

**ANOTHER
NAME
FOR EVERY
THING**

with

RICHARD ROHR

Bonus: Turning to the Mystics with
James Finley

Brie Stoner: One of the most memorable experiences that I've had from The Living School and from the Center for Action and Contemplation is getting to sit at the feet of the masterful James Finley. He has this energy. If you've never heard him speak or seen him in person or seen a video of him speaking, he's basically like the Gandalf of Christian contemplation. He'll start speaking and his words are like Gandalf's pipe smoke where it just kind of weaves circles around you and the next thing you know, you're like in this trance, and you don't even know why you're just weeping. You're weeping and you feel like you're sitting with God and God's sitting with you. And there's like this unitive oceanic oneness of the oneness of oceanic oneness of all oneness of all time. You know what I'm saying?

Paul Swanson: Exactly. He brings you to a whole new plane. You know, I first met Jim when I was an intern at the Center for Action and Contemplation twelve years ago.

Brie Stoner: Will you stop bragging about that? [laughing]

Paul Swanson: I'm going to try. I'm going to try to stop bragging about it. But, anyway, to get back to my story, I had this amazing privilege where I found myself at the table with Cynthia Bourgeault, Richard Rohr, and James Finley. And Cynthia and Richard started chatting, and Jim looked at me and I looked at him, and we both shrugged like, "Well, I guess we're stuck together for this meal." You know, I have this deep affinity for Thomas Merton. So, I was so excited to ask Jim all of my burning Thomas Merton questions. And Jim was just very eager to respond and give some insight, and wisdom, and humor and put some flesh on the things I'd read and know about Thomas Merton. And then the conversation slowly shifted because of Jim's poetic nature of just lulling you into the Divine Presence. Then all of a sudden, I forgot about my hero, Thomas Merton, and I was just having a very profound spiritual moment, a grace moment with James Finley, which, as we were saying, is often what happens when people are in his presence or listening to his words.

Brie Stoner: He has this capacity to help you see your life as that very meeting place where God is showing up, like Paula Darcy's line that, "God shows up disguised as your life." I feel like Jim is so good at getting us to that point of seeing in that way. And I've often told this story—I've told this story on the podcast and at conferences—one of the most powerful experiences that I had at The Living School was thanks to Jim's masterful teaching where I was a frustrated student, young mom trying to do this contemplative thing and feeling like this was really a path that was only available for people who are retired or had ample time on their hands, not people like me who were in the midst of motherhood, juggling life and work and screaming babies.

And so, I finally said to him one day during a session, I said, "Jim, where's the icon of the mystic mom with one baby on the hip and a crying kid on the floor, and burning food in the oven, and trying to do work on a laptop on the side, and just feeling like I get up in the morning and it doesn't matter how early I get up, my kids are always going to interrupt my prayer sit. And he said, "Okay, okay, you be you, and I'll be God," you know in this way that Jim talks. And he proceeded to say, "You know, it just means the world to me, Brie, that you get up so early and I see you there, and I see how much you love me and that you want to spend this time with me. And I just, I can't tell you what it means to me."

And so, he goes on like this, you know, for a while. And then he says, "You know, I just, I

just love you so much, I just can't bear it. It's just you're so precious to me, I just can't stand it. So, what I do is I rushed into the body of your children and I wake them up, because I want to know what it feels like to be held by you." I mean, there wasn't a dry eye in the classroom, especially mine. I was sobbing and to this day, I hear from so many people the ways in which that story has impacted them and how just powerful of an image it is. And this is what Jim, I feel like, it's one of his particular gifts is that he helps us see God in the shape of our lives, in the shape of our interruptions, in the shape of the things that we think are problematic. You know, he loves to say, "What's in the way, is the way."

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Yeah. He just is in rhythm with the beating heart of God I feel like.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: And there's a lot to Jim's story, right?

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: He was in Gethsemani, the monastery, with Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton was his spiritual director. And this is after leaving a household that was full of trauma, and he gets into his, his story, and his trauma and his journey from growing up in a household that held abuse, to leaving home, to going to the monastery, becoming a trauma therapist, and finding his own healing by helping others find theirs. And he does it all through the lens of the mystic. And I think that is what makes Jim such a unique teacher is he's so grounded in the hurt and the pain of being human—

Brie Stoner: That's right.

Paul Swanson: --and yet finding a way through with the poetic and humor and just—

Brie Stoner: A twinkle in his eye.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. There's just so much joy to his presence without him being like a huge personality, if that makes sense. There's a humility and such a splendid grounded-ness to everything about Jim.

Brie Stoner: The word that comes to mind is precious and he uses that word a lot. That there's something so precious about how he teaches, but also in the ways in which he helps us discover our own preciousness, even through some of the places we'd rather not go, even through the worst wounding that we've received in our lives, he has a way of gently taking us there, like holding our hand as we turn and face some of those things that we'd rather not face. And then somehow, through the grace of God, to locate God's presence in that moment of trauma or in those moments of deep grief and wounding. That's one of the many ways that Jim is gifted as a mystical teacher and a wisdom teacher.

Paul Swanson: And he's funny as hell.

Brie Stoner: Oh my god.

Paul Swanson: He's so funny.

Brie Stoner: Seriously. And he doesn't take himself seriously either.

Paul Swanson: No.

Brie Stoner: But you talk to him-- I remember there was one time when he just gave this like amazing talk, and everybody was just weeping. I mean, the entire symposium, all The Living School students were like hanging on his every word, and he gets down and we're walking along and he's doing his little Jim shuffle while we're walking, and he goes, "I have no idea what I just said." He says, "They think I said something, but I really don't know what it was." Isn't that funny? That's just his approach.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: He's so humble.

Paul Swanson: He bears witness to what the Divine is doing in him, and he has such a lightness and gaiety that it's so refreshing.

Brie Stoner: So, we're so excited to introduce you all to James Finley, if you haven't encountered him already. And to kick off this super exciting new podcast, which will be part of our CAC family of podcast shows, and this one is going to be called Turning to the Mystics with James Finley, and we think you're really going to enjoy his lens on trauma, on humanity, as he explores different mystics' teachings.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I can think of no better teacher to be teaching this modality of podcasts, because his voice, his depth, it all just transcends audio and goes right to your heart. So, the fact that Jim is joining the CAC podcast network family, I'm just thrilled because it's another voice I can bring and invite others to check out as they journey on this contemplative path.

Brie Stoner: I mean, he could literally just read the phone book, and I feel like I would be one with God.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Brie Stoner: That's very possible.

Paul Swanson: Yes, that's all it would take.

Brie Stoner: Unfortunately, I couldn't make this recording of this introductory episode, but Paul, you did hold down the fort, didn't you, for me?

Paul Swanson: I tried. Your presence was missed.

Brie Stoner: Thank you.

Paul Swanson: We have such a beautiful rhythm together when we're in this, and I was joined by another staff member, Kirsten Oates, as we were doing this live at The Living School symposium where Jim is teaching with Richard. And so, we got the chance for Richard to sit down and Jim to sit down, all of us together, and we batted around

Richard's experience on the podcast, which was fun to hear. And then, also, teed up Jim's so he could unpack where he sees his podcasts going, where he sees turning to the mystics being a different kind of landscape for folks either just beginning this contemplative journey, or those who are already down the path of the mystical journey.

Brie Stoner: We're so excited for you to listen to this conversation between Richard Rohr, Paul Swanson, Kirsten Oates, and James Finley. And, we'll see you all very soon for season three of Another Name for Every Thing.

Paul Swanson: Yay. [music playing]

I am so excited to here. And, Richard, I wanted to begin by saying that we have completed two podcast seasons of Another Name for Every Thing. Besides the excellence and beauty of your two co-hosts, what has been a surprising takeaway for you as you embarked on podcasting as a new medium for your journey? I mean, for your teaching of others?

Richard Rohr: Well, I can say I'm genuinely surprised at the level of affirmation, validation, encouragement I'm getting. It tells me we're living in an aural world that listens, because there's even folks—I guess I shouldn't say even—but who said, "I like

Richard Rohr: the podcast better than the book." Several have said that to me and, of course, that does nothing but excite me. But, yeah, and even that we can give them free, that's part of our Franciscan message, you know, that we're not in this to make money. We're in this to get the message out. So, now that Jim is able to do the same thing, is just very exciting, and anything I can do to back it up, encourage, validate, legitimate, bless, I think we're foolish not to go in this direction. And to have such a master teacher as Jim as our friend in The Living School and at the CAC is just as good as it gets, really.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And, can you speak to that a little bit? When I think of how you started the center by yourself, but then as you've delved into conferences and retreats, you've brought in other teachers. What is that saying to you when you bring in other teachers to be a part of a learning environment and community? And then, beyond just bringing other teachers, what was it about Jim that first sparked an interest in bringing him to speak to those who are listening to your work?

Richard Rohr: When did we first have you? Do you remember?

James Finley: What happened first is you said you had read Merton's Palace of Nowhere.

Richard Rohr: Palace of Nowhere.

James Finley: And we met on the road somewhere giving a retreat.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

James Finley: And then you invited me to the center to give a retreat.

Richard Rohr: Early '90s, would you say?

James Finley: Like that, I guess, and then we did two big conferences together—

Richard Rohr: Two big conferences.

James Finley: Following the Mystics through the Narrow Gate, and then we did Intimacy: The Divine Ambush.

Richard Rohr: The Divine Ambush, yes.

James Finley: Yeah, I think those were the—

Richard Rohr: Yes, those were the big ones.

James Finley: Those were the two big ones, yeah.

Richard Rohr: Well, Jim and I just have so much in common. We're almost exactly the same age. We were both novices at the same time in that year, that crucial year before Vatican II began, and that religious life experience gave us a sense of what I'm now calling "order" before the "disorder" came. And even though we would question a lot of that order now, it still gave us; well, it dipped us into the Perennial Tradition. So, I always know when Jim talks, I'm not just going to trust it, I'm going to like it. It's not like I need to sensor, or check. My god, he's way ahead of me. The most we can do is give him a platform to say what he's saying. And we've often said that he brings the heart to The Living School. If Cynthia is the head—I know it's unfair—and I'm the gut, he's the heart, and we make a nice team. We really do. So now, to have a whole podcast is just something very exciting.

James Finley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kirsten Oates: Jim, what was it like for you when Richard asked you to be a part of The Living School?

James Finley: Well, I heard that they were launching a living school, and there was going to be a gathering in a Assisi.

Richard Rohr: That's right.

James Finley: And Cynthia was there as part of this process, and then following that conference, then I was invited to be part of The Living School. "Would you want to join Cynthia?" And, of course, I said, "Yes." So that's how it happened, really, and it was just a natural fit for me. It just worked. It's been very lovely, really. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: The gut and the head needed a heart is what you're saying?

James Finley: No, I do feel that there's a Trinitarian energy between us and synergy, yeah, it's true. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: There is.

Paul Swanson: Richard, what do you think that Jim uniquely offers students that are maybe not in your particular wheelhouse, or Cynthia's wheelhouse, that they really can connect with at a deeper

level?

Richard Rohr: Experiential language and heart-based without neglecting head. And there's so few people who can do that. We Catholics, including Vatican II liberal Catholics, never really picked up the mystical level. It was, more or less, again, more head knowledge because that's what Catholics were used to. In my experience, it's wonderful, these are many of my friends—Vatican II, liberal, progressive, well-educated Catholics—have not passed on the faith to the next generation. And I think Jim talks in a way that's passable-on because it's experiential knowledge. It's convicting knowledge. It's knowledge that tugs at the heart and the body. And he says it in such a simple, often humorous, way that makes him hard to resist. So, yeah, what a gift that he discovered us and we discovered him.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, why is it that you were drawn to the mystics and have been so dedicated to that path?

James Finley: For me, what it was is that when I was fourteen years old, there was a lot of trauma going on in my home. And in ninth grade religion class at the Catholic school I was attending, the instructor mentioned, and we talked about monasteries—I'd never heard of monasteries before—and we talked about Thomas Merton. And so, I went to the school library that night, and in it was *The Sign of Jonas*, which is the journal Merton wrote at the monastery. And when I read it, maybe because of the trauma, I don't know, but it so went right to my heart. It's like whoever wrote this book, like, my god, you know.

Richard Rohr: I think that's the first one I read.

James Finley: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: *The Sign of Jonas*.

James Finley: Yeah. Yeah. And in the opening page there, he says, "As for me, I had but one desire, the desire for solitude to disappear into the secret of God's face." And I didn't know what it meant, but something in me, like I thought, it spoke to me. And so, I started reading that book over and over and went through the four years of high school, and I just felt called to go there. My master plan was I would go there, sit at Merton's feet, and he'd guide me into this thing, so that's how it happened for me.

Kirsten Oates: Wow.

James Finley: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: So, can you share a bit about that journey? You said when you were done with high school, is that when you left for Gethsemani?

James Finley: Yes, I finished high school. All the violence was still going on, and I asked my father if I could go to the monastery, and he threatened to kill my mother if I went. That's the world I lived in. It was horrible. And so, I got up the next morning and walked down to the Greyhound Bus Station and got on a Greyhound Bus and went to the monastery. First time I was ever out of Akron, Ohio, Cleveland.

Richard Rohr: Really?

James Finley: And I went into the monastery and had to be interviewed by three of the monks. One was John Eudes Bamberger, who was a psychiatrist and the abbot. They accepted me into the community and so I entered. I was eighteen years old, 1961.

Richard Rohr: '61.

James Finley: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: What month '61 would that have been?

James Finley: It would have been July.

Richard Rohr: And I was August 5th. That's today! I appeared at the novitiate on August 5th, yeah.

James Finley: Wow. I went July, yeah.

Richard Rohr: Almost the same time.

James Finley: Exactly.

Paul Swanson: Jim, what were you feeling as an eighteen-year-old entering a monastery? What was coursing through your veins?

James Finley: The Cistercian Order monastery that I entered and that Merton was a member of, traces itself back to the 11th century, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, which traces it back to Benedict in the fifth century. So, in the Catholic Church, there's these cloistered communities—the Poor Clares, and the Carmelites for the women are cloistered, like Teresa of Ávila. And then for the orders of men, it's the Cistercians, the Trappists, and then also the Camaldolese and the Carthusians.

And so, you enter the monastery and there's no active ministry of any kind. They don't serve the poor. They never leave. There's no television. There was no radio. And you got up at 2:30 in the morning, slept on a straw mattress on boards in a common dormitory and ora et labora, chanted the Psalms, manual labor. Then the silence is very strict. We use sign language to talk, and you weren't supposed to make useless signs, so I didn't talk for about six years. And we just immersed in prayer, like to just be a person of deep prayer, like seeking God in prayer and believing that that fidelity touched the world. So, it touched the whole world. And so, it had a very profound effect on me. It was like having a dream while I was awake, like it was the God-conscious life. And so it was. And I just immersed myself in it, really.

Kirsten Oates: What was it like the first time you met Thomas Merton?

James Finley: Well, when I first entered then, just before the Vatican Council, there were lay brothers, it was a life of manual labor and prayer. They wore a brown monastic habit. And then the choir, they went on for ordination. They wore the white Cistercian cowl, and so on, and they chanted the Office in Latin. And so, there was a life of manual labor, study, and prayer. So, because I barely graduated from high school, they discerned I had a vocation to the brothers, so they put me in the brothers. I wanted to go to the brothers. But, here, Thomas Merton

was novice master, of choir novices, and so I didn't get to have him for my director, but he was there. I could see him walking around, but I didn't get to talk to him.

But then there was an experimental program where the brother novices could sit in on the first year of class for the second-year choir novices studying for the priesthood. And the person teaching philosophy was Daniel Walsh, who taught Thomas Merton philosophy at Columbia University, who studied under Juleson [@ 00:20:59] on the medieval school of Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas. And so, I signed up and I sat in on that class, and I just took to metaphysics. For some reason, I can't explain, just metaphysical language was a way of putting words to a certain kind of religious experience. And so, they changed me over into the choir. And so, Thomas Merton became a spiritual director.

And the story I tell is that because of my history with trauma, when I went in to see him, I couldn't talk. I hyperventilated. I couldn't talk. He felt numinous to me, like it was this thing. And I couldn't get my breath. And I remember being very embarrassed because I wanted to impress Thomas Merton, and I couldn't even talk.

Richard Rohr: You couldn't talk.

James Finley: That's why I was doing this, I didn't tell him about the abuse. I just said, "I'm scared because you're Thomas Merton." And he said—this shows you the power of an intervention where later I became a therapist. I worked at the pig barn.—he said, "Every day under obedience, I want you to leave afternoon work early, before vespers and come in here and sit down with me and tell me one thing that happened on the pig barn that day." I can remember thinking, "I can do that." And I'd knock on the door, he would put the typewriter aside, we'd sit down. He followed all this and that opened it up. It was like a very healing experience for me. And then that opened up this whole thing about God for me. I had read his books, and why I'd come there. And so, I think it's really true for all my studies in Thomas Merton, sitting together, talking about the pigs was really the essence of his teaching.

Richard Rohr: "One thing that happened on the pig farm."

James Finley: Really, just come and talk to me like one person to another about the ordinary life, and then that's the grounding place for everything.

Richard Rohr: Brilliant.

James Finley: Anyway, that was it for me. I was really just-- Yeah.

Paul Swanson: I like how you were drawn to metaphysics and then what cracked you open with the Merton was the pigs.

James Finley: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: It was the very concrete and real.

James Finley: That's right.

Paul Swanson: How did that translate into your love of the mystics, of studying the mystics?

James Finley: Well, what it was for me, I mean, this is a big thing, that's what all this is about, I guess, what does that mean? I'll share an experience I had, typical experience that I had for me is that I was in the silent monastery studying metaphysics, and Merton. I used to take these long walks in the woods, and it was in the wintertime. It rarely snows in Kentucky, but it can snow there. It can get cold. And so, I walked out and there was a long interval. On Sunday afternoon, you could have all afternoon out there. And I sat at the base of the tree in the snow, and I put my head back against the tree and I just sat real, real still. I can remember that it was so still, I could hear the snow hissing. That's how silent it was.

And a full grown deer came and walked right past me. And because I was downwind and I didn't move, what it was, he turned and looked right at me but he didn't see me. And I got scared because I thought if I scared him, with the antler, he could kill me. And he walked right by, and I looked back up into the sky and—do you know how the snow comes down like this?—I remember my prayer was, I said to God, like, “Is this the way it is with us? That as I look up into the sky and the snow coming down, I'm looking right at you, but I don't see you. And if I don't see you, I don't really see the snow either, because the snow is your presence in the world.”

And it was moments like that, that when I open Meister Eckhart, or when Merton started introduced me to John of the Cross, I sensed they were talking about that. You know what I mean? They were trying to talk about the intimate immediacy of the divinity of all things intimately realized. And so, when I read them, I started reading them at that level. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's one of those statements that goes straight past your head to your heart.

James Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: When you say that, Jim. It takes a while to let the mind sit with something like that, but if you feel it in your heart, you know it's true.

Richard Rohr: Allow it, yes. It does.

James Finley: I like this statement by Merton, he once said, he said, “There's certain things in life we simply have to accept as true where we'll go crazy inside and they're the very things we can't explain to anybody, including our self.”

Richard Rohr: Wow.

James Finley: And he said, “That's God's voice in your heart.” And he said, “The trouble is we play the cynic.” You know, we doubt the intimacy of the unexplainable, and we get lost in answers about God instead of the intimacy of God.” And I saw that at the heart of the mystical lineage of the Christian tradition, I think is that, to my mind, is along with all the world religions, really.

Kirsten Oates: I'm curious now, Richard, since we're celebrating your anniversary of entering the—

Richard Rohr: Yes. I didn't know it. I was '61, and you went in late July.

James Finley: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: I went a week later. My goodness.

Kirsten Oates: How is that for you? Do you remember?

Richard Rohr: Oh, I was just so idealistic and just couldn't wait to put on that brown robe and they shaved our head off, our hair off, excuse me. The morning of the sixth the Feast of the Transfiguration, shaved our head off, hair off, excuse me. It was pure excitement. I didn't come from the trauma that Jim came from, so I think it was a little safer experience for me. It was like a great adventure. "I can be holy. I'm going to learn what it means to be holy." So, I was very earnest, like a "one" on the Enneagram is, probably an excess of earnestness. But that year, it was so wonderful that you normally have, in our order, a one-year novitiate. Did you have two?

James Finley: Two.

Richard Rohr: You had two, yeah. Well, I must have sensed that, because I went to the novice master and I said, "Can I stay another year?" He said, "No, you can't," because I wanted to preserve what I was experiencing. It was just so precious. Most of our days were quiet. I mean, our novitiate was like your whole life was. You only talked when you needed to talk. We didn't have sign language. These are the things about the old Church, the so-called old spirituality that really had validation. If you came with a healthy container, yeah, they worked. If that's the

Richard Rohr: right word, I'm not sure. It was wonderful. I loved my novitiate. Yeah. But I was all in love with myself, you understand? How perfect I was, and even dear Father Benno, he had heard me say on one of my earlier cassettes, "My novice master said I never made a mistake." And he came to me, he says, "Richard, you never did. You did everything according to the book, because I thought by doing it right, I would earn God's love.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. So, the novitiate was made to order for "ones."

Richard Rohr: For a "one." It really was, yeah, made to order.

Kirsten Oates: What was your favorite thing to study? What took your attention?

Richard Rohr: In novitiate?

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: Or in scholastic, like, when you started your studies, what was your favorite?

Richard Rohr: Of course, I went to Dun Scotus College. See, his Dan Walsh was very Scotistic, wasn't he? It's another thing we have in common; whereas, most of the Church is Thomistic. Thomas Aquinas. So, again, I always know he comes from the same metaphysics that I do, "the univocity of all being," and so forth. Only because I had a full four years of Scotus did he become my great teacher, and I knew I'd probably never have a chance to teach him to others because he's just so inaccessible. He's called the "Subtle Doctor of the Church," and his subtlety, unless you're trained in scholastic categories, it just goes right over your head.

But I had time and at least one really good professor to help me unpackage it. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Since we know that listeners that it may be new for them to hear, Thomistic and Scotus, the difference, or is there a way to speak in generalities about the difference between the two so they can get a sense of how you guys were trained in that theology?

Richard Rohr: I'll say it and then you might say it differently. If you see on the Dominican coat of arms: Veritas, "truth," truth was considered the highest goal of theology, of religion, which is why they became the "hammer of heretics" and they brought good thinking, and we needed it. We thank them for it still to this day. Well, Scotus, Bonaventure, building on Francis, insisted that love was the highest virtue. They really called it "will," but they meant the will to love, that love is a choice. Love is a decision. And for people who just took a summary course in philosophy, that was usually the way the two schools were differentiated. And it isn't entirely fair because certainly, the Dominican's believed in love. We sort of believed in truth, I guess. But because we had orthopraxy, it didn't look like orthodoxy to a lot of people. So, we were never taken as seriously as intellectuals, why we didn't have universities, and so forth.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Richard Rohr: And why I use the term in our school "alternative orthodoxy." But I believe, of course, that it's still orthodoxy, but it is alternative. But it's not heresy. And we were never called heretics, which I love to say, was the broad-mindedness of the Church in the 13th century.

Paul Swanson: Jim, does that check out?

James Finley: Yeah. How I would put it, first, the distinction between Aquinas and Scotus, the Franciscan and Dominican schools, and then Aquinas and Scotus were both mystics, where they merge with each other. The way Dan Walsh used to put it in class for echoing Scotus, Duns Scotus, is we don't exist because God is, we exist because God loves us. And the primacy of love is the mystery of being a person. And that's where you get this ontology of love. See, if we would give to love the same stature we give to being, how would we articulate an ontology of love? How would we do that? It's that.

Thomas Aquinas says that's true, but who God loves is who God eternally knows. And who God eternally knows is who God knows that you are hidden with Christ in God before the origins of the universe. And since God never, never, never, never doesn't know who you are, see, as a *capax dei*, a capacity to share in God's own life, that's the primacy of knowledge. But that knowledge is a knowledge that's only realized in love. And it's also a knowledge that's really, it's God's own knowledge, and God is love. So, they both, they circle back around, and they approach each other, so it looks in one sense that it could be like a dichotomy, is actually, the love-knowledge nature of reality, and it happens to be our reality, too, then.

Richard Rohr: And it was this divine knowledge that is like carnal knowledge, love knowledge, at least we were always told.

James Finley: Yes. And then the divine knowledge is contemplation, and the divine knowledge is God's own knowledge given to us as our own knowledge. See, that God gives to us the gift of God's own self-knowledge, which is the person that we are. And then the mystics use that to give

them a language to express mystical experience. See, that was their backdrop. And so, the metaphysician and the mystic are in the same, wouldn't you say that's true, that they kind of echo each other.

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah, yeah. The other one I just referred to, I won't take long, but the other argument was the "nature of being," and Thomas taught "the analogy of being," that all other beings were analogous to the being of God, which is good. I mean, it creates that capax dei you're speaking of, but Scotus went further, in my opinion, and spoke of the "univocity of being." Univocity in Latin is "one voice." You may speak with one voice, one consistent voice of the being of God, the being of angels, the being of humans, the being of animals, the being of trees

Richard Rohr: and waters. And that's what made us fall in love with Scotus—the doctrine of the univocity of being. But that wasn't taught to most priests. We thought that was our little treasure, but that's why Merton considered himself a Scotist, and also Gerard Manley Hopkins.

James Finley: And you know, it's interesting, too, about my Meister Eckhart, who was a Dominican following Aquinas, and so was a Dominican, is that, see, for Meister Eckhart, he really saw, again, the oneness of those two aspects.

Richard Rohr: Positions, yeah, because he was a non-dual thinker.

James Finley: He was a non-dual.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. That's right.

James Finley: For Eckhart, I get off on Eckhart, but see, for Eckhart, one way that Eckhart would put it is that if we think of God as reality itself, that ultimately just one thing is happening, the infinite reality of God is infinitely giving itself away in and as our very reality. So, if God would cease creating us into this present moment, at the count of three, at the count of three, we would disappear for we're absolutely nothing outside and dualistically other than the presence of God. But it's our nothingness without God that makes our presence to be the presence of God, and religious experience is the experience of that, which is Christ Consciousness.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Beautiful. Jim, can you fill us in a little bit between entering the monastery and then joining The Living School? What happened in between?

James Finley: What happened in between is that when I started going into direction with Thomas Merton, he led me in the reading of these classical texts. So, I started with John of the Cross. And what really struck me is when I would sit with Thomas Merton, I was just convinced that I was in the presence-- He was like a lineage-holder in the tradition going back to Christ, all night in prayer kind of thing, and I would walk out into the woods and sit out in the woods, and I opened John on the Cross for the first time and I read the prologue of the Ascent of Mount Carmel, and it was the same voice, like the deathless voice of the mystical consciousness of Christ in the world. And so, I was just so immersed in the mystics in that way.

So, when I came out, when I left the monastery, I said, "How can I continue to live out

here, this interior life as a contemplative lay person in the world?” And so, I continued with my practice, and my-in depth study of the mystics, and the teachings. And then that’s when I wrote Merton’s Palace of Nowhere, because I was a high school religion teacher. It’s on Thomas Merton’s idea of ultimate identity, the true self. And I started getting invitations to lead retreats around the country ever since.

Richard Rohr: And it’s still a best seller.

James Finley: It’s still around, yes, and it’ll be around when I’m no longer around. So, that’s really what started it. I just got immersed, because I think what the mystics are for people, they sense the mystics are very beautiful, and they can tell they’re profound, but they’re not easy. But if you can get a little bit of help, like stepping inside what they’re trying to help us understand, there’s like an inner consistency to everything they say. And if you make the reading a kind of prayer, the following of the mystics can change your life, really. So that’s really what I’m attempting to do here, how to have an intimate, utterly sincere, heartfelt, quiet opening up of a process where we can become comfortable with the mystics and realize that in some ways, what they’re talking about are things that are already going on within us. We’ve now been given a language to talk about it. And I think that’s an encouraging message to give to people.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: I think another reason the book is so endlessly attractive is that title is the whole thing. Your book is poetic. The way you talk is poetic. The Palace of Nowhere. I mean, someone has to ask, “What does that mean?” And, of course, it’s from him, isn’t it?

James Finley: No. You know where it’s from?

Richard Rohr: Who?

James Finley: From the Taoist sage, Chuang Tzu.

Richard Rohr: Oh, it isn’t from him?

James Finley: No, it goes back to Lao Tzu and the Tao Te Ching and Chuang Tzu. And Chuang Tzu, the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu, said, “Come with me to the palace of nowhere where all the many things are one.” And Merton was very struck by Chuang Tzu. He wrote a little book of translations on Chuang Tzu. And so as soon as I heard that little phrase, I thought, “What a lovely metaphor.”

Richard Rohr: Oh, was it a choice, an inspired choice—The Palace of Nowhere.

James Finley: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: I love listening and being in conversation with you all about the mystics because it just wells up so easily and falls out of your mouth in poetic words where I think the rest of us are running to references at times. And Jim, I think specifically about the space that you entered

into the monastery and having that trauma with you, and you've just spoken so eloquently about how you've

Paul Swanson: turned to the mystics as inspiration and guidance for depth, what does that offer? What does training in the mystics offer those who are experiencing trauma?

James Finley: Yeah, that's another big thing for me because when I wrote Merton's Palace of Nowhere, a clinical psychologist then offered me a full scholarship for a PhD in clinical psychology with family support if I would integrate the teachings of the mystics with mental health. So, I went to Fuller Theological Seminary, the graduate school there, and got my doctorate, and focused on trauma and went through therapy for my own trauma, a lot of therapy. And what I think it is, and it's what I'm working on now really on this healing thing, how to be a healing presence in an all too often traumatized and traumatizing world, especially if you yourself are traumatized. And I think this touches everybody today, because there's like an atmospheric traumatization in the air.

So, I think what the mystics are, is this: that as terrible as the trauma may have been, and as terrible—and it is terrible. It's like being burned alive. It's just horrible—that as terrible as trauma is, there is that in us that is undiminished, unthreatened, and indestructible because it's that in you that belongs completely to God. And what you'll find in a lot of people in their traumatizing journey, without romanticizing how scary it is and how much courage it takes to walk, like remembering things you don't want to remember, feeling things you don't [want to feel], in the presence of someone in whose presence it's safe, like to walk that walk, in the very midst of sharing at the feeling level what hurts the most, you can come upon within yourself that which has unexplainably sustained you in the pain. And once you get a touch of that, it's like a mystical experience in a way. I think it's the mystery of the cross in the ground of the body. I think it's a mystery of like a deathless beauty.

So, I see God as a presence that protects us from nothing even has got unexplainably sustains us in all things, and through your trauma walk, you can come up on that, and if you walk the walk as they say in AA, and you come out the other side, you're just fortunate. You're less symptomatic, self-cutting or flashback. I mean, whatever your thing was, ritualized traumatizations, you realize that something was given to you through the healing that changed your whole life. And I think what was given to you is the mystical life. And then that opens your heart to have compassion on a traumatized world because each person in the whole world is that. Each person is invincibly sustained in the love of God who's been overtaken by the density of fear and confusion. And how can I be someone in the world in whose presence other people might find it somewhat easier to recognize that in themselves, which I think is the contemplative dimensions of ministry and sharing. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Wow. That line of, "protects us from nothing but sustains us in everything," it's one of those things I need to just echo through my head as I walk about this traumatized world.

James Finley: And you know, Merton used to say at the monastery, "Is there a Christian in the house? Raise your hand." If the cross means anything, whatever it means, "God takes care of us," it doesn't mean God takes care of us. If it means taking care of us as God protects us from the cruel thing from happening because Jesus was executed. And not only was he executed, but he lost his faith. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" So, if God loved us to the

point of becoming our desolation, see, then we can find in that desolation the mystery of the resurrection shining bright. And once we found that in our self, then that's what gives us the courage to be present in the world, I think, in our own way, as we're called to do that.

Kirsten Oates: Do you feel like the mystics are really trying to help us tap into that experience?

James Finley: I'd put it this way, I think it's a charism to be called to this mystical state as like your primary longing. Not everybody has that. It's a charism. It's an eschatological charism of the infinite presence of God in the human condition like somehow it's already realized; realized eschatology. But then I think religious consciousness, discipleship, always echoes with the mystical dimension. But I also think human consciousness itself echoes with religious mystical dimensions. So, in studying the mystics and turning to the mystics for guidance, it might not be true that we're called to realize it is with the radicality, which the mystic realized it, but it's like incremental realizations of non-incremental, infinite love.

It's giving itself to you right where you're at. See, it's true that the realizations are incremental and you may just be a beginner. But what if the infinite love of God is infinitely giving the infinity of itself away as the humblest beginning? So, the very first step is already actualizing everything. To start to sense that in yourself, like first poetically when you hear it, but then to sit with it until it starts to sink in, I think that's what's so powerful about it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So, Jim, let's talk about some of the mystics that you'll be turning to with this podcast.

James Finley: I want to start, I want to focus on the mystics that I've been reading for the last thirty-some years, or so, and commentaries. So, what I want to do is I want to go through-- I would put this way, let's say in classical music each composer has his or her own genius for music. And if you really love music, you can recognize the voice. It's the same with poets. All poets are poets, but every poet has their own voice. You know what I mean? They have their own voice, and I think mystics are like that. So, there's this common mystical resonance in everything mystics say, but each mystic has his or her own. So, we need to find the mystics that resonates with, who's the one who's attuned with us.

So, for me, what I want to do is I want to do an unhurried, quiet, in-depth introduction to the mystics that have touched me, which, first, is Thomas Merton, Cloud of Unknowing, Teresa of Ávila, John of the cross, Meister Eckhart,

James Finley: and Ruysbroeck, John of Ruysbroeck. And I may also want to include the Buddhists. I also may want to include Zen Master Dōgen because Merton introduced me to the universality of this mystical tradition. So, when Merton was in the monastery, Abraham Joshua Heschel came to visit him. Thich Nhat Hanh came from Vietnam just before he went to Plum Village. He's back in Vietnam now. He was dialoguing with the Sufis, the Muslim mystics. He had a very deep dialogue with mystical Islam.

And so, as we kind of quiet, we'll see where this goes, that we may quietly look at this contemplative ecumenism where there's this universal language that's in all traditions and transcends all traditions, which transcends the ideological tendencies of traditions. Yeah. But those are the ones I want to start with. And I want to do it experientially, like I would like to look at the seminal passages. And I also want to look at it in terms of practice teaching in community. Like how do we concretize it in our practice, and what do they teach about

practice, and what do they bear witness to in the teaching, and how do they offer guidance in how to follow the path that leads to it? And then what this community [inaudible 00:49:41] community, which is a community with God, which is the community with others seekers?

And then what I, which is at the heart of Merton's teachings, too, is that my practice is to be a habituated until my whole life becomes my practice. And my teaching is to be communicated as if life is my teacher, and then to have community is that the world is my community, which is Christ Consciousness. And that's how it universalizes itself in life, I think. So, that's my thought.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: And will your podcast be available for beginners? Like, if I'm a beginner to the mystics, will I be able to—

James Finley: This is what I tell people. My wife used to attend all my retreat talks, where I could talk like this. She said, "You need to know that when you talk like that, a lot of people in the room don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about." But, she said, "It doesn't matter."

Richard Rohr: No.

James Finley: They don't care.

Richard Rohr: It doesn't matter.

James Finley: Because there's a language of the heart that immediately resonates. Like something very deep inside of me is being spoken to, and it somehow bypasses the answers, and in the resonance, it names you that you know this.

James Finley: So, I would say this, I would say that the beginner-- Thomas Merton once said, "John of the Cross is writing for beginners," he says that, "but," Merton says, "he's writing for a certain kind of beginner." And it's the beginner who begins at the beginning, which is you've been humbly accessed by God in ways you can't understand. And so, what I tell people, if you just stay with it, like be patient with it, and it's like music or poetry where repetition is not redundancy, and let it soak in and see where it takes you. Thomas Merton once said, "Let's face it, we're beginners all of our life, really." And so, I would say this is for beginners.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. I have a quick story. My husband took me to Divine Ambush for our anniversary, and it was my first interaction with the CAC. And I was pretty deep into you two already, but he'd never read anything of yours or listened to anything of yours. And so, Jim got up and started talking about John of the Cross, and there was a big football game on that day that my husband wasn't watching to be able to-- And I remember sitting there a little anxious like, "Oh my gosh, is he able to understand this? How's he feeling about this? This is so important to me," and you talk like you do, Jim, and anyway, at the end, he just turned to me and he goes, "I didn't understand a word of that, but I loved it."

Richard Rohr: That's not uncommon.

James Finley: Someone came up to me after one of the conferences he said, "Do you have any guidelines for how to drink out of a fire hose?" It was like a torrent, but it's also very gentle. You know what I mean?

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

James Finley: I think it's very gentle.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

James Finley: It's disarmingly simple.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

James Finley: That's what it is.

Kirsten Oates: Wow, and it's changed our marriage, changed our lives for the better having continued on this path. Yeah.

James Finley: See, this is what I think Francis, like with me with Merton, to be in the presence of a holy person can change your life. And you can realize that you're reading a mystic, although physically they're dead, they so radically meant every word they said, you're in their presence. And if you realize it's getting to you, then you're being carried in the lineage, I think. Like, "What's this asking out of me? What's it offering me?" Yeah.

Paul Swanson: It's interesting that the last question on season two of Another Name for Every Thing was someone asking about, "Am I seeing this right? I'm seeing the mystic in the every day. I'm seeing it in my friends, what I eat, how I participate in the world." And it feels very connected to what you're both saying here about how the mystics help shine a light into the depth of the way you participate in the every day. Could you both further that? And I think to Jim, also about what does that look like for how you're hoping folks will take away from what they learn in the mystics that you journey through and with?

James Finley: How would you answer that, Richard?

Richard Rohr: You know, the phrase that comes to mind is from Karl Rahner, a Jesuit, God bless him, and he loved to speak of the mysticism of ordinary life, and that we hadn't achieved that yet. We so tied it up with celibacy, monastery, a certain kind of almost platonic asceticism. And until we released ourselves from that, we wouldn't discover the mysticism of ordinary life. And I think The Living School and the teaching of all three of us—Cynthia, Jim, and myself—are trying to give, although it might sound as esoteric to a beginner or for the first time, we're really trying to point them to the holiness of the ordinary. And it's got to be true. It's got to be true. God could not have made himself invisible. Let me read that quote that I started with today, that Isaiah quote.

James Finley: Oh, yes. That's great.

Richard Rohr: It's Isaiah 65. I put it at the beginning of the book *Just This*. Now I can't find it. "I am ready to be approached by those who do not study me, ready to be found by those who do not even seek me. I say, 'I am here. I am here,' to people who do not even invoke my name." Isaiah 65:1. Talk about an available God. But, we in so many ways, really made God esoteric or unavailable, or something other than life at its depths, or life at its truth.

Kirsten Oates: So many people were touched by you talking about finding the Christ in Venus.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Oh, I have a stack of letters on that. Yeah, it's true. Venus was my dog, and it's true. Anything that you let draw out of you, the positive energies, the divine energies, the love energies, that is Christ for you at that moment. Very really so.

Paul Swanson: And how about for you, Jim?

James Finley: What I think it is, where I'm affected by this, when I speak like this is, I'll share a story, for me. When I first got my doctorate, I was starting my private practice, and I was flying somewhere to give a retreat on my Meister Eckhart. I remember it was so unusual, I got bumped up into first class. I never flew first-class before, which was great. And there was a man sitting next to me, and I had my sermons of Eckhart open, and I was writing my notes. My handwriting's terrible, and the man next to me, he said, "I don't mean to interrupt you, but what language is that?" I said, "It's English." I said, "I'm giving this talk on the Christian mystic,

James Finley: Meister Eckhart." And he said, "I'm an Israeli Jew. I'm Jewish. I'm an atheist, and I teach physics at a major university."

Richard Rohr: Oh, wow.

James Finley: And he said, "I see no proof for the existence of the non-empirical. That is, if you can't measure it, I see no proof that it's real." And I can recall right at the moment, you know how when someone questions your belief system, because I was going to say, "Well, if there's no empirical proof for the existence of the non-empirical, is it also true, there's no empirical proof for the non-existence of the non-empirical? So that if there is going to be a proof, it's going to have to be an evidence commensurate with what it's evidence of?" Yeah, I didn't say it. But then he said to me, because I told him I was a therapist for a week, I was a therapist for a week, and he said, "Can I ask you a personal question?" "Yes." He said, "My wife and I had one daughter, she was a brilliant young woman in doctoral studies, and she was killed." He said, "My wife and I were devastated by it." And he said, "We set up a trust in her honor in perpetuity that a person get a doctorate in that thing."

And then he said to me, this is what got to me about the trust, he said, "It helps but it doesn't." And I don't remember a thing we said after that, but I thought we were in the presence of God. See, it helped. And what I call it is people come out from behind the curtain. Whether it's spiritual direction or therapy, you can tell the change in their voice. Like, "You got a minute?" And everyone has a question from behind the curtain. And I think the mystics are about that rather than the words about it. It's visceral. Like, where has it gotten to you? What are you doing with that? So, I'm trying to make it safe, "Can I be vulnerable and safe at the same time? Can I be radicalized in this way and see what God might have in mind for me?" And so, that's how I always feel I'm speaking, I always feel I'm

addressing myself to that.

Richard Rohr: "It hurts, but it doesn't." That's what he said?

James Finley: "It helps, but it doesn't."

Richard Rohr: What helps?

Kirsten Oates: The trust he'd put together for his daughter.

James Finley: It can't bring her back. There's no words for the pain. But you know what, it helps.

Richard Rohr: It helps.

James Finley: And I thought that was-- See, that's his religion, his love for his daughter was her deathless beauty in his heart, which was non-empirical. See. You know what I mean?

Richard Rohr: Sure. Wow.

James Finley: So, anyway, I think this is how Jesus walked the streets. Jesus was in love with this.

Richard Rohr: With this.

James Finley: This is where he lived, and I think those are the mystics trying to [communicate] the ultimacy of that.

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: That's an amazing arc thinking about just the way you talked about being inspired by the metaphysics, and coming from an experience of trauma, and then coming back around to having to work with your own trauma and the way you turned around to the world, and then served and helped in the healing of those who had experienced trauma, and how the mystics have been at the core of that journey.

James Finley: They have. [inaudible 01:00:22] Sometimes I told traumatized people, it would help me, because they feel very annihilated, you know, they've internalized their flashbacks, they're sitting there like that. And then I say, "You know, as destructive as this has been, and is, there's obviously something in you that's stronger or you wouldn't be sitting here talking to me. And if together we could find that as the base from which to face what's so painful," because the trouble is the intensity of their pain closes off experiential access to that and then it transcends the pain. That's a lot of the healing journey.

And so, I think the mistakes are talking about the same arc of the great death sublimated to a very refined level like that. And I think it's an unbroken line really. Yeah, yeah. I'll share a true Merton story. He said it to the novices. He once said, "We tell God, 'I'm really, really serious about this mystical union with you under one condition, that when I cross the line into mystical union, my ego will remain intact, and I'll get to become a mystical ego and finally get the respect I deserve.'" He said, "God isn't handing on any deals with this operation." I liked that about him. Merton was so good at naming something.

Richard Rohr: A master.

James Finley: He was a master, yeah.

Richard Rohr: My sadness is that the typical, and I don't know if this is true, I suspect it is in Protestant churches, but the typical Catholic at St. Mary's Parish in Akron, Ohio or anywhere else, never gets any of this.

James Finley: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: They get a watered down version that's so easy to dismiss.

James Finley: You know where I think they get it if they're lucky, that the pastor or the homilist is a humble person of deep prayer who speaks from their heart—

Richard Rohr: That's good.

James Finley: --and it communicates itself there.

Richard Rohr: Even if he isn't a wonderful theologian.

James Finley: But it doesn't get articulated to bear witness, that's what The Living School's about, I guess. That's why CAC is really good. What is contemplative Christianity in the world?

Kirsten Oates: And this is the benefit of the podcast and the ability to put you two online like this and give access to your wisdom and years and years of study and teaching. And so, we're excited to have Jim join the CAC podcast family. And congratulations to Richard and you, Paul, for what you've been putting together.

Paul Swanson: It's been a hoot. I've had a blast hanging out with Richard and Brie in that way.

Richard Rohr: It has. We've had a wonderful, wonderful response from people.

Paul Swanson: And, Richard, knowing that Jim is now entering the world of podcasting, what advice do you have to him as he curates his own teaching for the oral tradition?

Richard Rohr: Well, I think you've already always operated out of this. You don't need to try too hard. You just need to say what's hidden there right beneath the surface. I don't know if that's a gift of being an elder now, but the medium itself, precisely because it's free, people know you're not in this to make money. I'm in this to communicate a message, and there's a purity of form that the podcast form allows us. So, I just encourage Jim to trust it. I know he will anyway. But it's freedom from both sides—for the speaker side and the listener side.

Paul Swanson: Well said.

Kirsten Oates: Richard, we've just released the first episode of your second series where you had questions come in from listeners. What was that like for you to have that interaction?

Richard Rohr: To do the second series, huh?

Kirsten Oates: With the questions from the audience that had listened to the first series.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. It's just, and I'm prone to dismiss: "No one's taking this seriously. No one's listening to it. No one cares," all my inner, negative voices. Those questions that Brie and Paul handed to me were just, wow, there's a whole bunch of people out there who really do care and really getting it. So, it was very rewarding in the questions themselves.

Kirsten Oates: We're hoping to do the same as part of Jim's podcast to get questions in.

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes. Do, do.

Kirsten Oates: Last question: do you have any advice for future listeners of Jim's podcast?

Richard Rohr: Future listeners? Because they're going to hopefully hear this before they've thrown their lot in with him. Well, you're going to have to take off your linear, logical, systematic brain, which is what we call in spiral dynamics, the orange brain. And we have to know that most of techie America is educated in that brain. That brain, as good as it is, it might be able to record this conference, but it can't understand what Jim is saying. It won't necessarily oppose it. It'll be seduced by it. If the body is at all calm and the heart space is open, it'll find Jim's language very seductive in the best meaning of that term, divine seduction: "Where is this peace? Where is this freedom? Where is this naturalness coming from?" And I think that's what we're all longing for when we have so much jumpy, jumpy, loud, over-opinionated religion. Jim has something much better to offer you.

Kirsten Oates: And at some point, we all need to break through that mind to get to the Christ consciousness.

Richard Rohr: I think so.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Well, thank you for asking us both good questions. Thank you.

James Finley: They're beautiful.

Paul Swanson: Thanks for being a part of it. Thanks again.

[music playing]