

Turning to the Mystics



Teresa of Avila:
Listener Questions (Part 2)
with James Finley

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 the final episode for Season 2 of Turning to the Mystics, where we've been turning to St. Teresa of Ávila and her book the Interior Castle. It's been an absolute joy to be a part of this season, and thank you so much for listening. We're ending on a wonderful note turning to listener questions in a dialogue with Jim. So, let's get started.

Well, thank you for being here, Jim. And this is our second episode on turning to listener questions, and we're so grateful for the questions. They really help with the understanding of your teaching. So, thank you for sending them in. You ready to get started Jim?

Jim Finley: I am. I'm ready.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, great. So, we have a question from Amy and she's asking, "Would you consider Eliot a mystic?" I think he was, as are so many poets.

Jim Finley: Yes, you know, first of all, T.S. Eliot and other mystics, too, we'll see in a broad sense, yes. As a matter of fact, I have a retreat that I give on Four Quartets and I intend, once we finished the Christian mystics, we'll see how the series goes, but I'd also like to do each one on these poets. I would like to do Blake and T.S. Eliot, and Dickinson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Rilke and on the poet as mystic. And Heidegger's thoughts on poetic thinking is thinking that transcends conceptualization, and so on. Yes.

And so, is T.S. Eliot the mystic? Let's say this. I want to make a distinction between mystics in the classical sense of the Catholic Tradition: Teresa, John of the Cross, and instances such as T.S. Eliot. T.S. Eliot is definitely, in the broad sense, a mystic because he has this—Actually, for example, Four Quartets, the theme of Four Quartets is realizing that we tend to be trapped in the circumstantial, temporal order of the unfolding of time, trying to find happiness in time, and he gives example after example how it's not possible, it's a hopeless cause because of death, because of brokenness. It's just not possible. But if we accept it's impossible, we're never going to find it there, the birthless, deathless love of God shines through that brokenness, the fire and the rose are one; and, therefore, he has a very refined, mystical sensitivity about him.

And then the classical mystics that he sources with Julian of Norwich, and quotes John of the Cross, and then Krishna, or the Bhagavad Gita, and the Buddha. So, he's definitely, yes, it's very, very mystical in that sense. Related to it, it's the distinct sense—and we don't know because I'm not aware, or maybe I just haven't found it yet—where he self discloses at this level, because the mystic in this, in the narrow sense of these classic mystics, is that using Teresa's imagery of the seventh Mansion, for example, that there's a place poetically in God where the infinite presence of God is presencing itself as our presence, like a communion, as a capacity to be realized. She says, in the imperial heaven, the highest, highest heaven, and in the highest heaven of the capacity for that union is then in the very center of our soul.

And so, in the classical sense, it's literally being divinized through love so that one's very

reality is realized to be the reality of God. And so, that narrow sense of the divinization in our nothingness without God is distinct from the broader mystical sensitivity and what it finds in poets and some artists. And it's in all of our lives, really, through dance, through music, through healing process, we can get intimations of the mystical dimensions or layers of these experiences.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's helpful. So, the poet offers us insights into reality, kind of the mystery, the unseen components of reality that we might not otherwise see. So, in that way, it's helping us become more present, more aware, more conscious.

Jim Finley: Yes. In other words, here's another way of putting it, I think, too, is the poet says things that we can't take in what the poet is saying by determining that I have to conceptually be able to explain it. I have to be willing to let the need to explain fall into the background, to be present to the intimations of the unexplainable, in this poetic voice, and there's something mystical. And the very fact we can appreciate the poem bears witness to the mystical dimensions of ourselves, that we're nourished by that. And the same then with the mystics. When we read Teresa, we're struck by the beauty of it, but we can't let what she's saying enter into us. What we can't do is this, we can't say that we're going to take the beauty of Teresa and take it into us. Rather, we have to let the beauty of Teresa take us into itself. We're taken into the mystical oneness. It's having its way with us in our surrender to the beauty of what she's saying. And those two are distinct and related to each other.

Kirsten Oates: That's so helpful. Thank you, Jim. We have a question from Jazz. He says, "I'm not a believer, but it has been suggested that a contemplative path might address a longing that a purely intellectual, theological inquiry has failed to satisfy." So, he asks, "Can one discover if God is real in this contemplative way or is belief or faith a requirement?"

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's a good question. First of all, I think that there are people who are deeply sensitized to the mystical who don't identify with any belief system. They don't identify with any of the traditional belief systems. And, therefore, what they feel they're longing for is this direct realization of this unitive mystery, this infinite unitive, mystery and seeking it. And then they find in people like Teresa that she's talking about that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And, therefore, although she's Christian through and through, her Christianity is like a medium or a modality through which she's bearing witness to this unitive mystery that transcends Christianity and is wholly present in and permeates it completely as a way towards it. But one can find that immediacy of the infinite union with the infinite that echoes in her voice without necessarily oneself ascribing to. So, we can find it that way.

There's another thing here that's important, I think, is we can begin to see that maybe it's not so much that we don't identify with it, but if we would see the Christian imagery as poetic metaphors of the ineffable, then we see that what it does, it provides us a language, which was to talk—that's how she starts out the Interior Castle—she says, I've been sitting here looking for how can I begin to say this about prayer? She says it came to me, the soul is like a castle made of a diamond or crystal. So, under the imagery, the metaphorical imagery of the soul as a castle, she finds a language to express these ineffable things, and all the

mystics are like that. So, I think the more we see these things as metaphorical, poetic imageries, [illuminating] and incarnating the unexplainable, the more we can kind of be in concert with, even though we ourselves might-- That's why, also, for example, I can be a Christian, but this is why I can deeply identify with the Dharma. I can read the stories of the Buddha's enlightenment, and I can see it's another language for this universality, and I can resonate with it, and that's the interconnectedness of the mystical dimensions of all these traditions.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm. [affirmative] Jim, would it be fair to say when Jazz is asking about a belief or a faith requirement, it's not a faith in the dogmatic kind of black-and-white Christianity that's been taught in a lot of churches, but it is a belief or a faith that that experience of mystery, of connectedness, is real and that we can pursue it.

Jim Finley: Exactly. You know, in the Christian Tradition, they say belief is a sign of faith. We're not saved by belief, we're saved by faith. So, the creed is belief: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ." That's the creedal formulation of the belief that then embodies or configures the faith, which embodied is surrendered to the presence of God who's touched our hearts, and so on. And so, there's a lot of people that are top-heavy with belief and not much faith. They have a lot of belief, which is the ideological, etiological approach or the fundamentalistic approach of the belief. But these mystical traditions see the beliefs as opening out upon what the beliefs allude to, which is this faith in the consummation of that union in faith. And so, these distinctions are helpful, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Really helpful, really helpful. This is wonderful. A question from Maryann. So, she asks, "If it is true that everything in creation has been known eternally by God from before its creation, and God's infinite generosity is pouring itself out as God's self, while I'm happy to affirm that about me and other humans and animals, about mountains, about the ocean, about my garden but Coronavirus?"

Jim Finley: Yeah. Like I said, reading Teresa and these mystics, one of the gifts is it raises questions like this.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And these questions have a long history to them. So, for example, in the philosophical theology of Aquinas, and then in Duns Scotus, and then Karl Rahner, these different theologians, you find them-- How would one theologically respond to theologically? So, the question for us is how do we respond to it experientially? Like, in our spirit, how do we respond to it? One way that helps me to say it is that it's really true that ultimately speaking in creation and in the beginning, God said, "Let there be light." So, in the beginning, let there be stones, and trees, and stars, and you and me. And so, this is God who's reality itself, speaking all that is real into being. So, in that sense then, God is the fontal origin and ground of ourselves in all things, like that.

And she's indicating here that we can learn to see that in mountains and rivers. And we get that the stars at night, we get that sense, our love for each other as human beings. But what about the virus? You know, what about political strife? What about

racial violence? What about all of this? And I think what we're saying here, then, is that this condition, this state that we're in as human beings, we're experientially exiled from the all-pervasive divinity of ourselves in all the things. And it's in that exile that we act out the traumatizing things we do to ourselves and to each other. And so, we're to be healed from that.

But there's another part of this, too, is that the presence of God is permeating and is present in the fragmented, fragile nature of nature itself, which is death, disease, old age, sickness, heat, and cold, mishaps, falling down the stairs, that God's fully present in these broken fragmentations of the nature of things, disease, and illness, and death. God motivates and inspires us to be a nurturing, protective person, to be as careful as we can to protect ourselves and others. When they do occur, God inspires us to do what we can to heal the effects of those things and to do our best to heal it, which is the corporal works of mercy, which really is the spirituality of the healing professions. But we're moved by God to do our best to heal these things in an inner peace that's not dependent on the outcome of our efforts because in terms of God, it's the mystery of the outcome.

So, I think this is a very sensitive point about where the presence of God is present. And look how often, too, another piece of this, when I work with people in trauma or my own trauma, very often we're going through something that really is traumatizing, and being careful to in no way romanticize that or to make light of that, often what happens is something was given to us there about mercy, or about the mystery of God that we would not know had we not gone through that. And so, it's all very intimate and mysterious, really, these kinds of questions. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. That's a big one. Take a breath after that one. That's a hard one to just sit with.

Jim Finley: That's why I say with these people on retreats, too, I'll say when they ask questions like this, I feel like the mystical Ann Landers, you know, like people, "Explain the Trinity," you know, "What about suffering?" Well, let me toss out a few ideas. So, the questions are so deep that they can't be answered, but they can be responded to respectfully. And as we kind of respectfully sit with these questions, we gain our own insights, and we gain, or we connect the dots. That's wisdom, really. We kind of, we're just sensitive to the depth and reality of these things.

Kirsten Oates: Who was Ann Landers?

Jim Finley: Ann Landers was an advice columnist: "Dear Ann." She had a sister, too, who was a columnist. And, you know, "My husband won't stop making fun of me, and what should I do?" You know, "Dear Mildred, tell your husband to back off." So, people would write in. She had a syndicated column on problem solving things in daily life, so it kind of dates me, I guess, Ann Landers.

Kirsten Oates: [laughter] Thank you. Thank you for letting me know. This is "Dear Uncle Jim, help me with this." Okay. So, we have a question from Ivan from Melbourne, I wonder if that's Melbourne, Australia? I was assuming. There is a Melbourne in Florida, I believe, but--

Jim Finley: There is someone here later from Australia.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, this Ivan must be from Australia because he's talks about Archbishop Pell who was a terrible Australian archbishop.

Jim Finley: There was someone who was delighted to hear your accent. They're from Australia, and they said how nice that was to hear you talk, it made her feel--

Kirsten Oates: Probably the only person on the podcast who can fully understand me, but—

Jim Finley: No, It's not true.

Kirsten Oates: So, Ivan who is definitely from Australia, so Ivan asks, "I would appreciate it very much if you could comment on people like me on a mystical path but coming from an agnostic/atheistic perspective. Are there such people as agnostic/atheistic mystics? We are seekers, too. I know this experience could rock my life to its very foundations."

Jim Finley: There are a lot of things in here, too, this question, too, has a lot of layers to it. You know, first of all, about the gay/lesbian person in the Catholic Tradition. And, regrettably, there has been a long-standing prejudice against and bias towards, and naming as sinful, you know, referring back to certain texts, and so on. And that goes way, way back. But one finds that in all the traditions, I was listening—I don't know if it was Krista Tippett or not—but it was a woman who she describes about being a Jewish woman, being openly lesbian in the Jewish community, being soundly rejected. One sees strong in Islam, too, these very traditional rejections. So, I think we're at a turning point with that—

Kirsten Oates: Thank goodness, hey?

Jim Finley: --through society in terms of presentations of gender and the different ways we experience gender and the inclusiveness of different approaches, and that. So, there's that whole question. And so, in the Church, for example, although you have no trouble finding priests like that, who hold that position, you'll find more and more who don't hold that at all. And so, the parish that I'm in, there's a very open ministry to the lesbian/gay community. They meet regularly there. The parish administrator that runs the whole parish is a gay man, married to another man. They have a little boy they adopted, and everyone just accepts that. So, the thing is, if you're looking for a worship community in the Tradition, then find a community that has that openness. The Episcopal Church in general, it's conflicted, too, but it's done better at first over this than the Roman Tradition, but the Roman Tradition is really coming along. So, there's that.

Next, about this about God, then being so deeply-- And by the way, how does one then stay bonded to the Christian Tradition in a Christian Tradition that rejects you as a gay person? And what I think the mystery of it is, is Jesus was rejected. Jesus was a Jewish mystic. Theologically he's the Christ, but experientially, he was a Jewish mystic who was soundly rejected by his own Jewish Tradition, which actively contributed to his execution. And so, this idea of kind of the prophetic presence of the rejected person itself can be a calling, not to be bitter or cynical, but be forthright, honest, and real, and work with that, all that, all that.

The next thing is about the presence of God in this. This has to do with the names of God. And so, sometimes we experience God, and Teresa talks this way too, all the mystics, as a presence, like the presence of the Divine Nature, the presence of God, but also sometimes then speaks of God as a person; that is, God is someone who creates me as someone destined for infinite union with the infinite someone who creates me. Cardinal [Inazuke] 21:18 “Can the one who made the eye not see? Can the one who made the heart not love?” And so, the real question is not why is there something rather than nothing, but why is there someone rather than no one?

And so, my subjectivity is in a transsubjective communion with the infinite personal presence of God. We also see this mystery in Jesus. Jesus spoke of God as Abba, as Presence, and so on. But one finds in the presence of Jesus the presence of God as incarnate in the living presence of this person. And by the way, I also think that in Teresa—this is what in Hinduism the guru is—the living mystic is someone in whose presence you feel you’re in the presence of God in their presence. And they’re inviting us, then, to realize the same is true of you. You just don’t know it yet. So, we speak of God as presence and then we speak of God then as personal, like transsubjective personal. And they’re all true. You know, we move back and forth across these different modes, and as it’s given to us to do so.

On atheism and agnosticism, I think this, it depends if by agnostic you mean the person who doesn’t say since we don’t know for sure factually, “I don’t care. I don’t care to be involved in it. I don’t care.” Maybe, maybe not, see? I don’t think you can have mystical union and that attitude. You can have it in a mystical agnosticism. Namely, I don’t have certainty of any specific idea of God, but in the silent communion, I pass beyond all ideas of God, which is the apophatic dimension, the hidden dimension of unknowing. Likewise, with atheism. I don’t think you can have it in atheism because an atheist, unlike the agnostic, atheism is a kind of faith. Namely, the atheist is one who believes there is no God. So, you couldn’t be a mystic in that sense because there’s no infinity to be united to, you know, this is it. There’s nothing but the empirical, there’s nothing but this.

But I do think like the theologian, Paul Tillich, he said that he was an a-theist; that is, not an atheist, but an a-theist, like the divinity of God transcending all specific modalities of God and yet somehow present in all of them. So, it’s another question where this is kind of subtle how we understand this. I would say, too, with this person, if I was seeing them one on one in direction, I think what really matters is the sincerity of your question, would you care about this at all, and the intimacy of your caring is the way rather than trying to sort out these answers. I know at another level we need to do that but what matters is the intimacy of the caring that bears witness to the path that we’re on. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And it’s interesting, too, that the emphasis on Jesus so the relational, even though the Church may not facilitate a healthy way of being in relationship, the relationship, even with Ivan, is beyond the Church, because he talks about interactions with Jesus and the presence of Jesus. And so, so that’s, yeah.

Jim Finley: And for someone in the Catholic Tradition, say, with these mystical sensitivities, that we know that Jesus is the Church. In other words, “This is my body,” meaning not just this bread is my body, which is its own mystery, but in the presence of the disciples at the Last Supper opening his arms to all of them and saying, “This is my body.” And so, Christ’s living

body so when the community receives the Eucharist, you know, they're participating in God's oneness with us as the faith community of ourselves in this, this kind of sacramental, liturgical dimension, which is consummated in mystical fulfillment. Yeah. But it gets lost in the theologies and in the unawareness of these dimensions.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So, a question from Margaret, she's saying that she accompanied her sister to the end of her life, watched her go through a huge amount of suffering and experienced a lot of loss. So, she's talking about the process to understand the implications of this shared life/death journey for relationships, person to person, and living out the realization of that thin space between heaven and earth as faith-filled expression of who I am now. So, she's asking, how can she understand what this kind of suffering changes?

Jim Finley: Yes. I'll share this out on my own experience with Maureen and some reflections on the way of the widower, especially this is true when there's been any close bond to the loved one who dies. So, at one level, the human experience is how painfully and kind of absolutely absent the beloved is. You'll look around, they're gone. They're so thoroughly gone, you know? And so, insofar as you're still bonded to them, you can walk around crying out loud, screaming about it because the interconnectedness of the two of you, you kind of lost your orientation in the world, really. But what happens—and this is the grieving process and the spirituality of grieving—that if you don't panic, you know, and you ride the waves of that, as it comes and you pace it and stay open to it, you can begin to discover in some very deep, deep way that the beloved who's crossed over isn't dead.

That's what love is really, like Marcel, "We know we've learned to love someone when we've seen in them that which is too beautiful to die." And we also know that not only is the beloved not dead, but that in their death—and this is where the faith comes in—they didn't go anywhere. They didn't fly off. They're not trillions of miles away in some place called heaven: "In God, we live and move and have our being." And so, the beloved, the deathless presence of the beloved is right here. And so, for such a person, the veil between life and death becomes more diaphanous, you know? It's very mysterious, because in some way in your love for them, they already somehow took you over there too. "I live not where I live," John of the Cross says. In some way, the one who's crossed over is right here with you, like this.

And so, in a way this loss can start becoming itself a kind of a mystical realization of the deathless interconnectedness that permeates death itself. And, also, we can take solace before we get too upset about it, in very, very soon that we'll be joining them. I mean, it's not like we're stuck here forever. In about three and a half seconds we'll be over there too. So, this is a temporary arrangement here. We have a very short time, really, to learn how to love and love never dies. And so, that whole process of bereavement and then grieving as opening out upon mystical sensitivities can somehow enrich life really.

Kirsten Oates: What comes to mind for me is, you know, I lost my grandmother about fourteen years ago and she was one of the closest people in my life, and I just wasn't even able to grieve. Her loss was so traumatic for me, and so that thin space that Margaret's talking about, I didn't experience that with her because I was so-- I couldn't approach it. But I will say even over time with my grandmother as I've learned to come to terms with her not being present physically, there are ways that she has started to show up, you know. I see her in me, things

that I do, and I know that's her. And, also, just, you know, experiencing that loving presence coming that she offered me, but coming now from this bigger space.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I think sometimes what happens in a death like this, especially if we're young, or if we're really dependent on that they were a love contact, is in their death instead of a thin place, it becomes a thick place. That's the problem. And what happens then, is their loss has traumatized us. This is why unprocessed grieving can turn into depression, or it can turn into addictive process to numb the pain. So, as we go through the grieving process, we come out the other side and it starts becoming a thin place. I also think this is also related to contemplative prayer because as long as we're kind of out here and objective, reality is not nearly, we're not nearly in enough approximation that we can talk about it, but when we're in vulnerable, wordless silence, we're in this realm between birth and death. And that's very often where we can sense the communion of ourselves with, we're all interwoven with each other, heaven and earth, and the living and the dead, and everything, God, you know.

Kirsten Oates: I shared this in another podcast episode, but you know, the last words my grandmother ever said were, "God is pure love." And, you know, at the time I was at least happy for her that she died in a place of comfort and acceptance, but then those words just stuck with me for years, [music] and this is what led me to the Living School and to being here today.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: So, thank you, Margaret, for that question.

Jim, a question from Liz. This is a follow-up question to a little suggestion you made around how to read these mystics and to kind of read and journal. So, do you mind just going over that practice?

Jim Finley: Yes. See, I think this is so personal. For many people, just listening to the podcast is enough. It enriches them. And we're going to take a break and do St. John of the Cross and just walk with it, and fine. But some people, this might lead some people to want to get into Teresa. And so, when we get our copy of the Interior Castle and get a journal, we sit down, how do we go about it? We have to be very patient with ourselves, and so on. And one thing that helps, like in *The Collected Works*, the Institute of Carmelites Studies, Washington, DC, in *The Collected Works of Teresa*, they have a lovely introduction to the Castle there and an outline of it and break it down. And Peers, too, has an outline. But what I was talking about is this, because this personally helps me, you have to be inclined to do it, is take the Interior Castle and read the first paragraph. Then outline the paragraph. This is the way I was taught to outline. And when we outline something, it forces us to look at the infrastructure, the paragraph, because it's not random. And so, what you would do is Roman numeral one would be the topic of that paragraph, which is the topic sentence. Usually it's the first sentence, not always.

And you would write that out longhand. You'd write out what she says there, longhand. And so then, for example, you might say, "As I sit here now, I'm looking for some way to put words about prayer." This is how she starts, and what's come to me is the prayer, the soul can be likened to a castle. You'd write this down. Then she makes a comment on that. So, you would indent and put a capital letter A, and she makes an observation about the metaphor

of the castle, noting that in the castle there are many rooms, just like that. Then you might notice she makes another distinction, which would be capital letter B, then maybe under letter B, she makes a distinction about that distinction. So, you would indent and put a number one, a number two, and then come back and do C.

So, what you would do is, you would write out the infrastructure of the para[graph], which requires you to sit with it. Then I suggest putting a square on the piece of paper and write, “How have I, or how am I experiencing what she’s talking about?” And this makes sense to me, it makes sense to see it this way to me. The second paragraph is, “If I were to say it, how would I say it?” Because the best way to learn something is to teach it. If someone would ask me what Teresa’s Interior Castle is all about, what would I tell them? So, by trying to find the words to say what she’s saying, it helps us to internalize it, then put another box under that and ask what’s this asking out of me? What is this asking out of me?

And then put another box and then say how’s that going? How’s that going? And so, then you would sit with it and then that itself might lead to maybe closing the book and just do a sitting, just sitting with that and reflect upon it. Then you would do another paragraph and you would go through the whole Interior Castle that way, if you were inclined to do so. And then it might take you a year, two years to get a year well-spent. Take a break, then come back and start all over again. And this second time around, the boxes will be very different. So, “What you said, how would I say it?” It might be blank. You may say, “Beats me. I don’t know what she’s talking about.” But two years later, you’d write and write, because you’re different. And so, that’s my approach. Repeat until death, you would just keep repeating that, knowing that certain mystical works like this, you never get to the end of them because every word bears witness to what’s endless and you learn to live with the rhythms of that and the openness of that, which is the beauty of it. So, that’s what I’m saying like that, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. And that’s a journaling practice you’ve done in your—

Jim Finley: It is. And I think what I’ve written in my books or giving my talks, even what I’m doing now, it’s the consequence of sitting with the texts like this for many years, really. How could I find the words to help people benefit from the beauty of what she’s saying, which has so enriched my life? How can I pass that on to this? And so, then each of us, in his or her own way, we would take that because I can’t share what I don’t have. I can’t share what I’m not. So, how can I internalize it? And then how am I being asked to share it? Maybe not in words, maybe I’m to share it by the way I treat the people I live with. Maybe I’m to share it by my attitudes, or my prayers for the world, and so on.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. That’s really helpful. Ann sent in two questions. So, one is, “Are our experiences when moving through the Mansions likely to be colored or filtered by individual personality and upbringing?” Let’s start with that one.

Jim Finley: Yes. I would say that it’s always colored by it. Let’s put it this way. Let’s say the mystical awakening is universal. People are awakened with the God-given capacity to be quickened by this oneness and the desire then to stabilize in it. When the person so awakened tries to find words to what’s happening to them, they find in the words the lineage in which the awakening occurred. So, in the Jewish Tradition, the person might refer to some key passages in the Torah or in the prophets. And then in the mystics and Kabbalah, like that one would

turn and say, “Oh yes, this is my thing.” And in Islam, one would read the poetry of Rumi or Hafiz, or in the depth of the Holy Koran itself, like the depth meaning of the Koran itself. So, and then one’s own unique experience at one’s own tradition, as a Christian, or as a Jew, or Muslim or Hindu, whatever one is. So, it’s always colored. So, what you’re always doing is seeing these colorations as incarnations of a light that shines through them, see, because it’s always in relationship to this mystery infinitely greater than yourself that’s permeating and giving itself to you, not in theory, but it’s giving itself to you concretely in your own unfolding experience. That’s my understanding of it.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Ann mentions that she’s standing predominantly in an Enneagram headspace. And I did just want to bring that up because any of these systems that help us experience reality more clearly can be incredibly helpful. But then in the end, they can turn and become the stuck place. You know, that if we think the system is going to give us the answer or the system is—

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: --and so, at some point, and this is the bait and switch of this path, right, that you start off, it’s incredibly helpful. I’ve seen things about myself I couldn’t see. I’m feeling God’s presence through this system. But if I stick to it too strongly it will become a barrier to the presence I want to be.

Jim Finley: That’s exactly right. I’ve heard Enneagram people say that a couple that they know got divorced and how surprised everybody is. And they’ll go, “Well, no wonder. She was a Two and he was a Five. How was that going to work?” [laughter] “We could have warned them right away, ‘Don’t do it,’” Like, taking it literally. But in the same way, if you take it correctly—and all this is like this, Scripture’s like this, life is like this—if we take it correctly. And the Enneagram is a great example, like Teresa, or certain paradigmatic, poetic configurations of grace that can shed light on our experience and kind of help us find our way and help with things connect. And that’s a very good example.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So, even the frameworks Teresa offers, if we stick so tightly to the framework expecting it to deliver something—

Jim Finley: Really. Like, “What Mansion am I in? And how can I get to the next one?” And you know, we miss the point, really. But if she says she’s trying to help us find the language where, what is the quality of my experience of, and response to, God’s deepening presence in my life, then all of a sudden it gets very personal, you know, very kind of interior. And she always means it, it’s clear she just means it in that sense.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Thank you. Ann also talks about the image of spiritual marriage not resonating for her at all. And so, she’s asking for another metaphor, immersion, like a fish and water.

Jim Finley: Whatever’s helpful. Whatever’s helpful; immersion. Something that might be more, if spiritual marriage doesn’t work, for example, when we get to Eckhart. See, these nuptial mystics, it’s love imagery. And then that parallels Bhakti yoga, devotional love, the Gita, and so on, and it parallels Sufism. But Eckhart, he doesn’t talk this language. He talks about presence, and he talks about having a virgin mind, see, the birth of the word in the soul. And this is why Eckhart is more analogous with Buddhism, on mindfulness and presence, and so

on. And so, we need to find what is the language that aligns itself with what's given to us?

I have to say this, though, with mystical marriage, what might help is the analogy doesn't have to be marriage. Just think of someone that you love very much. And what is that experience like to love somebody that loves you? Just to have that experience. Now, what would that mean that that gives me some taste of what it is that's happening between me and God, even though-- And she speaks to her having a condition where she can't form images of emotion. She has that. And I think, too, that inability to form, which is related to her question, really, itself could be a calling because it could be a calling to apophatic mysticism, that is, to live without an image. What is imageless realization? How does one seek this? So, the whole Cloud of Unknowing, what is the unknowing that doesn't coalesce around any image as a path. But then, I would say what it does do, it coalesces in the sincerity of her question. It coalesces in the concreteness of her desire, but not necessarily an image that she holds onto. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So, she mentioned she has, am I saying this right, Jim, aphantasia?

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Which, what is that?

Jim Finley: It's a condition in which the person cannot form images of their own emotions. They can't configure it. We can form an image of it and their mind doesn't, this is one aspect of it. So, you could see then all this stuff about mystical marriage is an image.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: But since her mind doesn't allow her to have a viable access to images, you can understand then why she would-- And that's why I'm suggesting an apophatic way of no image—

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: --and just let the poetic beauty or depth touch her, as it touches her. And like she's saying through immersion, interpenetration, oneness, just stay with what, where the flow is for you. Let the rest go over your shoulder. Don't worry about it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. I have some resonance with the question I think because of my confusion about love and marriage, given my mother and father's, you know, growing up in a household where that wasn't— So, we're reaching for a finite experience and so many of those finite experiences have been broken for us in our individual context. And so, really trying to find the one that actually resonates for us.

Jim Finley: It's true. For me, this happens a lot, really, this is where therapy touches spirituality. Like, Jesus's "Abba, Father," one, there's a whole patriarchal thing. You know, it's Abba, it's really, it's the divine origin, like this. So, there's that issue of how do we find an inclusive language for God as a way that it allows us to use the word Abba, our Father, the way that Jesus intended.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: But there's another thing, it's like with me, my father was a violent alcoholic. I was brutally beaten and repeatedly. And so, my image of my father was hardly a basis. You could see how someone would just walk away from it just to be true to himself. So, for me, the image of loving father was healing for me. See, I saw it as a corrective move or a counterpoint to that. And that my father, through his brokenness, was an aberration of what a father is. And I could learn to see that and work it through. And so, everyone has to sort all this out.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah. Thank you. So, we have a question from Michael who shares a very personal story, and he asks Jim, "Is it possible that I glimpsed the seventh Mansion when I had what I would describe as a mystical experience following a very difficult few years while in my twenties?"

Jim Finley: Yes. Well, first of all, this happens a lot, actually. Sometimes when someone's traumatized, it doesn't happen at all. The opposite happens when they're traumatized, it kind of closes everything down and it can become an ongoing, internalized thing they need to work through, posttraumatic stress disorder, and so on. But sometimes what happens with some people, in the very intensity of the loss, it's just when things became the darkest, the light shines in the darkness but the darkness grasps it not. It was precisely when things got so completely dark that a light was shining in the darkness and changed my whole life.

I remember once, years ago, I was giving a retreat, and this is way back when I first started, and there was somebody on the retreat with his wife. And he was at D-Day and the storming of the beaches, and D-Day, at the beginning of the invasion. And he said it was just horrible. He remembers, he said, the noise. And as they were storming the beaches out of these boats that were landing and all these troops, and they were being machine gunned down. Literally, his buddies were being blown to pieces on both sides of him. He said, "All of a sudden it was like everything was happening in slow motion and silent." He said, "It's the most peaceful I ever felt in my whole life." He said, "I even asked God to let me die because I was afraid if I'd live, I'd ruin this." And he said he would never, never forget that. And this happens a lot. It happened with me too. It's how my awakening first happened was in the middle of my trauma. So, sometimes what happens in the middle of the trauma is the quickening occurs. It's true.

It doesn't mean that it takes the trauma away, but it can give a reference point within one's self, to find one's way, it's like that. So, then the next thing is, is it possible then in such a state to have a glimpse of the seventh Mansion? Because when you hear her talk about the seventh Mansion, it has echoes of what you experienced. You know, there's like intimations, and I think this,; not the seventh Mansion in itself because the essence of the seventh Mansion is that it's permanent, but I think you could have a flash of what it would look like if it were permanent, like having tasted it for a fleeting moment, I got a glimpse of what that would be like to be so habituated in that, that it would be like the constancy of everything that I experienced. I think, yes, in that sense. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Part of his story is, you know, going through something traumatic and then later having a vision. And I resonated with that, that it's sometimes not in the midst of the trauma, but something arises later.

Jim Finley: Yeah. By the way, yes. This is another piece that he mentions. We can have an experience

like this, and sometimes unexpectedly, days, weeks, months, or years later, sometimes half awake, half asleep where we see something, all of a sudden, the quickening occurs that all of a sudden, like a previously unrecognized layer of what was given in that moment comes out into conscious awareness. It does happen. Yes, it does. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. I resonate with that too.

Jim Finley: Yeah, me too.

Kirsten Oates: So, a question from Sarah, she's asking, "Should I have a spiritual director even if I can't find someone who knows and is on this contemplative mystical path?"

Jim Finley: Yes. I think that, here's my sense of this. First of all, let's say typically speaking, a spiritual director is someone who helps you in your prayer. They help you discern how God's present in what you're going through. That it's like that, kind of spiritual directors, or some people go to a retreat house or wherever they have spiritual directors and look for someone to help them. If they're drawn this way to the mystical, if their spiritual director is very pastorally grounded in the faith, very loving, but they're not like this, you can just tell. So, the real question is where can I find a contemplative spiritual director? Someone who is in direction and someone who has also himself or herself been sensitized to this, and they're not that easy to find. What I suggest to people if they're in the Catholic Tradition is check out retreat houses, especially ones who offer contemplative retreats, are there any spiritual directors there who offer guidelines in contemplative prayer? Also, through Contemplative Outreach and also International Christian Meditation Society, where you will find people to assist.

Sometimes, you have to look-- I mentioned in earlier podcasts, I was talking once with Thomas Merton about this at the monastery. And he told me, he said, "Once in a while, you'll find someone with whom you can talk about such things, but they're hard to find." He said, "It's a temporary arrangement, and you'll spend most of your life without one, which is the solitude of the path." So, you have God, you have prayer, you have Teresa, and you also have daily life. You also are open and receptive to what God's communicating to you in the middle of your situation. But if one can find a contemplative director, it's a gift when that happens.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And this is a difficult situation for Sarah because she's a spiritual director herself, and there's a requirement that you must meet with a spiritual director to retain your accreditation. So, if she can't find a contemplative spiritual director there's a way of being in a role that, you know, she can—

Jim Finley: Yeah, here's my thought. This path we're talking about, it's always configuring itself and calling us to itself in the circumstances in which we're being called. So, you have to work the system, you have to know how to work the system. So, if I'm a spiritual director, and I know I myself need to have a director in order to be a director, then I go have a director.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And even though I can't find a director who's a contemplative director, it doesn't stop me from having my director. It doesn't mean that God's not present in my relationship with my director. It just means this is part of my solitude. And then it might just so happen that

somebody that I'm directing is being awakened to this. In my presence with them, they might find someone to offer experiential guidance and encouragement. And so, God can use me to pass on to them what I can't find somebody to pass on to me directly, but it's passed onto me in silence, it's passed on to me through the mystics. And that's my walk.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). With the contemplative path that the acceptance that God's presence is present in all the circumstances.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: And so, how do you take in the lack of a spiritual director that gives you guidance as God's presence in your life and operate from that center? That's been a shift for me in trying to orient to the world a little differently on this path.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I think is what Jesus meant by the will of God. The will of God is God's presence in the circumstances of what I'm in, and how can I find that divine depth dimension that's sustaining me and present to me in this situation? Also, in AA, it's life on life's terms. And also for the Buddha—later podcasts we may do the Buddha, the Dharma and the Gospel—see, for the Buddha, the whole middle way, that suffering is caused from determining that the condition necessary for you to be happy is other than the conditions that you're in. As long as I've determined there is a certain condition that's necessary for me to be happy, and it's not this condition, I'm not happy. And therefore, what I have to learn is how can I find the depth of what I'm looking for welling up out of the condition that I am in, deeply accepted, deeply seen? So, this is a kind of a universal depth dimension, intuitive thing, in all these traditions, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So, to suggest that a contemplative spiritual director is ideal is not to say that if there's not one that God's not very present in that and can work through those circumstances, yeah.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And by the way, if you have a contemplative director, good for you. But guess what, they're going to die, or move to Idaho or something, you know, some damn thing. [laughter] Who knows? "Oh, I got a director, I got a director!" Or they're going to get a phone call and find out you died. You know, like, "Oh gosh, it was a really good person there." So, anyway, we need to kind of just roll with it and take it as it comes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, I appreciate that question from Sarah because I think you could replace so many circumstances like that. You know, if I had a church that was contemplative, if I had a partner in my life that was contemplative, if I had-- In ideal circumstances, we'd have all those things. But in our world right now, this contemplative path is so rare, and we have to travel much of it alone.

Jim Finley: See. I think this is so hard to do, but I think what all the mystics are saying, what Jesus is saying is, how can I learn not to let the conditions that I am in determine the fundamental condition of my mind and heart? How can I let the fundamental condition of my mind and heart be grounded in a depth of presence that utterly transcends all these conditions, unexplainably permeates all these conditions? So, I'm aware of the conditions. If it's sad, I'm sad. If it's scary, I'm scared. I'm just a human being, but how can I sink the taproot of my heart in a presence that's not reducible to any of this? And grounded in it, it's sustaining me in the midst of this. I think that's an important kind of way of articulating part of this path

in a way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's really helpful. And you just have to keep coming back around to it because it's confusing. But I appreciate you saying that Jim, that we're not avoiding our emotions, we're accepting them fully, but through them finding that deeper-- Yeah.

So, Jim, one last question from Sue, and she asks, she says, "I'm puzzled by the recurring use of the Lord's Prayer. To me, the God in this prayer does not jive with the God that the mystics describe. The God of this prayer is separate, elsewhere, patriarchal, judgmental. I would like to appreciate this prayer. Instead, I find it off-putting, not just on this podcast. So, can you help me understand why is this particular prayer appropriate for this podcast?"

Jim Finley: Yes. Well, first of all, I think the Our Father and Father is off-putting because of how often in the Christian Tradition, authoritarian, punitive, judgmental, table-pounding, Bible-thumping rhetoric in all Catholic Tradition, all traditions. So, no wonder what we've done to it. So, I think some things are helpful, why I use it, several reasons. One, what would really help is to prayerfully reflect on what Jesus meant by it, through his parables, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, a key example. And he meant the opposite of that. He meant like an infinite, oceanic tenderness with utter disregard for our foolishness, who keeps drawing us in and uniting to us is precious in the foolishness itself, which is experiential salvation, see, which is-- So, that's why it's the Good News of Jesus Christ, not the Bad News. It's not the Bad News of Jesus Christ, [laughter] like, "I never really liked you anyway" [laughter] 'so you're out of luck, sorry.' And no wonder because you're such an unworthy per[son], like that. It's the opposite. So, that's the first thing. What did he mean by it? The other thing, in his own life, it says he would spend whole nights in prayer and then he would come out walking the earth looking for people. And what he was looking for was to pass on or communicate through him this love, like utterly trusting, "Father, unto your hands I commend my spirit." It's how he died. It's how he died. So, that's one thing, as a corrective thing, as being restored back to the original wording of Jesus, who offered it, and now the aberrations that were done to it over time is that.

The next thing, another reason that I use it also-- By the way, in Teresa, I think in *The Way of Perfection*, she has a beautiful thing on meditating on the Our Father. She walks through it phrase, by phrase, by phrase. I was thinking of doing that myself. See, because Our Father right away is a term of endearment, like Our Abba. And since it's our, we're all siblings of your infinite love. And since heaven, like Teresa tells us, is heaven, in heaven and I'm in heaven with you but also my soul is your heaven, see, because you're in me. So, we could walk through the whole Our Father as a kind of mantra, these phrasings. And the reason I use it at the end is to bear witness that I'm saying this within the Christian Tradition, like contemplative Christianity or mystical Catholicism, open to all the traditions. And so, when people would come to my sitting group at St. Monica's, when I used to have it, most of them there were Catholic, but a lot of people were Protestant denomination, some were Jewish, a lot of Twelve-Step people that weren't even religious at all in that sense. And so, the Our Father is said in that universal, collective voice. Each person says it out of his or her own lineage and way. So, that's why I-- Those are some thoughts that helped me. And then I would say to her, if it bothers her that way, either consider rethinking it in these terms, or just don't say it. You know, no laws, you're going to have to walk through.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, it goes back to what we were saying earlier about finite examples of the infinite and sometimes because of our background, because of the way the Church has behaved, they block us instead of inviting us. And so, if it's blocking you, it's not helpful, but can you return to it, the invitation that Jesus founded in it, which was the invitation to a loving, infinite God.

Jim Finley: That's right. Another way to put it would be it's using a different word that has the same meaning. For example, I think there are certain moments in life where we're going through like a loss in a relationship, or something. And what you're struck by, is that somehow, you're touched about what we might call a boundaryless benevolence, that there's something benevolent that's sustaining me in this. And so, the benevolence becomes the metaphor. And so, that's what we're really looking for, like the tasting of that core.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Thank you for affirming that. Well, Jim, we've come to the end of our time for questions. I want to let everyone know, we didn't get to every question, but we did read every question. And so, please feel that if you send a question, it is influencing the direction of the podcast, the teaching, the sensitivities. So, we're grateful for everyone who took the effort to send a question. How are you feeling, Jim, at the end of Teresa?

Jim Finley: I feel very good about it. One, I feel good personally that these mystics that I've been so immersed in since I was in the monastery, really, that I now have a providential opportunity to share with people. And it's just going to be out there and stay out there like long after I'm gone on the earthly plane, that the teaching stays. And I feel good about the sincerity of people's responses, that they're touched by it, and because these teachings aren't easy to find for some reason, and I feel very good about it. So, it's good we're taking a break. And then I think in January start up again, and we'll do St. John of the Cross on The Dark Night of the Soul. And we'll do John of the Cross next. So, I feel very good about it. I feel very grateful for it.

Kirsten Oates: Why is John of the Cross the next mystic?

Jim Finley: He's next for me because John of the Cross and Teresa were close friends. They were mystics together and knew each other very well. And, also, at the monastery, John of the Cross was probably the first mystic that had a profound effect on me over the years. So, it was very personal for me for that reason to share John. And like Teresa, he's very rewarding, but not easy. So, once you get to the inside of his language, it all starts falling into place. So, that's why I'm doing John of the Cross next.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Thank you, Jim. Well, thank you for the time today. Thank you for this incredible season and the beauty that you've revealed. And thank you, Corey, for being there in the background and helping us in all that we're doing.

Jim Finley: Yeah, really, thank you, Corey. Yes, very much so. And also, Kirsten, you, because these questions that you're asking are these very leading questions that a number of students have said this and these dialogues help them because it brings their own things out into the open, so it's a contributing part of all this. So, and Corey, both of you thanks so much.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Thanks, Jim. [music] And a quick shout out to Paul Swanson who has been in the background listening with sensitive ears to the direction of the podcast and helping shape it with us. So, thank you, Paul.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Thank you, Paul. What a guy! [laughter]

Kirsten Oates: So, we'll be back in 2021. [music]

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