



Turning to the Mystics

Questions About The Practice

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

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

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

Kirsten Oates: Welcome to our second question-and-response episode for Turning to the Mystics Season One where we've been turning to the Christian mystic, Thomas Merton. In today's episode, we'll focus on questions that came in about contemplative practice. Thank you so much for the fabulous questions. It's been wonderful to read your emails and listen to your thoughts and feedback. I'm sure all the questions today will be a help to everyone who's listening.

If you're listening to this episode in real time, you'll be experiencing what we're experiencing, which is this chaotic, challenging time of coronavirus. Jim and I and Corey are here together online, Zooming in from our own shelter-in environments and living with the ups and downs of this new experience.

With that in mind, Jim, I wanted to start with a question around getting advice about a practice we might use if we're having trouble sleeping. I, myself, have been having trouble sleeping since the coronavirus experience began. I find myself waking up between 2:00 and 4:00 most nights, and my body's just wide awake, and I can't get back to sleep. When I've shared this experience with friends and family, I find a lot of people are having the same thing going on. And so, I wondered if there's a practice or advice that you might have for those of us struggling with sleep these days.

Jim Finley: Yes. Well, a few thoughts, first of all, regarding your sleep, one of the things I think is helpful to see what our normal patterns are because for some people a disturbance of sleep is an ongoing thing that's been with them for a long time. But the concerns about the pandemic, and so on, can exacerbate that so it increases a sleep disturbance problem that's already there. And, likewise, whatever you do to help you, one, get to sleep and stay to sleep, you continue to be faithful to those, whatever your little ritual is—a cup of chamomile tea, or warm shower, whatever you do, you would do that.

Also, to know that when you wake in the middle of the night and you can tell what's on your mind are images you just saw on television that day or in the media about this, and you start taking the magnitude in and where's all this headed; and so, it gives rise then to feelings of anxiety and I think, also, feelings of depression about such overwhelming suffering and the uncertainty of it all. There's that.

So, what we're talking about now is simply what might help with that. See, what would be some spiritual remedies that would help with that. A few thoughts, you have to try them on for size and see what helps you. You know, first, one thing that might help is to know that these disturbed feelings are entirely normal. They're a very appropriate response to what's happening. So, you're like tuned in. But what we're trying to do is to recognize the ways in which the intensities of these concerns is cutting off experiential access to the presence of God sustaining us in the midst of these concerns, which is always there breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat.

So, what is a meditation practice? So, maybe just reflecting on the presence of God is with

us. It might be through our breathing. What is the practice that takes us to the deeper place that helps to reinstate us in this groundedness of God sustaining us being there for and with us? And then how to hand our fears over to the care of God, that we take our troubled heart, and we hand our troubled heart over into the care of God, sustaining us in the midst of our troubles and our fears so that our peace learns to reside in this loving presence of God that sustains us in the midst of this and in a peace that's not dependent on the outcome of the effort, whether it be our death, anyone's death, the death of the world, because it's a peace that isn't dependent on anything at all. It's a peace that transcends conditions, permeates conditions, sustains us in conditions. There's that that might help.

Another thing that helps is to know that not only are we united in our collective preciousness in the love of God, but we're united in our collective fragility in the love of God; and, therefore, we all belong to each other, and we're all woven to each other. And so, our concern is a little piece of fear in the burden that we carry, this little echo of the charisma that burns all over the world, and by freely choosing to participate in that and hand that over to God, that can also help as a form of empathic communion with the collective preciousness of ourself to Source.

And something that helps me personally, I'll share it because we all find our way, is that I'm up at night a lot, I always have been, and I walk around in the dark with my cane, so I don't fall over. And so, one of the things that helps me, the things I just said I do, it helps me, also, is I listen to talks in the dark. I put in earphones, Krista Tippett, like a spiritual talk. There are other places. If I put on real onset [00:07:00] on the timer and just listen to a spiritual talk, it helps ground me in spiritual things that are also true.

But something that helps me as I walk around in the dark, I realize that God is present in the darkness in which I'm walking around and around in the living room. And I also know that God is not just present in the dark, but God is somehow the reality of the darkness itself. And what I do is I talk to the dark. I talk to the dark, and knowing that as I talk to the dark, God hears me in the dark in ways that I cannot and do not need to understand.

Jim Finley: So, somehow by befriending the dark, recognizing God's presence in the dark, I realize that darkness is a kind of a sovereign, quiet, trustworthy darkness that is actually permeating the darkness of our fears. And I think that's the key, is how to breathe in that sense of the sovereignty of the divinity of the darkness and then to permeate the fear so they form kind of an alchemy, and it softens the edges of the fear, and that helps me to do that.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for sharing that, Jim. That's a beautiful practice, and thank you so much. I do like the idea, too, of listening to talks. Like if you can put earphones in so if someone else is in the room with you sleeping you don't wake them. I think potentially your Lectio Divina talks could be a nice way to kind of meditate on those in the middle of the night, might be nice, too.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I share with people that once I went on a pilgrimage to Rome with Jean Vanier, a happy memory, on one of those pilgrimages with developmentally challenged children from all over the world who gathered at St. Peter's. It was an amazing experience, really. And one of the women that I was watching there was a developmentally challenged woman who lived in Cleveland where I lived. And she would come to my talks, and she would record my talks.

She had a tape recorder, and she would record my talks. So, one year she came, and she gave me a gift of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. And in the front page of the book she wrote, "Love is not an emotion, it's a gift of God from me to you." I'm sure her mother would have had her write it that way. It was sweet that she gave it to me. And she said, "You know, every night I turn on the recorded talks that you give." She said, "You put me to sleep every night." [laughter] She meant it as a source of gratitude, you know what I mean—

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah.

Jim Finley: --not as what happened to her as she's listening to me on the retreats. But it is nice having a soothing-- It is nice listening to beautiful things that we know they're beautiful because they're true. And in our fear, we forget them. See, that's the problem. If we can stay connected to the beauty that's as and more real than the fear and permeates the fear, that kind of incarnational process I think is transformative, you know?

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. I think a lot of people would be grateful right now if you could put them back to sleep.

Jim Finley: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'd be grateful if I could put myself back to sleep, you know what I mean?

Kirsten Oates: [laughter] Yeah. Well, onto some questions from our listeners. The first question is from Tim, and he says that he leads a small group of people one Thursday a month through meditation practice, including *Lectio Divina*. "So, Jim, can you please speak to the novice person who's doing a sitting practice and what to expect from engaging in the practice? What is the point of doing the practice regularly, and how do I gauge the benefit of the practice and if what I'm doing is working?"

Jim Finley: Yeah. By the way, when we get to the phase in these reflections where we're talking about *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and other mystics, also, we'll be talking about this first phase, which is the phase of *Lectio*. Let's say what *Lectio* is. One way of looking at it is, say, that there is our faith, there's our sense of faith that God's present in our life, whatever tradition we're in, and how we experience that. But we also know that the truths of our faith tend to be somewhat distant, where we're somewhat removed from the immediacy of the complexities of our daily life, that the conditions of our daily life kind of overtake the truths of our faith, see, so that we realize this challenge we face is that we all face in our life is that the complexities of the day eclipse our capacity to be experientially grounded in the truths of our faith.

So, what meditation and prayer are then is a way of freely choosing. It's a set of grace strategies for freely letting the concerns of the day kind of fall into the background as we devote ourselves to the *Lectio*. And the *Lectio* in this sense is really a state of sustained attentiveness to a beauty not yet thought about. And so, in the *Lectio*, primarily Scripture, the words of Jesus, or Scripture, but any of the teachings of the saints or anyone whose voice, whose words access us with the truth of God that inspires us, or touches us, or reassures us so that when we practice the *Lectio*, what

it does, it teaches us to listen. See, it teaches us to set aside the anxiety into the background and focus instead on taking in God speaking to us in this word, and we take it to heart. We take it to heart.

Then in taking it to heart, then the *Meditatio*—the *Lectio Divina* and then the meditation—then what’s received in the state of attentiveness infused with love activates a dialogue between ourself and God, a loving exchange between ourself and God. So, God talks to us in the *Lectio*, and then we talk to God, and we share with God in a sincere way how the word that God just spoke in our heart touches us. What questions does it raise? Where are we at with that? And then we sit more, and we read the text again, or we go on to the next passage. And we go back and forth and back and forth. And that back-and-forth process of the listening, the active engagement of the *Meditatio*, leads to the prayer which comes from the heart center, which is the desire, “Help me with this.”

So, this practice, then, see that which is essential never imposes itself, that which is unessential is constantly imposing itself. So, in a higher-order imperative of the awakened heart, we freely choose to lean into this ever-so-delicate, non-impositional truth of God’s word in our heart. And then when the meditation ends, we ask God to give us the grace not to break the thread of that sensitivity as we go through our day. So, the habit of that fidelity to the daily rendezvous helps to habituate us in this kind of state as we go through the day, which can then lead into more contemplative, non-reflective forms of wordless communion with God.

Kirsten Oates: And, Jim, for the beginner, the person may be doing that for the very first time, the question, “How do I gauge the benefit of the practice and if what I’m doing is working,” what coaching would you give to someone?

Jim Finley: Well, I would say that, you know, first of all, the first thing to notice is your desire to even try it because the desire to even try to learn this art form, the gentle art of contemplative living bears witness that the awakening you’re searching for is already occurring.

And even though there may be voices inside, like internalized, critical voices, like, “You’re not going to get far. What do you think you’re doing?” whatever, to know that chorus of voices, whatever they are, we keep leaning into the voice of God that speaks to us in a very different way. And they’re words of encouragement, they’re words of love, they’re words of we’re unexplainably loved in the midst of the unresolved, and all of that. So, I think that’s the most important thing is the purity of the intention, which is the childlike sincerity of even desiring it.

And then knowing that what we’re asked to do here is to be very patient with ourself, very patient with ourself, because it’s never other than the intimate immediacy of our present ability to do it. We’re met there and over time, if we just stay there over time, we can watch it grow and deepen. I would say that those would be some things to consider that would be helpful for the beginner.

Thomas Merton once said, “Let’s face it, we’re beginners all of our life. We’re going

to die a beginner.” [laughter] So, how can we learn to be-- Because we’re in water over our head, you know, we’re in the mercy of God. We can’t comprehend it. –So, how can we learn to be a humble, wise, and patient beginner, you know, along this path of awakening?

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). When I was a very beginner in this practice, I do remember a sense of frustration about not being able to clear my mind, or not being able to focus, or not being able to, you know, the way I get distracted, and what really helped me in your teaching, Jim, was how I deal with that frustration. If I can continue to bring God’s loving voice and patience into the way I deal with my frustration about the practice, then I’m starting to attune to the way God’s present in my practice.

Jim Finley: Oh, that’s exactly right. Thomas Merton, once said in the monastery to the novices, he said, “You know, sometimes in prayer what we think of as distractions are really the way we’re being inspired to tend to untended things.” So, instead of being distracted by the distraction, we would make a loving attentiveness to that which distracts us to be our meditation. See, “What is it about this concern that scares me so? How far back would I have to go to find the very first time I had feelings about this issue, and how could I ask you, Lord, to help me to recognize your presence in the midst of this, and how might I be willing to go into frames of reference that are beyond this and sustain me in it?”

And then once you’ve tended to that, then quietly set it aside and return to the practice. If it comes back again, go back again and do it some more. And the next day, sit down and do it some more. And so, what you’re doing is you’re constantly like riding the waves of the sincere reality of yourself as you are in the presence of God, which is the practice. See? Yeah, I think so.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That’s so helpful, Jim. And I think this is why I have so resonated with your teaching as a way to enter into the practice because it’s always the loving response to anything that arises is actually the practice.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: And I do remember like a switch going off in myself at some point when I realized how frustrated I could become at myself or how frustrated I could become at my distraction and realizing, “Oh, this is actually the opportunity right here to do what Jim’s been teaching me, which is to bring the voice of God’s love into and open my heart to God’s presence.”

Jim Finley: That’s right, because I think the wounded ego, it’s just unrelenting and keeps generating the obstacles. So, what happens is, let’s say we hear this approach, we go, “That sounds lovely. That sounds lovely. What I’ll do is I’ll sit and turn to what it is in the presence of God,” and then we’re monitoring how effectively we’re able to do that, and then we get frustrated that we can’t do that because we can’t, see, and that’s the point! [laughter] The point is God is unconditionally loving us in our inability to do it. God’s not waiting for us to be able to do it to start to love us, and then we can start to maybe calibrate our heart to a finer scale and break it down into smaller parts, like what’s the fear made out of, that experiential self-knowledge in the presence of God is the way I think we move on. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you, Jim. That’s so helpful.

- Jim Finley: Another thing I think that really helps, also, is to have a counterpoint of a blessing—a person in our life, or relationship in our life, a ministry in our life, a gift in our life, the sun moving across the sky, the fact we're breathing in and breathing out, and switch over and on purpose, stabilize ourselves in how real the blessing is and how deep it is, how much it means to us, and then we can start to see how we're canceling out the blessing by this contracted intensity of the fear-based concern. And by letting the blessing flow into the concern, you get more of a realistic picture of the balance of things in God's ways in our life.
- Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful. Do you think, Jim, for a beginner then, they might even have that blessing in mind before they start the practice so they're ready to turn to it?
- Jim Finley: Yeah. You could, you know, for example, it would be a way to begin, so I'll say it as a prayer. It could be any text in Scripture, because every word of Jesus echoes with what I'm saying now, really. It's good news, really. You would sit down in the presence of God and in effect you would say this to God, like, "Lord God, I know you're here now all about me and within me--" St. Augustine says, "You're closer to me than I am to myself." "--and your infinite love is being poured out and given to me as my very life, and I'm being sustained by you unexplainably in this moment in blessings that I can't even begin to comprehend. So, it's in your presence that I'm asking you to help me to be more experientially aware of this loving presence that's always there as the ground out of which I then touch the hurting places and look at the hurting places." And I'm asking for
- Jim Finley: this grace because I tend to do the opposite—I start out with my hurt and then I try to get past my hurt from the vantage point of my hurt instead of starting out with the love that sustains me in my hurt. And so, I find that kind of invitational, welcoming prayer, it kind of creates the context for the meditation to proceed. Yeah.
- Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. That reminds me, too, of what we were talking about earlier with the broken sleep and how to turning to blessings might be another way to help calm the system when we wake up in the middle of the night.
- Jim Finley: An example I gave in the Merton talk, in two of the sessions, I think, is Merton had insomnia, and he's lying there and he writes, "And suddenly the bed becomes an altar and in a distant city somewhere someone is able to pray." So, that kind of quiet, inner integrity of being awake in the presence of God radiates out and touches the world in ways we don't understand. And I think that's another kind of transformative way to drift off to sleep.
- Kirsten Oates: This question is from Cindy, and there were a couple of questions on this topic that I'm going to read to you. And this is the topic around practice and depression. So, Cindy asks, "I feel hopeless and unmotivated most of the time. What can I do for myself to still pursue the contemplative way of living yet temper that with the reality of my depression? Will the contemplative way of life that I'm seeking begin to ease some of the depression?"
- Jim Finley: I want to speak first as a psychologist about depression and then take a look at how spirituality can be a healing resource in the healing of depression, like, whether spirituality touches depression. I'm speaking about the psychological reality of depression. You know, depression is a serious thing, and it comes in different forms. So, there can be kind of a chronic dysthymia, like a low-grade depression. There could be the depression arising

from unprocessed trauma. There can be a genetic predisposition to depression if our parents were depressed. It's a physiological, it's a psychiatric, meaning more of a chemical thing, some correlative to hypertension, or correlative to other medical conditions that merge with psychological. It can also become a certain habituated way we tend to see things, catastrophizing and seeing things, and it can weigh on us.

So, the first thing, I think, is to know that we're doing what we're doing to free ourselves from the symptoms of depression, through therapy if we have access to it, to thinking it through, working it through, being with someone who's trained to help people work through depression. If we need medication to help us stabilize the neurotransmitters of depression to do that, notice that you're doing what you're doing.

Next, whatever the rituals are that nurture you, you know, the walk, whatever. We all have our little self-soothing rituals that you're being good to yourself—personal hygiene, food, exercise, friends, like this. And so, you're doing those things, like you're doing your homework with the depression as you kind of work through that and where you are with it. So, then you turn to God for help. And so, you ask God for the grace to

Jim Finley: inspire you and guide you in your ongoing efforts to be healed from depression. It's an ongoing process, like, "Help me do whatever it is I need to do," and we do that.

But then what you also do is say, "What I'm trying to do is I'm trying to learn from you the way that you're hidden deep within me and invincibly in the midst of my depressed heart because I am depressed." A lot of people are depressed. I'm one of them. See, a lot of people are anxious. I might be one of them. A lot of people are addicted. I might be one of them." We all have our litany of brokenness. You have yours, I have mine. "But the thing is, Lord, you're present in the hidden depths of my traumatized heart, which is the preciousness of my heart. It's buried under the rubble of my depression. So, I'm trying to find my way up out of the rubble of the internalized depression, and I'm asking for your guidance in this that I might take to heart the truth of the things that you tell me about myself." And in that spirit, then, if you're in the Christian tradition, you'd open the gospels and what does Jesus have to say that that sheds a consoling light into the depression so that we might hold on to it as a way to counter the depression, like a counterpoint to the depression? And so, those would be some things that I would suggest, you know, because depression is so personal, all of these things are so personal.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. And when she says that, "Will the contemplative way of life begin to ease some of the depression?" I guess it's not guaranteed it will ease the symptoms of depression, but it—

Jim Finley: How I put it is this: It doesn't mean that we're no longer afraid when scary things happen, but rather fear no longer has tyranny over our heart. It doesn't mean we're no longer sad when sad things happen, the sadness no longer has tyranny over our heart, just as someday we hope when we die, we'll die and our death will not have tyranny over our heart.

So, what we can do is in our depression maybe know that this might be our path now, it might be fairly chronic. It takes courage to deal with depression. It takes resourcefulness. It takes perseverance. But to know that in the midst of my depression, I'm asking for the grace that my depression not have tyranny over my heart. My depression doesn't have the authority to name who I am. See, I am not what's wrong with me, see, "Only your infinite love for me has the authority to name who I am as unexplainably precious in the midst of my depression," and I'm trying to discover that. And the more I discover that, the more I think it can help to actually then lighten the depression, see? Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. I just want to repeat that phrase. It's so helpful to know that I'm not what's wrong with me.

Jim Finley: That's the issue. Yeah. Really. It's really the idolatry of conditioned states over the infinite love that sustains us in those states. And, really, a lot of meditation is about the healing, a lot of faith is about the healing of that, I think.

Kirsten Oates: This is a question from Ian who says, "I feel as if I'm actually getting worse at meditation," (He said he'd been practicing meditation for a number of years and that he's getting worse at it.) "and [I] find myself easily distracted and barely able to maintain any focus. I used to sit for quite a while with no problem. I've slowly lost my ability to do so. I've become very depressed, and I'm experiencing a lot of anxiety lately. Am I just coming to the end of my rope and need to let go to see what might come next? Is this a normal progression in the contemplative journey? I feel so helpless and lost."

Jim Finley: I want to answer first psychologically, and then I want to answer in terms of the dark night. So, I want to approach it first psychologically, say like in a talk, like to find out some more things. Here would be some questions: "When you were going along, you used to meditate much better. As you look back to when it started, the meditation started to not go so well, what was going on? Was there anything going on at the time, or the remembrance of a past thing that reactivated itself, that could help you to understand what started the shift toward the difficulty in depression? And what would it be to like retrace the threads of that back to unpack it psychologically and in the presence of God because maybe what you're being asked to do, what's surfaced, is some yet-to-be-dealt-with issue. It's still like lodged, stuck in your throat. You know, it's just like right there, and you're being asked to look at it, and walk through it, and understand it because there are just things we can't pray away because we're incarnate beings." So, one, there's that. And what do I need to deal with? And maybe it's something that might be ongoing. I'm carrying it inside of me, so, whatever might come up.

Let's say you check it out. You look at that and you say, "You know, well, there's some of that, but I don't think that's it. I don't. You know, I look at myself, and I'm no more sinful than usual. I mean, I'm still just me, and life's hard. I can't trace it back to some decisive event." So, what could also be going on is this John of the Cross, the dark night, is that on this Earth, we experience and respond to God's presence mediated through faith. That is, it's mediated through belief, through inspirations, through consolations, through mediations of God's presence in our life. But this is not our ultimate destiny. Our destiny is unmediated communion with God forever, the divinization through love forever.

And God sees that we're attached to these finite, mediated ways of experiencing God's presence. And God is seeking to free us up to be in a more boundless state of presence. And God knows that as long as we still have access to this finite means of experience of God's presence, we won't let go with them. So, God lovingly removes our ability to be nurtured in the customary ways we were nurtured, and we're left in kind of the aridity or a state of powerlessness. So, it's what was once called a "hell of mercy," really, and we have nowhere to turn. We have nowhere to turn, and we throw ourselves on the mercy of God and we learn to wait in this unexplainable place we didn't see coming, which is really the harbinger for this infinite love of this tasting of this mystical union. And sometimes instead of either/or, it's both.

Likewise, if you are going through the dark night, but you're subject to depression, the dark night can trigger your depression. But, likewise, the depression carefully tended to, can open out upon experiences of the dark night in which God is strangely found in some unfelt way sustaining you in the broken place. So, I think it's helpful to consider things along those lines that can be helpful, this discernment of what's happening.

Another thing I suggest to people is stop meditating for a while. Watch Jerry Seinfeld re-runs. You know, really, I mean, who cares? You know, go have lunch. [laughter] You know, take a walk and, you know, relax. And then after you take a little breather from what isn't going so well, come back because God's present in the pleasures. God is present in the life, God's present in the thing, and come back and give it another try. Sometimes that little break that kind of hits the reset button and sometimes that's helpful.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. And just going back to what we talked about earlier, the way you treat yourself through all of that is also recognition of your faith that God, even though you're not experiencing God's presence, God is still present to you.

Jim Finley: That's right. See, because I think the sincerity of our tenderheartedness towards ourself in our brokenness is the presence of God in whatever form that takes. And that might mean for some people, for a time leaving behind pressure that we're not going to church. We have to trust ourself. We have to listen to the promptings of our body and our heart and go with the flow with where we're at and do our best with it and have an open mind.

Kirsten Oates: There was something you said in that answer that I just want to repeat as well, which was, you said that, "Some things we can't pray away." And I do think, we do see people who have the hope that their spiritual practice will resolve all the incarnate issues and that can lead to a kind of bypassing of what's the necessary work of good psychology or—

Jim Finley: I think we do think that and when it doesn't work, then we lose faith in God, or we think something's wrong, but there are things in life we can't pray away. Like the pain I feel about my wife's death, sleeping alone every night, I can't pray that away. I cannot pray my sadness away, see? But I can learn to pray in the midst of my sadness and learn to listen to it and see what it has to teach me about life, and love, and whatever. So, prayer is not a remedy for getting rid of difficult situations. It's kind of a graced clarity that allows us to be clear minded, and real, and open in the midst of our situations. It's a big difference.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's really helpful, Jim. So, even going back to Ian's question about feeling so helpless and lost, there's a prayer that can be prayed in the midst of that?

Jim Finley: That's right. It's like, you know that saying I heard, I forget who said it, he said, "My goal is to live forever, so far so good." So, what I can't do is pray away my death. See, "so far so good," but it's already there. It's already in the mail. [laughter] And insofar as I find it troubling, that's how I can't pray away my death. Do you know what I mean? Like, I just can't pray away the realities of my incarnate existence on this Earth, and I don't have to. I have to find God's presence in the incarnate realities. I should do my best to have prayer be a way to move me past suffering that hinders my heart. [music] I should do my best with that always but grounded in a peace that's not dependent on my ability to do that. I hand the rest over to God and God works with that.

Kirsten Oates: A question from Laurie: She says, "It seems that as I deepen my journey and become more attentive and open, that I'm having both more and less difficulty in living my regular life. I feel more peaceful and grounded and yet more sensitive to stimuli. I can feel more easily overstimulated and need to retreat more. I also feel harshness so much more deeply and almost physically. I then question some of my friendships because I feel like in being

too open, too vulnerable, that in the end I involuntarily retract and in some ways am uninterested in a lot of conversations. Is this a normal part of the journey?”

Jim Finley: Yes. Well, you know as Johnny Cash said, “I keep a close watch on this heart of mine. I keep my eyes wide open all the time. Because of you, I walk the line.” And I think what happens is that, it’s really true, this prayer opens up our heart, but it opens up our heart and sensitizes us to the price we pay for being awake; and, therefore, we have to learn—I like the Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche saying, “My raw and beautiful heart”—I need to be very careful. See, how can I open my heart to the suffering of the world without being traumatized and overwhelmed by the suffering of the world? See, so how can I pace, how can I back off and guard the treasure of my heart, the pearl of great price, so that when I reach out to touch the hurting place, in myself or in another person, I realize that in that touch of love, some of the pain that I’m touching flows back through the touch into me?

And so, I have to pace my empathic vulnerability to the suffering within myself, especially that had been more opened up to it in my prayer. So, it calls for a kind of a refined, courageous prudence in pacing and trusting the opening to kind of watch over ourself. I mean, I think that’s the art form of it. And then I think when it comes to sharing it with others—you know, Jesus, “Don’t cast your pearls before swine,” you know, trod them under foot—we need to be very careful to sense if I’m going to share something vulnerable like this, is this person capable of honoring what I’m about to share, or is it that they would be dismissive towards it, or they won’t get it; and, therefore, I kind of learned to discern the invitational moments where I can find someone to share. And if they can reciprocate and hear it, I can share it a little more. We can see where that goes. But sometimes when we open up because we want so badly to have someone understand what matters more than anything else, and they don’t understand it, it can even pain the pain of our aloneness, and we have to decide what to do with that. We have to sort that out. So, I think those are very delicate things, and that’s important, too.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And I really resonate with Laurie’s description there, too, that as I moved through practice over the years, that the increase in a sense of vulnerability and empathy with suffering. But I do wonder, Jim, with the friendships piece, how do we keep a state of humility, because I can also see the flip side of feeling like I know better than other people. They can’t understand me. So, how do we keep that sense of humility around our friendships and relationships?

Jim Finley: Yeah. Well, by the way, let’s say we’re committed to this path, and let’s say that we’ve been endowed with certain gifts, or predispositions, or sensitivities, and so on, in which case it’s kind of brought us to a point of clarity. And when we’re with somebody, we’re kind of aware that this person has not yet come to the point of clarity that we’ve come to. We can see that. They’re still kind of struggling with something. And, therefore, how do we avoid a one-up feeling of superiority over the other person?

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Jim Finley: It’s kind of a condescending attitude. First of all, some things that helped me with it, first of all, is to know that the truths in which we’ve been awakened-- Everything that we have, we’ve been given, and we’ve been given to give it. And we’ve been given to give it to ourselves

and to each person we meet who's suffering. It isn't for us as some kind of claim to hold onto as something about ourselves, but rather it's love accessing us as a call to be even more Christlike and loving to each person. I also know however gifted I might be, I also know an experiential self-knowledge, I have my own more-than-enough wounds to deal with. Merton once said, "We're all a bunch of dopes, but we're loved dopes." And we're all broken, and whatever it is I know, pales in comparison to what I don't know yet.

Also, the preciousness of anybody is not dependent on the degree to which they realize their preciousness. Their preciousness is the preciousness of God that shines out of the mystery of who they are. Look at a mother, say, bathing her infant child. This child can't do anything, can't do anything, and yet she's smitten by the preciousness of that child like that. And see, that's the true value. And so, the attained value that comes through life is a value that is in the service of seeing that and is not in this comparative, which in its own way is real, but if we're not careful, it just gets in our way.

Kirsten Oates: That's so helpful because I do think what you shared about choosing people who are safe to be vulnerable with and might be able to attune to you is really helpful. But the rest of the relationships—the community, the friendships—it's more about them living into the gift of love that you're being given.

Jim Finley: That's right. And I would like to play this podcast, say, to the Living School and CAC, and so on. See, I would say to all the people that are listening to this podcast and benefiting from it, that we form a community of contemplative seekers and in the company of each other, we're not alone in things that matter most, see? We're not alone in the things that matter most. And so , we can look for a prayer group, a sitting group, a Centering Prayer group, a Bible study, or just certain friends, you can kind of sense, you know, we're in the presence of a fellow seeker, which you are able to share it with. And you can also sense while in their presence people God infinitely loves that aren't aware of this.

Jim Finley: And so, we're always kind of just going with the flow of what's real and being grateful for the connections that are there. And also, I think when we read the mystics, you know, you can read John of the Cross, 16th century, but his deathless presence shines out in everything he says, and they keep us company. You know, we're in the companionship of the eternal preciousness of these teachers down through the ages that still live on in our heart and let us know that we're not alone. So, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Beautiful. I love the reflection on the community listening to this podcast, and these questions that come in are just so helpful for kind of concretizing that so that we can hear each other and you can be present to what's happening for people in the community.

Jim Finley: That's right. You know, when I was teaching high school religion, I wrote high school religion textbooks and taught seniors. And also, the college classes that I've taught or on retreats, you know, the student is revealed by the quality of their question. It's not the one who has the answer, the one that has the answer because they read the book, you know, they have the answer, but it's the person we hope who read the book, they did their assignment, that's hopefully how it goes, but really it's a sincerity from which their question is expressing that is the reality of the clarity that they're coming to themselves and that's what makes these

questions so relevant, I think, like Rilke grew up and learned to love the questions.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). In relationship to community, there is a question from Becky who resonated when you said, Jim, “This Catholic Church of mine, what a hyper-critical, patriarchal, condescending, self-righteous, beautiful, tender, mysterious community this is.” And Becky really resonated with that and is struggling with how to orient to her church community. So, she asks you, “What can I learn from the mystics about staying with this community I have loved in the face of such discouragement and, frankly, disgust at the hypocrisy, patriarchy, et cetera, et cetera.” [laughter]

Jim Finley: I think it depends on several things: one, there are some faith communities where if it’s in the Catholic tradition, say, the pastor, the priest, or the deacon, or whatever it is, they really are spiritually insensitive, judgmental, all that. It can be so pervasive and what you’re looking for is so absent, sometimes people are better off not going. You know, why put yourself through that? Because the Church is a mystery. You know, the mystical body of Christ is all-pervasive inside and you can sit alone in meditation with the Scriptures open and in the media Ecclesia, in the midst of the Church, you do your practice.

Another thing you can do is look for the faith community that is there, where that leadership are people of prayer. It might not even be in your own denomination, but it has that vibrancy of piety, and sincerity, and seeking, that nurtures and feeds you, and they promote that.

The other approach is a lot of times it’s in between. It’s like a relationship—it’s too bad to stay and not good enough to leave. [laughter] You’re in relationship with the Church like that. So, what I find helpful is this, several things—one, when I sit there in the

Jim Finley: church to listen in the readings to one thing in the Scriptures that touches my heart and in the homily, what’s the one thing the person giving the homily, the homilist, said that I know rings true to me and is helpful? And to also know that all these people came here out of a communal sincerity of seeking the presence of God in their life, and for all their brokenness, I, in my brokenness, am one with these people, and God loves these people. See? And sometimes we’re asked to be kind of a quiet, prophetic presence, like a contemplative, graced, broken person who’s just quietly present like the anonymity of God, you’re just there, and you feel called to be that way with those people.

You’ll also find, if you look very closely, there are little subsets in the community of people that are more awake, you know, more concerned. You kind of gather around those clusters as subsets within the big community, but the Church itself is a big tent. You know what I mean? Everyone’s in there, and everyone’s welcome, and we’re all invited to the wedding feast. And so, anyway, those are some things that helped me.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim.

So, Jim, this is the last question for today, and it comes from Ed, and he says he seems to be conflicted at times when meditating or praying. He says that, “I think I hear you, Jim, speaking about the presence of God in everything, and I can really identify with that. But I also hear in prayer and meditation reference of prayer to a relationship with a personal God.

I'm trying to resolve that difference."

Jim Finley: Yes. You know, there's a Hindu teacher I like very much, [00:50:00] Ramakrishna—a Yogi, or Namaste, because he had this God consciousness—and in one his books where he has these interviews he would have with people, like spiritual direction, and the person was speaking of the presence of God in everything, but the person was having trouble with people who think of God as a personal relationship. And Ramakrishna said to the person, he said, "I think you're really coming into a deep sense of God beyond form. I don't think that you've come into the sense of God with form."

And so, God is present in everything, but in our tradition, see, it's the primacy of love in God's personal creation. To the realist, the issue is not why is there something rather than nothing, but why is there someone rather than no one, and you're that someone, see? The infinite subjectivity of God is being poured out and given as the mystery of my very subjectivity, heart to heart, person to person, unexplainably forever. And so, I'm awakened to this in my psychological subjectivity. I hear it, I have an opinion, but, really, what I'm reaching toward is-- Dan Walsh in philosophy classes at the monastery, he used to say, "We must transcend objectivity. We must transcend subjectivity. We must find our way to trans-subjectivity."

It's like reading the poetry of John of the Cross, it's so personal, you know these mystics, when you read what they say out loud, it's so personal to them. That's not hearsay. It's not a theory. It's in the ground of their body. It's embodied in who they are. And so, you realize then the mystery of who you are as a person is becoming more and more identified with the infinite personal presence of God as the person that we are and are called to be in the mystery of God's infinite subjectivity.

Jim Finley: Thomas Merton says, "If God is a Holy Spirit called Father, and God is a Holy Spirit called Son, is it possible that the name of the Holy Spirit is my name?" That God takes to herself, God takes to himself, fully and personally in the depths of my heart, see, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and James Finley. Amen." [laughter] See, is it possible that God's not all that interested in my spirituality, but God's infinitely interested in me? God's in love with me, see, and God wants me to taste how infinitely in love God is with me so that I, being so taken by being loved so, I give myself to the personal love of God that's infinite, boundaryless, and transcendent.

And so, the two work together that way, the personal and transpersonal, and the being of God, the ontology of things, are the names of God, or modalities of God. I think this is important for us in the Christian tradition about the Christ and God's revealed to us as a person among persons, infused with this deathless presence. And the question is what is the transpersonal personal love that shines in the person that we each are? And I think that my little book, Merton's Palace of Nowhere on the True Self, there's a lot of this centered on identity, on ultimate identity.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And, Jim, what your answer there really gets at the heart of what the mystics are trying to teach us, and it's not easy to learn because it's a both/and situation, and we like to be very linear and black and white about answers.

- Jim Finley: Yeah. Here's how I put it, one way I put it, it was like back in the good old days when I was holy, it was so clear. But for quite some time now, I'm perplexed, and I'm perplexed because I was caught mid-sentence accessed by a love that unraveled me and leaves me with nowhere to stand except in the love that took me to itself. And through the gift of tears, to being moved so in the depths of myself in this way, how do I learn to let myself be led by the love that accessed me and is transforming me into itself and that's the, you know what I mean, the intimate interiority of the echoes of heaven in my heart, I think.
- Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And really sitting with these practices you're offering and just slowly and patiently letting this unfold from within is the practice.
- Jim Finley: It is the practice. See, another way of looking at it: Let's say I'm sitting there, and I have this buzz of my distractions, and I can't get past the distractions. And I say to God, "Look at me sitting here with all these distractions." So then God interiorly says to me, "I agree. I agree. I can see things aren't going well for you at all. But I think it's helpful to know that the tenacity of your distractions in no way whatsoever hinders me being infinitely in love with you in the midst of your distractions, see, and if you could join me in discovering that, then the distractions would be like the thorn in the flesh. They would be the constant teacher drawing you back to the love that loves you so in the midst of it," and I think it's the artistry of it is along those lines, I think.
- Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. Thank you, Jim. I go back to what I shared at the beginning that we're in COVID-19, and I know I'm not at my best, but it's great to hear that reassurance that showing up with sincerity of heart and a desire to be with God and bring God's presence into the world is—
- Jim Finley: You know what else I think, too, about the virus and what we're talking about now: Let's say I'm sitting here like this, I'm refining my ability to be clear about such things. Right now, all over the world are people slipping away in death, with their loved ones wringing their hands, sobbing their eyes out, not handling it well at all. Who am I to think that I'm supposed to be exempt from that ineptness, and that poverty, and that pain? And is not my very inability my point of interconnectedness with them in the love that sustains me and sustains them? And that's where I think something like this can really help us. I need to take care of myself because otherwise I become one more traumatized human being that needs to be helped. So, I need to take care of myself, stay grounded and clear minded, but I'm clear minded for the sake of the tenderness. I'm clear minded for the sake of the empathy. I'm clear minded, and I think that's the quality of it, I think. Yeah.
- Kirsten Oates: Well, with that in mind, Jim, we might need to end this podcast with just, maybe you could give us a word or two to help us be in solidarity with people who are grieving, people who are suffering. For those of us who have the opportunity to listen to a podcast like this, could you just lead us into a blessing?
- Jim Finley: I'll end with a prayer like this: Lord, God, we are so grateful that you have awakened us to this desire for yourself and the desire to share your loving presence with everyone that we meet. We're grateful for these beautiful words that we know are true, that you're deeply present in the midst of these unresolved things. And so, we ask from you the grace to continue to deepen our obediential fidelity to learning to depend on you sustaining us rather

than depending on our abilities to get past or beyond anything at all. And by being such a person, may we be someone in whose presence other people are a little bit better able to sense this preciousness in themselves, [music] and may we extend this blessing out to everyone in the world.

Kirsten Oates: Amen. In the name of the father, the son, James Finley, and all our listeners.

Jim Finley: [laughter] Yeah. Say your own name. Make the sign of the cross and say your own name. "Amen." There you go. Good prayer.

Kirsten Oates: Amen.

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