

Turning
to the
Mystics



The Way of a Pilgrim

Bonus: Stories of Pilgrimage
with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Hi everyone. This is Kirsten here, and this is a very special episode of Turning to the Mystics and something we haven't done before. So I thought it would be helpful to start with a bit of context before we officially dive in. In Season nine, we explored The Way of a Pilgrim by an anonymous author, and that book narrates the journey of a pilgrim in the Russian Orthodox tradition following the universal path of spiritual awakening. As a part of that season, we invited listeners to share their own stories of interior pilgrimage, reflecting on how their experiences resonated with the Pilgrim's journey. It's hard to share how grateful we are for the stories we received. We received so many incredible stories from our listeners, and while we don't have time to share them all in this episode, Jim and I and the team read each one and were deeply touched.

In this episode, Jim and I will lightly touch on core themes from The Way of a Pilgrim, and then you'll hear a story or two from our listeners that relate to the theme. Jim goes into a lot of details on these themes in season nine, so if you want to hear more on the themes themselves, please take a listen to season nine. The stories will be shared by our listeners in their own voices, and we thank them for being a part of our community and for sharing themselves so vulnerably with us here. So let's get started.

Welcome everyone to this bonus episode of Turning to the Mystics, and I'm here with Jim and we're excited to share these stories of pilgrimage. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, yes. It's such a grace to be able to listen to the people listening to us, and we can all be together like this on this path. So yeah, it's wonderful.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, really wonderful. So Jim, you just wanted to share some opening statements before we get started.

Jim Finley: Yes. I was really moved in reading these stories of awakening, and I was moved because when Kirsten organized your responses into themes, these themes are the very, if we listen to all the mystics Turning to the Mystic series, and we would color code these themes and color code them in the mystics, the same themes that the mystics are talking about. And so it kind of bears witness that we found our way into the interiority of the divinity of our lives that the mystics invite us to discover. So it's encouraging. It's lovely.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Wonderful. And so for the episode today, Jim, you are going to reflect on each of these core themes and then we'll hear from our listeners some stories that relate to the theme. Before we turn to our first theme, though, we have an opening poem and we chose this poem because it reminded me when I read it of what you share often about how wonderful it would be to have all our listeners sitting in a circle together and sharing about our lives. And I wonder if you'd just reflect on that vision for us.

Jim Finley: Yes, and having led silent contemplative retreats for 30 years, mainly in the United States and Canada, but in Europe also, I'm so struck by the fact that each time we sit in silence

alone in our home, we're not alone because we're sitting with people all over the world who are sitting this way. It's like a contemplative community that's all over the world. And so that's what I sensed in this like a liturgical richness to this oneness that we're sharing with God's oneness with us. It's a lovely poem. It's beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. So let's listen to the poem.

Fleming : My name is Fleming Conley and the name of this poem is A Seat at the Table.

The Celestial choir sings as Frankincense burns. I bid you welcome. I am the greeter at the table. The table is infinitely long and your seat has been held for you for lifetimes. It is yours. The goblet passed from hand to hand, is everlasting always full. The liquid is nourishing yet no drop passes your lips. Sit. Look around you see who is here. Lean forward and look down the table. Is that Jesus? Is it Buddha? Who holds your heart? Whom do you seek? Together the illumined sit here. There is much laughter and deep and abiding bliss.

You sit in the company of those who will steer you, who will take your hand and lead you. It is your time. You have earned this seat at the table. Everyone is here for you and right now only you. Soon you'll become accustomed to the conversation, the drink, the laughter, and the brilliance. At that time, you will seek others to join you at the table and will reach out to offer a helping hand. You will become a greeter, I know you will, helping those new to the table to feel comfortable with the luminosity of sitting with divinity.

Kirsten Oates: So the first theme we're going to be reflecting on is the way the pilgrim was quickened and this idea of being quickened by God in our lives.

Jim Finley: Yes. So the story starts out with the pilgrim's quickening. So he's at church, the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, and there's a text and the text quickens him. That is, it opens him up in a way that he didn't see coming. And so it gives a deeper meaning to being a pilgrim. So with each of us, I think too, if we would look back, see how has it come to pass that each of us have come to be the man or woman who's able of being touched by these things. And if we look back, is it not true? We can look back and there was an unforeseeable quickening in your life, maybe a number of them actually. So it's like bearing witness. I will not play the cynic. I will not doubt my awakening heart. And so we listen to the quickening this way. And so that's what I think is so significant about this.

Kirsten Oates: And now we have two beautiful stories of quickening to listen to. The first is from Nanette who was quickened by the words of Saint Francis. And the second is from David, who was quickened while overlooking the beach in Cornwall, England.

Nanette: This is Nanette from Louisiana. In 2015, I was invited by my husband to accompany him on an 11-day pilgrimage to Paris, Rome and Assisi to follow in the footsteps of Saint Francis. During our first lecture by Sister Marie, an American Franciscan, I heard these words, "And he began to see things differently." It was during the time of our daily reflections with others that I heard in my heart again, these words, "He began to see things differently," and apply it to my own spiritual life. I considered this experience a conversion, a turning point. I saw through this opening a way to begin to know that God was accessing me. I understood the truth that even with all of my past struggles, God did love me. He gave me the grace to see others as he saw them using St. Francis' life of love as an example for me.

David: Hi, this is David from West Oxfordshire in England. I'd like to share an experience that I had while sitting at a beach cafe in Cornwall, England. As I sat at a table that morning waiting for my wife to get us a coffee, I had what I can only describe as an epiphany. It was a beautiful, sunny, warm October day. There were mums with their toddlers on the beach and a PE lesson taking place in the sea with some primary school children. All of a sudden I had this overwhelming sense of God's presence and his love for all of these people. It was as if heaven opened up and God's love descended and embraced each of us. We were all part of his family. It was an experience that words failed to accurately describe. It brought such joy and peace to my spirit that I sat there basking in the glory of it all. Wow. Wow. Wow is all that I can say. I didn't want it to end, but my coffee arrived and it was as if the spell was broken.

Kirsten Oates: The next theme we're going to touch on is the longing that arises after the quickening.

Jim Finley: Yes. My sense of this is I think everyone experiences moments of quickening in the midst of nature, intimacy, with children, service to the community, art, poetry, solitude, silence. I think we all have these like this sense of oneness or the sacredness of the immediacy of our lives. But what isn't universal is the longing to abide there. So having tasted the oneness, then there's the gift of the longing to be ever more habitually established in that oneness, which is the longing, which is an echo of God's longing for us. And this sets us on this path, this archetypal journey to consummate this longing.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, in your teaching about the longing, you mentioned how it asked something out of us and it asked something out of the pilgrim. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Jim Finley: Yes. That the longing ask of me that I seek to turn towards and rest in the longing, which is an echo of God's longing for me. And so it ask of me a kind of obediential fidelity to be attentive and faithful to the longings of my own heart. And in the monastery in cloistered monasteries. Everything about the life was designed to protect this out here in the world is not like this really. And so really it requires a certain kind of fidelity to a daily rendezvous where the quiet time to be faithful because it's so subtle and it's so delicate. If we're not careful, we walk right past it. So it requires of us kind of a refinement of the sensitivities of our awakening to lean into it and follow it, see where it takes us, and see what God has in mind.

Kirsten Oates: We have one story related to longing to listen to, and it comes from Elizabeth who shares her experience of great loss and expressed her deep longing for God as a cry for help to abide in a profound gift she received from her son.

Elizabeth: This is Elizabeth phoning in from Lexington, Kentucky. Our son Mac died suddenly of a blood infection, two weeks shy of his 9th birthday on New Year's Eve, 2012. The suddenness of his death left us and all who loved Mac in utter shock. It felt like being tossed through a threshold into a bewildering altered reality where everything looked the same, but everything had changed. I was cut to the core, but also keenly aware of our then 15-year-old daughter and determined not to lose both children, one from a

blood infection and the other from my grief.

In the night after Mac died, I heard him clearly, it was brief, “Mom,” he roused me. “Mom,” I have never forgotten it. More than 11 years on it is seared in me. Something shifted in me, a kind of awareness, a newness. Even when I felt suffocated in the despair, I was swimming in something else, as Rilke said, entered in. I came to my desk the next morning at dawn with my coffee to read and pray as I had done my whole adult life. But that morning was different. I said to God, “Please help me. I heard from Mac, I sense his presence. I don’t want to dismiss or ignore these experiences. I don’t understand them, but I don’t want to be afraid of my own life. Teach me, guide me, help me.”

These sprouts of new life that grew up in the ash of Mac’s death were difficult to explain to others. I went searching for teachers and found my way to Sister Joan Chittister by way of a quote from Hildegard of Bingen and then to CAC. Over these years, I have come to realize that while I was searching for Mac, God was searching for the whole of me.

Kirsten Oates: So the next theme, Jim, that we want to touch on is the teacher and the path.

Jim Finley: When we’ve been awakened by this, drawn by this longing, it can feel very lonely because it’s so hard to find anyone who even knows how to talk about it. We can think maybe we’re going a little crazy, we’re different this way. And so what we’re looking for then is how can I find somebody well-seasoned in such things. See, this is what the Pilgrim discovered. He keeps seeking different strategies. And this is where it’s so exciting to find the mystics because when we read the mystics like the Pilgrim, you can tell the Pilgrim’s talking about what’s happening to you. So that’s what we’re looking for. This is why I also notice with all these mystics or the Pilgrim has been dead for some time now, but the deathless presence of the Pilgrim is still talking to us and guiding us as our teacher. And that’s the intimacy of it.

Kirsten Oates: And what was amazing about the Pilgrim’s discovery of the teacher is he was in the presence of the teacher before he was able to see the teacher.

Jim Finley: This is true, and I think that’s often true too. So for example, when we first read *A Mystic*, we can tell it’s beautiful, but it’s not an easy read and we don’t realize that we’re being invited to slow down and get very quiet and patient to discover it. On a broader scale, what happens later I think as we find our way to this teaching, is we realize that there is no lack of the teaching being given, there’s only the lack of the awareness of the teaching that’s always there because the people we live with and the situations of our life, life is our teach. God is present and incarnate in the unfolding of our life. And this is why we see in the Pilgrim how the teacher guides him along the path and it radicalizes his sensitivity to everyone he meets on the road.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So Jim, will you talk a little bit more about the path that the Pilgrim discovered through the teacher?

Jim Finley: Yes. I think the path first, it starts out first of a path of devotional sincerity, and that’s the path that Pilgrim was already on. He was a church at liturgy, he was praying, and

so the prayer would be liturgy, Lectio Divina, spirit, meditations and prayer, desire. But now this is something where we're touched by something that's somehow qualitatively to deeper place. It might flow over into our thoughts like our meditation, but it transcends thought. It might flow over into our aspirations and desires to be more loving more Christ-like, but it overflows our desire because it's God's infinite desire for us stirring in us. And so he has to pass beyond the boundaries of his own abilities and his own reflection. And so the path then that's laid out for him is how do we do that?

And so the teacher then is someone who's immersed in an ancient lineage down through the lineage and he's really sitting in fidelity to the lineage of a heritage that goes back for centuries. And so when we listen, we're being touched by that lineage. When I was in the monastery, the Cistercian order in the Roman tradition, Thomas Merton, I saw him as a living mystic. And so when he led me to John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila of the Pilgrim, I saw he was introducing me to the lineage, which is a living lineage that lived in him. Then I might sit with him and it might live in me. And that's what's so moving about these stories.

Kirsten Oates: We have two lovely stories to listen to on *The Teacher* and *The Path*. The first from Catherine and the second from Brian. Both find their teachers and their path in quite an unexpected way.

Catherine: This is Catherine from New Zealand. It is nine years ago when I find myself looking to deepen my relationship with God through the writings of Christian contemplatives. One day, the long held yearning finds its voice and I say to God, "It would be good if I had an actual teacher in my life who can answer all my questions." Immediately, there is a very distinct impression which comes almost as a memory of someone with knowledge of the spiritual life who can help me. Within weeks, I start to hear the increasingly insistent thought, which comes from the deepest depths, "Get ready." I have no idea what to get ready for, but I start to wonder if I might be about to die, wanting to somehow prepare myself. I turn to yoga and meditation classes. I'm in my third session when there is some comment from the teacher so small as to be insignificant, but with it comes sudden and absolute recognition. The person in front of me is the very same one who came to mind in prayer. I am taken by surprise. I was certainly not expecting this Buddhist yogi teacher, but here she is.

Brian: This is Brian from Texas. Well into the middle part of my life, I'd come to a point of spiritual and mental ennui, finding little to no solace in the Christian practices that had once sustained me. I started practicing Zen meditation at a local Zen center. In some ways, Zen practice was perfect for this time in my life. It was a way for me to do my best to simply sit and try to accept what was happening at that time. I thought of it as special therapy for people like me who couldn't get out of their own. Way later, a fellow from the Zen Center where I had begun my practice sent me a note that he had greatly enjoyed listening to a series of lectures about Meister Eckhart by this guy named James Finley. I had had an interest in Eckhart since my days in college, but had no idea who James Finley was.

The lecture sounded interesting, but I wouldn't do anything about this for another year. When the thought of listening to the lectures arose again, I started listening to them in my car. As I drove back and forth to work before I was even halfway through the lectures, I remember thinking, "What have I stumbled across?" I discovered that James Finley had been

a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemane with Thomas Merton. I was reminded of how much Merton had meant to me in an earlier time in my life and began to reacquaint myself with his work.

The aspirations that I had attempted to satisfy as a Christian and continued to follow in Buddhist practice began to fold together in a way I would not have anticipated earlier. The best I can do to articulate this process is that I've come to have this sense that the contemplatives of these two traditions, and I would guess some other traditions as well, are all circling around and pointing to the same thing. I don't know that I'll ever be able to participate in a spiritual practice that doesn't point beyond itself in this way ever again.

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

Kirsten Oates: The next theme is on surrender.

Jim Finley: I think first of all, there's a way of perpetual conversion where we're called to surrender and move beyond habits of the mind and heart that cause suffering to ourselves and others. Then there's also this surrender then where it's illumined by faith. How do I surrender myself over to being attentive to what God's calling me to who I am deep down and really am and I'm called to be, how do I surrender to that? It gets even deeper as we have to surrender over not being disturbed that we don't know how to do this. See, as long as we're still trying to do it, it'd be refinement of us. So we somehow have to surrender over the ability to know how to do it, to sit in a quiet place where we learn from God who guides us in ways that we don't know how to do it, but God illumines us with that knowledge, and I think that's the mystical dimension of the surrender.

Kirsten Oates: So the Pilgrim, he had to keep surrendering to the prayer of the heart the teacher was telling him to do more and more repetitions to practice that surrender.

Jim Finley: That's right. And notice what the teacher does, and he's being very attentive to the pilgrim. What he does is every time he feels the pilgrim has found his footing, he increases it a little more so he'll lose his footing because we're trying to find this place that's like a free fall into God, like a sudden awakening of a oneness that washes over us. It was infinitely beyond anything that we would be capable of. So that's at the heart of this, I think really.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. We have three precious stories of surrender. The first is from Jill who was able to surrender her desire for retreat in the acceptance of challenging circumstances and found experiential salvation. David shares how during a pilgrimage on the Camino trail, he was invited to surrender his own expectations and much more. Sharon shares how she surrendered her need to understand and was met by God in a profound way.

Jill: Hi, I'm Jill from New Zealand, Christchurch in New Zealand. I've been wanting to go on a retreat, but my husband is waiting on surgery and the thought has been occurring to me during my rendezvous time I can enter into an internal pilgrimage at home during this time. In fact, through this whole journey with his sickness, I can enter into an imaginal pilgrimage room both physically and spiritually, maybe pilgrimagingly where the profound comfort I'm seeking is found and I'm welcomed in the sacred alone space in the depth of my being over and over again. This is becoming a very personal path where in your words, I find experiential salvation and love en route.

David: My name is David from Dublin, Ireland, and I'd like to share my Camino story. At Easter in 2019 with the blessing of my wife and family I set out from Saint-Jean-Pierre-de-Port in Southwest France, and I ended up in Santiago five and a half weeks later. I started out walking on my own. My plan was to use the time to think about what to do next in my life and my career. But as I set out on day one to walk, it was immediately clear to me that God had other plans for this journey. That might sound a little bit arrogant or presumptuous, but it really isn't meant to be. There were no dramatic flashes of light or rolls of thunder, but I know better than I've ever known anything at any time in my life that God met with me and it started that day.

Essentially, God hijacked my Camino. I realized that my whole life I had created a God in my image, a partisan, punitive, judgmental, dualistic God who pretty much hated everything and everyone not an altogether unusual image for an evangelical Christian I now know. Once that realization set in the way was then open for all sorts of transformation to take place, which it did. I would describe it as a removal of layers and layers of rubbish and blockages accumulated over many, many years. In the evenings I'd get together with others for a meal where burdens were shared and lifted. Joy was shared and experienced, and it didn't matter if you were never going to see the other person again, but usually you kept bumping into them in towns along the way. I knew as I reached the end in Santiago that something had been done to me rather than that I had done something. Thank you for your wonderful podcast and thank you for letting me share this story.

Sharon: This is Sharon from Indiana. I was 16 years old when in his sophomore year of college, my older brother, just several weeks before his 20th birthday committed suicide. My life after that was divided into the before and the after that trauma experiences often create. The before being, the years of my life before he killed himself, and the after being my life the years after. His suicide, which took place in spite of my specific prayers for him and my parents' religious fervor was understandably a terrible emotional and spiritual crisis for me. I would ask any who would listen to try and make sense of why this had happened. This questioning went on for years. One evening I remember asking God once again, "Why?" And then suddenly hearing a very clear response. "If you never know the why, will you still trust me?" I knew this was the voice of God within me because it was nothing I would ever come up with on my own.

The response to my question felt so real. It could have been audible, although it was not. Strangely, in spite of the non-answer element, I felt suddenly deeply seen in my distress. I didn't feel like my question was dismissed or diminished. It occurred to me that much like I desire a sense of being unconditionally loved, God was asking that of me. I was surprised then drawn. The ask to trust and love God in spite of all that was unexplained was in hindsight more powerful than any explanation of events because it was about the power of being in a loving, trusting relationship. The quality of a relationship is much more powerful and it creates more peace than any intellectual understanding or explanation.

Kirsten Oates: The next theme is fulfillment.

Jim Finley: Yes, the fulfillment is being unexplainably fulfilled in the love of God, incarnate in Jesus for us, in our tradition and our lineage and being utterly fulfilled in that in the love of Jesus, Jesus awakens us to our heart. And the heart is the place where the presence of God and the

presence of us are one, it's the heart. So it's not like in yoga, the heart center, the chakra of the love center, but it's this place of the oneness where we and God mutually disappear as dualistically other than each other. And so it's fulfilled unexplainably. It's a fulfillment that cannot be explained, and it's a fulfillment that we learn to live by. And so eventually we kind of learn not to seek it because when we seek it eludes us. When we turn towards it to explain it, it eludes us, but we keep surrendering to how we're being unexplainably overtaken by it, and we learn to be transformed that metamorphosis of our very subjectivity in this love, that's the fulfillment.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. And these stories from our listeners, are their attempts at explaining this sense that you can feel through their story of fulfillment.

Jim Finley: That's right. And I also sensed in their stories also this quality is they're trying to find words for fulfillment for which there are no words. You can bear witness to the attempt to say it, but no matter what you say, it falls short of a fulfillment that lies beyond what words can say. But in the sincerity of trying to say it, you're bearing witness to it. And I think there are stories do that.

Kirsten Oates: And we have two stories on fulfillment from our listeners, one from Ren who waits patiently to be guided to fulfillment, and one from Bob whose acts of service led him into an experience of divine love.

Ren: This is Ren from Indiana. One of Jim's teachings that has been the most meaningful to me was the idea that trying to fit God into your mind is like trying to fit the ocean into a thimble. When I first heard the thimble in the ocean imagery on the podcast, I didn't know exactly what it meant, but I knew that it meant something very important. This led to a profound moment of mental healing during a retreat. As an exercise on the retreat, we had been asked to tie a stone on a piece of yarn around our neck as a physical expression of the burdens we were carrying. At the peak of the retreat, we were given quiet time to sit in a chapel, to pray, and to hang our burden stones on the cross once we felt ready to do so. I knelt and prayed with all my heart, hoping that I would feel a lift of the burden of self-hatred that had been weighing me down for so long.

I take the stone off my neck then put it back on again. Then repeat the process hoping that the physical action would lead to an opening in my heart. One by one, the other retreatants began to walk up and hang their stones before walking out of the chapel. After praying with all my heart for what felt like hours, I knew that I could not go up and hang my stone with honesty in my heart. So I walked out of the chapel stone in my pocket. I felt so ashamed that I was not able to do the right thing, but I also knew that I could not do that dishonestly and have peace with myself. I spent the rest of the retreat feeling that stone in my pocket and found myself constantly checking to see if it was still there out of fear it would fall out and someone else would see that I still had it.

Suddenly, a clear picture came into my mind of what I needed to do. I needed to throw that stone into a pond at a park near my campus that was a place of deep meaning to me. A fellow retreatant drove me to that park in the dark of night, and I walked to a dock on the water. I held the stone out, and with a deep breath, let it drop. I watched the ripples expand out from the center as moonlight reflected off the water, and I felt peace. In that moment.

I knew that something was permanently altered in my heart. I was fundamentally free in a way that I had never known. Since then, there has always been a core confidence in God's oceanic love that is always enough to hold everything and everyone that which protects me from nothing but sustains me in everything.

Bob: This is Bob from Colorado. One pilgrim experience that has illuminated my life is fostering infants and toddlers. These sweet traumatized spirits came into our lives one by one. They stayed for several months on their own journeys toward love, wholeness and family. Our role was to love them and provide peace, joy, and delight. What I learned, what I experienced was the essence of divine love. Of course, I love my family and my own biological children quite deeply, but I found this same deep abiding love for these children who came into my life and then were gone. And if this divine love binds me to these young spirits, then it must also be available to bind me to all spirits.

Kirsten Oates: And the final theme that we're going to look at is the divinity of ordinary life.

Jim Finley: Yes, the divinity of ordinary life. So this fulfillment in a deep sense is not of this world. It literally is a foreshadowing of paradise. It's dying at the hands of love to everything, less than love, till nothing's left of us, but love. And it's this celestial fulfillment beyond this world. And yet at the same time, this fulfillment of God beyond this world is the fulfillment that in Christ is fully present in the ordinariness of this world itself. So it becomes incarnate infinity, intimately realized. So there's something divine about standing up and sitting down. See, there's something Christ-like about wiping off the kitchen counters. There's something Christ-like about it just being alive, being attentive to this. And so it comes full circle this way. And that's the unit of experience. See, that's the mystical experience, that this non-dual dimension isn't dualistically other than the dual, the non-dual dimension is the infinite ground of the dual itself. And that's the divinity of ordinary experience, I think.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, the ordinary life, even in this state of oneness, still includes suffering. We can't avoid the suffering of the world. And the pilgrim himself is beaten up on the road at the end of this chapter.

Jim Finley: Yes. See, the divinity of ordinary life is not simply the divinity of the goodness of life or the fulfillment of life or the joys. It is that, but it also includes which is more mysterious, what is the divinity of the broken places? And so in the life of Jesus, we see his daily life. So he lived our life, but also he suffered our suffering and he died our death. And he's one with us in the suffering and death. So this is important, and I say this to as a traumatized person and a trauma therapist for years, not to romanticize loss really, because loss is, loss is very painful, and we have to walk through it and tend to it and do what we need to do to internalize it. But there's something else too about this is that we come to a place where when Jesus says, "Do not be afraid with you always."

He didn't say, "Don't be afraid. I'll personally see to it that nothing painful happens to you," but rather no matter how painful the things might be, I'm one with you in it. And therefore we can look back to the painful things that really were painful, but in time with the grace of God, it's painful, but it's not just painful. There's something in it that has to do with God's oneness with us, not just in our glory and happiness, but one with us in our tears and in the broken places of our life. And that's important. I think sometimes too I've thought that

sometimes we pretend that we care less than we do because if we let ourselves accept the feeling, love how much we care, we'd be swept away by it that's why.

And there's a certain wisdom in that. But how can I find within myself a depth of love that transcends the pain of the world, not by fleeing from it, but by radicalizing my ability to stay present in it without falling over. And even if I do temporarily fall over, which I will sometimes, I'm just a human being, I learn to get up and hopefully all the wiser for it. And I learn to be more fragile or more respectful for the vulnerability of life. I think that's so central for all of us, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And that's that experience of salvation in the everyday life over and over again, so that life just isn't a set of joy and suffering, joy and suffering. But there's something-

Jim Finley: That transcends and ribbon through both. And by the way, when you're actually shooting the rapids you can't feel the joy. You're not supposed to, you're traumatized, that's what trauma is really, but as you walk through it, and I say this, a lot of deep trauma therapy is all about this too. As you turn to feel at the feeling level and walk through it and experience it and understand it, you discover that as deep as the suffering is, there's something in you that's not reducible to it because you're still here. Not only are you still here, but you're here grounded in a presence that you sense includes and transcends the suffering itself. And then this also opens you up to empathy because each one of us is a unique addition of the same story. So we walk this world of infinitely loved broken people like Jesus did.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. And now we have two stories from our listeners. The first is from Zarina who experienced the divinity in the ordinariness of life through a simple seven-minute walk. And then Paul experienced divinity in learning to just be in God's presence, in his brokenness, his suffering, without trying to change anything.

Zarina: This is Zarina from England. I had a beautiful awakening experience which came upon me during the time of COVID. I'm someone who needs a lot of space and solitude, and I found lockdown extremely challenging as I had to home school two children, look after my elderly mother-in-law who was housebound and diabetic, coordinate multiple meals and timetables in a day that was jam-packed. But I'd get up early at 5:30 every morning to sit under my beech tree in the garden so that I could have some quiet time and silence before the children woke up. But what moved me most were the daily evening walks I had to do across the field to bring my mother-in-law supper each night.

This simple seven-minute walk, which I've walked so many times before, became saturated with a sense of God's presence. Listening to the bird's song, noticing the fading light, the gentle evening breeze on my skin. I was simply taken over by a simple, profound bliss, a oneness that I can't describe. I felt completely suffused. It was so unexpected in the stress and chaos of everything else, but it felt like a homecoming within my deepest self. Those brief seven minutes stretching into a timeless space. And although there are some days now when the sense of presence dims, a shift has happened and it has changed everything.

Paul: Hi, this is Paul from Minnesota, and I'm sharing a recorded message in regard to part of my journey and pilgrimage. My pilgrimage as most are is one of glorious brokenness. My childhood was challenging. My brother committed suicide before his 22nd birthday, and my

sister Katie, was in a fatal horseback riding accident on her honeymoon. She laid in a coma for 10 days before she mercifully died. My son was born six hours later in the same hospital. My wife died 16 years ago as a result of a rare brain cancer and was ravaged to her last breath 10 months after being diagnosed. Turning to the Mystics has given me something more than anything I could have learned as it has encouraged me to just be and that I do not possess the power nor the ability to transform my woundedness.

I also arrived at a place where I wouldn't change anything in my life as it is all essential to the only path I have, and it is the one that has led me to God. I am spiritually lifted by being driven to my knees. I see God in all of these things and that they were not just traumatic experiences and tragic losses and grief. I do at times get a real lonesome feeling for my people. And sometimes I'm a downright mess, I suppose. I think actually I'm most irresistible to God as a downright mess. So the mystics remind me, let go and let be, and that all is well, and that as I look back, I can see my heart is being enlarged by divine proportions.

Perhaps most of all, I see love guarantees it will break my heart in a million ways, and as God heals my heart, I find places in it I never dreamed existed. Finally, I would just like to thank Jim and Kirsten as for the last three years, you truly have been sage guidance and absolutely wonderful spiritual directors. Thank you very much.

Kirsten Oates: Now we're coming to a close, and I just offer deep gratitude to everyone who shared their stories so sincerely with us today. What a gift.

Jim Finley: Yes. I'd like to echo that too. Yes, so grateful.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, thank you so much for the season on The Pilgrim that invited us to connect to The Pilgrim story in such deep ways.

Jim Finley: It was a gift for me to share it.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you, Jim. Thank you, Corey and Dorothy in the background. 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.