



Turning to the Mystics

Bonus: Deathless Beauty in the
Fleetingness of Time

Jim Finley: [music] Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell tone]

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to this podcast episode of Turning to the Mystics with Jim Finley. This is another bonus episode trying to be responsive to the situation we all find ourselves in. We are returning to run the regular episodes on Thomas Merton on a Monday, and then we'll have these more responsive podcasts playing on a Wednesday for a period of time while they remain helpful.

So, Jim and I are adapting to the situation with the podcast. I think we're adapting to the situation all around, but we look forward to meeting you where you all are on a Wednesday with this more responsive podcast, but we really encourage you to stick with your practice and return to listening to the weekly Lectio, Turning to the Mystics podcasts, turning to the mystic Thomas Merton.

So, Jim, thanks again for taking time today to be with us for this special podcast. I'm here with Jim in his study in California. I'm in my study in California, and Corey's on with us again in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Corey, in this last week, has now joined us in the shelter-in regime. And so, we're all adapting to this new way of life.

So, thank you, Jim. And you're going to lead us now in some teaching and practice, and then I'll be back at the end, and we'll look at some questions that have come in this last week.

Jim Finley: Good. Thank you, Kirsten. Greetings, everyone. I'm so pleased we can have these sessions together. I want to continue with our same basic format as I'm going to share kind of a poetic reflection bearing witness to this spiritual worldview of the contemplative traditions and end with a way to meditate, to ground us in that awareness. And then we'll do a little sit, and hopefully, then, during the week as you're so inclined, you can return to this and find it helpful and continue on in your practice. Hopefully, you'll find this a resource for you. Also, for the remainder of these briefer episodes, I will limit myself to one core metaphor and staying with that. So, with that, then, I'll share this reflection with you.

You know, in this reflection, I want to turn towards the healing stories of Jesus in the Gospels. And, particularly, I'd like to share what all these stories share in common, and what this common domain of all these stories shares in common with us in our situation here with the pandemic that we're going through, and whatever other suffering we may be going through in our life, how are we drawn into these healing stories? And, the reflection on the healing stories in the Gospel is that we see that Jesus spent whole nights in prayer in which he surrendered himself over to his eternal oneness with the Father that was his very identity as God's presence in our midst on this earth. And he came out from that dark, sweet communion of that union roaming the earth looking for people to set free from suffering.

And when the word got out, the suffering came looking for him: "I can't walk. I can't see. My daughter died. I'm a prostitute. I have leprosy," and so on, the litany of human sorrow. And we can then put ourselves there, that we come to Jesus, you know, "There's this pandemic, and I'm scared about myself or loved ones, the images on the TV. I'm just afraid

for all of us as a society on this earth.”

And what Jesus does is that he always, in each of these stories, he first responds to the suffering and does so in a miraculous way, this beyond our power, so that the lame walk, the blind see, and so on. But then he says, “I do this for you as a sign that you might believe.” And so, the true miracle then is what is it that these outward miracles are signs of, and how do we participate in that interior miracle? And I’d like to get at this then in kind of a poetic way, in a distilled essence of this, of our faith, is that Jesus stands with the person who’s come to him in their suffering, or say we’re standing there with Jesus suffering, and as they are there together, this is between the two of them, this is in the interiority of the person who is suffering in the presence of Jesus, Jesus says to the person, “I know you because God, the Father, has eternally contemplated you in me, hidden with Christ in God forever before the origins of the universe. I see you. This is the unborn you for God has never, never, never, never not known who you eternally are in me from before the origins of the universe. And this you, this unborn you, that God forever knows is the unborn you that will never die because God will never, never, never, never, never, never, not know who you are in me. I see the deathless beauty of yourself in who you are, the person that you are, created by God in the image and likeness of God for God’s sake alone as your eternal destiny. That’s who I see.”

And Jesus says this to begin to set us free or to join him in realizing that what’s devastating about our fears is not that we can’t walk, or we can’t see. It isn’t that we have leprosy, or it isn’t that we’re terrified by the pandemic. The root of our fear is that we think we are what’s wrong with us. That is, we tend to think the conditions in which we find our self, have the authority to name who we are. But Jesus knows that the conditions in which we find ourselves do not have the authority to name who we are. Only the deathless love of God has the sole authority to name who we are subsisting in that love as light subsists in flame, forever. Jesus sees that. And standing there, in the presence of Jesus, then the person—this is experiential salvation—they see reflected in his eyes, their true face before they were born, and they’re set free from the tyranny of fear.

Jim Finley: They’re healed with deep, deep healing.

Now, we don’t know what happened to each of those people, but in one way we do know, they all died. They lived their day-by-day life, and they’ve been dead now for a long, long time, but tell me, what kind of life do you live in your fleeting passage through time once you’ve been liberated in this way, deep within your heart, like this.

And so, I think then this is our prayer that I’d like to suggest to you, really, that we’re looking at here in this collective thing that we fear, is that first of all, we are to do what Jesus did. We’re to respond first to the reality of the suffering. That is, we’re to do what lies in power to protect our self, and our loved ones, and others from the destructive, life-threatening effects of the pandemic. We are. And, also, our hearts are to go out to those who are working directly with these people, to inspire them and guide them, sometimes at their own risk, to deal with this kind of traumatizing societal crisis that we’re going through. We’re to do that.

But we’re also to do it, reminding our self in the presence of God, that we engage in love’s work, leaning into it, grounded in a peace that’s not dependent on the outcome of the effort, for we’re grounded in a peace that is not dependent on anything at all, for it’s the deathless

love of God that sustains us, like the eternity of our self in our fleetingness through time, and this is what we pray for. This is what we pray for, not as a liberation that transcends the world to take us away from it but as a liberation that gives us the courage to be present to it, like leaning into it, knowing the eternal resolution in God's love in the circumstances in which we find our self, for our self, a loved one, whoever it might be. So, this then is the image. This is the image. And so, I would suggest to you then this is a way for us to meditate.

And so, one way to meditate is a kind of Lectio Divina; that is, we can ponder this in our heart, see? As we hear it spoken of in this way, what do we make of it? Like, where are we with this? Where are we with this? And how would we each ask God to give us the grace to join God in seeing us the way God sees us to be invincibly established in this deathless love in the fleetingness of our life in our passage through time? How would that be? And so, we could reflect upon it. And we could also reflect upon the fact that unless we spend some daily time grounding our self in this rendezvous with this love, the kind of intensity of the daily stimulations overtake us. So, we need a place apart to get re-grounded in this presence to come out and live our life.

And lastly, we can have a more contemplative sitting practice. For example, you may sit and listen to your breathing, because with each breath you take, you're living your one-less-breath-to-breathe life, that you're melting like a candle. You're fleetingly passing away, and very, very, very soon now, you won't be here. But who you are in the fleetingness of time will eternally be subsisting in the love of God forever, and ever, and ever, and ever, and ever, and we sit that we might realize this deathless beauty in the fleetingness of things and then grounded in it, live by it, and living by it, share it with others day by day.

Jim Finley: So, with that then, let's sit together in meditation. [bell tone] I want you to sit straight, fold your hands in prayer and bow:

Be still and know I am God.

Silently repeat within yourself. Repeat after me:

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

[bell tones]

[silence @ 00:13:30 – 00:14:55]

[bell tones]

And then bow. Slowly say the Lord's Prayer together:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us. St. Teresa of Ávila pray for us.

Blessings to all of you, until next time.

Some of you have been sending in questions or sharing things that these reflections awoken in you. And so, Kirsten will now interview me kind of representing all of you. We'll have a little dialog here to bring a kind of a dialogical stance where we're all connected in this process together. Okay, Kirsten.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. Thank you for that beautiful reflection. I was really touched by it, trying to picture myself in front of Jesus, and hearing you say that what Jesus sees when he looks at me in my suffering is this deathless, timeless person. It made me think about the images we're getting at times on the news, and on TV, and on social media of the doctors, and the nurses, and the patients that are sharing their gratitude for what they're doing and how I see like a deathless, timeless beauty in the way they're serving. Have you experienced that?

Jim Finley: Yes, very much so, very much so. And what's beautiful about it, really, when they're really engaged in this healing encounter, there's a kind of un-self-aware transparency about engaging in attempts to help this person or to help these people. And the selflessness of the encounter, you can see this deathless love of God shining out through their eyes, and their voice, and so on. Very much so, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I saw a picture of a man, and he'd written a sign and was holding it up against the glass window because he couldn't go inside of the hospital. It said, "Thank you for saving my wife's life," you know, "Thank you for all you're doing." And he had tears running down his cheeks and just these exchanges of gratitude and kind of a sense of beauty in the world right now amidst the chaos and the suffering.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And I would think, too, this would be a source of hope that when all this settles down, with all the suffering and everything that's going to come out of it, that it will give rise to a renewed social order of what our priorities are, you know, as human beings, as a people. It would be like a spiritual awakening will emerge out of this.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Something that's been happening in my neighborhood the last few nights is in joining with the solidarity of gratitude that's being expressed around the world for the hospital workers, you know, in Italy and places like that, they've been coming out at a certain time and clapping and banging on pots and pans. And so, my neighborhood started doing that but instead of clapping, they're

howling. So, at 8:00 PM last night, my husband and I and our dogs went out onto the balcony and all around like “Howl”—

Jim Finley: [laughing] Wow. That’s nice.

Kirsten Oates: --just echoing throughout the Hills. So, there’s also like this sense of a timeless, deathless communal beauty—

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: --that’s arising, not just individual, but communal.

Jim Finley: That’s true. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, before we turn to the questions, Jim, I just wanted to ask if there’s anything you’ve been doing or that you’ve done in the last week that’s helping you in that practice of staying grounded or finding places of gratitude.

Jim Finley: Well, again, I mentioned briefly that my wife died, about how many days ago now—eight, nine days, I don’t remember—and she died here at home in Hospice. My eldest daughter who is a hospice nurse was here with me helping me take care of her. And so, I’m living with the emptiness of it all. But also, I’m living with her deathless beauty, you know, her deathless beauty. And that this deathless beauty of herself having crossed over into God is the deathless beauty on which we based our whole life together, in our marriage, and spiritual directors, and therapists. And so, this really makes poignantly present to me the deathless beauty of everybody, you know? And so, when I turn on the news, what I’m going through here within myself and see in microcosm what’s going on in the world, in Christian terms, what’s the view from the cross? What does the view look like from the vantage point of love crucified in the preciousness of a world so fragile and so beautiful?

And so, there’s that, and then I sit looking out at the ocean, which is right outside the door here, I’m lucky, and the timeless eternity, the earth is bodying forth this love, this body, this sacrament of this love. And just like you, being touched by the goodness of people, and here in the neighborhood where I go for a little walk and people keep their respectful distance, and wave at each other. And so, there’s a kind of a tenderness that I see coming out. And preparing these talks helps me, you know. I have to walk the walk here and not just talk the talk. [laughter] I have to be authentic with this. This helps me, too. It reminds me what I’m about and what I believe in.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you for sharing that, Jim. This last week, my husband had a birthday, and in his family tradition, they’re big about birthdays, you know, they love to celebrate. And so, he was feeling kind of a bit anxious and down about his birthday arising in the time of COVID-19. So, I surprised him by setting up a Zoom link and inviting his family and my family to join us for a birthday party, which was really sweet because our families are rarely together because they’re, you know, separated by distance. So, we had Hal’s sister and nephews in Texas. We had—we call him our nephson—my nephew who we kind of adopted, he was up at Tahoe, and my parents in Australia, my brother in Singapore, and my sister in the Philippines. And so, we had an international birthday party, and it was just very, very touching to be together. When my parents came on the screen, they had a big happy

birthday sign behind them. They had hats on, they had whistles, they had candles and cake. So, yeah, it was really special even, in a way, more meaningful than what we would have normally done.

Well, I want to turn to some of the questions and feedback we've been getting. Jim and I have both read all the emails that have come in, and we really feel a sense of community in the people listening to this podcast. And so, we wanted to share with you some of that sense through your questions and through some of your comments. So, thank you for making the effort and taking the time. It's really meant a lot to me and—

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: --and I think to you, too, Jim, to read those. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

So, the first question comes from Julie in Texas, and she's been sitting with the phrase, that you mentioned in the last podcast that "God protects us from nothing but sustains us in all things." And she was lining that up with a verse in John 17:11 that I'll read for you. Jesus is saying, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the

Kirsten Oates: name you gave me so that they may be one as we are one." And so, her question is, "What is the protection that Jesus is talking about in that verse?"

Jim Finley: Well, this is my sense of this, and I want to say this, first as a trauma survivor and someone who's worked with trauma, so I'll put it in graphic terms. I live in Santa Monica in the general area of Los Angeles. And so, tonight in the City of Los Angeles, and really in major cities throughout the country and throughout the world, there are little girls who are going to be incested again, and there are little boys who are going to be beaten, maybe half to death, by their own father or stepfather, and God's not helping a single one of them, if by help, it means stepping in to stop it from happening. God didn't stop my trauma from happening, nor did God stop the damage that it did to me psychologically. So, I mean it in that sense.

Likewise, the whole mystery of the cross is that whatever it means that God protects us, it does not mean that God prevents the cruel thing, the harsh thing, the brutal thing, the violent thing from happening to us in our innocence. It doesn't mean that. God depends on us to be there for and with each other, to protect each other at that level. But having said that, having said that, God protects us from nothing, but God unexplainably sustains us in all things. And we're unexplainably sustained in the deathless beauty of our self being sustained by God unexplainably on up to this present moment, and we have faith and trust on up to and including the moment of our death and beyond. In the moment of our death, we are being unexplainably sustained by this infinite love taking us to itself. So, I mean it in those terms.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And Jim, for those people who really struggle with that way of looking at life, to accept that the suffering exists, but to know there's this deathless, timeless love, what advice do you give them to kind of get in touch with that love that you're speaking of?

Jim Finley: Well, I'll say this again about the reality of trauma. And, by the way, that's how personal the pandemic is. It touches internalized traumas and abandonments. Some of us have much more resiliency than others and some of us have been through things. And if we've been through internalized traumas, the present trauma reenergizes what we've been through. So, this is what I mean by the traumatization of spirituality. See, it's the trauma that traumatizes the capacity to know that we're being sustained, because in so far as we're in the grips of our trauma, we can't access that. We cannot access that, see? And, hence, we rely on ritualistic reenactments of internalized trauma, abandonments, and addictive numbing. This is the psychological reality of suffering, of human suffering.

So, what we're really trying to do then is wherever we can find just one person, sometimes it's being alone in the midst of nature, sometimes it's prayer, sometimes it's just one person in whose presence we sense that we're not alone. And they can see in us a value we can't yet see, or that we know that in their presence we're not alone because they're with us. And little by little by little, we can internalize that to get re-grounded again. And so, we're always trying to pass this on and help each other out. We're all in this together, and we're all helping and being helped by each other in this collective effort. So, in our passage through time, the encounter goes the way it goes, but it's grounded in a peace that's not dependent on the outcome of the encounter, because it's grounded in the love that depends on nothing, because it's the infinite love of God upon which everything depends. So, poetically it's beautiful and true, but to what extent it rings true for us and how we experience it touches on what we're going through at the time, our coping strategies, and all of that needs to be respected in its complexity.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, I hear two things we can do out of that. One is these meditations that you're creating specifically for this point in time that are coming out of an intuition of what might be helpful for people to connect to that love. And I know the one from last week, the whispering in Jesus' ear, I've been trying to do that every day, and the one today in coming to Jesus in our suffering and knowing, trying to see ourselves through Jesus' eyes, the beautiful meditation you get gave us today, is one way to help. And then you're suggesting another way is to either reach out to a friend or be the friend—

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: --that reaches out to someone else who might need this.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I think what we're looking for is where are those people, or those places, or those things which when I give myself over to them with my whole heart, it re-grounds me in a kind of a connectedness as something that's sustaining me in the midst of my difficulties. And, hopefully, exactly these sharing's we're doing here might be for some people among those resources to help them.

Kirsten Oates: Well, we certainly got some feedback this last week that it's been helpful, so we're continuing on. Well, thank you for answering that one, Jim.

Another one is—and it's a good follow up to what we've just been talking about—Helen is asking, “How can we respond to other people's fears regarding this pandemic?”

Jim Finley: My sense is this: The first thing we do, we respond by acknowledging the context of our relationship with this person, so, maybe someone real close, like our husband, or wife, or one of our children, or a close friend, it's like that. Sometimes we really don't have that kind of access to them, you know, it's more distant. So, what we're always doing is acknowledging the limitations of the encounter that it doesn't lie within our power to rescue them, so there's that.

The next thing, like we were saying about the meditation with Jesus, is when they express their fear, we begin by saying to them, “I’m so sorry you’re having to go through this.” In other words, we let them know they’re not alone instead of trying to fix it or cheer them up, we first join them to let them know they’re not alone in their pain, like “I’m with you in this pain.”

And then we look for little openings, like what could I possibly say that might be helpful? I think we’ve all had the experience of being with a friend or a loved one and they’re in

Jim Finley: immense pain and they’re sharing something. And we say something that helps them, and we don’t know how we knew how to say that. So, I think we need to kind of be open to the flow of what might be given to us, like, how can I be helpful, accept the limitations in it and the holding of the sincerity of the encounter, and then see where that goes with the givens of each person.

Kirsten Oates: That’s helpful. And I like that stance you’re encouraging, which is just in kind of a how can I be helpful, but not with a sense of responsibility for knowing the answer, just an openness. And the answer may or may not be given but not to feel that responsibility, just the openness for the flow—

Jim Finley: That’s right.

Kirsten Oates: --of love meeting this person where they’re at.

Jim Finley: I also think what happens then, based on the given, is a dialogue ensues, and the reassurance comes out of the sincerity of the dialogue. There’s like an exchange, and in the midst of the sincerity of the exchange, there’s a kind of the opening up of something where a little light shines in. I think it’s often like that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I wanted to read a couple of quotes that were sent in from people listening, just to give you a sense of where some people are in our community so that we might stand in solidarity with them. One is from an anonymous friend, and they wrote, “I work in a busy grocery store making bread and other baked goods for the extremely stressed-out community, and it is so calming to come home and listen to your voices and get centered in God.” So, someone who’s one of the few people working in a place being in contact with the stressed-out public, that must be challenging.

Jim Finley: That must be very challenging. And I also think, too, is that, say, the person grounds themselves in this space we’re in, so that when they go out and they’re making bread, “Give us this day our daily bread.” See? “May the love with which I make this bread convey to them something of the love that’s present in their life,” you know, kind of a sacramental quality to the bread that concretizes it as a service. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: That’s beautiful. Another one comes from Kate in the UK, and she says, “Thank you for this bonus podcast. I’m home with three young children, so lovely to feel valued as part of a podcast community.” So, I know many, many parents, my sister included, has four children, and so, she’s home. When she came onto the call, the birthday call, someone said, “How are you doing, Sarah?” And she said, “It’s Groundhog Day.” It’s just the never ending—

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: --being at home with the kids.

Jim Finley: By the way, I think, too, parents of children go through this. Children are so somatically empathic with what we’re going through, and we need to be very careful to protect—

Jim Finley: you know, we're afraid—but we need to be very careful to be a reassuring presence. And then when they do express a fear if they're seeing something on TV, we can acknowledge their fear, and say “Everyone's kind of afraid, you know, but we have each other. We love each other,” that kind of age-appropriate response to being present and protective to them as they find their own experience of this based on what they hear from the media, whatever. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative), similar to the meditation we did. That's kind of a theme, Jim, that the way Jesus approached people's suffering in the way you're encouraging us to always acknowledge it, the reality of the suffering, not to fix it, reject it, or try and move people on from it, but first, like, really acknowledge that it's true.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Before we close, I just wanted to invite people into our discussion and be a bit transparent about the desire to have people resume the Thomas Merton teachings on the Mondays and then they can pop in and listen to these responses on the Wednesday. But the rationale, just the teaching of Thomas Merton being timeless and important throughout time, when he was teaching, there was a lot of suffering going on as well.

Jim Finley: There was. People are going to vary to what extent they care to get into the life of each teacher, mystic teacher. But Thomas Merton, there was a lot of suffering in his life, you know, in his childhood, his parents dying, and inner struggles that he went through, which he was very open about in his journals, his inner turmoil and struggles.

I'll share something, though, that touched me about—I don't know if I say it in one of the little talks I did, or not—as I went in once to see Thomas Merton-- We could end with this thought. I went in to see Merton once for spiritual direction, and I was talking about this union with God that I was seeking there in the monastery, and he said, “Well, you know,” he said, “this union with God that we're seeking, is a union of God we're seeking in which we are learning to experience the suffering of the whole world in our heart, that we're not finding a rarefied air beyond the suffering of this world, but rather we're grounded in the love in which our communal fragility is being lived out in our own brokenness so that when we carry it with loving tenderness, that willingness to carry that tenderness touches the whole world in ways we don't understand.” And Merton was a deep believer in that through his own life.

And so, it's interesting to read about the lives of these people and the suffering that was in their life. No one's exempt. Do you know what I mean? We're not exempt from it, but we can learn to stabilize our heart in the depth of the love that transcends the suffering and unexplainably sustains us in it. And that's the peace I think that we're looking for. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Just hearing you say that quote from Thomas Merton just reveals what a great teacher he is for this this time. And so, there's an opportunity for people to practice in those sessions.

Kirsten Oates: Just before we leave, Jim, I did want to read one quote from our community, and I think there was a number of people who wrote in with a similar sense of wanting to offer condolences to you. So, I'll just read this one from Michelle:

Hearing today that in the midst of all of this, you just lost your wife. And in the midst of

this immediate loss and grief, [music begins] you are speaking to us with such presence, compassion, and love. You're being here for us, I was deeply moved and wanted to connect with you in your sorrow, and let you know how much you have given me and how grateful I am.

So, thank you, Jim.

Jim Finley: It was a gift to me, so, thank you.

Kirsten Oates: See you next time.

Jim Finley: Yes, next time.

Kirsten Oates: 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 at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. Please consider rating it, writing a review, or sharing it with a friend who might be interested in learning and practicing with this online community.

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We'll see you again soon.