

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross: Dialogue 1
with James Finley

- Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.
- Kirsten: Welcome, everyone, to Turning to the Mystics. This is our first dialogue for the season. Today, Jim and I will be reflecting on his first meditation. Jim, I wanted to start by asking you, why did you choose that particular piece of St. John's work to reflect on?
- Jim Finley: Yes. This reflection, which is the Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book Two, chapter 13, I chose it because this is really where he begins giving us insights into ways we tend to pray before the onset of the dark night. So this is a way to say the devout Christian or the sincere spiritual person might pray each day prior to the onset of the dark night. That's why I chose it, because this helps us to... He also then shows how the dark night begins to occur, which can be quite confusing at first, in three signs. So, it's a nice experiential introduction with how it occurs in prayer. And then in subsequent sessions, we'll see how it spreads out into all of life. It becomes an habitual underlying thing that affects all of life, this finding a way to perfect union with God in a passage through a dark night, which emerges with this infinite love, this union with the love of God. So that's why I chose it.
- Kirsten: Thank you. I relistened to the introduction as well before this dialogue session, and I was struck by at the very end of the introduction, where you go through the things that St. John of the Cross assumes. And so, I just wanted to reflect a little bit on that in relation to prayer. So, he's assuming a certain experience in prayer or a certain commitment to prayer. Is that right?
- Jim Finley: Yes, let's talk about that. Let's reflect on that together, and we can dialogue about it. I think what he assumes is he's speaking to the sincere Christian person, sincerely wanting to respond to Christ, "Follow me," and to found our life upon Christ's life, and which is our faith, the measure of which is love. This involves then not just experiencing God's loving presence in our life and our relationship with other people, but experiencing God's loving relationship with us in our heart in prayer. And so, what are the qualities of the way the sincere Christian person prays, and how they're accustomed to experiencing God's presence in prayer, and as a rendezvous with God, I guess you might say?
- Jim Finley: I think what he's assuming here, what he's saying is that our experience of God on this Earth comes to us through faith. So, we hear God loves us, and through the power of the spirit who dwells in our hearts, we're empowered to experience and know that God does love us. So that in prayer, and here I think he would typically assume too, which we were talking about in Teresa and some with Merton, where we would begin then with this lectio, that is we would open the scriptures, open to a passage in the gospels and we would listen to Jesus speaking personally to us or the scriptures, whatever the spiritual voices we turned to. We would see that as God's voice speaking personally to us in the moment that we're praying. Now, when we do that and experienced that, then we respond to God in a dialogue, a meditatio. That meditatio leads to responsive love like, "Help me with this, be faithful to this."
- Jim Finley: The key thing for John of the Cross is that these are finite ways of experiencing and responding to the infinite presence of God. They're efficacious onto holding us, but they're finite and that it's our belief, our insight, our constellation, our aspiration, our inspiration, our ministry, efficacious and the holiness. That's what he's assuming. He's also assuming

that when we die, it won't be like this. When you pass through the veil of death, we'll pass through into an infinite union with the infinite presence of God. As one with God, as God is one with God and our nothingness without God, that's the life of glory, and that ultimate destiny of intimate union, infinite union with the infinite mystery of God, beyond thought, beyond images, beyond this. What starts to happen where our journey starts to becoming mystical is even though we're still on this Earth, God begins to grant us a foretaste of an infinite union with God when we're still in the body, we're still in time.

Jim Finley: Now, each mystic introduces this. There's different ways this phase can happen to us. For Teresa, we call them the first three mansions, which is lectio, meditatio, and prayer. And the fourth mansion, it comes as the quiet. The time has come to love more and think less. In that quiet, you begin to realize your heart's being enlarged to divine proportions. It goes from there. For Merton, it began in such simple moments as turning to see a flock of birds descending or knowing love in your own heart and you're quickened from within with a sense of a oneness with God, and then it goes from there. For John of the Cross, he doesn't present it as beginning in those ways. He presents it as a deprivation of constellation. So you go to your place of prayer and you open the scriptures. You're very devout. You look forward to the rendezvous. You find nurturance in it, and you're not nurtured. You're not nurtured and the well goes dry. There's a deprivation.

Jim Finley: He says, "What's really happening is that God is seeing that we're attached to the finite ways of experiencing infinite presence of God. God weans us off that dependency by simply removing our ability to be nurtured." That's the approach John of the Cross takes. Not only is that just happened in prayer, then it happens to all of life. Everywhere we turn, there's not enoughness about everything. He said, "But if we don't panic, if we don't panic and just stay with the deprivation, then the third sign is for all of a sudden, this fullness starts welling up," which is really what he's then getting into. So the dark night then is really a deprivation of the ability to experience God in finite ways so that we weaned off of those, they're constructed to be the influx of experiencing God in infinite ways that were deep, quiet, spacious attentiveness beyond words. So that's the gist of it.

Kirsten: Jim, when he talks about the dark night, there's a piece in the poem where he says that the dark night is guiding him. So, is the deprivation a guidance?

Jim Finley: Yeah, it is, in this sense. In this sense. Let's say you go to the deprivation, you're in the deprivation, and then what you start to experience if you just stay with it in complete dependency on God, I'm reading then from the third sign, article seven, "At the beginning of this state, the loving knowledge is almost unnoticeable. there are two reasons for this. Ordinarily, the incipient loving knowledge is extremely subtle and delicate and almost imperceptible. Second, a person who is habituated to the exercise of meditation, which is wholly sensible, hardly perceives or feels this new insensible purely spiritual experience. This is especially so when through failure to understand it, he does not permit himself in the quietude, but strives after the other more sensory experience. But the more habituated he becomes to this calm, the deeper his experience of the general loving knowledge of God will grow. This knowledge is more enjoyable than all other things because without the soul's labor, it affords peace, risks, savor, and delight."

Jim Finley: So here's how the night guides us, I would think. We're sitting there in this night, which we

didn't see coming. We weren't planning on this. We might decide in this wordless powerlessness to turn back and try to meditate again by thinking about something. You find every time you try it, you're not being true to where your heart is. It doesn't nurture. It doesn't nurture and it's somehow impoverished. Something's missing in it. But then every time you turn back to the quiet again, every time you just sit in the sustained attentiveness infused with love, this influx of the depth of presence keeps welling up, but you need to be very patient because it tends to be very delicate and very subtle. And so, for a long time, you don't even notice it. But if you recalibrate your heart to find enough scale, you start to see this unexpected enrichment of presence welling up. And so, that's how the night guide you.

Jim Finley: See, as long as I'm willing to stay in this sweet powerlessness, I'm unexplainably led into unexplainably depths of simplicity and presence. Every time I turned back to get my bearings again and what I can think about, I'm feeling I'm at odds with what's happening to me. It's like a spiritual direction, discernment question within yourself. So it's really offering contemplative spiritual direction for people to whom this is happening, and also to let us all know that this will happen to all of us. As we'll talk about it a little bit later, it already is happening to all of us in different ways. It's a matter of recognizing this transformative event that happens with some life really, I think.

Kirsten: Yes. Stepping back to the beginning, Jim, when we start our prayer life and start moving into a sense of God's presence in other people, in our own heart, in the scripture, do you think that the prayer life changes throughout the years? So this is a significant change he's talking about, but is prayer and faith stable and throughout our lives?

Jim Finley: Yeah. Let's say that there's someone through their whole life in prayer never experiences this, because it's a kind of a charism. It doesn't happen to everybody. And they spend their whole life in devotional sincerity in the lectio of listening to God speak in prayer and speaking to them in all of life, and meditatio, they reflect upon the things that God has given to them in their life and in their prayer. And then in the prayer, sincere desire, "Sustain me. Help me." And then they translate that into attitudes, Christ-like attitudes, and then translate that into how they treat other people themselves. That's the life of deep holiness. The person could live a very saintly life and not once experience it in this deprivation way. Yeah.

Kirsten: Mm-hmm (affirmative). But they might have times where they're grieving and they're experiencing loss, or they might have times where they're experiencing greater joy or gratitude? So the prayer life, the sense of God presence can shift and change.

Jim Finley: Yes, but here's the difference, I think. This is where I'd like to say we all can have experiences of the dark night. Let's say a person is going through their life and they hit really hard times. As they hit hard times with their health or their marriage or parenting or their job, or loss of friends, whatever it is, the hard times, the pandemic or something, they experienced it as a hardship and they turned to God to give them the strength to get through it. They turn for help. They turn to prayer, and that goes away it goes. The dark night experience would be this. I've come upon hard times,

and in my marriage or my parenting or in my job or in my health or in my career, I hit hard times and it's really hard. It's really, really, really hard. It is like constancy and long suffering. I realize it's not just hard. Something's being given to me out of it, like inner resources within and beyond myself I didn't know I had.

Jim Finley: It's like in AA, a recovery from addiction, a person goes through all this hardship of just wreckage of the past everything, but it isn't sobriety just restabilizes them, but having had a spiritual awakening as a result of following these steps. And so, their addiction and the pain of the addiction was a dark night, in which out of that loss, a light shined in their life that maybe they never would have found had they not gone through that night and that's why they can say they're grateful for their addiction, like their addiction saved their life. They didn't get back to where they were. It gave them an unexpected fullness that they never would have found at all hell not broken loose.

Jim Finley: I would say that's how the dark night can happen to all of us. It isn't just that we struggle, ask God for the strength to get through something, but in the strength, in the struggle itself, we start to notice something's happening inside of us. There's something very important, actually. As soon as when we're shooting the rapids, we don't see it when it's happening. But as it settles, we look back and we're at a different place. See, I would say that's how the dark night pertains to all of us, that transformative power of loss, bringing us to new a fullness we wouldn't have found without the loss.

Kirsten: What's the difference between someone who goes through that experience and does deepen versus someone who might not experience that dark night, that deepening? What's going on there, do you think?

Jim Finley: Well, I think this, I mean, life goes the way it goes. So, I just want to have the psychological levels first. Sometimes people hit hard times and they don't come out of it. Not only do the hard times go on, but they fragment, they break inside and some people never come out of that. They don't get the help they need or someone to be there for them. Life's hard. Some people, if things fall apart, they never do get it back together again. It goes different ways as life is suffering. Sometimes people do get the help they need, but again, they get the help they need that restores them back to a more balanced place and they move on. So, that's how it goes.

Jim Finley: But then there are some people for whom the troubles, the heart, the unraveling of everything was so painful. It wasn't just painful. Like Jesus, the Pearl of Great Price, you came up on a Pearl of Great Price within yourself and a certain invincibility of God's presence. So that's the providential nature of this. This is why I think we all need to get the help that we need to stabilize and how to see God in it. Likewise, and so far as we're on this journey, we're all on this journey in different ways. So always be open because we never know when it's going to be our turn to pass this on to somebody. In such a simple thing as stopping to ask somebody, "Are you okay?" you could be saving their life.

Jim Finley: And so, I think that's the rhythms of grace, the move to the darkness of the world. Here we're saying it has the potential for mystical awakening. Like the hymn,

Amazing Grace, here's a slave trader, but all this horrendous things, Amazing Grace, "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see." And the song to this day moves us when we hear it and that'd be the dark night. It would light the dark. He says, "Oh, darkness lovelier than the dawn." Precisely because it got so dark, the light shown in my heart and led me out of the darkness.

Kirsten: Jim, it's not a reflection of the person or how much God loves the person or how faithful the person is in terms of whether they move into this deeper experience or not because the presence of God is the same for all of us. Is that right?

Jim Finley: Yeah. John of the Cross says, there's a passage where he says, "I need to clarify what divine union means." He said, "One form of divine union is God's infinite union with everyone and that God's perpetually creating all things, sustaining them and being." So God's sustaining oneness is the God's sustaining oneness that empowers us to take our next breath, to stand up and sit down. It's the empowerment of the sun to rise each morning, of the sun to set each night. It's the sacredness of the creative generosity of God flowing out as the gift and miracle of being alive and real. There's that. He says, "This is different than this effective union, which is the extent to which in our heart we realize that and respond to it."

Jim Finley: See, so God is present in all of us. God is infinitely in love with all of us. God is a staining us, come what may, but the extent to which in our conscious reflection, we're aware of that and respond to it. That's the grace event, both in the first level of faith, the sincerity of discipleship, how we're sustained by fate to go through life and so on. And then also how through those very struggles, it can quicken into this mystical that he's concerned about. He is offering guidance for people that were being introduced to this mystical dimension of this.

Kirsten: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Jim, am I hearing this right, that there's a sense of expansiveness? So, ways we thought we knew about God, ways we communicated with God. On the other side of the dark night or through the dark night, there's some kind of beyond expansion, new possibility, new deepening of our understanding of who God is or new ways of communicating or...

Jim Finley: Exactly. See, let's say first, we're talking about the life of living by faith, the measure which is love. We lived this. And we can really speak of incremental degrees of expansion and contraction. We can speak we're qualitatively more aware of the love of God, more responsive than we used to be. We're also aware that we have inner work to do, that our heart's contracted, that we need help the more or the less, the more or the less. And that's real, and we work with that and we know God's with us in it, and it goes the way it goes. What John of the Cross is saying the dark night is the deprivation of the ability to function at that level, because what starts to happen in the beginning of the dark night is that it's like you unexplainably start coming upon a boundaryless fulfillment, that you can't add anything to it because it's already infinite and nothing threatens it, but it doesn't belong to you. It's that in you that belongs entirely to God in a kind of godly fullness.

Jim Finley: So as soon as you turn back around to try to make it fit in your answer system, as soon as you try to make it, it doesn't fit. That's still there at that level, but this has to do more with... I think it's the intimate awareness of a longing we don't understand, for fulfillment we don't understand, but what we know it's real because we can taste it in the poverty of our heart.

He says, “To have no other light to guide you, except the one that burns in your heart.” See, like that.

Kirsten: Beautiful.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it is beautiful.

Kirsten: I think, Jim, when I read the poetry or in listening to you and Mirabai speak the poetry, it has a quality to it that’s just beautiful, deep, kind of heartfelt. But then John of the Cross was asked to go one step further and offer a practical understanding of the steps of what happened to get to that poetry.

Jim Finley: Yes. Let’s say there’s some mystics who bear witnesses, but they don’t show you the path to get, Julian of Norwich, for example, in Revelations of Divine Love. Also, in poetry, the poetry of Mary Oliver or T.S. Eliot, it’s so beautiful. So you just sit in the beauty, but they don’t show you how like, “How do I do that?” When you’re sitting in the present, you’re in its presence, but how do I do it? So John of the Cross, these teachers that we follow here, Teresa, John and Merton, what they are is they’re people... We’re going to look at Julian too, because there is a way to go. So, one, they bear witness to this.

Jim Finley: I mentioned this, I think, in the introductory thing we did, when I was 18 and read John of the Cross for the first time, I walk out in the woods and sat the base of a tree and opened it up. I can’t tell you, it just blew me away. It was so beautiful I knew it was somehow about me, but then he takes another step. He takes another step. He says, “I want to help you to understand what’s happening to you.” He says, “And this can be very confusing. I want to give you guidance so you don’t unwittingly get in the way of what’s happening to you. I want to offer you ways of discerning how to move on so we can get ever deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper.” That’s what makes these mystic teachers so helpful. It’s beautiful, but it also illuminates a path, illuminates a way to proceed.

Kirsten: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Jim, what I’m hearing you say is if you determine this is happening to you, that actually in the end, there’s nothing you can do. Just be open to it, having its way with you. Is that the-

Jim Finley: Yeah, except this. Except this. Yes or no, I would say. It’s really true. You can’t do anything about it because it’s God. It was God’s turn. You’re not in control here. This is clear. But here’s what we can do, because love is never imposed, it’s always offered. What’s the artistry of cooperating with this? Because I can walk away from it. Maybe sometimes we do, it’s just we walk away and then it’s there waiting for us. It comes back. So what’s the artistry of obediential fidelity to what’s happening is a paradoxical engagement of a surrendered oneness with God doing this to you as you keep letting it wash over you and go into you and letting it deep. So there is a paradoxical fidelity about it, I think. Yeah.

Kirsten: Mm-hmm (affirmative). You also said that the meditation, do you suggest people keep trying the daily prayer and the daily meditation, even when it’s not drying up like this?

Jim Finley: Yes, like droughts. I can still pray. Darn it. I’m not a mystic yet. Damn, some people get all the luck. I’m just an average garden variety Christian, trying to be holy.

Kirsten: On my knees. On my knees, my hands folded.

Jim Finley: Yeah, walking around with my best cripe. I got to wait until I die to experience this. This isn't fair. Now, here's what I think. Here's what I think. Where each of us are right now in our life, all the givens of are... Let's say we're meeting in spiritual direction to talk. Let's talk, that where you are with all the givens, the painful and the good, where are you are in your attitude to want to be a person of goodwill, who want to be an attentive, engaged, vulnerable, grounded person as best you can to help other people do the same, and the more you're responsive to the graces that are given to you, to your faith, to scripture, to the Eucharist, through prayer, through a ministry, that is holiness, that is because the measure in this path is not the measure to which you've had certain kinds of experiences. See, the measure is the extent which we surrendered to the will of God, which is we surrender to love.

Jim Finley: Remember, Teresa said that. She said there are some people... As she starts the fourth mansion. We don't have these experiences at all that are much holier than people have them. It's a charism. Some people have it. I think we're talking about earlier, each of us has it in our own way where we can experience a transformative, like easing into something that was always there and we were just fighting it somehow. We do this. And somehow we know this is godly. There's something graced about it. So I think we all have that. But he's writing for people who are living this life. He assumes that the ordinary good Christian, holy Christ-like life with all of its ups and down, but there are some people for whom this starts to happen.

Jim Finley: Also, there are people for whom that starts to happen differently. Like in Teresa, it doesn't start with the dark night. It starts with the quiet and your hearts being aligned to the divine proportions. But then in the six mansion, all hell breaks loose the night starts because you're being unraveled. You're being unraveled and she follows that path. So I go to that way. That's what counts, is that there are situation where... The very fact people are drawn to listen to this, that very fact bears witness they already on this path, because if they weren't, they wouldn't be drawn to listen to it, because we only recognize what we know. The very fact that it speaks to us, that hunger for it, it's already there and that's what matters. You just lean into it and see where it goes.

Kirsten: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I feel sometimes a temptation that the journey is to escape, like these beautiful poems or this sense of experiencing something more infinite and... So, how do you balance out that sense of "I'm escaping from the finite, but it all has to land back in the finite at some level in my life"? Is that right, Jim?

Jim Finley: I think this, that for some people, this commitment to spirituality is an escape. The reason they're in church every night is they don't want to go home, but maybe it's that escape that holds them together, but it is an escape. That's why it doesn't really mature until the escaping from life, it gives us the courage to face life as best we can. Sometimes that is there. I think what John of the Cross would say about this is it you'll notice... Teresa of Avila says somewhere in the castle, she says, "When all this started, if you knew what you were getting into, you think maybe I would have been better off by going down this road." What you realize is you're just being undone in silence. This is not a walk in the park. See, you know what I mean? There's a kind of a death to everything less than infinite love.

- Jim Finley: Also, I think to realize that it's true, that it brings us back to being faithful to what we need to face in our vulnerability, like it brings us, so we get more real. That's the mark of it. It has a quality of heightened empathy, heightened compassion, heightened presence, but we should always be aware of that because it can be an escape.
- Kirsten: Mm-hmm (affirmative). John of the Cross, in his own life, after the dark night was very concretely present to his ministry to what he was asked to do.
- Jim Finley: It goes, when we look at the Spiritual Canticle and the light that shines out of the darkness and being married to God, mystical marriage and so on, he was really known for a sensitivity to the poor, his sensitivity to the sick. He was also known for his compassion. One of the friars writes in their journal, "When we go off our little Sunday groups and small groups for our walk, we always hope John of the Cross will join us because he always makes us laugh. The deep love he had for Teresa, this deep mystical friendship bond that they had, he was fully alive..." At his death, the monastery that he went to, he deliberately chose one of the superior who didn't like him. On his death bed, he called the superior, "So whatever I did to contribute to the conflict between us, I want to apologize." That's how he died and it said the superior came out crying. It changed his life.
- Jim Finley: So that's the evidence of this. It radicalizes, which I think is Christ consciousness in the world. It's beyond the darkness of this world in a way that paradoxically radicalizes our presence in it to the holiness of life on life's terms, I say, in AA. We walk it as holy and we are all infinitely loved broken people. We're trying to be faithful to the grace of this and bear witness to it. Yeah. Sometimes I say to myself a little prayer in my advancing years, "God, help me to be the kind of old person young people want old people to be. Help me not just to talk like this, but help me to walk around like this and answer the phone like this and talk to my grandchildren like this." We're all trying to do our best here to walk the walk.
- Kirsten: That's lovely. I was going to ask you, if you have felt the dark night yourself, if you've feel like you've been through this passage?
- Jim Finley: I do, very much so. One, in a certain sense when I grew up with this intense trauma, which is this book I'm writing now, and then clinging to God in prayer to save my life. And then I went to the monastery. I lived in cloistered silence for six years. I changed my life, got me into this. I changed my life. But then what happened when I was sexually abused but one of the monks, I had a breakdown in loss refuge and dropped out of the church. I left. I just was lost, absolutely lost. But as I slowly found my way back, first to yoga, actually into the dharma, and then circle back around into mystical Catholicism, I came back around into it again. And then I had more experiences of it while my divorce happened and my family was falling apart, like a sense of loss, like nowhere to go. "Where do I go from here?" And that paradoxically transformed me and strengthened me.
- Jim Finley: When Maureen died, it was a dark night. It was just unbearable, just excruciatingly unbearable, but out of it has come... I'm still settling into it, a kind of a mysterious gentleness about it, something very... I was talking to one of my brothers on the phone and he said, "Well, Joe, when you were in the monastery, you were telling Thomas Merton you wanted to be a hermit. Now, it comes full circle. Guess what? You're a hermit, an unwilling hermit." I said, "Well, that's probably right." So it's so strange to me that I live here like this.

Where we live for 30 years, the oceans right outside. I get to teach like this, from my home like this, close to my daughters.

Jim Finley: Life is very fleeting, fragile, and ultimately divine, I think. So I do think several times over I've been through this. Yeah. And there might be more to come. So, I just thought how... Yeah, there you go. See, what I think we're talking about, is it possible to so deeply die to everything less than infinite union with infinite love, that when the moment of death happens, nothing will happen? I mean, something will happen biologically, but it would have already occurred. See, you know what I mean? It has already become celestial in its unexplainable simplicity, like that is that. I mean, that's high poetically sensitive in a way.

Kirsten: Just continually surrendering anything that gets in the way of trusting God, of loving God, being open to God.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Like Jesus on the cross, "Into your hands, I commend my spirit." He handed himself over to the God he could no longer find, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken on me?" So my last breath, I'll inhale. God breathe into me the gift of the breath. But when I exhale, I'll exhale myself into God, like this, and the circle completes itself. Can I get to a place where that vision becomes so viscerally self-evident to me? It is so habituated, because I feel that's what's transforming in these mystics I've been following. I just feel I'm trying to pass on what was given to me. So each person can sense how it's actively being given to them now in their own unique way, and then follow it and see where it goes. That's my sense of the sessions are.

Kirsten: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, Jim, you are the gift. You are the gift and thank you for sharing with us today.

Jim Finley: Thank you. Thank you so much, Kirsten.

Kirsten: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So If you have a question, please email us at podcast@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.