

Turning to the Mystics



T.S. Eliot

Dialogue 4: Little Gidding
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 book, the Four Quartets, and I'm here with Jim to discuss his session on the last poem in the Four Quartets, Little Gidding.

Jim Finley: Yes. Looking forward to walking through this together. It's a beautiful poem.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, the book comes to a beautiful conclusion in this poem.

Jim Finley: It does.

Kirsten Oates: I really enjoyed your session. Thank you. Just to begin with, just like all the poems, this poem is grounded in a real place in England. So Little Gidding is an Anglican church. Well, it was the home of an Anglican community, anyway, established in 1626, and I looked up the image on the internet and it's a beautiful little chapel, and you can still visit that today. I believe.

Jim Finley: Mm-hmm. I believe so, yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. But the big point for us in the poem is that this is a long-standing place of prayer. Is that right, Jim?

Jim Finley: That's right. Because we're going to Little Gidding to kneel where prayer has been valid. The poem kind of grounds itself there in prayer.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm wondering how you see this poem overall in relation to the other three poems?

Jim Finley: Yes. I see this poem, I think of it as the grand finale of all four in this sense. In the three previous poems, he's inviting us to reflect on time or the ways that we experience our passage through time from birth to death and how we tend to live in a time that's exiled from the primordial time of nature, the changing of the seasons at the end of each day, the light yielding to the darkness of the night, the waves of the sea and so on. So there is this kind of timeless primordial time. He said, "I think the river is a great brown God." And he says, "This river is within us. This primordial rhythm is within our bodies, within us, but we tend to be exiled from it, and even deeper than we tend to be exiled from eternity."

And so we're trying to find a way, then, to redeem the time. We're trying to find a way to ground ourselves in the eternity of each passing moment of our life. And the first three poems are like the precarious insights into this process, and there are certain moments where we become conscious, where we're not in time, in the Great Barber when it starts to rain. And so there's a little hiatus, like a taste of eternity and time. But they're fleeting. They're fleeting. We get pulled back into time again. And so the poems go on and on that way just looking at our life.

But what happens in Little Gidding, really, he's going to invite us to join him in coming to

Little Gidding, to kneel where prayer has been valid because it's resolved in prayer, and in this sense for T. S. Eliot, where it's such a deeply Christian poem, is that we don't need to liberate ourselves from time because in Christ, the eternal presence of God has entered into time, that Christ is one with us in time. St. Paul says, "For me to live is Christ." So Christ lives our life. Christ suffers our suffering. Christ dies our death, and in his resurrection is our resurrection. The dying words of Jesus on the cross is, "It is consummated. It's finished." But what we need to do is we need to kneel in prayer and open our heart to that, and that's what Little Gidding's about. Little Gidding is all about this prayer of devotional sincerity of opening our heart to this infinite eternal mystery. It is already permeating each passing moment of our life, and that's the culminating beauty of the poem, how it all ends.

Kirsten Oates: And Little Gidding doesn't specifically say the name of Jesus, say the name of Christ, but there's hints and references throughout the four poems and then specifically in this one as well. Can you just help us see that a little more clearly, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yes. It reminds me of Tolkien in *Lord of the Rings* because Tolkien was a devout Catholic, but there's no mention of Christianity in it, but it's deeply spiritual. So too with T. S. Eliot. It's deeply spiritual, but it's also Christian, his own Anglican faith. But in *East Coker*, he talks about the whole world is our hospital, and he talks about the Eucharist, that the flesh of the Eucharist, the flesh is our only food. The blood of Jesus is our only drink. So there's a little momentary where it's made explicit, but otherwise he's bearing witness to the universality of God's presence in life itself. It's like Richard Rohr's understanding of Christ is a new word for everything.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: It's this universality that's revealed to us in Christ, in our dispensation, the Christian dispensation. So that's my sense of it.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, I think it might be helpful if I just read that section from *East Coker* that you mentioned where it really strongly points to Jesus coming into time and Christ conquering time. So it's actually part four from *East Coker*, and I'll just read it now. 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.

Jim Finley: The underlying insight is this, it's that the root struggle that we go through cannot be resolved on our terms, but it's already been resolved by God on God's terms revealed to us in Christ.

Kirsten Oates: Would you also say to his references to Christian mystics like John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich who had this worldview. So the Christians he references we know were grounded in this worldview.

Jim Finley: Yes. What we're going to see in this poem where he meets this master, this dead master, is this compound ghost are the mystics that he's referring to throughout the poem. And also, but notice it's universal because in the reference to the middle way and to the lotus, you see Buddha and then the Lord Krishna and the Bhagavad Gita. So this universality of mystical consciousness throughout all the world's religions and for him and the mother tongue of his own Christian faith.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. That's so helpful. And I also just wanted to draw out the contrast between the two places, the place where we started and the place where we ended. So the place where we started, Burnt Norton, this place of suffering, and then little Gidding, a place where prayer has been valid. Does little Gidding help us resolve the suffering in Burnt Norton?

Jim Finley: Yes, and I think this is true of each of the three prior poems. We'll use Burnt Norton as the example. So we're in Burnt Norton, so we're at a place, we're in a moment of time. In the past, a tragic thing happened, a murder-suicide, and we're in the burned ruins of where that occurred. And in this present moment though, we're with T. S. Eliot at Burnt Norton. This is the place where in the past that's happened. And no matter how many centuries into the future people will visit Burnt Norton, it'll always be the place where in the past that happened, and therefore of all time is present. It's fixed, see, and therefore it's unredeemable.

And then he gives a hint. He said, "If we take the path we didn't take and open the door that we didn't open and the door that we didn't open was faith," and as soon as he opens the door of faith, the dead are there. And not just the man and woman who died there, but all the dead are there, the communion of saints. Why? Because nobody dies. We're all eternal. In God, we live and move and have our being. And all the dead are here. The angels are here in this way. But then when he looks into the dry swimming pool filled with sunlight and he can see over his shoulder all the dead looking with him, when a cloud passes, they're gone. And so it's like a passing glimpse of eternity and time, but it's a passing glimpse. And that's what happens in each of the previous poems, these little moments, these little blessed moments, but they all slip away from us and we get drawn back into time. And that's what's going to build up to the resolution of this, kneeling in prayer at Little Gidding.

And so the lesson here at the heart of Little Gidding is how can I learn to live in an ever more habitual awareness of this eternal love of God that is ribboned endlessly as a love that never passes away flowing through everything that's endlessly passing away? And this moment we're sharing right now is passing away, but shining out from it is this love of God that never passes away. And how can I learn to be habitually stabilized in that, not just from time to time where I rest in it, but in an underlying habitual sensitivity throughout my whole life, which is the teachings of the mystics.

Kirsten Oates: And I found in following Little Gidding with you that it's really, it's almost like guidelines. It's the path of how to open ourselves to how to be participants in this, stabilizing ourselves to be open to God's presence in that way.

Jim Finley: And here's another way that he's similar to these masters that he quotes. What we find in the masters is the central place of prayer, and so really what all these mystics offer us are guidelines in prayer which are guidelines in yielding to this transformation that's occurring in our heart when we yield to the love of God that's transforming us into itself. And so that's what T. S. Eliot does here also.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. So Jim, let's now turn to part one of the poem of Little Gidding, and he opens this poem the way he's opened all of the poems, which is to ground us in

this primordial sense of time, and he's doing that again in Little Gidding. It's almost like, am I getting this right that it's a pedagogical tool, that it's a first step to move us away from this myopic confined consciousness focused on sequential time, opening us up to a presence greater than ourselves? We're not in control of every moment. It's opening our consciousness to take us from the limits of being focused on sequential time opening us to a sense of larger time where we're not in control, where it's beyond the expanse of our own lives, and this is a pedagogical tool as a first step to open our consciousness towards God's presence.

Jim Finley: That's right, and that's the tool that we find through all the previous poems. So he starts this one that way, and the image that he uses is the paradoxical image of a bitter cold winter day and brilliant sunlight shining on the snow of the bare branches of trees, and therefore they light up, but it's not the light of generation like leaves and buds and flowers and everything. So it's this paradoxical no time time, no solid footing in the midst of time. So he starts there.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And so for our own journey into Little Gidding, a place where prayer was valid, this pedagogical tool, this would be how nature can support us, how in our own prayer life like as a step towards this, and I think you've also pointed out how our own breath is primordial, so these tools that live in our world with us that we can ground ourselves in.

Jim Finley: So how he segues then into this Little Gidding part, he has this thing about the season, this paradoxical. He says next in the same stanza, "If you came this way taking the route you would be likely to take." So it could be what? If you took this way along these branches covered with snow or in the summer, it doesn't matter, whatever it was, if you came this way, the route you would normally take and where you're headed, he doesn't tell us yet where it is, but you're headed to Little Gidding, and then he gives all these different places, all these different routes. He said, "Maybe you weren't even planning to go to Little Gidding. You didn't even know it was there. Oh, what's this? You step inside." He said, "No matter which way you go, when you kneel in the depths of prayer, it's always the same. It's always the same."

And the image that I see in it is that what if when we die we're annihilated? What if there's just nothing? So it really doesn't matter how you lived your life because in the end it's still nothing. I mean, I guess it matters existentially. You want to have a fleeting value to your life like Camus, and there's an existential sense of that. But what if instead, when you die, it's infinite union with the infinite? It doesn't matter how you get to. It's infinite union with the infinite. And when you kneel in prayer, it's realized there. It's almost like when we look back, we didn't find it because we didn't know we were looking for it. Well, we serendipitously stumbled across it, giving itself to us an unlikely moment. That's the feeling that it has for me.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Wonderful. And we're going to go further into this first part where he seems to offer us guidelines for this prayer then and how we can engage in this kind of a prayer, and so we're starting with, if you came this way taking any route, starting from anywhere at any time or at any season, it would always be the same. And so this idea, if we relate this to our own life, so it's however we come into a place of prayer. Can be

in our own house. Can be when we wake up in the morning. However we came to pray. Is that how we think about it?

Jim Finley: Yes. We come in the midst of our day. But then when we sit in prayer, what happens? See how then in the midst of whatever is the context in which we begin to pray, what is it that prayer is offering us?

Kirsten Oates: Okay. So I'll read through the guidelines and maybe you can help us understand them. Yeah. So you would have to put off sense and notion.

Jim Finley: Let's start with that. Here's my understanding of it. I think I have a felt sense of myself. I have a certain set of assumptions or a certain attitudinal stance where I try to make sense of my own day, and that's important psychologically. It is. But here, when I kneel in prayer, I'm in the midst of the boundaryless, incomprehensible love that's loving me so, unexplainably from all of eternity, and therefore it's the inadequacy of that felt sense. See, it's too claustrophobic. It's too one dimensional, and I have to be willing to lean in deeper and not limit myself to my own internalized set of assumptions about anything.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Wow. That's a great description. So even the sense of our own body, so in a way we even let go of the sense, if we're focused on the breath, we're focused on the sensations in our body where we're trying to allow God to expand our experience of even that.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. In other words, we can look on our body as an object. We say like, "My body," and we go to the doctor and we have a sense of our body, but the immediacy of the felt sense of the immediacy of our body is an immediacy that's given before I think about it, and the breath grounds me in the immediacy of my body. It's preconceptual and transconceptual immediacy because it's incarnate, and so I'm grounded there, and in that then I pass beyond all sense and notion. Likewise all my notions. I took careful notes. I have all set of notions that I've learned and all. You don't disrespect any of it. It's just that all of it's inadequate because it's finite.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Next it says, "You are not here to verify."

Jim Finley: See, what does it mean to verify? It means that when I hear something, here's how I verify. Let me check that out and see if I agree. I think that works for me. Anything else? And so I'm not here to have things aligned with my finite assumptions because that's still me. I didn't come here for that. I do that all day long. I do that all day long. So it isn't... Put it another way, too. Then it isn't, I'm not who my father thought I was. I'm not who my mother thought I was. My lover, my spouse. I'm not who I think I am. Can I join God who God eternally knows me to be hidden with Christ and God before the origins of the universe? And there is no notion that's capable of containing that. And so I kneel down in prayer in this kind of openness to the boundarylessness of God.

Kirsten Oates: Gorgeous. Lovely. So you would have to put off sense and notion. You are not here to verify. Instruct yourself is the next one.

Jim Finley: Yes. It's not like you're taking a mini-course, mystical union or bust. Like what's the method? Because again, it's you again. You're not here to instruct yourself so you can memorize the instructions and go out. So you're not here for that because it's bondage.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So even though we might follow these instructions, at the end when we're in this state, we're letting go of all of this as well.

Jim Finley: That's right. And another big insight is this, too. It's not disrespecting any of this, because he's using words, too. It's just that it's not adequate all by itself because it's finite. It doesn't have the final say in who we are because only an infinite union with the infinite love of God has the final say in who we are. That's the sense of it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. The next one, you are not here to inform curiosity.

Jim Finley: Yeah. It isn't like, "Gosh, I wonder..." Like, "Gee, I wonder what mystical union is. I think I'll get a book on it and read it," and I'll pass on that one. Or, "Oh, that's a quaint idea. Anything else? I think I'll watch television." If you're just curious, you're not hanging from the thread where your very life depends on opening yourself to this one mystery. That alone is real, which is who you are as the beloved of God in your deathless presence, so it's way beyond curiosity.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yes.

Jim Finley: But it might start in curiosity.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. You're not here to carry report.

Jim Finley: Yes. So you're not here to take something that you can go back and tell somebody about.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, yeah.

Jim Finley: And a key image for me here is Moses before the burning bush. So it's burning but it doesn't burn up, and so you can't even scrape up some ashes to show somebody. But what do you say really? What do you say? But this is what contemplative spiritual direction is, and this is what the poem is. You can tell when you're in the presence of someone who can't explain it either, but they can tell what you're trying to say because they know it, too, and I think this is where we meet T. S. Eliot as our teacher, because there's something here, unexplainably intimate, and in his words and the cadence and rhythm of his voice, we get intimations of this unexplainable mystery.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. And the beauty of the path, too. Even just reading these guidelines, there's something. Yeah. There's a beauty that's woven through it like a simplicity. Yeah.

Jim Finley: You know what else to, Merton says, "With God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way," and we begin by reminding ourselves we belong to God, and we begin by reminding ourselves to understand means to realize we're infinitely understood. And here's the thing. It isn't some complicated thing we're trying to do it right. The very sincerity of opening yourself to it is this. It's infinitely more than enough because you're more than enough in the eyes of God and you're nothingness without God. So it's that kind of naturalness that we bring.

Kirsten Oates: Next it says, "You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid." And I'm curious about this one. One is the sense of kneeling, which is kind of a humble stance, like there's a humility to it, but also where prayer has been valid. So if we're doing this in our own homes, is it

important to have a particular place or is the whole world a place where prayer has been valid?

Jim Finley: Yeah. See, I always say here, it's been valid because this is where a community of people lived what they believed. They lived it. For me to live is Christ. It's the way we live. It's an attitudinal stance that we carry towards ourself, others in all things and all of that, and because of their fidelity to it, it gives the validity to the prayer, and now we're kneeling there. This is why people go on pilgrimages where a saint lived or where... A way of looking at it then, if that's true and that is true, what is also then true is our own home is the place, and the sincerity of our prayer, our own home is the place where our prayer has been valid. Why? Because God accepts the sincerity of our prayer, and so it makes our own home to be Little Gidding.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. It gives a sense, too, that there's a regularity to it. You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid. So I've done it before. I'm doing it again and again and again. It's been valid.

Jim Finley: That's right. And I think another thing about home this way is if there's a place where we go each day for our rendezvous with God for prayer, and each time we get up from our prayer to live our life and we wash the dishes and wipe off the counter and look out the window, there's less and less distinction between wiping off the counters and the prayer. There's like an habitual underlying awareness that everything matters beyond what we can explain because there's a concrete holiness to the concreteness of the day by day.

Kirsten Oates: That sounds like the perfect lead into what he says next. "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. The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living."

Jim Finley: So there is that the dead had no speech for when living because they were still living in their body, but now being dead speak with tongues of fire. And when you kneel in prayer, you can hear them because when you kneel in prayer, you're also in a moment of time, transcending time. This way the communion of saints.

Kirsten Oates: What do you make if this, Jim, that prayer is more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind or the sound of the voice praying? Because that's a lot of the way we enter into prayer is there's an order of words, an occupation. We're trying to be conscious in our prayer. We can listen to our voice praying.

Jim Finley: Let's say anyone learning to be an artist or to be a poet or to be a healer. There is a certain discipline one has to undergo to be trained, like a set of methods. But as long as one is still working out of methods, it's just method. Those methods have to be in the service for when it catches fire. So we can see T. S. Eliot's discipline as a poet. This is a very disciplined poem. It did not come without a price. But it's in the service where it catches fire and the words take on a kind of luminosity. Just like when we see a work of art or a dance, you see this also. The person is so given over to it that something shines not from them but through them in their commitment to it.

And so prayer has to be more than just a rote. The fact you're kneeling and saying your prayers doesn't mean you're praying. It means you're checking off a to-do list. This isn't on

the to-do list. This is the imperative of your awakened heart, and you give yourself over to it to God who's given over to you in every breath and heartbeat. It's in the reciprocity of the self-donating presence. It's beyond a task or a chore or a method.

Kirsten Oates: And that's very much in the way we begin the prayer, the way we open ourselves with that intention at the beginning of the prayer that we're not just here to say the words. We're opening ourselves to that.

Jim Finley: That's right. And I think another insight here is we might start with the method because it is a method. You go, you sit and you light a candle, you open the scriptures, whatever it is. You start somewhere. But it's your point of entrance where in the ongoing sincerity of the prayer, you go beyond the method into this communal realization. It's always there.

Kirsten Oates: And he describes that as here, the intersection of the timeless moment is England and nowhere, never and always. And so for us it could be here, the intersection of the timeless moment is our home, and nowhere, never and always.

Jim Finley: That's right. And this phrase has come up several times throughout the poems, the intersection. So along the horizontal line of time, passing through time in the middle is the vertical depth dimension of God. So when we're in prayer, as the prayer deepens, deepens, deepens, there's a point of passing through the intersection of the zero variance prior to the difference. So the distinction between God and creature, time and eternity, birth and death. And this intersection then is our own living room every time our own home, our own bed, every time we're given over. And by the way, insofar as we're attentive to these reflections right now, this moment is the intersection.

Kirsten Oates: Amazing. Well, then there's, moving on to part two, there's a scene change, and this is where our narrator meets the teacher, and it's very reminiscent for me of our last season where we did *The Way of a Pilgrim* where unbeknownst to the Pilgrim, he stumbled into the presence of the teacher, and it had that kind of feel to it.

Jim Finley: It really does.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Something else when we discover a mystic, any time we encounter John of the Cross, we didn't see the encounter about to happen, but all of a sudden you can tell you're in the presence of it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Or you're in the presence of it, you already were in the presence of it. You didn't know it yet. So I think it always has that surprise element to it, and like *The Way of a Pilgrim*, and now this is his and this kind of poetic image imagery now of meeting this dead master.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Beautiful. And so it's this lead up of being in that kind of uncertain place, the way our Pilgrim was, too, in the searching, in the uncertain hour before the morning. It's kind of the opening of this section, but we're going to move to where it says, "The first met stranger in the waning dusk. I caught the sudden look of some dead master whom I had known,

forgotten, half recalled.” And so this sense of, like you say, there’s a part of me that it feels familiar.

Jim Finley: Let’s say that in the past I was reading St. John of the Cross and Teresa, and in that past moment of reading, I was touched by the depth of the teacher’s voice opening up God’s presence, and so I was touched, but then I forgot. And so something strangely familiar, like I’ve been here but I forgot, and so this is like a renewed encounter with this voice, with this presence.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And then he has this amazing point. He makes both one and many in the browned baked features, the eyes of a familiar compound ghost, both intimate and unidentifiable.

Jim Finley: And again, the compound ghost are the mystics as he’s referred to throughout the poems. So it is John of the Cross, and it is the Lord Krishna, and it is the Buddha, the lotus rising. So really it’s this polyphony of mystical masters and teachers and they’re all compounded and we’re in the presence of this compound. And also, what’s that phrase again about...

Kirsten Oates: Both intimate and unidentifiable?

Jim Finley: Yes. It’s so intimate, but I couldn’t begin to identify it. See? It’s an unidentifiable immediacy, meaning I couldn’t pin it down or something because it’s a boundaryless state.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. It’s almost like going back to those guidelines for prayer. It’s almost like being in the presence of the teacher. Things like sense and notion are dissolved, those earlier guidelines. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That’s why I like that phrase by Thomas Merton praying to God. He says, “You who sleep in my breast are not met with words, but with dispossession, within dispossession.” You’re met when I’m dispossessed of the ability to find a footing when I could even begin to explain this to anybody. But then you get used to being dispossessed, so you have to be dispossessed to being dispossessed, because the ego’s always trying to carve out a new niche to stand on.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And this is an eternal free fall into this abyss of this love. Right?

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. This next part, “So I assumed a double part and cried and heard another’s voice cry, ‘What? Why are you here?’”

Jim Finley: Yeah. Here’s my sense of it, the double voice. See, when we listened to this mystical language, there’s that in us that sees this. Otherwise it wouldn’t make any sense. And there’s that in us that doesn’t see it yet. So in some sense, the master is our own awakened self to the extent that’s been awakened to this, and then there’s that that’s still confused by it. And so that which is awakened to it needs to be endlessly patient with the part that doesn’t see it yet, which is to be all merciful towards oneself. And so we play this double role with oneself. Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Although we were not, I was still the same knowing myself yet being someone other and here faced still forming yet the word suffice to compel the recognition they preceded and so

compliant to the common wind. I guess that's the way they've been brought together. Too strange to each other for misunderstanding. I love that paradoxical.

Jim Finley: Yeah. It's so incomprehensible, you can't even misunderstand it

Kirsten Oates: In concord at this intersection time of meeting nowhere, no before and after, we trod the pavement in a dead patrol. This master, coming upon the master has created that intersection for him.

Jim Finley: That's right. And notice also it's in no place because it's every place, and it's in no time because it's every time, and so we're walking together with the master.

Kirsten Oates: And then I said, "The wonder that I feel is easy, yet ease is cause of wonder, therefore speak. I may not comprehend, may not remember."

Jim Finley: Yes. It's like this. I wonder why I feel so relaxed in the presence of the ineffable. I feel so, I'm just relaxed here. And yet the very fact I'm relaxed is a source of wonder. And the reason you're so relaxed is that the infinite love of God is creating you in the image and likeness of God. It's who you are is the beloved. You're worth all that God is worth and your eternal nothingness without God. This is your homeland. You belong here. You belong here, and that's why you're so relaxed. It's a nice insight, yes.

Kirsten Oates: It's a lovely insight. Thinking back to those guidelines that we're not here to inform our curiosity or instruct ourselves. It's more like we're opening to be overtaken by this ease and this sense of wonder, the newness.

Jim Finley: Yes. That's a good insight because we could say this, in this awareness of this being at ease in this presence, the very notion of trying to explain anything is so stupid. In other words, give me a break. I mean, you're not even there anymore.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: You know what I mean? Oh my God, please. This is what the master is going to tell him, too, about to say. You're just unexplainably beyond it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: By resting in the depths of it, giving itself to you unexplainably.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So he asks the master to speak, but then the master says he's beyond words. Really? Is that what the master kind of shares? He's beyond words and points to this idea of being between two worlds becoming much like each other.

Jim Finley: Yes. See, he says, "First of all, please talk to me," because he hasn't said anything yet.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And by the way, I think there's something else, too, and you see this in Hinduism with the guru. It's the presence of the master is the teaching. I think this is Francis of Assisi, too. You

know what I mean? It's like the presence of the... You know your heart has not deceived you because can tell you're in the presence of what your heart's been looking for, so no words are necessary. Some of the Hindu teachers, they say this also, "The main teaching is silence, but if you need talk, I'll talk." But otherwise, it's the silence that teaches. So he says, "I may not comprehend and I may not remember, but I want you to talk to me anyway." And then he says, "I'm not eager to rehearse my thoughts and theories that you have forgotten." I'm not going over all that again. See, because you know why? Because when I touched you back then, that was for then. I don't need to keep circling back and repeat myself. What we're trying to do is stay present, what's unexplainably happening right here.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, yes, and so that's when he says, "But as the passage now presents no hindrance to the spirit unappeased and peregrine," which I think you described as longing, "between two worlds become much like each other."

Jim Finley: That's right, and I think it's this, the gate's flung wide open now. See? This is the oneness. It's just God in all directions, unexplainably forever. The gate's wide open.

Kirsten Oates: And that idea of two worlds becoming like each other. You've told on that before, but it's like all the aspects of our world become like each other. So life and death, dreams and awake, and there's kind of something joining them.

Jim Finley: To me, here's what it means. In moments where we're graced with this unit of luminosity, which is this eternal world, there is also the world where last night I didn't sleep well and I was lying there in the dark. And these two worlds are very much like each other, the ordinariness. It's the divinity of the ordinariness itself. Otherwise you're creating a new dualism again. But what is the all-encompassing unity that permeates everything unexplainably forever. It's just merging into this oneness that all shall be one. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. And then I guess the realization the narrator gets from the teacher, he discloses, "Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age," and there's this beautiful teaching on what it means to surrender as you age and what it feels like to age, but then also what it's like to surrender into that, which I found kind of refreshing and compelling, and in stark contrast to the way we think about aging in our day where we're trying to fight it, we're trying to stay young. There's no dialogue about accepting and the beauty of aging.

Jim Finley: Yes. See, in a way where he says the gift of aging is the inevitable falling apart of everything. See? Your body, you may get to a point, not only does your body not work anymore, you don't even know who you are anymore. Dementia. Someday you may be sitting all alone in a wheelchair at the end of a long hallway looking out a window and you don't know who you are anymore. It's coming. And so in a way, this is not something to look forward to from the standpoint of the ego and time. But what if it's all about the universe isn't big enough for you anymore? What if you're already crossing over and none of this is relevant to you? Job well done, good and faithful servant. You're being unraveled because you're crossing over. You're not being annihilated, but consummated, unexplainably what's endlessly beyond all of this.

So what looks like the end, the cessation and is the end, isn't an end at all. It's the beginning, which was already realized in prayer, but now in crossing over it's realized in the light of

glory. So instead of being intimately realized in your awakening heart, it's now openly given to you forever. Everything's revealed, and this is destiny.

Kirsten Oates: So this is very much back to his pedagogical tool of bringing us into the consciousness of primordial time. So this is the body's time, the primordial timeline of the body. He takes us into that and then he opens up from the primordial into the timeless time.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. We're all hoping for. I hope for it. We all hope for a peaceful death. You know what I mean? We might be granted that. Some deaths are peaceful, but maybe not. Maybe your last act on this earth, you're going to fall off your bedpan and die. That's not the point. It isn't the configuration of circumstance. You're just beyond all of that. Trust it. If God is Lord of life, God is Lord of death. God's the infinity of life and God's the infinity of death. And so we're headed towards that point. And in one sense we're already there. The end is the beginning and it's now. And so that's the wisdom that age brings.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, let's just read through this because I don't think our elder community has offered a ton of wisdom these days, so it'd be nice to go through this. So it starts, we're in part two. "Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age to set a crown upon your lifetime's effort. First, the cold friction of expiring sense without enchantment offering no promise, but bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit as body and soul begin to fall asunder."

Jim Finley: So look, if we're looking at this in terms of your bodily experience of yourself in time, this is not good. But what if your experience of yourself in time and your body is one-dimensional and claustrophobic? You can't go to where you're trying to find in fulfillment and stay where you are. You have to let the gate break open in order for it so that which never ceases ending has to end.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So second, "The conscious impotence of rage at human folly and the laceration of laughter at what ceases to amuse."

Jim Finley: Yeah. You're wasting your time and being angry about how foolish you've been so many times and you're wasting your time about how foolish humanity tragically is shaking your fist at it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Well, and I can see if you've lived a very long life, I mean, even for T. S. Eliot seeing two wars, I mean, you've got to shake your fist at human folly that they would ever, after seeing the devastation of one world war, embark on a second one.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And I think there's another insight here, too. It has to do with nonviolence and war. This is Thomas Merton, too, on peace, on nonviolence, and Dr. Martin Luther king. This doesn't mean we so spiritualize it, say, "Well, it's just war. Only God is real." It really kind of violates the sacrament of the body. It's tragic, and we have to accept the tragic as tragic and we have to face it as best we can to heal it and not be part of the problem. But here's the point. We need to lean into love's work moving toward peace and a peace not dependent on the outcome of our effort. Because by human standards, Thomas Merton says it may go down in flames this way, but that's not the point. Sometimes it's the violence we do to ourself we have to face. Sometimes it's in our marriage. Sometimes, we all have these little scenarios in our minds of resentment and bitterness and prejudice, and so we need to be honest about it, but endlessly tender-hearted toward doing our best to face what we need to

face, and I think it has that feeling, too.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. Well, that's certainly where it's going to land us, isn't it? Yes. It's taking us there. And last, "The rendering pain of reenactment of all that you have done and been, the shame of motives late revealed and the awareness of things ill done and done to others harm, which once you took for exercise of virtue, then fool's approval stings and honor stains."

Jim Finley: It isn't just I become so old I can hardly get around, but this pathetic little ritual I have of compromising myself with the use of food or sexuality or anger or resentment or prejudice. Here I can barely stay alive and I'm still doing it. I can't stop and I have to depend on God's infinite mercy on me in the deep acceptance of that I'm fragile to my last breath. But the mercy of God's infinitely greater, and also the folly, the very things that in hindsight I can see were foolishness. I pretended to myself it was a virtue. I had a rationale to justify the compromising of myself or the relationship or this person or this group of people. And you just see the curtain pulls back and I think it's a view from the cross, Jesus hanging on the cross. Father forgive them, they know not what they do.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Because a lot of people sincerely thought they were being virtuous in that act. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Exactly. You get caught up in something. Martin Heidegger says, "It's very hard to see our assumptive horizons. It's very hard to consciously see what we're assuming that guides our behavior." Because it helps us to see what we see, but it blinds us to what we don't see, and sometimes what we don't see is huge. A lot of psychotherapy has to do with this to pulling the curtain back like this and looking at things in a broader way.

Kirsten Oates: It's just one of the challenges of being human.

Jim Finley: It is. It is a challenge of being. Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: I would probably add a paragraph to this today, which is the way we really don't honor older people in our society, that we value youth over age, and there's a fight against the look of aging, even. You know? Yeah.

Jim Finley: There's someone I know who was one of the national leaders with ARP, and he's also a dervish, a Muslim dervish. He's a practicing dervish in mystical Islam. And one of his main points is that indigenous societies, the elders held the wisdom of the community, but in an atheistic secularism, the old don't know what they're for, and they're for this.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. To pass this on.

Jim Finley: But they don't see it. So really we're reinstating the wisdom of the elders at the brim of eternity about time and gratitude and being present and so on. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: So from wrong to wrong, the exasperated spirit proceeds unless restored by that refining fire. What is that refining fire, Jim?

Jim Finley: I think he's going to talk about this fire in fire. The refining fire is the fire of Pentecost. Or let's put it another way. It's the fire that burns away the relevance or substantiality of anything less than the infinite love of God. It's that fire.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. How does Pentecost point to that, Jim? How do you link those two?

Jim Finley: How I put it, the poem's kind of alluding to it, also. The Pentecost is that a long time ago, a small group of people in an unlikely hour had an experience. Jesus has died. This is the whole mystery of the cross. You go through this whole thing, Pentecost acts. And it says we don't know what that experience was. Metaphorically it has tongues of fire over their head, like tongues of fire, but they were metamorphosized in the Christ mystery like a fire that burns away everything less or other than his oceanic mercy that alone is real. And although we can't explain it because we can't explain our own Pentecost, our own awakening, but whoever met those people out on the road met Christ, and that's us.

For me to live as Christ, that I am more and more surrendered over to this love that courses through my veins, as Merton puts it, that manifests itself standing up and sitting down. I'm just more and more present to it that I might be somebody in whose presence others can more easily recognize it in themselves by the way I listen to them or the way I pay respectful of them, or I try to help them. I try to incarnate it habitually more and more, and all this slippage where I don't do that, I know God closes the gap with mercy, and I try to live that way.

Kirsten Oates: So then, Jim, prayer is the vehicle in Christianity for surrendering to this refining fire?

Jim Finley: Right. That the prayer in this broad sense is anything habitually entered into with our whole heart that takes us to the deeper place is the prayer. So it might be sitting in vulnerability with the beloved might be reading a child a good night story. It might be tending the roses. It might be the long slow walk to no place in particular is the prayer. So it's not prayer limited to the devotional prayer, but this prayer stance and all of its different modes.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And that's how we carry it forward into... Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. That's how it gets habituated.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. Well, let's move on to part three, and in part three you point out how T.S. Eliot is quoting Julian of Norwich. "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." And he's going to repeat that a few times before we end the poem. It's like he's ringing a bell, I think he said, and I'm wondering what is the bell he's ringing for us with that quote?

Jim Finley: This is my sense of it. Again, echoing Julian, who we looked at in one of the earlier sessions of *Turning to the Mystics*. We did Julian. See, all shall be well. Surely in glory all shall be well. True. Christ rose with his wounds. The eternity, but glorified by love. See, all shall be well. Next, the next insight is everything already is unexplainably. Well, because God loves us so, and I am on this path where I shall realize ever more deeply was already unexplainably true, which is the path. That's my sense of how he's echoing Julian.

Kirsten Oates: And then he closes this section, "All manner of things shall be well by the purification of the motive in the ground of our beseeching."

Jim Finley: And the motive, like Jesus, thy will be done. And your will is the providential nature of what's happening, that it's trustworthy, even if you're hanging on a cross. But I only want to stay open, abandonment to divine providence. I only want to stay open that only your will

be done in me. So my own motive, I know my ego has a whole list of motives and I'm aware of them and it can't help itself. It's my ego. But the motive of my awakening heart is to do your will because your will for me is you. You are your will for me. You're my destiny.

Kirsten Oates: It reminds me of Teresa of Avila who we've also studied, that that was her last...

Jim Finley: That was her thing. Exactly. That's exactly right.

Kirsten Oates: Only one thing left, which is to do your will. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. She says at the end, mystical marriage. For the one who's come to this, there's only one question left. How can I be helpful? That's a great way to end, and to be helpful means to embody this with everyone you meet.

Kirsten Oates: So all manner of things shall be well by the purification of the motive in the ground of our beseeching, and the ground of our beseeching, this is this stance of prayer? Is that-

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: I think it's the depth of our sincerity or it's the depth of our longing. When we want something very, very much out of love, it's the ground of our beseeching, or the depth of it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. Well, moving on to part four, I just want to go to the second stanza. Jim, who then devised the torment? Love. So I love that question. Who then devised the torment that we're all experiencing? And the answer, 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, which is the torment. We're either consumed by fire or fire. That's our torment.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's right. So I think there's two levels to this.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Okay.

Jim Finley: The love consumes the fire in that if we really listen to love, it won't let us be at rest. To be at peace with ways we're compromising ourself or another person or the relationship or an animal. It won't let us, and it burns like a holy burning of the discontent to passively go along with our own call, because the price paid for the half-lived life is bitter. See? And it's love is the fullness of life itself this way. But then at a deeper level, it's love, and what it does is it's a love that burns away everything left. "You made our hearts for thee, O Lord, and our hearts are restless so they rest in thee," St. Augustine says. And so it burns away the willingness to trying to hold on to anything less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God, and that's the fire and that's love that does that. It's not enough for us.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. What do you think of the word torment? Who then devised the torment?

Jim Finley: I think the torment is, it's a torment where someone is being openly vulnerable about the struggle of not wanting to give up what they know they're going to have to give up and also struggling. Not only are they going to have to give up, they're not able to give it up. See,

that's the torment. But our sincerity in the torment lays something open for possibilities. This is at the heart of sobriety. In 12 steps, we have come to admit that we are powerless, but the depth of the admitting opens up a whole new way of spiritual awakening.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. It reminds me of your work in trauma, too, because it burns like fire to re-experience a terrible trauma that you've had, and so, yeah, you need this love dimension to help you do that.

Jim Finley: But sometimes these liberations happen in joyful moments. They do. But the joyful moment reveals the high joy beyond the joyful experience. It's like a foretaste. And so we don't want to limit ourselves to conditioned states, but sometimes the liberation comes in the midst of suffering because in the very midst of suffering, we come upon within ourselves what Jesus called the pearl of great price. It's the invincible preciousness of yourself in the midst of the unresolved. This happens a lot in deep healing work. So it isn't that it's not regretful, because it is. It isn't that it's not hard, because it is, but it's not just regretful, because hidden in the willingness to look at it in a patient, careful, trusting, and vulnerable way, it lays bare the possibility of a great awakening. And so at the end of the process, it isn't just you're less symptomatic than you used to be. One would hope so. But you discovered something that no one can ever take away from you, and you discovered it in the dark and you learned to live by it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. The last thing that comes up for me in relation to that, who then devised the torment, going back to his tool of grounding us in the primordial, because part of the torment we're going to die in time, and like you said at the beginning of this session, there's no way out of that, and that can be a huge torment to the ego to come to terms with that, and so yeah.

Jim Finley: It raises an interesting question about the mystery of creation. See, so if before creation there was nothing but God, it means that everything that is is and flows from God, including the mystery of brokenness, and that's an image that we use in the Catholic liturgy on Holy Saturday night during Holy Week when they light the Paschal candle, when Christ rises from the tomb and they sing this hymn, and in the hymn they say, "Felix culpa, oh happy fault to merit such a redeemer. Thank you Adam for screwing everything up." Because out of that came Christ. It's a lovely thing where you sing this praise because the light shines out through the broken place. So I think it invites us just to sit with the mystery of all of this, this kind of non-linear depth to it all.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes. It shines out through the broken place and through the death, the death on the cross.

Jim Finley: Exactly. That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Lovely. Well, let's turn to the final section of the final part where we're taken into a beautiful soft landing of the four poems. So I'd like to just reflect on the last section. It starts with the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling. "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

Jim Finley: Yeah. This is my sense of it. We shall not cease from exploring. It goes on and on and on.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and I see two senses to this. Remember earlier in one of the poems it says it's in the nursery bedroom.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: It brings us back to the origins of our life and how mysterious it is. This whole journey that has brought us right up to this moment, like the unforeseeability of it all, but also the beginning is the beginning where God said, "Let there be light." So our beginning isn't where we... In time is not our beginning. Our beginning in time is where we appeared out of the eternity of God. So it's the beginningless beginning and it's the infinite fertility of the beginningless beginning and it brings us to that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Wow. Beautiful. "Through the unknown remembered gate, when the last of the Earth left to discover is that which was the beginning, at the source of the longest river, the voice of the hidden waterfall and the children in the apple tree not known because not looked for." I just wanted to pause there because this is kind of referencing other pieces of the poem bringing us.

Jim Finley: That's right. He's going back again like a refrain for these very subtle moments where we get glimpses of the unexplainable shining through the intimacy of the day. So in a way, he's briefly going back, walking. So it's really true that the previous poems was a journey leading up to this fulfillment, but it's also true in hindsight that the fulfillment, a deep prayer was already ribboned through the journey itself of unconsummated longings. It's all interwoven.

Kirsten Oates: So in a way, to arrive where we started, we're arriving where the whole poem started as well in a way with this undergirding the whole poem. Yeah. "But heard, half heard in the stillness between two waves of the sea, quick now, here, now, always, a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything."

Jim Finley: I think there's certain moments, say at a sunset or before a great work of art, and it's like wordless awe. It's just we're not thinking anything. It's just a state of wordless awe, and then therefore, it's a state of complete simplicity. It's not composed of anything. It's so utterly simple. But it costs not less than everything, namely as soon as you try to find a footing and something to explain it, you're already falling out of it. So you have to be willing to perpetually live in the unexplainable nature of everything, which is the manifestation of this love bodying itself forth as life itself, really.

Kirsten Oates: And in a way costing not less than everything because it is at the heart of everything.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And I also think it's something else we need to give up. We need to give up being concerned that we don't know how to do this. We have to give that up, too, because although we don't know how to do it's already being achieved in us unexplainably by God, which is why we're capable of being touched by this.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's a lovely little section in the stillness. Quick now, here, now, always. This idea of

collapsing time. And then it closes, “And all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well when the tongues of flame are enfolded into the crowned knot of fire and the fire and the rose are one.”

Jim Finley: Yes. I think there’s two things here going on. One, it’s kind of allusion to Dante when he has dug through hell, through purgatory and into heaven, at the end he sees God as, the whole mystery is like a huge rose. The petals of the rose are the blessed, as we’re the petals of the rose of God. The rose is one. But here, I think he’s giving it also another connotation, is that the fire and the rose are one, is that the fire of all the pain that hurts and the fire of the Pentecost that burns away the substantiality of everything less than God and the fire of that being anything less or other than what it means to stand up and sit down. The all-pervasive oneness of everything and the fire and the roads are one.

And that’s why for all the suffering we’ve been through, there’s more suffering ahead. We’re not done with it yet, but that suffering, we don’t know what it’ll be, but we already know what it is. It’ll be more configurations of the love that sustains us in it, unexplainably. And also there’s more insights ahead and there’s more love ahead. We don’t know what that, but it’ll be more of the same. It’ll be the unfolding of this immediacy, of this rose. So he’s weaving together birth and death and time and eternity and suffering, gain and loss and liberation, and it’s all, the oneness of everything is the ending.

Kirsten Oates: And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

Jim Finley: Yes, they shall, and they already are.

Kirsten Oates: They already are. Well, Jim, thank you for walking us through this poem again after your beautiful session. I’ve really enjoyed being able to dialogue with you about it and so deep and beautiful, so thank you for today.

Jim Finley: You’re very welcome. Yeah, it was a gift to share it. Thank you.

Kirsten Oates: And thank you Dorothy and Corey in the background, always supporting us in putting this podcast together. 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.