you’re in the presence of this ungraspable thing. “In concord at this intersection,” there’s the intersection again of time and eternity, at this intersection between the living and the dead, between time and eternity, “... of meeting nowhere.” This is no particular place because it’s the reality of every place with, “no before or after.” This is not in sequential time. We’re in the depths of prayer with God, we’re in eternity. “We trod the pavement in dead patrol.” So now you and this compound master were walking together in the dark. And T.S. Eliot’s leading us. He’s part of the entourage. We’re all walking together.

“I said,” to the dead masters, “the wonder that I feel is easy, yet ease is caused of wonder.” In other words, “I’m kind of amazed that I’m so relaxed with you. Yet the fact that I’m relaxed with you makes me wonder.” See? But why am I so relaxed with the infinite? Because it’s my home. I belong here. I’m not intruding to something. “Therefore speak. I may not comprehend and may not remember.” That is, “Please talk to me. I might not be able to comprehend what you’re saying, but please talk to me.” And also, “Whether I comprehend it or not, I may not remember it, but please talk to me.” And he, now the master, speaks. We’re going to take notes from the master.

“I’m not eager to rehearse my thoughts and theory which you have forgotten.” In other words, here’s what I get a feeling of this. You get this strange feeling, this kind of intimate divinity of this immediacy of ourselves, at some strange level we already know this. It’s like we recognize it, we already know it, but we forget. “I am not eager to rehearse my thoughts and theory, which you have forgotten. These things have served their purpose, let them be.” “Back in the past when I, the compound master spoke to your heart, that was for that time, but now you’re with me, it’s this time. So the circuitous journey of your own life where I’ve been speaking to you at each of those times, let them be, let the past be, but if it is, let it be. Be with me in this eternal present.”

“These things have served their purpose, let them be. So with your own,” and here I mean by the own, our own meaning those we love and care about. “So with your own, and pray they be forgiven by others. And I pray you to forgive both good and bad.” Lord, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Pray that all those you love and care about will be forgiven and pray that all those who are being forgiven will forgive you. This kind of mystical body of the infinite mercy of God, of this communal, this forgiveness of each other.

“And I pray you to forgive both good and bad.” God says God lets His sun shine on the good and on the bad. “Last season’s fruit is eaten. The fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.” In other words, last year’s... There’s all these lovely meals and good times that we’ve had and we remember them. But the filled up beast who fed up on such thing kicks the empty pail, falls over, but nothing’s in it because it’s time. It’s all given, it’s all lost in time. But there’s something lost in time in the depths of it that isn’t lost at all. And can we find it? That’s what the poem’s about.

And, “For last year’s words belong to last year’s language.” That is to say, “I used to talk about such things, but I used to talk about such things the way I used to talk about them. But now where I’m at right now, I don’t talk about them that way anymore because now it’s being given to me to say these things in a new way. It’s a kind of an unpremeditated way, like the flow of the awakening heart, like the realizations of it, which is this kind of language of the poem itself, this way. “And next year’s words await another voice.” “And by the way, next year I’ll speak in another voice which isn’t known to me yet like this.” “But, as the passage now presents no hindrance to the spirit unappeased and peregrine,” peregrine is a hawk, unappeased and... It’s like the relentless longing of our heart for this divinity.

“Between two worlds become like each other.” What are the two worlds? The worlds of time and eternity, of birth and death, of the infinite and the finite, of gain and loss, of suffering and joy. These two worlds become like each other. “So I find words I never thought to speak in streets I never thought I should revisit.” And what are the streets you’re going to revisit? The streets of your childhood, places you grew up, the memory. But now you’re able to see them in this light. You’re revisiting them and seeing the grace nature that was rippled through them and at the time you weren’t able to see it, how God was present in all of that. Which is what brought you right up to this very moment with the stranger or this very moment we’re listening to T.S. Eliot share these words with us. We’re on a journey that’s unfolding this way.

Now the scene shifts again. “When I left my body on a distant shore,” see now you’re dead.

“I left my body on a distant shore. Since our concern was speech and speech impelled us to purify the dialect of the tribe.” Back before I left my body in the body, I was in the language of all the people who were speaking languages in their body and we were trying to perfect the dialect of the tribe. We’re trying to refine our language, trying to put words to these things. “And urge the mind to after sight and foresight.” And we’re always, again, past and present, like horoscopes and future and past and future. We kept ruminating over it endlessly. “Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age.” Now he’s going to share if you just wait long enough, and not everyone lives long enough to become old, but if you do, these are the gifts of age. And since I’m 81, I pay close attention right now to this. “So if you just wait long enough, there’s no rush, you just wait long enough, here’s what’s coming.” And these are gifts.

“First, the cold friction of expiring sense without enchantment, offering no promise but bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit.” In other words, it isn’t just that your body’s falling apart and it’s not just that you don’t have the energy anymore what needs to be done, you don’t even care anymore that you don’t have the energy what needs to be done. You’re unraveling and the universe isn’t big enough for you anymore. You’re running out, not out of time, but you’re flowing out beyond the edges of time. That’s the way it was still in time. “As body and soul begin to fall asunder. Second, the conscious impotence of rage at human folly,” it’s such a waste of time to be so angry about the collective stupidity of humanity, including our own. We can shake our fists at it and don’t we ever learn? The answer is no. We never learn. It goes on and on and on. We never will.

But God loves us so in the endless folly this way. “And the laceration of laughter at what ceases to amuse.” In other words it’s not funny anymore. It doesn’t serve a purpose to be cynical or to scoff or to laugh. It’s not amusing. There’s nothing to laugh over. That’s nothing to be angry about. “And last,” the third gift, “the rending pain of reenactment of all that you have done and been. The shame of things ill done and done to others harm.” And it’s this, although I am old and I know better, in my mind I can’t keep ritually reenacting the shame I feel about the things that I did, about the evil that I cooperated with and I went along with it, about the suffering that I caused. Even though I know, because oceanic mercy on me is boundless in all directions, it has no substance. For some reason because I’m just a human being, I painfully reenact in the middle of the night my reenactment of regret this way.

And God’s infinitely in love with me in the midst of the regret that I can’t stop regretting. “The shame of things ill done and done to others harm, which once you took for exercise of virtue.” It’s really bad. You actually developed a rationale justifying the harm that you did, explaining it as virtue/ you had a rationale for what you did. But in hindsight you can look back and see that it was ill-conceived. It lacked integrity because you didn’t yet have the integrity to be in that integrity. “Then fools’ approval stings.” You know, you got to be careful when a fool thinks you’re amazing. Especially if you buy into it, because then you’re a fool too. There’s certain people you don’t want to think you’re amazing, the fools. “And honor stains,” it stains if you make anything out of it.

“From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit proceeds,” like a litany of sorrows and regrets, especially when we trip again and fall, we get triggered back into that space, like, “Here I go again having another episode of ritualistic regret.” “Unless restored by that refining fire. And what is the fire? Pentecost. It’s all burnt up. God is the substantiality of the unsubstantiality

of everything less than God. It's gone. It's just nothing. The Pentecostal fire burns it away this way. "Where you must move in measure, like a dancer." So now kneeling in prayer at Little Gidding, like Merton says, "With God, a little sincerity, goes a long, long way." It's not contrived, it's completely natural. You're just relaxed with the infinite love of God in a kind of rhythm or a dance, which is kind of the rhythm of your breathing, the rhythm of the flow of your unfolding sense of yourself. "Or you must move in measure, like a dancer." The day was breaking. In the disfigured street," disfigured because now it looks so different in the light of this, "He left me with a kind of valediction," like a blessing, "and faded on the blowing of the horn," like gone. But we're left in the aura of how we were transformed in the presence of the master.

Third part of the poem. And moving about halfway down the first stanza, "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." And here now he's quoting another dead master, Julian of Norwich, and he's going to repeat it now like a refrain several times. So again, Julian of Norwich was one of the mystics we studied in the Turning to the Mystics podcast. And as a young woman, she was dying. When the priest came with the last rites, he held up a crucifix, and looking at the crucifix, she had a series of mystical experiences of crucified love and she was restored to health. And she was so moved by that experience she spent her life as a recluse. She lived alone as a solitary, in Norwich, in this little hermitage there. And people would come to her little window for contemplative spiritual direction. And she wrote a book called Revelations of Divine Love.

So he's quoting Julian now, it's one of these departed masters is now being echoed in the poem. Moving on down now he begins by saying, he says, and this is something, by summoning the specter of the vision of a Rose. And the Rose is capitalized. And here this is an allusion to Dante's Divine Comedy. Because The Divine Comedy, when Dante is led from hell through purgatory into heaven, when he gets to heaven, it's an enormous rose and the petals of the rose are us. It's the faithfully departed. So we're the petals of the rose of God. And this is going to come again later in the poem.

"We cannot revive old factions," although we try. "We cannot restore old policies," but we try. "Or follow an antique drum," but we try. This is what keeps therapists in business. We just can't give up trying to drag out into the open what's gone, hungry ghosts. "These men, and those who oppose them and those whom they opposed accept the constitution of silence, are unfolded in a single party. Whatever we inherit from the fortunate we have taken from the defeated." And who are the defeated? I think it's the preciousness of the broken and those who are lost that are God's beloved. And it starts raising the whole question about what it even means to be fortunate. What is it? It's raising the paradox of it all.

"What they had to leave us, a symbol. A symbol perfected in death. And all shall be well and all matter of things shall be well by the purification of the motive in the ground of our beseeching." That's all Julian. And what is the motive that's purified in the ground of our beseeching? Love alone is the motive. When they ask Jesus, "Out of all these beautiful things that you say, what is the one thing that if we had lined our heart with that everything else you say would make perfect sense?" And Jesus said it's, "To love God with all your heart, with all your mind and all your strength." And then we say, "But I don't know what all my mind is, what all my heart is unless you show me." And then in effect, God says, "What all your mind is is God's own mind given to you as your mind, God's own heart given to you as

your heart. God is the divinity of yourself and the unending ordinariness of your life. It's the purification of the ground of your beseeching, this way you rest in that."

So now beginning part four, skipping the first stanza, second stanza. "Who then devised the torment? Love. Love is the unfamiliar name behind the hands that wove the intolerable shirt of flame, which human power cannot remove. We only live, only suspire consumed by either fire or fire." I'd like to reflect on this. First, I think there's a level at which love devises the torment, namely this. In my heart, I know what love is asking out of me. To let go of or to give up in ways I'm hurting myself or another person. I'm not ready yet to give it up. But unless I give it up, the pain will fester. So it's love, this is truth of love that will not let me alone until I learned from love how to be true to love. It means that. But there's also something else about love.

St. Augustine says, "You made our hearts for thee O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." That God made our hearts in such a way that nothing less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God will ever be enough for us. We know it's true because there's moments we taste it, but we're powerless to abide in it because we're clinging so tightly to the finiteness of ourself. We're addicted to being finite. Even though it's claustrophobic and it doesn't lie within our power to give it up unless God helps us, through the grace of prayer and love found and love lost and prayer and so on. This fire, this love. So it's either the fire that burns because of perpetuating burning torment or it's the fire of Pentecost, which is the fire of this love, which by surrendering ourself over to the fire, it consumes our discontent. It delivers us from the illusions that anything is missing, that God loves us so and is infinitely one with us in our endless ordinariness. That's the sense of it.

"We only live, we only suspire," meaning we only breathe. And my sense is this, when you were born, the first thing you did is take in a deep inhalation and let out a big scream. And the last thing you're going to do on earth is you're going to exhale and you will not inhale. Likewise, all along the line, inhaling, exhaling, inhaling, exhaling. And this is why in prayer, the Jesus Prayer when you inhale, but when you exhale, "Lord Jesus have mercy on me." This is also why in yoga, in the breath pranayama, awareness of the breath. This is also why in the cloud of anointing to say a simple word, that somehow in the grounding of the breath is like a grounding place beyond linear time.

So we can only suspire, we can only breathe. But every time we inhale, the infinite love of God is exhaling God into us in self-donating love. And when we exhale, we exhale ourself into the love that's giving itself to us. And that's the reciprocity of the breath. "We only live, we only suspire, consumed by either fire or fire." Either the fire that's half killing us, but we can't give it up, or the fire that burns so bright and letting us know God's already overtaking us in our inability to give it up, like praise the Lord. So it's like that.

So moving on now to part five, and moving about halfway down the first stanza, starting with the line, "We die with the dying." "We die with the dying," that is to say, how many people in the world today are going to die today all over the world? Thousands of people. And we might know one of them. Maybe we might know someone who's dying today. And the day's coming we're going to die along with thousands of people and no one will know we're there either. It'll be our turn. And so we die with the dying and we're going with them, because we're on our way to our own death. "We die with the dying. See, they depart and we

go with them. We are born with the dead,” that as we are born, when we learn from the dead how to die to the illusion that we’re nothing but the self things happened to in time. The communion of saints, they circle back around and visit us and guide us and help us.

We’re born with the dead, and teaching us that we too shall never die. “See, they return, and they bring us with them.” That somehow we’re already carried over into God, hidden with Christ and God forever. And they bring us with them when they visit us, like the circularity of ourself. “The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew tree are of equal duration.” That is, the moment of the rose, just for a few hours. And the yew tree that lasts and lasts, a symbol for birth and death, are of equal duration. The moment in which God said, “Let there be light,” and this present moment for God, it’s the same moment. It’s eternity.

“A people without history is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern of timeless moments.” That is to say, remember before, as we grow older, things change. And that life is a series of timeless moments, including the timelessness of this moment, holding what shines through and transcends all these patterns. “So, while the light fails on a winter afternoon,” now we’re at Little Gidding again at the end of the day, kneeling in prayer, “in a secluded chapel, history is now and England. With the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling, we shall not cease from exploration. And in the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.” It all come a great big, huge circle. And we’ll come back to the very beginning and recognize it for the very first time, what it was all about to begin with and we weren’t ready to realize it this way.

“Through the unknown, unremembered gate,” death, any death to the illusion of the finality of time, death born of this mystical oneness with God in prayer and death is death. The unremembered gate. “When the last of earth left to discover is that which was the beginning.” The only thing left to discover was the beginningless beginning, of the let it be of God, which perpetually begetting this present moment, original newness. “At the source of the longest river,” remember the river is a great brown God. “The voice of the hidden waterfall,” John of the Cross speaks about this. Everything fails like falling water. And the voice of the hidden waterfall that never fails, never ends. “And the children in the apple tree,” remember Burnt Norton, he circles back around the the very first poem, “Not known, because not looked for.” Because we don’t even know how to look for it. And I think it’s because we don’t know how to look for it because there’s no it to it. It’s not an it, therefore it’s not known. And yet, it’s not knowing, in a way it’s the deeper way to know.

“But heard, half heard, in the stillness between two waves of the sea.” See, “Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am God.” “In the stillness between two waves of the sea.” So this elusive imagery, “between two waves of the sea” or in the song of a bird or the wind blowing through the trees, you get intimations of it. Because it stills you. So you don’t choose to hold still, it stills you and, “Be still and know that I am God.” You pause in this stillness, which is the perpetual stillness. “Between two waves of the sea. Quick now, here, now, always, a condition of complete simplicity,” unraveled and empty handed, “a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.” That’s a great line.

And what do you give up? It’s the cost of giving up anything that you thought, anything that you’re even capable of finding or losing will ever be enough for you. And so you have to give it all up. You have to give it all up because it’s infinitely less than what you’re looking for.

Because God made your heart in such a way that nothing less than the infinite love of God, infinitely more than the sum total of all those things, is enough. And yet, once you see their nothingness, you see God shining out through all of them. The incomprehensible stature of simple things, standing up and sitting down and so on. “And all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well when the tongues of flame are in-folded into the crowned knot of fire. And the fire and the rose are one.” That’s lovely. And here I think it’s the petals of the rose, “And the fire and the rose are one.” The fire is the fire of our suffering, transformed by Christ on the cross, the deathless nature of death was shined with the light of resurrection. And at the same time, it’s the fire of Pentecost, which is the fire of eternity. And the fire and the rose are one. And that’s the end of the poem.

Okay, so let’s end our time together in prayer. I invite you to fold your hands and bow and repeat after me. Be still and know I am God. Be still and know I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be.

I hold your hands and bow. We’ll slowly say The Lord’s Prayer together. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but to deliver us from evil. Amen. Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. Julia of Norwich, pray for us. Blessings until next time.

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